

Insights Document

Reimagining a New Golden Age: US Jewry, Jewish Identity & Israel

Executive Summary

The March 2025 strategic workshop convened by the Zionist Enterprises Department and Atchalta revealed critical insights into the evolving relationship between American Jews and Israel following the horrific events of October 7th, 2023. This gathering, building on a previous Israeli workshop, identified both significant challenges and promising opportunities for strengthening Jewish identity and connection.

The workshop identified a profound "October 7th/October 8th divide" - a fundamental experiential gap between Israelis who continue to experience direct trauma and American Jews who have moved to processing the aftermath. This divide is exacerbated by conceptual poverty - a lack of adequate language and frameworks to understand the new reality.

Social media has accelerated polarization, creating what researchers call "collective illusions" where algorithmic amplification creates an appearance of unanimous anti-Israel sentiment, leaving those with nuanced views feeling isolated. Progressive Jews face particularly acute identity challenges, with many feeling politically homeless as progressive spaces increasingly reject Zionism.

Perhaps most concerning is the widespread emotional numbness among Jewish professionals - not indifference, but a trauma response that allows them to function while processing grief. This psychological dimension suggests an urgent need for mental health support systems for community leaders.

Despite these challenges, October 7th has sparked renewed interest in Jewish identity exploration and created unprecedented cross-denominational cooperation. The hostage situation has served as a unifying force that transcends political divisions, while the collapse of prior assumptions has created space for more nuanced understandings.

The approximately one million Israelis living in North America (according to some estimations) represent a significant bridge-building population, while the shift from crisis response to resilience-building creates space for reimagining relationships. Many participants expressed optimism that current disruptions might be setting the stage for a "new Jewish Golden Age."

Workshop participants advocated developing richer cultural frameworks of Judaism anchored in Jewish values rather than detached universal principles. This includes reclaiming and redefining Zionism rather than abandoning the term, emphasizing Hebrew as a cultural connector, and moving beyond the "big tent" approach that has diluted core Jewish values.

Key recommendations include mapping coordination between organizations serving different life stages, creating support systems for traumatized Jewish professionals, empowering young leadership, investing in staff training, rethinking Jewish day school engagement, and creating Jewish spaces beyond traditional institutions.

The discussions revealed greater emphasis in the American context on emotional processing and the challenges of progressive Zionists, while the Israeli gathering focused more on institutional reform and opportunity with progressive audiences.

Some have stressed the urgent need and a strategic opportunity to reframe antisemitism as a broader threat to core American values, countering the false narratives that equate anti-Israel sentiment with anti-racist activism.

Moving forward, a working group will be established within six months to develop new language and frameworks addressing the conceptual poverty identified in both gatherings - part of an ongoing process to strengthen Jewish identity and connection with Israel while attending to the psychological needs of community leaders.

INTRO

On March 26, 2025, the Zionist Enterprises Department (ZED) of the World Zionist Organization, in partnership with Atchalta, held a strategic workshop at The Jewish Education Project offices in New York. The workshop brought together Jewish leaders and professionals to explore the challenges and opportunities for strengthening connections between American Jews and Israel in the new emerging reality following October 7th. It was the second event of its kind, following a similar event that was held in October 2024 in Jerusalem with Israeli social leaders.

This is another benchmark in ZED's and Atchalta's commitment to catalyze the exploitation of the emerging opportunities following October 7th to better the relationship between Israel and world Jewry and strengthen the Jewish identity framework.

This document presents key insights from the workshop discussions, highlighting fundamental shifts, persistent challenges, and potential paths forward.

METHODOLOGY

The workshop featured interactive brainstorming sessions with leaders across various sectors of Jewish communal life including education, advocacy, community relations, philanthropy, and grassroots organizing. Participants engaged in reflective discussions on how their personal Jewish identities and organizational approaches have changed since October 7th. Through structured conversations, participants identified key challenges in Israel's relations with American Jewry and proposed conceptual frameworks and actionable strategies for strengthening connections going forward.

To effectively manage the extensive 35,000-word transcript generated from these sessions, Atchalta utilized its proprietary in-house AI tool, *The Calibrator*. This tool proved particularly valuable in identifying opportunities, operational insights, and blind spots, some of which were explicitly stated while others required careful reading between the lines. The output was carefully and meticulously edited by us, and we now offer it for your comments and suggested edits before we publish it.

The workshop identified several key challenges in the relationship between American Jews and Israel that have been accentuated or transformed since October 7th:



- **Conceptual Poverty:** Both communities lack adequate language and frameworks to understand the new post-October 7th reality. As one participant described it, "October 7th meant the old world collapsed, yet no new clear paradigm has emerged from it." This conceptual gap has led to differing narratives about the events themselves, reflecting the fractures in both Israeli and Jewish society.
- **The October 7th/October 8th Divide:** A fundamental experiential gap exists between Israelis and American Jews. As one participant articulated in their writing, "In Israel, every day is October 7th. In the US, every day is October 8th." This reflects how Israelis continue to experience the ongoing direct trauma while American Jews have shifted to processing the aftermath, creating misunderstandings and frustrations. As another participant noted: "I will never have the same experience or the same function in my head of processing October 7th as someone in Israel. I just won't... they will not understand what we go through here, which is fundamentally different."
- **Progressive-Zionist Tensions:** Progressive Jews face particularly acute challenges in navigating their identities post-October 7th. One workshop participant who works with progressive Zionists described: "Most people I meet with kind of laugh when I say what we do or are like, 'How is that possible?'... it's about changing the perception of Zionism within the American left." They described how "the progressive movement has completely turned on us," leaving many politically "homeless."
- **Social Media's Role:** Social media has accelerated polarization and exposed Jews to unprecedented levels of anti-Israel sentiment. One participant identified 2014 during the Gaza war as a turning point when "social media began being deployed in a way I had never experienced" and when "American Jews were like, 'I'm embarrassed to be Jewish. I feel lied to by my camp and my school.'" For many, October 7th represented a dramatic escalation of this phenomenon, with another participant describing seeing "every person I have ever known in my entire life minus like super, super Jews" posting anti-Israel content.
- **Collective Illusions in the Digital Sphere:** The social media dynamics observed by participants reflect what social scientist Todd Rose terms "collective illusions" – situations where individuals support positions publicly that they may privately question or reject. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to the Israel-Palestine discourse following October 7th, where social pressure and algorithmic amplification can create an appearance of unanimous anti-Israel sentiment. The resulting echo chambers make those with nuanced or pro-Israel views feel isolated and marginalized, despite potentially representing a significant silent cohort. The workshop discussions suggest this effect has intensified dramatically since October 7th, creating deeper divides between perceived public opinion and individuals' private beliefs - exacerbating the feeling that Jews are a minority abandoned by others.

- **The Politicization of Zionism:** The term "Zionist" has become increasingly charged. A participant described how "once I felt it was trying to be taken away from me, I became very protective of it," and shared how their poem starts with "telling my friend I was a Zionist, and immediately she looked unwell." Other participants mentioned friends referring to it as "the Z word" and advocating abandoning the term altogether.
- **Emotional Numbness and Trauma Response:** Jewish professionals reported experiencing a trauma response that one participant described as "going numb" - not indifference, but an emotional shutdown: "There is literally nothing that shocks me, surprises me, upsets me anymore... Nothing shocks me anymore." This numbness was described as a protective mechanism allowing people to continue functioning professionally while dealing with ongoing trauma.
- **The emotional toll on Jewish communal professionals emerged as a recurring theme across every discussion table, significantly exceeding what the authors of this document had anticipated prior to the event.** Participants distinguished carefully between "numbness" as an emotional experience versus "indifference" as a cognitive one, noting that they "care very very much but are unable to express any emotion about it." One professional described colleagues diagnosed with acute PTSD who experienced memory loss from the period following October 7th, while others reported living in a constant state of "fight or flight" with "no time to process" and "no opportunities to deal with our own feelings." The depth and universality of this trauma response among Jewish professionals suggests an urgent need for communal organizations to develop specific mental health support systems for their staff members who have been serving their communities while simultaneously processing their own grief and trauma.
- **Challenges with Non-Jewish Progressive Allies:** A participant described profound disappointment when trying to get progressive partner organizations to acknowledge Jewish pain after October 7th: "We wrote things for them to say... No one would say anything. There was like one group that said this very muddled kind of like 'Israelis and Palestinians, like we're thinking of like both peoples.' Everyone was silent."

Opportunities for Renewed Connection

Despite these challenges, the workshop identified several significant opportunities for strengthening the relationship between American Jews and Israel:



- **Renewed Interest in Jewish Identity:** The events of October 7th have sparked increased interest in Jewish identity exploration. Many participants described personal identity transformations, with one noting, "I now wear a kippah on my head again very proudly... October 7th almost personally forced me to reevaluate, like I really do love being Jewish, and I love all of being Jewish, not just the piecemeal things that I decide to be Jewish with." This renewed commitment creates openings for meaningful engagement even among previously disengaged Jews.
- **The Hostage Situation as a Unifying Force:** Paradoxically, the hostage crisis has created a shared focal point that transcends political divisions. As one participant observed, "The hostage situation is holding the American Jewish and Israel relationship – it created a real infrastructure of connection. Something about this situation created an openness to the Israeli experience within the American Jewish community." This shared concern has facilitated conversations that might otherwise be impossible in the current polarized environment.
- **The Collapse of Prior Conceptions:** The shattering of assumptions following October 7th has created space for new thinking. One participant described this as "the collapse of the conception" being "a humbling experience" that "has made me more open to people with different opinions than I previously held." This openness represents an opportunity to develop more nuanced understandings of Israel and Zionism beyond pre-existing narratives.
- **The Blurring of Boundaries:** Workshop participants noted that "boundaries are dissolving, and a fluidity is emerging that creates new opportunities." The approximately one million Israelis and their children living in North America constitute a significant population that can facilitate deeper connections between communities. These shifting boundaries allow for new forms of engagement that weren't possible before.
- **Reframing antisemitism by positioning it as a fundamental threat to core American democratic and pluralistic values.** This reframing involves directly challenging and disrupting misleading narratives promoted by anti-Israel groups, which inaccurately conflate pro-Hamas and anti-Israel stances with progressive, anti-racist activism. By mobilizing diverse coalitions committed to protecting American pluralism, fostering cognitive dissonance among unaffiliated critical Jews, and uniting politically varied Jewish communal organizations in decentralized yet coordinated campaigns, the Jewish community can effectively transform current fragmented reactions into a cohesive and compelling response. This approach leverages a critical historical moment to reshape the public discourse, strengthen broad-based alliances, and create lasting systemic change in combating contemporary manifestations of antisemitism.

- **From Crisis to Resilience-Building:** As communities move beyond the initial emergency response, there is growing recognition of the need to focus on long-term resilience rather than just crisis management. One participant observed, "Prior to Oct 7, there were many assumptions and mostly Hasbara; people are now willing to think more about where we're headed and where we need to go." This forward-looking orientation creates space for reimagining the relationship between American Jews and Israel.
- **Rethinking Jewish Education:** The crisis has highlighted both successes and failures in Jewish education, creating momentum for innovation. As one educator noted, "This has changed the role of the Jewish Institution – there's an appetite for exploring what Jewish and Israel engagement looks like." The recognition that "Jewish education that was only holocaust was not good enough, the same now for Jewish education that based on October 7 is not enough" points toward more comprehensive approaches.
- **Potential for a "New Golden Age":** Despite the challenges, several participants expressed optimism about the future, suggesting that current disruptions might be setting the stage for renewal: "We are manufacturing Jewish history. The need to be intentional and forward-looking and make choices has real applications... The systems in place are not meeting all our needs and may be setting the stage for a 'new' Jewish Golden Age."

Insights, Responses, and Recommendations

The workshop participants identified several conceptual frameworks and actionable approaches for strengthening connections between American Jews and Israel and Jewish identity:

Conceptual Frameworks:

- **Cultural Framework of Judaism:** Developing a richer Jewish cultural identity that complements existing religious frameworks is essential. As one participant expressed, "Developing a framework of Judaism as culture is a pressing need... We stand before an opportunity to reshape Jewish identity into something coherent, cohesive, and deeply meaningful." These frameworks should be anchored in Jewish values and traditions rather than detached universal values.

- **Beyond the "Big Tent" Approach:** Many Jewish organizations have aimed for the lowest common denominator to engage as many Jews as possible, resulting in diluted messaging. One participant noted, "We used to say we have a big tent. But after [October 7th] we have to look at it differently. Look at the basic way if you're in or not in. There are groups who are no longer in." Organizations must articulate clearer values while maintaining inclusivity where possible.
- **Balancing Universalism and Particularism:** October 7th has dramatically shifted the balance toward more particularistic Jewish concerns. A participant observed that "there is a drive for universalism that is not as it used to be, now it's broken. What do universalists do today? Now they are not let in so they become particularists." Organizations need to articulate how specific Jewish concerns connect to broader human values in this new context.
- **Redefining and Reclaiming Zionism:** Rather than abandoning the term due to its politicization, participants advocated for reclaiming and redefining it. One participant emphasized the importance of "not doing the Jewish people a disservice by giving in to giving this word away out of fear," noting that protecting the concept became important "once I felt it was trying to be taken away from me."
- **Hebrew as Cultural Connection:** Several participants emphasized Hebrew language as a critical connection point to Israeli culture. One noted, "It's hard to understand a culture if you don't speak the language," while another suggested that "Hebrew is a significant part of the gap" between American Jews and Israelis. This points toward greater investment in Hebrew education as a cultural connector

Actionable Strategies:

- **Mapping and Coordination:** Develop better organizational mapping to understand "who's working with which populations and doing what" and identify gaps in service. One participant noted the need for "project managers" in each organization who can shepherd individuals through their Jewish journey, ensuring continuity across life stages and preventing people from falling through the cracks.
- **Professional Support and Healing:** Invest in supporting Jewish professionals who are experiencing trauma while serving their communities. The workshop revealed that "professionals play a therapeutic" role for others but "do not process themselves." Organizations must create "more spaces for healing and acknowledgment" and recognize the "obligation to professionals [who] need their space of processing."
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- **Empowering Young Leadership:** Create more opportunities for young people to lead rather than simply participate. One innovative suggestion was developing "some sort of an internship that seniors in high school are actually the ones going into the Jewish club... and actually doing the recruiting themselves for the programs," recognizing that "the population today is an active one."
- **Investment in Staff Training:** Prioritize staff quality across programs, recognizing that "our best data point is that two buses, exact same itineraries, exact same everything, rank the food worse if they have worse staff." This requires investing in young professionals who "are more similar to the youth of today than to anyone who's working in this field."
- **Rethinking Jewish Day School Engagement:** Consider how to make Jewish day schools more accessible and appealing to non-Orthodox families. One participant suggested a "birthright level investment" to increase the percentage of non-Orthodox Jewish families sending children to Jewish schools, noting the long-term data showing "kids who go to day school are more likely to opt in" to Jewish life and Israel engagement.
- **Addressing the Cost Barrier Directly:** Create more direct financial support for Jewish life engagement. As one participant put it, "The cost of Jewish life is at the end very simple – it's about money. If PJ Library figured it out, why can't we create models for different types of education?" One innovative suggestion was giving "every Jewish family \$5K" for Jewish education, with those who don't need it being encouraged to donate it.
- **Creating Jewish Spaces Beyond Institutions:** Support Jews in "making their own spaces" beyond traditional institutions. Recognize that with current tensions around Israel, some Jews are seeking alternative environments where they can express their Jewish identity safely and authentically.
- **Integrating Holocaust Education with Contemporary Issues:** Develop more sophisticated Holocaust education that connects to contemporary antisemitism and anti-Zionism. One participant observed, "There needs to be a change in Holocaust education" to help young people understand current events in historical context.
- **Preparing for Long-term Complexity:** Move beyond simple, one-dimensional narratives about Israel. A participant noted, "It took ten years too long to address the Israeli-Palestinian reality in Jewish communities in the U.S." Organizations need to prepare Jews of all ages for engagement with complexity, as "Americans don't know the history — in the absence of knowledge, people turn to the anti-Zionist camp."

Comparison with the Israeli Gathering

As noted, as part of this strategic process, a similar workshop was held in Israel with Israeli participants in October 2024. While each gathering reflected its distinct context and organizing concept (the Israeli workshop focused primarily on Jewish Cultural Identity), several overlapping themes—as well as notable contrasts—emerged.

Shared Insights Across Both Gatherings:

- **October 7th as a Catalyst:** Both workshops identified the October 7th massacre as a paradigm-shifting moment that reignited questions of Jewish identity and the connection to Israel. They also noted renewed interest in Jewish identity and Israel, even among previously unaffiliated or disengaged Jews. As one New York participant articulated, "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 sentiment was echoed in the Israeli gathering as well.
- **The October 7th/October 8th Divide:** The New York workshop articulated a profound experiential gap between Israeli and American Jewish experiences, captured in the phrase "Israel is still on October 7th. The American is already on October 8th." This temporal metaphor illustrates how Israelis continue to experience the ongoing direct trauma while American Jews have moved to processing the aftermath. Both gatherings recognized this fundamental difference in perspective as a challenge that must be addressed.
- **Emotional Toll and Trauma Response:** A recurring theme across every discussion table in the New York workshop was the emotional toll on Jewish communal professionals, significantly exceeding what was anticipated. Participants described experiencing a trauma response that manifested as "going numb" - not indifference, but an emotional shutdown serving as a protective mechanism. This emotional dimension was underestimated in the earlier Israeli gathering but emerged as a crucial factor in understanding how communities are processing these events.
- **Cultural Jewish Identity as a Connector:** Both workshops emphasized the importance of fostering a more meaningful cultural Jewish identity, particularly as a means of engaging younger and less affiliated Jews. The New York gathering specifically highlighted the need for more diverse cultural expressions of Judaism, such as Jewish food, music, and celebrating the Jewish calendar in non-religious contexts.



- **Conceptual Poverty:** Each gathering pointed to a lack of sufficient language, frameworks, and educational tools to understand and respond to the new post-October 7th reality. As one New York participant noted, "October 7th meant the old world collapsed, yet no new clear paradigm has emerged from it."
- **The Israeli Diaspora as a Bridge:** Participants in both countries emphasized the growing institutional role of Israeli-Americans and Israeli expats worldwide as a critical bridge between Israeli society and Diaspora communities. The New York workshop specifically noted that "boundaries are dissolving, and a fluidity is emerging that creates new opportunities" through the approximately one million Israelis and their children living in North America.
- **Rethinking the "Big Tent" Model:** Both gatherings challenged the "Big Tent" approach for its tendency to dilute core Jewish values. As one New York participant observed, "We used to say we have a big tent. But after [October 7th] we have to look at it differently. Look at the basic way if you're in or not in. There are groups who are no longer in." This reflects a shift toward more clearly defined boundaries while still maintaining inclusivity where possible.
- **Professional Development Needs:** The New York workshop placed particular emphasis on supporting Jewish professionals who are experiencing trauma while serving their communities. Participants recognized that "professionals play a therapeutic role for others but do not process themselves," highlighting the need for creating "more spaces for healing and acknowledgment" - a dimension that was less prominent in the Israeli gathering.

Divergent Emphases:

- **Emotional Landscape:** Both gatherings were designed to address broad strategic themes rather than focus on participants' personal reflections. Yet, the American gathering's conversation naturally and repeatedly shifted toward the emotional toll experienced by Jewish professionals post-October 7th. Participants described experiencing "numbness" as a protective mechanism and distinguished it from indifference: "There is literally nothing that shocks me, surprises me, upsets me anymore... Nothing shocks me anymore." Many described being "in fight or flight" with "no time to process" and "no opportunities to deal with our own feelings." One participant even shared how colleagues had been "diagnosed with acute PTSD" and experienced "memory loss from that period of time." In contrast, the Israeli gathering remained more centered on strategic frameworks, placing less emphasis on individual emotional impact.

- **Progressive Audiences:** In the U.S., there was deep concern about the sense of political homelessness among progressive Zionists. One participant who works with progressive Zionists described how "the progressive movement has completely turned on us," noting that even when trying to organize around climate action, "every person who sends me a climate group...I literally just google them with the word Palestine. And I'm like, there we go." Others described the painful experience of progressive organizations failing to acknowledge Jewish pain after October 7th. In Israel, participants saw a strategic opportunity to re-engage progressive Jews who may be reconsidering their relationship to Israel due to the rise in antisemitism and alienation from progressive circles.
- **Trauma and Identity Shifts:** American participants described profound identity shifts in the wake of October 7th, with many reclaiming Jewish practices and symbols they had previously set aside. One participant described how "October 7th almost personally forced me to reevaluate, like I really do love being Jewish, and I love all of being Jewish, not just like the piecemeal things that I decide to be Jewish with." Another described a disturbing shift in worldview: "There is a concept in Western thinking... that all people are inherently good... The last several months have led us to feel that's actually not true, and some people just are rotten." This psychological dimension was less prominent in the Israeli gathering.
- **Organizational Focus:** American participants stressed the need to care for Jewish professionals as frontline responders to the crisis. One innovative suggestion involved creating better "handoffs" between organizations serving different life stages, with participants noting "how do we get people from Hillel college... here's the next stage" and emphasizing the need for "project managers" in each organization who can shepherd individuals through their Jewish journey. Several participants emphasized staff quality as critical: "Our best data point is that two buses, exact same itineraries, exact same everything, rank the food worse if they have worse staff." Israeli participants, meanwhile, highlighted institutional reform and innovation, proposing the creation of new networks, educational resources, and frameworks for "Judaism as culture."
- **Hebrew Language:** While both groups emphasized the importance of cultural connection to Israel, the American group specifically stressed the importance of Hebrew as a cultural vehicle. Participants noted that "it's hard to understand a culture if you don't speak the language" and identified "Hebrew as a significant part of the gap" between American Jews and Israelis. The Israeli group did not specifically highlight the role of Hebrew language acquisition in the same way.

- **Zionism as Terminology:** The American workshop featured extensive discussion about the term "Zionist" itself, with participants debating whether to reclaim, redefine, or potentially abandon the term. One participant described writing a poem called "Bad Jew" that begins with "telling my friend I w as a Zionist, and immediately she looked unwell." Others mentioned friends referring to it as "the Z word" and advocating abandoning the term altogether. This linguistic and identity struggle around the term "Zionist" was notably less prominent in the Israeli gathering.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

The workshop revealed that while the October 7th tragedy has created profound challenges for the relationship between American Jews and Israel, it has also opened important windows of opportunity for deeper connection and understanding. The events have forced a reconsideration of assumptions and approaches, creating space for innovation and renewal.

Moving forward, Jewish organizations must balance immediate crisis response with strategic investment in long-term relationship building. By developing richer cultural frameworks, supporting grassroots initiatives, investing in professional development, and leveraging technology, the Jewish community can strengthen connections between American and Israel during this critical period.

This workshop is part of an ongoing process to reimagine the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry, with a new appreciation for the human dimension of this work. Future initiatives will continue to bring together diverse voices to develop a comprehensive strategy for strengthening Jewish identity and connection with Israel in this new era, while attending to the psychological needs of those leading this essential work. Within the next six months, we will establish a working group focused specifically on developing new language and frameworks to address the conceptual poverty identified in both gatherings.