

Insights Document

One Year After October 7th: Cultural Jewish Identity as a Unifying Force

The October 7th massacre brought Israel and the Jewish world to a unique crossroads. We now face a window of opportunity to reshape a cohesive, rich, and coherent Jewish identity. However, this window will not remain open forever, and in fact, it may already be closing compared to a year ago.

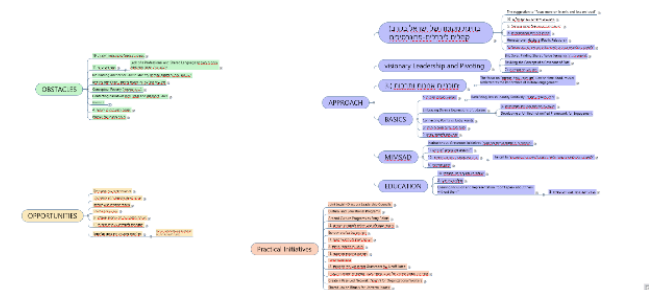
In the one-year commemoration of the tragic massacre, the Zionist Enterprises Department of the World Zionist Organization, in partnership with Atchalta, held a strategic workshop. This workshop focused on the impact of the past year's events on the opportunity to connect with unaffiliated Jewish young adults through the framework of a cultural Jewish identity, and on the relationship between Israel and Jewish communities worldwide.

The purpose of this document is to present the key insights and ideas raised during the workshop by over 30 participants—leaders from research institutes, Jewish cultural and educational organizations in Israel and the Jewish world, as well as representatives of various foundations. This workshop is only the beginning of a broader and more comprehensive process. Our next step is to hold additional strategic workshops worldwide and similar ones incorporating the voices of Jewish young adults people from the across the Jewish world.

Methodology

During the workshop, discussions were held in both roundtables and plenary sessions, where participants exchanged new insights. We analyzed the records from these discussions as well as ideas submitted by many participants after the workshop. We refined preliminary ideas and directions using generative AI, "broke down" and categorized distinct ideas into a mind map (Mindjet software, as shown in the image), which helped create this document.

We have tried to be as precise as possible in this document to reflect the points raised in the workshop. However, it is important to note the methodological difficulties and limitations we imposed on ourselves, which left many ideas that emerged in the workshop on the "editing floor." We received a vast amount of content, both in Hebrew and English, which naturally did not coalesce into a coherent "story" typical of such a workshop. To create a cohesive document, we deliberately omitted many ideas that we felt were less relevant or innovative. These constraints, along with the desire to write a "flowing," innovative, and



particularly concise document, have turned this piece into a creation that stands on its own, rooted in the event but with a life of its own.

Starting Point: Rosov Institute Study

The workshop presented key points from research initiated by the Zionist Enterprises Department and conducted by the Rosov consulting firm, focusing on "Cultural Jewish Identities and Interests." The research focused on those who identify as Jews but are neither observant nor affiliated with traditional or institutional Jewish organizations. They are, however, connected to Jewish culture through activities such as holiday celebrations, a sense of tribalism, food, family, and values (e.g., Tikkun Olam).

The study, conducted before October 7th, served as a reference point for discussions in the workshop regarding the changes and opportunities that arose in the past year. According to the research, cultural Jews express their identity through non-religious celebration of Shabbat and holidays, Jewish food, socializing with other Jews, identifying with Jewish values like family, community, and Tikkun Olam, and a sense of shared history and belonging to the Jewish people. The study also noted that many cultural Jews feel disconnected from central Jewish organizations, which they perceive as too religious or not addressing core aspects of their identity. The attitude of "cultural Jews" toward Israel is highly varied, ranging from indifference to criticism, along with positive connections. Many view Israel as a complex or controversial issue.

There is significant interest among cultural Jews in informal programs and activities that are community-led, have low barriers to entry, facilitate socialization with other Jews, and focus on Jewish food, arts, and culture, often involving children and families.

Challenges

Israel's relationship with the Jewish world faces several "traditional" challenges, fuelled by mutual ignorance and a clash of values and worldviews. These relationships have been further challenged in recent years due to increasing criticism from liberal audiences (especially younger ones) regarding Israel's policies on various issues, including religion and state, the peace process, and erosion of Israel's democratic image. As a result, Israel's central standing in the Jewish world has eroded.

The challenge of connecting with unaffiliated Jewish young adults is a key issue for Jewish communities worldwide. This challenge is exacerbated by several trends, including declining affiliation with traditional denominations, chronic disinterest in Jewish identity, generational gaps, and difficulties in reaching the millennial generation. Over the past decade in particular, Jewish communities have also faced internal political polarization and economic challenges in maintaining Jewish life. To these traditional challenges, we add several points of particular importance following October 7th:

- **Conceptual poverty:** We face a new world without having yet developed a new language or strategic anchors to understand it. October 7th was a paradigmatic event; the old world collapsed, yet no new clear paradigm has emerged from it.
- **Global and particularly American social polarization** has impacted the discourse about Israel, turning it into a divisive issue, even within Jewish communities.
- **Lack of a clear Jewish identity anchor** makes it difficult to reach a shared understanding of the challenges, let alone promote collective goals. Different Jewish narratives have emerged (even regarding the October 7th massacre), some of which are in tension with one another. The structural tension between Jewish sovereignty in Israel and the minority experience of Diaspora Jews is a significant and 'constant' factor creating fundamentally different identity experiences inside and outside Israel.

The Great Opportunity: The 'Covenant of Fate' (*brit Goral*) Becomes Obvious

- **Covenant of Fate:** The reactions to the October 7th massacre and the wave of antisemitism led many Jews to feel that they cannot truly escape the framework of Jewish identity. This sparked increased interest in Jewish identity and self-discovery journeys at both the community and individual levels.
- **Support for Israel:** The Jewish people are expressing solidarity with Israel at levels not seen in years, with many discovering for the first time that they care. Jewish indifference toward Israel has diminished in the face of an existential war. The collective Jewish historical memory of pogroms was awakened on October 7th.
- **The major opportunity with left-leaning audiences:** Even Jews who are highly critical of Israel during peacetime are showing increased interest in Israel, with many recognizing for the first time the double standard often present in discourse about Israel. The relationship between the Jewish liberal left and Israel has been particularly strained in recent years, but we now believe this audience is currently largely more reachable for engagement.
- **The events of October 7th blurred divisions within the Jewish community,** leading to unprecedented cross-denominational and cross-political cooperation not seen in decades.
- Notably, around the world, the Israeli diaspora, which has been institutionalizing over the past 20 years, **is becoming more active and serving as a living bridge between traditional Jewish communities and Israel.**
- **The crisis finds Israel amid a significant transformation with structural changes in its relationship with global Jewry.** For example, more Jewish world content is being incorporated into public education, leadership training in the

public sector, and informal educational frameworks, especially in youth movements.

- **In recent years, new technologies have emerged** that enhance personal educational experiences and facilitate P2P connections. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, rich online databases and educational content have become accessible to audiences previously unfamiliar with Jewish education.

It is worth noting that during the workshop, there were differing opinions on the nature of the opportunity to advance a Covenant of Destiny (*brit ye'ud*). While some advocated for seizing this window of opportunity to create a shared mission that would drive joint projects across communities, others argued that focusing on such a mission could highlight divisions and further expose the fragmentation and polarization within the Jewish world.

Insights, Responses, and Recommendations

Visionary leadership is needed, along with the adaptation of the Jewish establishment: Jewish leadership must seize this moment to:

- Develop a **sustainable Jewish vision** that places Israel at the center of the Jewish world—pluralistic, tolerant, and inclusive.
- **A broad tent, not an open tent:** The polarization within the Jewish world has led some Jewish organizations to aim for the lowest common denominator in order to engage as many Jews as possible. However, this often results in a diluted message with little value for building a meaningful Jewish identity. This is a key reason why some Jewish organizations avoid 'Israel engagement', as they feel it is no longer a consensus issue. The Jewish establishment must stand behind broader Jewish values that reflect mutual responsibility, solidarity, and a connection with Israel.
- **Balance between urgent and strategic needs:** Jewish leadership should balance resource allocation between immediate needs and long-term strategic projects, such as promoting the framework of Judaism as culture within communities and among individuals (see below).
- **Incorporating grassroots initiatives and creating opportunities for active involvement:** The Jewish establishment must provide space for grassroots voices and initiatives, adopting an approach that balances stability with innovation. Additionally, it should offer opportunities for individuals seeking to increase their engagement in Jewish matters. This could include volunteer programs, joint projects, or initiatives that enable meaningful contributions, even from home.

- **Developing a framework of Judaism as culture is a pressing need:** Reaching some of the unaffiliated requires creating a richer cultural framework of Judaism to complement the existing religiously-based frameworks. These frameworks should be culturally Jewish in nature and values, as opposed to the trend, especially in the U.S., of creating new frameworks detached from core Jewish traditions and the Jewish calendar, often with a universal character. Such frameworks should not be judgmental, but rather foster spaces where Jewish identity can be 'celebrated' through inclusive community and cultural activities.
- **The practice of developing a cultural framework for Judaism** should be reflected in both formal and informal educational content, visionary leadership, Jewish awareness (e.g., in media and social networks), and Jewish entrepreneurship. Jewish organizations should encourage this by creating opportunities for networking,

"importing and exporting" Jewish cultures between different communities worldwide, providing every Jew the opportunity for an Israeli experience, and developing leadership programs. In this context, it's worth noting that part of the rationale for holding the strategic workshop was the need for feedback between research and practice to refine and develop new ideas in the field of cultural Jewish identity.

- **Efforts should prioritize the opportunity to 'bring home' progressive audiences:** Since October 7th, liberal and progressive Jewish audiences have experienced cognitive dissonance due to the pro-Hamas wave of antisemitism, creating tension between their beliefs, values, and the discourse about Jews and Israel in their social and professional circles. To seize this opportunity, personal encounters and exposure to Israelis' personal stories should be prioritized, rather than relying on government-led advocacy efforts.
- **Conceptual poverty and education:** There is a need to invest in knowledge development to better understand the new world and translate that into educational and cultural projects. Efforts should focus on creating a new knowledge base and language that will help shape a modern Jewish narrative. This requires establishing a formal and informal pedagogical continuum for such connections. This effort is essential to bridge knowledge gaps between different communities and Israel. Innovative educational approaches are also needed to present this new content in a balanced way between home and community education.
- **Connecting the Israeli community:** Efforts should be made to connect the Israeli diaspora to the institutions of the Jewish community. The growing Israeli diaspora often flourishes separately from traditional Jewish community activities.

Core Values and Approaches:

In the roundtable discussions, several principles emerged as foundational for Jewish organizations work:

- **Adopting a pluralistic, representative, and inclusive approach:** Investment should be made in diverse cultural expressions of Judaism, such as Jewish time (the Jewish calendar), Jewish food, and Jewish music. Activities could include cultural festivals, cooking workshops, or music events celebrating Jewish cultural diversity, which would appeal to younger audiences.
- **Involving target audiences in decision-making processes:** "Don't speak about them without them."
- **Using positive language:** Avoid using negative terms like "unaffiliated" and focus on positive definitions. This could include developing new terms that describe young Jews' identities in a positive and empowering way. Changing the language can lead to changes in perception and engagement (e.g., "Affiliated by...").
- **Distinguishing between connecting points and entry points:** In efforts to reach the unaffiliated, many activities serve as a catalyst for engagement but don't necessarily foster long-term identity or meaningful connection.
- **Authenticity, not advocacy,** is a more effective approach to engage liberal and younger audiences. Programs should appeal to their values and ideals, creating a bridge to Israel.

Eclectic Examples of Practical Initiatives:

We aim to differentiate between **entry points**, designed to attract new audiences and spark initial interest in Jewish identity and culture, and **long-term connecting points**, which aim to provide a sustainable Jewish experience and connection to Israel.

Entry Point Initiatives:

- **Develop basic programs on Judaism and Israel:** There is significant demand among Jews, especially after recent events, to delve deeper into Jewish identity. Therefore, there is a need to develop or expand:
 - Short, accessible online courses on fundamental topics in Judaism and Israel.
 - Short tutorial videos explaining key concepts in Judaism and Israel.
 - Interactive apps for self-learning the basics of Judaism and Israeli culture.
- **Encourage bottom-up social initiatives:** Consider establishing "community labs" where community members can initiate and develop activities, supported by small grant systems for Jewish and Israeli community initiatives. Additionally, develop an online platform that allows community members to propose and organize events and activities.
- **Jewish cultural mobile units:** These would tour urban areas offering accessible Jewish content and activities. Pop-up events in public spaces could offer short, engaging Jewish experiences. Advanced technologies like augmented reality could be better utilized to create Jewish experiences in public spaces.

Long-Term Connecting Point Initiatives:

- **Establish professional Jewish networks in various fields**, where Jewish identity is integrated with professional development. This could enable young people to connect their careers to their Jewish identity in a meaningful way.
- **Form councils uniting Israeli and Diaspora leaders** to discuss shared challenges, such as combating antisemitism, fostering Jewish education, and addressing political polarization. These councils would ensure that Diaspora Jews have a direct voice in shaping Israel's policies and identity.
- **Digitally enhance the Israeli experience** through podcasts or videos showcasing the complexity and beauty of Israeli society, creating a digital platform for sharing personal stories of Jews around the world about their connection to Judaism and Israel, or hosting hackathons or competitions to develop innovative ideas for strengthening the Israel-Diaspora connection.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

The events of October 7th have created a unique opportunity to strengthen the relationship between Israel and the Jewish world and to develop a significant cultural Jewish identity. This document presented insights, challenges, and recommendations to seize this opportunity, with a focus on developing frameworks for cultural Judaism and reaching diverse audiences. In the next phase, we intend to expand this process through additional strategic meetings and workshops worldwide, incorporating the voices of Jewish young adults from the Diaspora, with the goal of developing a comprehensive and practical strategy to strengthen Jewish identity and connection with Israel in this new era.