



The Cultural Judaism Movement



Introduction and Context

This document is a manifesto of the Zionist Enterprises Department (ZED) of the World Jewish Organization. It advances a vision to consolidate a Cultural Judaism movement that is Zionist, pluralistic, diverse, democratic, liberal, and inclusive, and to establish it as a distinct and recognized stream within Judaism. This vision builds on, and is further strengthened by, the recent recognition by the World Jewish Organization of the humanist-cultural stream of Judaism.

Over the past five years, the Zionist Enterprises Department has led an extensive process to develop new language, tools, and a relevant mindset to shape a Cultural Judaism movement - a Jewish paradigm responsive to the current challenges facing liberal Jews. The present document is the product of insights generated through multiple strategic gatherings with hundreds of Jewish leaders from across the Jewish world, held both online and in person, and facilitated by the department in partnership with Atchalta/Astarta. These engagements included in-person gatherings in Jerusalem (October 2024) and New York (March 2025); virtual sessions with leaders from South Africa, Belgium, and Italy (July 2025), as well as Australia and New Zealand (August 2025); an in-person gathering in Budapest for leaders from across Europe (October 2025); and an online session with leaders from Canada (November 2025). In parallel, the department conducted dozens of additional discussions and interviews with leading figures in the Jewish and Israeli cultural Judaism ecosystem, further enriching the picture that emerged.

This work also builds on earlier research conducted for the department. This includes a study by Moshe Samuels (2021), which analyzed the most recent Pew survey and examined the department's potential contribution to liberal Jewish life in North America and its respective target audiences, as well as a study conducted by Rosov Consulting (May 2023) on "Cultural Jewish Identities and Interests," consisting of in-depth conversation sessions with 91 culturally Jewish young adults from 21 communities worldwide.

We would like to express our deep appreciation to the hundreds of participants who generously shared their time, perspectives, and sincerity, and to the many partner organizations that contributed their insights and even opened their doors to host. Their trust and collaboration enabled us to better understand the evolving reality facing the liberal Jewish world today — and to begin articulating a vision capable of responding to it.

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Key Findings

Our research identified universal patterns among liberal Jews, communities, and individuals worldwide. Despite geographic differences, these audiences share striking emotional and political dynamics. The following key findings outline the common shifts currently reshaping the liberal Jewish landscape.

1. Identity & Emotional Shifts

Jewish Awakening → Jewish Fatigue

Post-October 7, global Jewish communities experienced a profound shift from a "Covenant of Fate" (Brit Goral) awakening to "Jewish fatigue." In the first days of the war, the crisis unified Jews across political and generational lines, centering on hostage advocacy and shared purpose.

However, as the October 7 horrors were minimized and Zionism was weaponized as a slur in the mainstream public conversation, this solidarity gave way to exhaustion. Rising hostility and the demand to constantly justify their identity have forced many liberal Jews into a "contraction" of visibility. Rather than abandoning their heritage, they are retreating from the public square to private, inward-facing spaces - homes and synagogues, where Jewishness can be expressed without confrontation. This transition from outward celebration to inward preservation reflects a deep emotional depletion. Today's defining challenge: maintaining a proud Jewish identity amid growing political, moral, and social pressure.

2. Political & Values Tensions

Political and Narrative Homelessness

Post-October 7, liberal Jews face political homelessness as progressive movements minimize Jewish suffering. By rejecting "oppressor-oppressed" binaries, they find themselves excluded from former "moral" circles. Simultaneously, in many countries, right-wing antisemitism has been normalized and intensified, creating a pincer movement that leaves Jews squeezed from both sides.

Weaponization of Values

Core liberal values, human rights and social justice, have been weaponized. These principles were not lost, but reassigned meanings within anti-Israel contexts, turning a shared moral vocabulary into a tool for exclusion.

Universalism vs. Particularism

This "narrative homelessness" stems from an inability to reconcile universalist ethics with particularist Jewish identity. While many previously saw Zionism and liberalism as compatible, they are now forced to choose between them. Lacking a political vernacular to bridge this gap, they remain caught between their convictions and their identity.

3. Institutional & Communal Constraints

Leadership Burnout and Governance

Jewish professionals face profound emotional numbness and burnout. Tasked with holding communal trauma without space to process their own, leaders have retreated into silence and caution. This psychological exhaustion has become a governance crisis, stifling the institutional creativity and imagination required to navigate this era.

The Contraction of Pluralistic Discourse

Liberal Jews are caught in a discursive trap. In non-Jewish spaces, they feel forced to defend flawed policies to outsiders; within Jewish institutions, criticizing Israel is increasingly seen as disloyalty. This narrowed discourse reduces complex identities to a binary - maximalist Zionism or anti-Israel radicalism - leaving liberal Zionists without a communal home, and an inability to express authentic beliefs.

From “Open Tent” to “Big Tent” Approach

The events of October 7 and their aftermath exposed a central dilemma facing many Jewish organizations: who is “in” and who is not. Before October 7, many adopted an “open tent” approach - intentionally vague and cautious around contentious issues, including Israel, to preserve broad participation. However, growing fractures within the community, alongside a clearer understanding of where the broader Jewish public stands, have led many to conclude that what is now required is a meaningful big tent, grounded in clear shared Jewish values and an enduring connection to Israel.

Judaism Defined by Antisemitism and War

War and antisemitism have overshadowed all aspects of Jewish life, from Friday night dinners to communal rituals. This “defense-first” identity paused positive cultural celebration. There is an urgent need to rebuild a Jewish identity that exists independently of external threats and political advocacy.

The Need for a Convening Identity

"Cultural Jewishness" remains a fragmented field of dispersed initiatives rather than a coherent system. Millions identify as "just Jewish" and see themselves as "non-denominational," or unengaged in traditional Jewish communities and organizations, but these labels function as placeholders or definitions by negation. We must transform these reactive identities into a positive, proactive framework with shared content and agency.

Fragmented Liberal Jewish Ecosystem

Despite shared values, the liberal Zionist ecosystem lacks permanent infrastructure. While crises like the judicial reform and October 7 triggered temporary cross-border (mainly Israel-Diaspora) mobilization, these bridges remain fragile. The movement's goal is to break these silos, and to create durable channels for cultural exchange and strategic cooperation between Israel and the Diaspora and within Diaspora communities.

The Centrality of Authenticity

Among younger liberal Jewish audiences, authenticity has become the defining currency of engagement. Jewish identity now resonates only when it feels personally relevant, ethically aligned, and participatory - inviting individuals to act as co-creators rather than passive participants. This shift challenges traditional theological frameworks, rigid communal structures, and existing approaches to Israel, particularly in light of certain Israeli policies that many liberal Jews experience as misaligned with their values.

4. Dynamics in Israel

The Crisis of an Illiberal Horizon

A sensitive, shared concern among Israeli and Diaspora liberals is the potential drift of Israel away from liberal-democratic models. For Israelis, this manifests as existential anxiety, leading some toward emigration or distancing from civic duties like army service. For Diaspora Jews, this manifests as emotional detachment, reduced engagement, or a shift toward post-Zionist positions.

Liberals, but Not Part of the Liberal World

Israeli liberals experienced a profound identity crisis in the aftermath of October 7. While the war reaffirmed Israel's role as a safe haven, it also exposed a painful rift with Western liberals. Many came to feel that despite shared cultural affinities, the minimization of the October 7 atrocities and the rejection of Jewish self-determination revealed a fundamental divide in worldview.

Judaism vs. Zionism

A key distinction exists in how these groups perceive core terms:

- In Israel, Judaism is a loaded term, often associated with religious coercion and illiberal politics. While some Israelis find meaningful alternatives within the Jewish Renewal stream, others respond by distancing themselves from Jewish practice and identity.
- In the Diaspora, Judaism remains a positive, pluralistic identity, but "Zionism" is the loaded term, frequently conflated with specific government policies.

While Israelis struggle with the religious branding of their state, Diaspora liberals struggle with the political branding of their national movement, Zionism. Bridging these distinct tensions is essential for a unified liberal Zionist future.

Creating The Cultural Judaism Movement

THE UNIQUE ROLE OF ZED

The Zionist Enterprises Department sits at a unique crossroads in the Jewish world. It operates with and within liberal constituencies in Israel and across the Diaspora and provides a shared space where liberal Zionist values meet democratic values. ZED also has standing within the Jewish national institutions, giving voice to liberal and Jewish cultural perspectives from within the establishment.

This dual positioning, both grassroots-facing and institutionally rooted, makes the department a focal point for an emerging liberal, democratic, and culturally Jewish identity. It enables ZED to act as a translator between sectors and communities, bringing cultural and civic perspectives into the formal Zionist arena, and to amplify voices that are often absent from institutional decision-making. At a time when the liberal Jewish field lacks connective tissue and shared frameworks, ZED can serve as a bridge between communities, ideas, and generations.

Vision

The Cultural Judaism movement is a distinct liberal-Zionist socio-ideological platform grounded in humanistic values such as pluralism, democracy, and inclusion. Led by the Zionist Enterprises Department at the World Zionist Organization, the movement aims to build on emerging trends and opportunities and to catalyze a renewed conceptual framework, with updated language, patterns of conduct, and clear values, that can serve as a meaningful and widely resonant identity framework for individuals, communities, and organizations in Israel and the Diaspora.

As the institutional leader of the movement, the Zionist Enterprises Department aspires to:

1. Provide a Convening Identity: Create a home for "just Jewish," secular, and non-denominational Jews through a cultural-civic framework;
2. Build Global Networks: Foster active collaborations between liberal Jewish individuals and organizations across Israel and the Diaspora;
3. Address Modern Challenges: Respond to the interconnected identity, authenticity, institutional, and ethical crises shaping liberal Jewish life today;
4. Amplify Liberal Zionism: Strengthen the voice and prominence of liberal Zionist perspectives within national and international Jewish establishments;

Foster Cultural Jewish Identity: Work directly with communities to develop and sustain a vibrant Jewish cultural identity worldwide.

How the Movement Operates

To build a meaningful Cultural Judaism movement, work must unfold across multiple layers at once: shaping the public imagination, strengthening the intellectual foundations, and building living communities. Below is the operating framework through which the movement develops.

1. Research Arena: Intellectual Legitimacy

This arena builds the movement's conceptual backbone. By defining terminology, supporting academic research, and publishing collaborative essays, it provides the "intellectual clarity" a fragmented field currently lacks. The goal is to establish a shared language and document global cultural practices to lend the movement long-term legitimacy.

Why Now

The Cultural Judaism movement meets a critical historical moment. In Israel, a surge in Zionist connection coexists with a crisis of "Jewishness," which is increasingly stigmatized by political and cultural actors who instrumentalize Judaism for religious cohesion, fuel extremism, and contribute to democratic erosion. This creates an opening for liberal Israelis to seek identity rooted in culture and solidarity. Simultaneously, the Diaspora's post-war awakening has transitioned into a complex struggle with antisemitism and political isolation. Institutionally, a rare window has opened: national bodies now formally recognize "Cultural Judaism" as the fifth Jewish stream.

This unique convergence of social and political dynamics provides the necessary legitimacy to consolidate scattered initiatives into a coherent, strategic movement with a shared language of belonging.