

DEBORAH LIPSTADT: ANTISEMITISM 'TSUNAMI' | HANUKKAH GIFTS, READS & RECIPES | MARK PODWAL'S FINALE

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RETHINKING ISRAEL EDUCATION

Jewish day schools
tackle the complexities

הדסה



Ramping up—and Rethinking— Israel Education

Jewish day schools grapple with teaching the complexities of the Jewish state | By Sue Fishkoff

ON OCTOBER 10, 2023, Jonah Hassenfeld gathered his middle school students in the auditorium at Schechter Boston, a pre-kindergarten to eighth grade pluralistic Jewish day school in Newton, Mass., where he is director of learning and teaching.

It was the first day back in school after the horrific Hamas attack of October 7, and Hassenfeld knew he had to help his students process the tragedy.

“We had a very emotional ceremony for the entire school and said Tehillim (Psalms),” he recalled in a recent interview. After that, he brought the older students together to examine what happened more deeply.

A video of that 45-minute discussion shows Hassenfeld speaking calmly and

clearly about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the events of October 7, including the murder of more than 1,200 people in southern Israel and some 250 others taken into Gaza as hostages.

“There were other leaders in the school who were afraid this was going to be too much” for the students, he said. “You know, ‘Is a sixth-grader ready to hear about what happened on October 7?’ But we found it really brought down the temperature.”

Hassenfeld’s experience was duplicated in Jewish schools nationwide, as grieving teachers, administrators and students tried to make sense of the unimaginable.

With the ongoing war with Hamas and Hezbollah devastating Israel, and the

Israel is front and center and hands-on at Akiba Yavneh Academy in Dallas (above and below).

surge in antisemitism at home, this past year was one of the most challenging that Jewish day schools in the United States have experienced, say school officials. And now, with a new academic year underway, the impact of October 7 continues to reverberate in the classroom in several ways.

One effect has been a wide-scale re-evaluation of how and what these schools are teaching their students about Israel, with educators attempting to better educate young Jews about the country and its history, help them navigate information—and disinformation—they are exposed to on social media and elsewhere and prepare them to confront a potentially hostile college environment.

In addition, schools have experienced a demographic boost, with an influx of transfer students from public or non-Jewish private schools that they and their parents feel are no longer safe or welcoming for Jews (see sidebar on page 19.)

ISRAEL EDUCATION HAS ALWAYS been a key part of the Jewish day school experience, one of the major ways that these schools—private educational institutions that provide a dual curriculum of Jewish studies and general studies—help students develop their Jewish identities.

Of the 1.6 million elementary and



secondary school Jewish students in the United States, about 300,000 attend day schools, according to the AVI CHAI Foundation's 2017-2018 census of day school enrollment in the United States, the latest figures available. The majority of those students are enrolled in *haredi*, or ultra-Orthodox, schools. As of the 2021-2022 school year, some 92,000 students in the United States and Canada attend non-*haredi* Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and pluralistic or community day schools.

Ever since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the vast majority of these schools have prioritized teaching about the Jewish connection to the Holy Land. Only recently—in the past five to 10 years, experts say—have more Jewish schools introduced nuance into their portrayal of Israel, presenting the complexities of Israeli society and policies and exploring the Palestinian perspective. Educators say it's time to treat Israel with the same intellectual honesty as any other school subject if you want kids to develop a strong relationship with the country.

October 7 and the Israel-Hamas war have given new impetus to that shift, as more and more day schools feel an urgency to provide their students with what they need to flourish in a world where antisemitism and anti-Zionism are on the rise, including on college campuses.

"There has been a lot of increased interest in how schools are teaching about and thinking about modern Israel and Zionism, for a number

of reasons," explained Marc Wolf, chief program and strategy officer at Prizmah: The Center for Jewish Day Schools, an umbrella organization representing 306 non-*haredi* day schools in North America.

"Number one, strengthening that piece of a student's identity about what they think and what they believe about Israel and what they know about Israel," Wolf said. "There's a second aspect, particularly for high

Orly Fass, who teaches the class, said the first five weeks focused on studying various Middle Eastern ethnic groups "so when we come to Israeli history, it won't be in a vacuum."

"Israel is in a specific neighborhood. You can't understand the news from Lebanon without knowing its history, that it's Shia, Sunni and Maronite," she said, referring to different Muslim and Christian populations.

The students also read a Palestinian account of the Nakba, Arabic for "catastrophe," which is how many Palestinians refer to Israel's founding.

"It was really hard for them to hear this," Fass said. "We got into some big fights in class. We celebrate Israel all the time, and we should, but I don't want them to be shocked" when they hear about some of the more complicated parts of Israel's history and how others perceive Israel's history. "I want them to understand the entire picture."

Educators say they also must help students navigate the disinformation about Israel and the war with Hamas spread in the media.

"They get a lot of information from social media, but not knowledge," said Noa Kolomer, Israel and Jewish educator at Golda Och Academy in West Orange, N.J., a pre-K to 12th grade pluralistic school with 525 students "It's our role to help them decipher it, understand what it means."

For many in the day school world, the attack on October 7 was personal. These schools have Israeli teachers



Students at Donna Klein Jewish Academy in Boca Raton displayed their love and support for the Jewish state in the school gym.

schools, which is preparing students for campus and doing that in a way that strengthens their Jewish identity around Israel, so that they feel comfortable walking across campus, even if there are protests happening."

Some day schools are offering discrete classes on modern Israel for the first time. This fall, Akiba Yavneh Academy, an Orthodox day school in Dallas with more than 400 pre-K to 12th-grade students, launched "The Modern Middle East" as a mandatory class for all 11th-graders.

as well as students born in Israel, or with Israeli parents. People connected with the schools have family in Israel and they visit often. That heightened the need to help kids make sense of the Hamas attack and ensuing war.

“We have students with zero degrees of separation from what happened on October 7,” Rabbi Howard Ruben, head of school at the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in San Francisco, a high school with about 180 students, said, echoing the view of many of the school officials interviewed.

In the first weeks after October 7, schools leapt into action to support Israel, holding fundraisers or doing pro-Israel art projects, writing letters to Israeli soldiers and Israelis displaced by the conflict. It was, in many cases, Israel education on the fly.

“After October 7, what we saw in many schools was reactive,” said Sarah Gordon, senior director of Israel education at Unpacked for Educators, a division of OpenDor Media, a Jewish educational media company that works with day schools and congregational and supplementary schools.

“Teachers and heads of school were doing a yeoman’s job in trying to answer all of the questions that students had, and I think it raised a strong awareness of a real need for proactive Israel education,” she said. “We want to give students real cultural literacy, a deep understanding of

Israel’s history so they can talk about it with thoughtfulness, with nuance.”

Some of the changes have been in the works for a while. Sammy Chukran-Lontok, director of Judaic and Hebrew Studies at Donna Klein Jewish Academy in Boca Raton, a kindergarten through 12th grade community day school with more than 700 students, said that she last updated the school’s Israel curriculum 10 years ago. “October 7 came and gave it a new urgency and purpose,” she said.

The school’s high school curriculum this semester includes a new lesson on Israeli resilience as part of a Judaics class. According to the lesson plan, teachers present to students the idea that Israelis “demonstrated incredible resilience” after the October 7 massacre; that, “after months of internal division and protest” over judicial reform, Israelis “immediately jumped into action together” to defend the country; and that the war effort against Hamas is supported by diverse groups in Israel.

Students, in turn, consider under what conditions national unity can transcend deep divisions, and whether one can fight a war without being in the military.

ORGANIZATIONS that support day schools with guidance and resources are stepping up their game. Unpacked, for example, has released new videos and other material and has begun convening regional conferences for

Jewish educators. The first one, held in August in Miami, was aimed at giving teachers in day schools and supplemental schools specific ways to integrate the teaching of Israel and Zionism into their curricula as well as how to address charges of “apartheid” and “colonialism” that are often leveled against Israel. Upcoming conferences are scheduled for November in New York City and January in Toronto.

Prizmah, in collaboration with the Jewish Agency for Israel as well as The Jewish Education Project and the iCenter, two national organizations supporting Israel education, took educators from 19 day schools on a mission to Israel in March, to share best practices and learn from their Israeli colleagues. While such missions have taken place for decades, Wolf at Prizmah said this one, which was supported by the Jim Joseph Foundation, focused on new resources and curriculum related specifically to the current crisis.

One resource given to mission participants, compiled by Unpacked, was a list of Israeli songs released since October 7, along with their lyrics in Hebrew and English, the accompanying YouTube music videos and prompts to engage the students. “If you want your students to understand the current mood in Israel, one of the best ways to do so is by listening to its music,” the program description reads.

Typically, in day schools, Israel education is integrated into the general curriculum—in Hebrew language classes, social studies, art and other subjects.

But in the wake of October 7, some schools, like Akiba Yavneh in Dallas, launched separate courses on modern Israel. Other schools that have offered such courses in the past revived them for this academic year.

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Helena Levine



PRAYERS FOR PEACE IN ISRAEL
 WE INVITE EVERYONE IN OUR COMMUNITY TO WRITE ON THIS WALL YOUR PRAYERS FOR ISRAEL, SOLDIERS, FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS, OR OTHERS.

ENROLLMENT SURGE TIED TO THE WAR

Jewish day schools experienced a two-pronged influx of students following the Hamas attacks on Israel, from American students and their parents seeking a safer Jewish environment as well as from Israelis escaping the war.

Right after October 7, Jewish day schools began absorbing large numbers of Israeli students, some already in the United States on vacation and unable or unwilling to return home, while others came directly from Israel.

By January, Prizmah reported that more than 1,000 Israeli students had enrolled in schools from Atlanta to Boca Raton to Los Angeles. By June, most of the Israelis had returned home.

But another group of new students has stayed—those who transferred midyear from public and non-Jewish private schools.

More than a third of day schools in North America saw increased inquiries from parents at some point after October 7, according to Prizmah.

It's unusual for students to transfer midyear, said Helena Levine, head of school at Donna Klein in Boca Raton. This past January, however, her school accepted 13 transfer students, way above its usual "one or two."

The enrollment bump has continued, with more students making the switch for this academic year. A May 2024 Prizmah report that

Milken school students in L.A. wrote prayers and letters to Israelis (above and below).

surveyed 103 day schools found that 62 of them said they were enrolling new students for 2024-2025 "as a result of the change in climate post October 7th." While Prizmah does not yet have a tally of the total number of new students nationwide, half of the schools surveyed said they were getting students who did not come from their usual list of prospective families.

"We are seeing kids we would not have seen before, not from our usual feeder schools," said Sarah Shulkind, head of school at the Milken school in Los Angeles. But, she cautioned, "How much is because of October 7 is hard to say."

When asked their reasons for enrolling their children, parents in the Prizmah survey cited different factors, from safety concerns to wanting a more Jewish environment. The top reason, however, was concern about antisemitism—everything

from anti-Israel school board resolutions to teachers bringing pro-Palestinian material into the classroom to harassment from other students.

Of the 177 new students at Donna Klein this fall, Levine said 35 families cited antisemitism or anti-Zionism as their major motivation for making the switch.

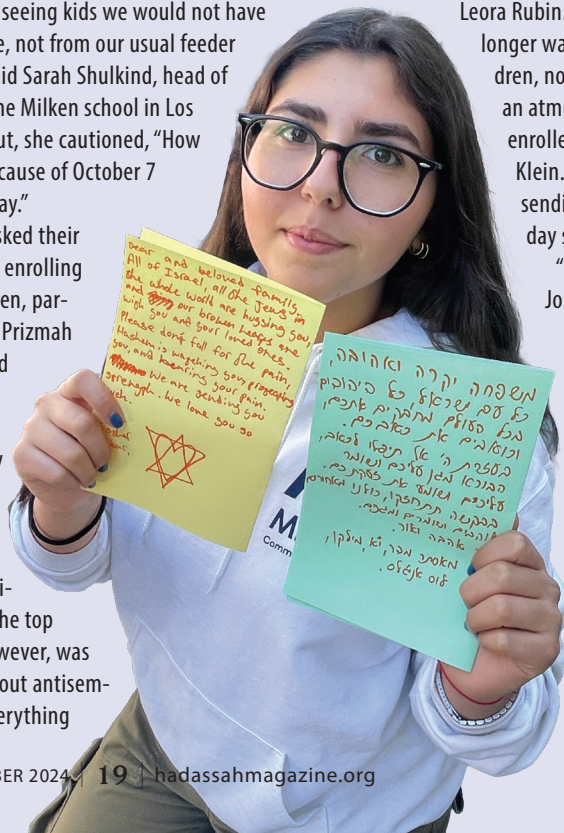
"We have families moving here from Canada, England, South Africa and Belgium as well as from other states," Levine said. "And they are looking for a Jewish day school when they might not have done so in the past."

That was true for Leora and Josh Rubin, who moved to Boca Raton over the summer from Ann Arbor, Mich., because, they said, they no longer felt comfortable in their city.

The final straw came in January when their local school board passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. "Everyone wants a ceasefire in theory, but this is not the purview of a school board," said Josh Rubin. "It was an attempt to demonize the Jewish community. We went to the meeting and were shocked by the hundreds of keffiyeh-clad people screaming at any Jew who spoke out."

"It was like a dagger to the heart," said Leora Rubin. Agreeing that they no longer wanted to raise their children, now 8, 10 and 13, in such an atmosphere, the Rubins enrolled the kids in Donna Klein. It was their first time sending them to a Jewish day school.

"It just felt right to us," Josh Rubin said. "After October 7, we realized that our Jewish identity and our kids' Jewish identity and their understanding who they are, their history, their present and their future, is very important. We think that sending them to Jewish day school is doing our bit." —Sue Fishkoff





Among other volunteer work in Israel last spring, seniors at Golda Och Academy picked fruit near the border with Gaza.

That’s the case at the Jewish Community High School in San Francisco. The course, “Israel: Conflict, Complexity and Hope,” has been reintroduced as an elective, but Ruben, the head of school, said that every student also learns about Israel as part of a mandatory course on modern Jewish history. “It’s an essential part of who we are as a school,” he said.

But whichever approach a school takes to Israel education, Gordon, of Unpacked, said the important thing is to be intentional about it. Set down goals with benchmarks and standards like is done for science, math and Bible study, she suggested. “What do I want my ninth, 10th, 11th and 12th graders to know, feel and do for Israel by the end of each school year?”

ISRAEL EDUCATION IN DAY SCHOOLS has at times been criticized, sometimes by their own alumni. In December 2023, alumni of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Md., a pluralistic junior kindergarten to 12th grade day school that enrolls 950 students, expressed public dissatisfaction about what they were taught about Israel as

teenagers.

“When we reflect on our years at JDS, many of us feel that our Israel education was defined by false narratives and glaring omissions,” the open letter, signed by roughly 150 alumni, said, referring to the school by its acronym. The letter, signed mostly by people in their 20s and 30s, began by expressing “devastation” about the October 7 attack but added that “we are also deeply concerned by Israel’s grave violations of human rights and international law, not only since October 7th but over the last 75 years throughout Palestine.”

The letter caused a brief public firestorm and two open letters of rebuttal from school alumni that garnered hundreds more signatures than the first. The school’s leadership also responded, saying they were “deeply hurt and disappointed” by the letter.

In fact, students at Charles E. Smith now take a mandatory course on the modern State of Israel and are also offered an elective called “Arab-Israeli Conflict” that uses *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine*, a book written by Israeli and Palestinian educators.

“On one page there will be the War of Independence. On the other page, we’ll talk about the Nakba,” explained head of school Rabbi Mitchel Malkus. “Students are understanding that Israeli historians and educators may teach about the War of Independence this way, and Palestinians may understand it differently,” he said, acknowledging that the course was launched after many of the authors of the critical letter graduated.

When Gordon entered the field of Jewish education almost 20 years ago, she said, very few day schools

exposed students to multiple narratives about Israel. That was true of her own experience attending a Modern Orthodox day school in Montreal, she said.

“I would say over the past five years, more and more schools are coming onboard,” she said, adding that while she and Unpacked may not agree with some of the narratives presented about Israel, students should know about them to be prepared for the post-day school world.

Rather than alienating young Jews, educators believe that focusing on more knowledge, Israel warts and all, especially in the higher grades, will lead to a stronger connection to Israel that will last through adulthood.

“One of the things that we pride ourselves on is training young people to be critical thinkers,” said Prizmah CEO Paul Bernstein. “We are trying to embed a love for Israel, yet with critical thinking around it. So, we’re going to have diverse opinions.

“What I’ve been proud to see,” he added, “is how many day school alumni are among those that are standing up and speaking for Israel and speaking for the community in a really difficult situation on campus.”

WHILE MUCH ISRAEL EDUCATION takes place in the classroom, it also happens in the country itself on school-sponsored trips. Many were canceled during the 2023-2024 school year because of the war. But others went forward, focused on learning about and helping a post-October 7 Israel.

Golda Och’s most recent graduating class spent three months in Israel in the spring, as they do every year, but this year they focused on helping communities and Israelis displaced by the conflict.

“We sent 28 seniors, and they volunteered on kibbutzim, picked fruit in *Otef Aza* (the Gaza envelope), helped clean homes in evacuated areas,” said Rabbi Daniel Nevins, the head of school. “It was a really meaningful experience.”

Mimi Lebeau, now a freshman at Columbia University, was on that trip.

“I was interested in how the school would approach [the war] while still giving us the traditional trip,” she said. “I expected we’d learn about all sides, but the way they talked about it went beyond what I’d imagined. We met settlers, Palestinians opposed to Israel.”

Rather than push her away from Israel, she said, the experience “made me stronger in my connection, because I understand more about the society.”

Whatever their approach to Israel education, October 7 and the resultant war has moved the day schools interviewed to do more—more classes, more discussions, more Israel.

At the Milken Community School in Los Angeles, a non-denominational sixth to 12th grade school with more than 760 students, head of school Sarah Shulkind said, “We have definitely ramped up our Israel education post October 7.”

Some of that was initiated by students. “They came to us, asking for more,” Shulkind said. The juniors and seniors formed a leadership circle; a daily minyan offered prayers for Israel and the hostages.

The school brought in 15 speakers last year instead of the usual three or four, representing a wide spectrum of Israeli and Jewish perspectives, including former Labor Party Knesset member Einat Wilf and Noa Tishby, Israel’s former special envoy on antisemitism.

In San Francisco, the Jewish Community High School held two

daylong workshops on Israel, one in December and one in March, where each student could choose their own entry point, be it through art, text, study, film or lectures.

Adi Alouf, director of Jewish and student life, began holding lunch-and-learn sessions once a week, where students would talk about a news event from that week from an Israeli perspective. For example, the week after President Biden’s State of the Union address in March, the kids analyzed how the president addressed the war with Hamas.

In mid-September, the session was packed when Alouf brought in 22-year-old Ofri Reiner, a survivor of the Nova music festival massacre. She spoke candidly of what it was like to run through a potato field with 1,000 other young Israelis while terrorists shot at them from the surrounding hills. Her brother, Shalev Dagan, an Israel Defense Forces soldier, was killed that day.

The two dozen students in the room listened in stunned silence. Afterward, 17-year-old Stella Rosen asked, “What is your advice for

keeping hope alive?”

“Hope is very fragile,” Reiner responded. “I agree it’s very hard after what’s happened.” Noting that she was active in coexistence groups as a teenager, today, she admitted, she “has faith,” but not hope. “I really believed in peace when I was young. It’s not something I can see now.”

While giving up on hope may not be the preferred position of many Jewish educators, the school did not shy away from having their students hear that perspective.

“At the beginning of the war, October 7 brought a fractured Israel together,” said Kolomer of Golda Och. “Now Israel is fracturing again. That’s the reality that is Israel. We want our students to be comfortable in the complexity.” **H**

Sue Fishkoff is the former editor of *J. The Jewish News of Northern California* and the author of *The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* and *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority*.

Journalist Gabe Stutman contributed reporting from Washington, D.C.



Ofri Reiner, a survivor of the Nova music festival massacre (third from left), shared her experience with students at the Jewish Community High School of the Bay in San Francisco.

COURTESY OF JEWISH COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL OF THE BAY