



The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education

The Implications of the Fallout from October 7th for Jewish Education: Insights from the CJPE Circle of Fellows

On October 7th, the Hamas invasion of Israel sent shockwaves through Jewish communities worldwide, prompting an urgent need for reflection and response. The Circle of Fellows session on July 16, 2024, convened by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE), brought together 19 educational leaders to discuss the immediate and long-term implications of this crisis. The session provided a platform to explore the challenges faced by Jewish educators and to develop strategies for fostering resilience, identity, and communal unity in the wake of the invasion.

Executive Summary

Speakers, including Osnat Fox, Dr. Samantha Vinokor-Meinrath, and Dr. Shlomi Ravid, addressed the emotional and practical challenges faced by the Jewish community.

Fox outlined the three phases of response: silence, intense action, and a current stagnant phase marked by a heavy emotional toll and increasing divisiveness. She emphasized the need for a peoplehood approach to strengthen identity and resilience. Vinokor-Meinrath highlighted the rapid mobilization required post-invasion, the shift from a thriving American Jewish community to one that now feels vulnerable, and the importance of fostering self-confidence and pride in Jewish identity. Ravid discussed the broader challenges to Jewish peoplehood and Zionism, stressing the need for a balanced approach to self-defense and social justice, and the urgency of fostering a pluralistic peoplehood.

The ensuing discussion and learning highlighted the significant challenges and opportunities for Jewish educators. In particular the conversation highlighted a shared feeling of a need to develop an approach that can tackle increasing divisiveness and generational shifts in a manner that recognizes diversity and views pluralism as an asset rather than a problem. The aspiration for a conceptual and pedagogic approach that addresses the multiple challenges educators are facing.

Key takeaways included the necessity of fostering a common moral vision that transcends individual differences and aligns with the broader goals of pluralistic Jewish peoplehood. The discussion underscored the need to find ways to include diverse political and religious views constructively. Creating spaces where difficult conversations can occur without fear of exclusion is essential for fostering a genuinely pluralistic community. True pluralism involves respecting and understanding diversity within the Jewish community, emphasizing educational encounters that allow for various perspectives to be expressed and comprehended.

From the Fellows discussion emerged a strategic response. Innovative Peoplehood driven engagement strategies are crucial for navigating deep disagreements and polarization with the goal of mutual caring between Jews. Participants emphasized the importance of non-dialogic engagement, through music and song, intentional use of silence, and communal service, to create spaces for empathy, meaningful interaction and understanding. Engagement that focuses on being in the presence of other Jews, lays the



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basis for more intensive verbal engagement on core issues that are also potentially divisive. One example, proposed by Jonathan Golden, is the use of reflective writing exercises, as a practical way to build on the feeling of connections and mutual empathy despite differing backgrounds. Those writing exercises can then feed into active discussions focused on acting to address a common challenge or goal that also includes consideration of differing ideological positions. This practice can lead to more productive dialogue and deeper understanding, helping to counteract the reactive nature of contemporary discourse.

In conclusion, the discussion highlighted that by embracing a multifaceted approach, which includes innovative engagement strategies and a commitment to fostering a common moral vision, the Jewish community can build a resilient and unified peoplehood. This approach honors diversity and fosters a sense of collective responsibility, helping to navigate the complexities of modern Jewish identity and community dynamics.

Full Summary

Phases of Response: Emotional and Practical Challenges

Osnat Fox, Director of Makom's Institute for Global Jewish Voices, outlined the three phases of the Jewish world's response. Initially, there was a period of silence as individuals and communities grappled with the enormity of the event. This was followed by a phase of intense action, characterized by educational efforts, activism, and solidarity initiatives. Currently, the community finds itself in a more stagnant phase, struggling with the emotional toll of ongoing uncertainty and loss.

Fox highlighted key challenges, including the loss of security and communal hope. She noted a surge in national identity, particularly among Israeli youth, but cautioned that this newfound unity is fragile and often accompanied by intolerance. The desire for activism is strong, yet the community must ensure that supportive spaces are available for meaningful engagement. Fox emphasized the importance of integrating peoplehood into educational efforts to strengthen identity and resilience, bridging divides through shared stories and practical solidarity efforts.

By "integrating peoplehood," Fox means fostering an inclusive Jewish identity that encompasses understanding, tolerance, and productive relationships with others. This involves creating educational experiences that encourage participants to see themselves as part of a larger, diverse Jewish world. To illustrate this, Fox shared an example from a recent seminar where a school principal expressed frustration with differing political opinions. "These really annoying people yesterday, their political opinions bothered me, but in having to listen and respond, I found my own center of gravity." This example underscores the necessity of moving through controversy and complexity, helping individuals strengthen their Jewish and Israeli identity through meaningful interactions and engagements with diverse perspectives.



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Immediate Mobilization and Long-term Implications

Dr. Samantha Vinokor-Meinrath, Senior Director of Knowledge, Ideas, and Learning at The Jewish Education Project, discussed the rapid mobilization required in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Educators were thrust into action, providing resources and support to participants while navigating their own emotional and practical dilemmas. This period saw a heightened sense of Jewish identity and a surge in communal connection, yet it also raised questions about vulnerability and resilience.

Vinokor-Meinrath elaborated on the immediate responses, highlighting the urgent need for educational resources by October 8th. Educators had to quickly adapt, often turning from their traditional roles to provide emotional support and guidance. She described the visceral reactions within the community, where many felt a renewed connection to Jewish peoplehood but struggled with how to act on it. Questions arose about the appropriateness of expressing emotions, reaching out for support, and maintaining normalcy in participants' lives. Educators were asked, "Am I allowed to be upset with friends who didn't turn up?" and "Can I tell my kids I'm scared?" These questions underscored the psychological strain and the necessity for immediate, sensitive responses.

The period of rapid mobilization also highlighted the role of educators as therapists, helping participants navigate their heightened Jewish identities. Vinokor-Meinrath emphasized that this crisis brought an awakening of Jewish identity for many, but it also left educators grappling with long-term implications. The focus of Jewish education, traditionally on thriving and joy, had to pivot to address vulnerability and resilience. This shift marked a significant change, as for the first time in over a generation, Jewish educators had to confront what it means to live with a vulnerable minority identity.

In September 2023, popular culture reflected a thriving Jewish identity, with movies like "You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah" topping streaming charts. However, post-October 7th, there was a stark shift from being a "cool minority" to feeling embattled. Vinokor-Meinrath pointed out the challenge of not letting external hatred shape Jewish identity and emphasized the need for a proactive stance rather than a reactive one.

Opportunities and Barriers:

Vinokor-Meinrath also addressed the opportunities and barriers in meeting this moment. One major barrier was parents' uncertainty about their knowledge and ability to support their children's Jewish education. Many parents felt unmoored and sought help, saying, "I want my kids to know, can you help me?" Some educational initiatives, like book clubs for teens and parents, were created to foster a deeper understanding and connection. However, there was often a tension between the desire for an awakened Jewish identity and the willingness to invest the necessary effort.

Vinokor-Meinrath highlighted the importance of exploring these opportunities to cultivate self-confidence and pride in Jewish identity. She posed a critical question: "How can I expect a learner to



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be proud of being part of the Jewish people when external forces shake their confidence and pride?" This question encapsulates the challenge of fostering a resilient Jewish identity that can withstand external pressures. She emphasized the importance of seeing oneself within the collective Jewish story, which provides a foundation for pride, self-confidence, and thriving despite vulnerabilities. The need for a strong, confident Jewish identity that is not solely defined by opposition to external hatred was a key takeaway from her presentation.

In summary, Vinokor-Meinrath stressed that this moment offers an opportunity to explore and cultivate self-confidence and pride. By fostering a sense of pride, self, and thriving through a deep connection to the collective Jewish story, educators can help participants develop a resilient and confident Jewish identity.

Peoplehood at a Crossroad: Challenges and Opportunities

Dr. Shlomi Ravid, Director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education, spoke about the broader challenges to Jewish peoplehood and Zionism in the wake of the invasion. He emphasized that the Jewish people are at a critical juncture, a crossroad that requires careful navigation to ensure the future resilience and unity of the community.

Ravid highlighted the need for a balanced approach to self-defense and social justice. The invasion intensified the divisions within the Jewish world, challenging the equilibrium between the right to self-defense and the ethical imperatives of tikkun olam (repairing the world). This tension is particularly pronounced in discussions about Zionism and its relationship with democracy. Ravid questioned whether the Jewish national movement can continue to support an increasingly non-democratic Israel that exerts control over another people. The events of October 7th have further strained this relationship, demanding a re-examination of what liberal Zionism means today and how it can inspire future generations.

Ravid also discussed the challenge of maintaining a joint destiny. He noted that the communal ethos of shared destiny which has traditionally driven Jewish collectivity, is being shaken. The need for an equilibrium that respects both self-defense and broader humanitarian values is crucial. He emphasized that the Jewish ethos is built on a balance between these elements, and total victory over one perspective could undermine the collective spirit.

The challenge of pluralism was another critical issue Ravid addressed. The divisions within the Jewish world are intensifying, and the public conversation about these issues remains limited. He pointed out that Jews abroad often still hold onto the belief that what is good for the Israeli government is good for the Jews, a perspective that needs re-evaluation. Ravid argued that only a pluralistic peoplehood can accommodate a wide diversity of perspectives, and there is an urgent need for a roadmap to develop this inclusive approach. This pluralism is not about relativism but about recognizing legitimate Jewish experiences and expressions.



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Ravid emphasized the importance of moving from a reactive sense of shared fate to a proactive shared destiny. The war has brought a wave of solidarity and a boost in communal areivut (mutual responsibility), but these feelings need nurturing to transform into a positive force. He stressed the importance of nurturing commitment to Jewish peoplehood and the Jewish communal life that is central to it. This includes fostering a connection to Israel based on shared values and a vision that can inspire young Jews to opt into their Jewish identity.

Ravid outlined several key ramifications of these challenges:

1. The war has touched an intuitive sense of peoplehood, but it is only part of the picture. There is a need to nurture a deeper commitment to Jewish peoplehood and, based on that, to Israel.
2. Joint destiny drives Jewish collectivity. It is essential to define core values and a vision that can inspire young Jews and ensure their participation in the Jewish communal life.
3. The conversation about Jewish identity must recognize that not all perspectives are equally valid. There must be a clear understanding of what constitutes a legitimate Jewish position.
4. The oppressive sense of fate needs to undergo a transformation into an obligation to love one another. This mutual love is at the heart of the covenant and essential for the future resilience of the Jewish people.

Ravid concluded by emphasizing that the Jewish people are at a crossroads. The challenges are significant, but so are the opportunities to redefine and strengthen Jewish peoplehood. By fostering an inclusive, pluralistic, and ethically balanced approach, the Jewish world can navigate these challenges and emerge stronger and more unified.

The session's discussion underscored the need for a common moral vision and cultural repair. Participants reflected on the importance of non-dialogic modalities, such as quiet, singing, and communal service, as forms of engagement. The challenges of maintaining dialogue amid deep disagreements and navigating polarization within the community were also addressed.

Discussion Highlights

The discussion honed in and developed the meaning of "pluralism" in the context of the Jewish educational response to October 7th. How does one enable a recognition of Jewish diversity that includes broad and often opposed political and religious perspectives, and yet enable positive educational encounters from the perspective of pluralistic Jewish Peoplehood?

1. On Pluralism

How Broad do We Go, Who is In - Consideration of those who are not Liberal

Elan Ezrachi highlighted the difficulty of including a broad spectrum of political and religious views within the framework of pluralistic Jewish peoplehood. He stressed the importance of finding ways to navigate



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these differences constructively. Babchuck mentioned that educators and community leaders must create spaces where difficult conversations can happen without fear of exclusion or marginalization.

Benji Davis discussed a meeting he participated in with Israeli Israel educators, noting that all participants were center to left-leaning on the political spectrum. He expressed that the conversation mirrored this ideological alignment of the participants in this discussion, and suggested that perhaps "pluralism" isn't the right term to describe our goal. He cited a similar issue with the concept of "achdut," which people use to refer to unity but act in a different manner. He prefers Avram Infeld's "unity without uniformity." Benji emphasized the necessity of including non-pluralistic viewpoints to genuinely embrace the unity without uniformity, ensuring a more comprehensive and inclusive approach.

How Broad do We Go, Who is In - Consideration of Israelis' lack of attention to Jews Living outside of Israel

Alon Friedman emphasized the stark differences between American and Israeli Jewish educators, noting that language and context create significant barriers to understanding. He recounted an event where American Jewish leaders spoke in front of Israeli educators, highlighting a profound disconnect. As an example, he cited an example given by one of the American leaders. He spoke of his daughter, who participated in a year-long program in Israel; she returned home with a feeling of dissonance. Calling the secular Israelis who she cares deeply about, "delusional Zionists," in that they do not invest time in considering the experience of Jews outside Israel. She cares more about the good of Israeli Jews, than they do about hers, and then is expected to defend Israel when she starts university this coming year. The example underscores the challenges of fostering unity and understanding between diverse Jewish communities.

2. Educational Challenges, Opportunities and Pedagogy

Meaningful Conversations

Michal Muszkat-Barkan noted that pluralism does not mean agreeing on everything but rather respecting and understanding the diversity within the Jewish community. She emphasized the importance of educational encounters that allow for a variety of perspectives to be expressed and understood. Muszkat-Barkan pointed out that acknowledging this diversity is crucial for fostering a sense of unity without uniformity.

Daphna Yizrael addressed the challenge of engaging in dialogue when there is significant disagreement. She shared that, in her experience with Bronfman Fellows, the care and deep empathy were present among the participants, but the disagreements were so profound that dialogue could not take place. Many participants were disappointed as empathy alone was not sufficient to bridge the divide, highlighting the need for additional strategies to enable meaningful conversations in such contexts.



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The Need to Activate and Build Empathy and Caring, Laying the Basis for Debate

Aharon Ariel Lavi, drawing on the experience of combat medics, cited the need to activate the injured as part of their recovery, ensuring they do not languish. He pointed out the inefficiency in spending vast amounts of money on unnecessary equipment, suggesting that resources could be better allocated to support the Jewish People's recovery in the aftermath of October 7th, underscoring the significance of practical support and resource management in addressing current challenges. He also felt that in a state of war it is too soon to actively pursue an educational strategy promoting political debate.

Josh Feigelson proposed integrating periods of silence and reflection into communal gatherings. He noted that these practices can provide a space for individuals to process their thoughts and emotions, creating a foundation for more productive dialogue. Feigelson emphasized that such practices are essential for developing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of pluralism. He referenced Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's teachings about the importance of quiet to achieve deeper levels of thought and reflection. Feigelson argued that incorporating silence can help counteract the reactive nature of contemporary discourse and allow for more meaningful, heartfelt engagement.

Drawing on experiences from his work, Feigelson highlighted the potential of quiet and non-verbal forms of engagement to create a shared sense of purpose and understanding. He suggested that communal silence, much like the traditional Jewish practice of sitting in silence during shiva, can open possibilities for connection and solidarity without the need for words. This approach, he contended, can be particularly powerful in moments of collective grief or crisis, providing a space for collective mourning and reflection.

Feigelson also pointed to the historical significance of silence in Jewish thought, noting how figures like Elie Wiesel have discussed the dual nature of silence—as both a tool of oppression and a space for deep connection and understanding. By reclaiming silence as a form of communal practice, Feigelson argued, the Jewish community can foster deeper, more empathetic relationships and navigate the complexities of pluralism with greater sensitivity and insight.

In the background to this conversation, Feigelson suggested considering David Brooks's recent column about Dewey v. Niebuhr and the project of articulating a common moral vision/vocabulary in a society. In the absence of such a shared language, we devolve into identity politics on both left and right. While Jewish peoplehood is a transnational project, there's a lot that can transfer. Feigelson commended Brooks's last paragraph, which is both hopeful and grim: "The task, then, is to build a new cultural consensus that is democratic but also morally coherent. My guess, and it is only a guess, is that this work of cultural repair will be done by religious progressives, by a new generation of leaders who will build a modern social gospel around love of neighbor and hospitality for the marginalized."



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Once Empathy is Established, Debate Can be Productive

Building on Feigelson, Jonathan Golden suggested that practical, non-verbal forms of engagement, such as communal singing and shared service projects, can bridge divides and foster a sense of solidarity. He cited examples from summer camps where Israeli and American counselors used music to process the events of the past months together. These activities helped to build connections and a shared sense of purpose despite differing backgrounds and viewpoints. Golden shared how playing songs like "Shevet Achim V'Achayot" and "HaSippur HaGadol" created a space for North American and Israeli counselors to reflect on the events of the past months together. This non-verbal engagement allowed them to open up discussions and connect on a deeper level, facilitating mutual understanding and empathy. Following the singing, the counselors engaged in a writing exercise, which involved reflecting on the story and actions discussed that night. At the end of this exercise, all the counselors gathered with their supervisor to think through how to translate their learning into practical work as bunk counselors. This builds on Golden's model of heart, mind, and hands: Heart (singing), Mind (writing), and Hands (thinking through practical applications). He believes that these shared musical experiences can serve as a model for how communities might navigate complex emotions and build solidarity in times of crisis. See Golden's model: [The Heart-Head-Hand of Israel Education](#)

Lisa Grant proposed an additional approach. She observed the polarization within Israelis and between American Jews. She suggested starting discussions within their own affinity groups before engaging with broader groups. This approach helps build a foundation of understanding and cohesion within similar groups before attempting to bridge divides with those holding different perspectives.

3. Generational Shifts

The discussion also touched on the generational shift in attitudes toward Jewish identity and peoplehood. Lisa Grant and others observed that younger generations are often more open to diverse perspectives but may lack the historical context that informs older generations' views. Lisa Grant stressed the importance of intergenerational dialogue to bridge this gap and foster a more inclusive understanding of Jewish peoplehood.

In conclusion, the session highlighted that fostering pluralism within the Jewish community requires a multifaceted approach. Educators and community leaders must create spaces for diverse perspectives to be expressed and understood, facilitate non-verbal forms of engagement, and encourage practices of silence and reflection. By doing so, they can help build a resilient and unified Jewish peoplehood that embraces diversity and fosters a sense of collective responsibility.

Conclusion

The Circle of Fellows session highlighted the significant challenges and opportunities for Jewish educators in the wake of the October 7th invasion. Key takeaways included the importance of integrating



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peoplehood to foster resilience, the shift from thriving to vulnerability in Jewish education, and the need for a balanced approach to self-defense and social justice. The discussion underscored the need for a common moral vision and innovative engagement strategies to navigate deep disagreements and polarization. By embracing a multifaceted approach, the Jewish community can build a resilient and unified peoplehood that honors diversity and fosters collective responsibility.