

REFLECTIONS ON JEWISH EVENT PLANNING DURING WARTIME – JANUARY 2024

We attended a large Jewish conference outside of Israel a few weeks ago, and wanted to report about a troubling phenomenon that deserves careful consideration.

The conference planners of this large pluralistic Jewish conference made a conscious decision that Israel and the war would have no place in the public spaces.

There were several sessions that addressed Israel, Gaza, and the war, but nothing in the public arena. Lobbies, halls, and corridors were home to other messages – climate change, gender issues – but there were no pictures of hostages, no signs declaring support for Israel.

This was clearly a decision that did not please everyone. Many Israelis and locals were deeply uncomfortable. The conference planners offered us several explanations for their choice, all of which felt highly significant, and worth examining as the war and its repercussions for Israel and the Jewish People may be with us for many months, if not years to come. We sense that these issues, of collective responses to the war, will become a recurring theme in Israel-Diaspora relations and Jewish Peoplehood in general.

[We preface our report by noting that everyone in the Jewish world is facing a traumatically changed landscape: No one is at their best, and we must be forgiving of miscalculations. We write this report in the hope to make decisions easier in the future, rather than to condemn mistakes of the past.]

The four issues we address are:

- 1 The desire or need to occasionally detach oneself from constant “war awareness”**
- 2 Developmental questions about when and how younger children should be exposed to the war**
- 3 The avoidance of dispute over deeply controversial issues in the community**
- 4 Generational chasms in attitudes to Jewish Peoplehood and solidarity**



1

“We need a break”

One reason the conference planners gave was that the local Jewish population had found the months following October 7th very painful. Not only were they horrified by the Hamas attack, they were also inundated with anti-Israel and anti-Jewish rhetoric in the street and in the media. They needed a break. Time to spend with their fellow Jews and, to an extent, avoid the constant bombardment of death and misery.

Our questions

To what extent should Diaspora Jewry feel the ongoing trauma of Israelis, in order to embody their solidarity? Can solidarity or even empathy be enacted without a public demonstration?

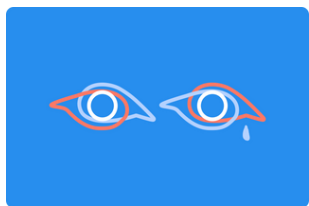
We all feel the need to take a breather from these overwhelming times. Yet many of us do so in the awareness that there are hostages, soldiers, and bereaved who are not granted such a luxury. This balancing of awareness and taking “a breather” might be easier in Israel since our entire public sphere will remind us of the war. We might say this constant awareness offers Israelis a form of “moral permission” to breathe.

Should a Jewish space provide a public reminder of Jews’ pain to offer moral permission to temporarily avoid it?

Our suggestion

“Neutrality” is not an option in these circumstances. Leaving the public space empty of the war is not avoiding a statement, it is making one.

Perhaps the choice might be the opposite of the one taken at the conference: Don’t leave the public space empty, allowing for people to choose to address the war in separate sessions. Instead, place the war -- or some element of it, such as refugees’ challenges or hostages posters -- in the public space, and assign specific spaces that are empty of war references. In this way, we can both encourage “taking a break” while acknowledging that awareness of the war is unavoidable. Alternatively, one might go the other way, and designate a particular space for marking the war and leave others clear.



2

“Some parents here don’t want their small children to be exposed to the war. It will damage their mental health.”

The conference was a multi-generational space, much like a synagogue or a JCC. Young children were there along with their parents. Parents had made a conscious decision to protect their children from such disturbing news.

Our questions

Are the parents worried about how their children might react? Or are they concerned about the questions their children might ask them, and how to respond to them? These are two different educational or psychological challenges.

Our suggestions

We refer to Dr Sivan Zakai’s ground-breaking research into young children’s encounter with Israel (“My Second Favorite Country”, 2022). Her rule of thumb is that our kids know a great deal more than we might wish them to know, a great deal earlier than we imagine.

The moment a child progresses from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” – about ages 5-7 – then the child is reading anything. Parents’ Facebook posts, news tickers on TV news, posters, and signs in the streets. Information is being gathered whether we like it or not.

Our only question as parents or as educators is **to what extent we feel our children require help in making meaning out of these snippets of disturbing information.** This approach to meaning-making can also learn from latest research into PTSD, which points to the value of framing events early so as to remember them in a less damaging way.

Perhaps the community or the conference itself might provide practical guidance to parents. Workshops and online information can go some way to enable parents to make courageous honest choices with their children.

**3**

“If we put up images of Israeli hostages, someone will ask why we’re not also remembering Gazan suffering, and it’ll end up as a big fight.”

The conference planners were, perhaps rightfully, afraid that ugly arguments might break out, or worse, an anti-Israel protest. To keep things calm, they felt it best not to call attention to Israel and the war.

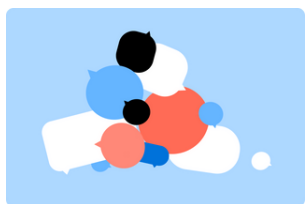
Our questions

Is it realistic or even desirable to expect a community to be pluralistic in everything except its attitude toward Israel? Might the health of a community be better judged by the way it engages with its differences, rather than the methods it uses to temporarily avoid them?

As happened at this conference, avoidance only postponed the argument. Conflicts did break out and arguments took place. Many bemoaned the lack of opportunity to address the issue in the open. Instead, these conversations acted as a dissatisfied murmur, an underlying grievance, rather than a topic for healthy open discussion.

Our suggestion

For the duration of this traumatic period, we would recommend that organizations and conferences specifically plan spaces and events that invite and curate healthy arguments. Certainly, these spaces and programs will need to be planned and managed carefully. For the Sake of Argument, among others, can offer guidance and assistance.

**4**

“There are more important things in the world that deserve our attention. The Climate Crisis, for example.”

It was not a surprise to find that the conference planners were all under 40 years old. There is a deep generational divide in the Jewish world, where more younger Jewish adults feel that the war in Israel has little to do with them. The idea that when part of the Jewish people is suffering all of the Jewish people suffers, is not a sensibility that they experience. And so Israel is just one of many issues, and by no means the most important issue to the planners, even in this historic moment.

Our questions

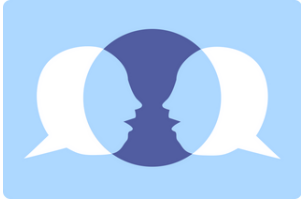
We found ourselves asking two equally troubling questions:

- Has our educational emphasis on Tikkun Olam, on helping others, on our “values”, inured our younger generations to the value of commitment to and solidarity with our extended family, our tribe, our People? Has misuse of the phrase “good for the Jews” led to a distaste for caring for our own? Might it be that Hillel’s perennial challenge to both look after ourselves while also looking out for all, has defeated us? Is being “for me” always morally inferior to being “for others”?
- Or is it the case that Diaspora Jews have happily internalized their commitment to other Jews in their extended family, but this sense of family no longer extends to Israelis? We played a maudlin thought experiment: Had over a thousand French Jews been slaughtered, and hundreds held in captivity, would the conference have removed mention of it? Is there a sense that Israelis’ power and agency remove them from some Jews’ empathy? Is it possible that for some Jews, to adapt a phrase, “Israelis don’t count”?

Our suggestion

Both these challenges, that of the implications of Jewish belonging, and the perceptions of Israel’s place in the Jewish world, will take time to address.

- Our sense is that to tip the scale back towards a balance between “us vs all”, the Jewish community must demonstrate its commitment to maintaining the tension. Perhaps we ought not double-down on supporting Israelis above all others: perhaps we should also demonstrate our ability to see the suffering of innocents in Gaza, too. Maybe the great Rabbi Hillel had a point when asking, simultaneously, “If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I?”
- As for perceptions of Israelis by the rest of the Jewish people, there is plenty of blame to go around. Israelis, too, are often guilty of ignoring the Diaspora when they speak of “Am Yisrael”. There are many excellent and heartwarming examples of “mifgashim”, when Jews from around the world meet with Israelis. But perhaps we ought to prioritize mifgashim that bring our differences to the fore, not only our similarities. We need to appreciate how different we are, not assume we are alike and then privately hit disappointment or frustration.



Summary

We hope that this analysis of the event we experienced is useful not only for planning communal events, but for raising questions about education and discourse amongst Jewish organizations more generally.

The suggestions we've made are not easy ones. In almost every case, they push for embracing difference and seeking out disagreement, rather than papering over it.

There is certainly a risk to this approach as well. But as extensive research has shown, the ability to contain diversity of opinion creates stronger families, stronger organizations, and ultimately, we believe, a stronger people.