

Insights document

Zionist Enterprise Department Australia & New Zealand session, August 13, 2025

Introduction

This document presents key insights from the **Australia & New Zealand** strategic workshop, held online in August 2025 as part of the Zionist Enterprises Department (ZED) at the World Zionist Organization and Atchalta process exploring Jewish identity, resilience, Zionism and connection to Israel since October 7. The session took place 10 months after the first Jerusalem gathering, six months after the New York session, and less than a month after the South Africa/Belgium/Italy discussion, offering a distinct regional perspective shaped by local realities and political climates.

Building on the insights from previous gatherings, the discussion reaffirmed the importance of cultivating a vibrant and meaningful Jewish cultural identity as a central pillar for strengthening Jewish resilience in the face of current challenges. The gathering also underscored the shared challenges and opportunities facing many Jewish communities, even as circumstances differ.

Ideas and collaborations that emerged from all gatherings are already being integrated into ZED's current work. Looking ahead, additional gatherings and a dedicated working group will focus on developing new language and frameworks to address the conceptual gaps identified in all sessions.

Core Challenges Identified

Notably, this gathering, like the previous ones, highlighted a similar feature of a **post-October 7 awakening of Jewish identity**, marked by a renewed personal and communal connection to Judaism, to Israel, stronger solidarity, and rising attendance at community events. The participants emphasized the growing demand for Jewish education, meaningful content, and distinct Jewish spaces where people feel understood: *"We are constantly aware of our otherness in ways we weren't aware before,"* as one participant reflected. Another recurring theme in all gatherings was the emergence of new crowds joining the community. In the Australia & New Zealand gathering participants particularly highlighted the number of Israeli expats joining the community: *"Israelis were overlooked, but they also seek Jewish identity,"* as one expat noted.

Yet as the war in Gaza has dragged on, this dynamic has shifted. By the third gathering (July 2025), we observed that some of the initial opportunities had, in certain respects, evolved into new challenges. In that gathering we coined the term **‘Jewish fatigue’**: emotional exhaustion, hesitancy to engage publicly, and a shrinking space to celebrate Jewish identity openly, particularly its Zionist dimension.

This sentiment of ‘Jewish fatigue’ was strongly expressed in the recent Australia & New Zealand gathering,¹ and highlighted several key issues:

1. Israel’s Political Isolation

As noted, October 7 and its aftermath sparked levels of solidarity with Israel not seen in years. For many, support for Israel is not merely symbolic; they offer advocacy for Israel in political and social arenas, a commitment sustained since the start of the war and, for some, even before.

Yet participants described a growing gap between themselves and the policies of the Israeli government, which has made offering support increasingly difficult. In recent months, many shared that they struggle even to justify the government’s actions in Gaza to themselves, a reality that makes advocating for Israel even more challenging. As one participant put it: *“The news from Israel is not making its way into conversations with our government and with Australians. Watching the news is exceptionally devastating and frustrating.”*

2. The Authenticity Deficit

Participants described the difficult juxtaposition they face when trying to voice their opinions about Israel. On the one hand, in non-Jewish environments, they often feel compelled to narrow their message, or even defend policies they themselves find illogical, as one participant expressed: *“The Israeli government is making things worse for all of us right now, but we cannot share that outside our community. I feel I must say things that make no sense, because I know people outside our community lack the ability to grasp the nuances.”*

On the other hand, another participant, who spoke about the frustration of having to defend Israel in non-Jewish settings, also noted that it can also be difficult

¹ It is noteworthy that the atmosphere of the gathering was influenced by heightened tensions, shaped by two closely timed events: a major anti-Israel march at Sydney Harbour just ten days earlier, and the Australian government’s declaration only three days prior of its intention to recognize Palestinian statehood.

to share their opinions about Israel within the Jewish community itself.² **One participant reflected that since October 7 there has been a slight narrowing of the conversation regarding the community's pluralism,** and they added that, at least to their knowledge, some people are disengaging from the community because they no longer feel comfortable in the conversation about Israel. One noteworthy comment came from a participant who shared that they feel uncomfortable even discussing Israel with Israelis: *"When we try to present a view that is even slightly outside the mainstream, we are told that we don't understand, that we weren't in Israel on October 7."*

Serious consequences may arise when individuals cannot express their authentic voice. On a personal level, members may feel drained from constantly having to 'pretend,' which can lead to alienation and exclusion both within and outside the community. At the communal level, such an environment risks stifling new ideas and diverse perspectives, undermining members' sense of agency and impact, and fostering a false sense of unity, while unresolved tensions remain buried, only to resurface in moments of crisis.

This dynamic connects to the 'big tent' dilemma that emerged in previous gatherings, and which we will further explore in the insights section of this document.

3. Israel's branding implications in non-Jewish settings

One participant recounted attending a professional conference where he spoke as a representative of a Jewish educational institute. He felt that, regardless of his actual words, the audience perceived him solely through the lens of the Gaza war: *'For the first ten minutes, whatever I was saying, they were thinking: "Gaza, Gaza, Gaza. Genocide, Genocide, Genocide."* This resonates, though not identically, with sentiments expressed in other gatherings, especially during the South Africa/Belgium /Italy session (July 2025), ***namely the yearning to simply live as a Jew, free from the constant political shadow cast by Israel.***

October 7 was a moment of profound particularism, mobilizing many Jews, even those previously disengaged, to express their identity and rally in support of Israel and the hostages. **Nearly two years later, however, that almost automatic linkage between Jews and Israel has become inescapable, and with Israel's image increasingly tarnished, it may be having a discouraging effect on some.**

² We cannot verify whether the sentiment about a 'silenced' discourse within the community reflects a broader phenomenon or merely the personal experience of few participants. Nonetheless, we chose to acknowledge it, as it may resonate with readers from Australia& New Zealand, or other Jewish communities.

4. Representation Deficit

Another dynamic raised was the growing visibility of a small and vocal yet non-representative group of Jews and Israelis that gains disproportionate attention by voicing what is perceived as the 'correct' opinions in the broader public discourse. These individuals have created numerous organizations that **present themselves as representative of the broader Jewish community, though they are not.** Non-Jews often cite or engage with these groups as if they speak for the community as a whole. Participants noted that this phenomenon was not as prominent before October 7, but it has grown significantly over the past year.

5. The Left is Left Homeless

As in previous gatherings, participants in this session also noted **the presence of a significant number of left leaning Israelis and Jews who find themselves 'orphaned', neither engaged with the Israeli/Jewish community nor able to fit into leftist circles.** When the question of their assimilation into the community arose, one prominent voice asked: *"Do they even want to, or can they, fit in?"*

We identified the opportunity for the Jewish community to engage with this group and suggested possible steps also during the previous sessions. Today, however, we may be facing a different reality, and the window of opportunity has narrowed significantly, if not closed entirely. We will return to this issue later in this document.

6. Leadership 'Jewish Fatigue' and the Need for Support

Participants, most of them in leadership positions, raised concerns about a possible sense of 'Jewish fatigue' among Jewish professionals and leaders. Others contrasted the current period with the war with Iran, recalling it as a period of greater optimism, underscoring the Gordian link between the situation in Israel and the diaspora.

This sentiment was also acknowledged in our New York City gathering (March 2025), where the psychological and emotional toll on Jewish professionals emerged as one of the central issues among participants. **In light of the broader ramifications of the prolonged conflict and shifting geopolitical landscape, the need to address leadership fatigue has become urgent.**

Insights to move forward

The following insights draw on observations from current and past gatherings, combined with Atchalta's unique AI tool, *The Calibrator*, as well as the organizers' experience and expertise.

1. Defining the 'Big Tent'

In all gatherings, the same tension emerged around how to manage the internal discourse about Israel within the community, and which opinions are considered acceptable or not. **Most participants called for challenging the 'Big Tent'³ approach for its tendency to dilute core Jewish values, and instead moving toward more clearly defined boundaries while still preserving inclusivity wherever possible.** In the South Africa/Belgium/Italy gathering (July 2025), we stressed that although the premise was moving away from the 'big tent' model, we emphasized that different communities may require 'different-sized tents,' tailored to their unique circumstances and capacities.

A practical way forward is to articulate a 'big tent' baseline that emphasizes shared principles most Jews can stand behind: **1. Israel's right to exist as a Jewish homeland; 2. A clear denunciation of terror; 3. A rejection of the colonialism discourse that erases Jewish indigeneity.** This framing avoids being drawn into the daily controversies of Israeli politics while affirming a broad moral ground that resonates across ideological lines.

This approach also creates space for individuals to acknowledge disagreement with government policies without compromising their core Jewish and Zionist commitments. It offers a shield against polarization by grounding the conversation in fundamental truths and boundaries.

Such clarity is also a way to push back against Jewish misrepresentation in non-Jewish settings. By clearly defining what Judaism and the Jewish community stand for, it provides a counterweight to distorted narratives. **In this sense, defining the boundaries of a 'big tent' is both an internal anchor and an external strategy.**

2. Creating a Richer Jewish Cultural Identity

The Australia & New Zealand gathering reaffirmed the importance of cultivating a richer Jewish cultural identity. While this theme emerged across all gatherings, in the Australia & New Zealand context it carried particular urgency. Participants stressed that political advocacy alone cannot sustain Jewish life,

³ "Big tent" refers to an inclusive approach that aims to encompass a wide range of Jewish individuals and groups, despite differences in religious observance, political views, or cultural practices.

especially when many struggle to reconcile their Zionist commitments with current Israeli policies.

The cultural dimension of Jewish life provides both protection and renewal. A strong cultural identity offers a way to process current realities without reducing Jewishness to defense or survival. It transforms resilience into something generative, grounded in continuity and joy rather than constant reaction to external pressures. Practically, this means investing in programs that foreground Jewish culture, music, arts, Hebrew, food, and literature, while linking them to deeper Jewish values and a meaningful connection to Israel.

A richer Jewish cultural identity also offers a constructive way to engage progressive and liberal Jews. A structured Jewish cultural program could act as a magnetic force for them, offering belonging without demanding ideological compromise.

3. Creating More ‘Jewish Catharsis Moments’

A striking element in the Australia & New Zealand gathering was the heightened sense of “Jewish fatigue,” expressed even more dramatically than in previous sessions. **For participants the gathering itself proved valuable not only in the exchange of ideas but also the simple relief of voicing these feelings in a safe, empathetic environment, what one participant described as a *Catharsis Moment*.**

Without such spaces, exhaustion risks calcifying into disengagement or burnout. With them, leaders are reminded that they are not alone, and that vulnerability can be transformed into renewed capacity for service.

Practically, this suggests building intentional spaces into the communal rhythm, whether structured reflection circles, retreats, or informal gatherings - where leaders and community members alike can share openly. These are not “luxuries” but necessities that sustain the individuals tasked with holding their communities through crisis.

During our NYC session, participants highlighted the need for **leaders-only platforms** to share challenges, reflect, and recharge without the constant “burden” of leading. Such spaces help leaders engage openly with peers and sustain their capacity to guide their communities. Given the recurring need, it may be time to develop dedicated national and international platforms for Jewish leaders to connect and support one another.

4. Reclaiming Zionism as a Movement, not State Policy

Across all gatherings, participants wrestled with the challenge of affirming a connection to Israel while also grappling with disagreement or disillusionment with some of Israel's government policies. This tension was especially pronounced in Australia & New Zealand, where many expressed difficulty reconciling their personal Zionist commitments with the politics they felt compelled to defend in external spaces.

Conflating Zionism with government policy narrows the conversation and alienates those who might otherwise find meaning in it. Instead, we should **reclaim Zionism as a spiritual and value-driven movement**, not reduced to state policy, but understood as part of the broader Jewish collective journey and identity.

This reframing allows communities to hold liberal values while affirming Jewish national identity without contradiction. It also opens space for self-education within the community: learning Zionism's history, diversity, and moral frameworks in ways that strengthen confidence and depth. As part of this, it emphasizes the importance of not relying solely on connections with Israel as a state or its institutions, but also cultivating positive relationships with Israeli civil society, organizations, and individuals—not only for the sake of 'mifgash' (encounters) but as a way to nurture deeper and more thoughtful Zionist perspectives. By embracing Zionism as a cultural and existential resource, rather than a political straitjacket, communities can resist polarization and root their connection to Israel in enduring Jewish values.