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# A polarized diaspora: the changing relationship between American Jews and Israel after October 7th

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A Polarized Diaspora: The Changing Relationship Between American Jews and Israel After

October 7th

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## **Abstract**

How has the relationship between Jewish American identity and Israel shifted since October 7th? Deemed ‘the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust’ by President Biden, the Hamas-led terrorist attacks on October 7th, 2023, marked a pivotal change in Jewish American support for Israel. Jewish American organizations sent nearly a billion dollars in donations to Israel after the attack during a growing movement of solidarity among Jews in support for Israel. However, the retaliatory Israeli policy and military responses after October 7th has prompted a political and generational divide between Jews in the US. Such a divide can not be generalized among individuals, however, three political movements shape the discourse: one that vies for consistent support of Zionism; one that argues for a new, progressive Zionism; and one that rejects Zionism in favor of an identity without. Within these three streams is a widening polarization between Jewish Americans that support Israel and Zionism, and those that do not. The policy and programming changes in Jewish American organizations are indicative of this, and organizations must grapple with which camp they position themselves in and the broader implications attached. For analysis, I will be looking at multiple Jewish American organizations that fall on a spectrum along these three movements: Taglit-Birthright Israel (Birthright), the American Council for Judaism (ACJ), and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). I will use these analyses to comprehend how Jewish American organizing can foster novel understandings of the relationship between Jewish Americans and Israel.

## Introduction

How does war change identity? On the Jewish religious holiday of Simchat Torah on October 7th, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups stormed the southern Israeli-Gaza border and attacked 21 Israeli cities and towns in the region. With about 1200 Israelis killed and 250 taken hostage to Gaza, the coming days showed Jews worldwide faced with calamitous grief and a search for reprieve within and outside of their communities. To many American Jews, October 7th brings the Holocaust at the forefront of one's mind. Perhaps October 7th was a wake-up call; it showed Jews that their safety was still compromised under a Jewish state, despite having grown up with the belief that a Jewish state was the panacea to their protection as a people. For other Jews, October 7th reinforced the need for a Jewish state. Israel provided a safe haven for Jewish refugees before, during, and after the Holocaust. Hamas's attack proved that Jews were once again a victim of persecution for their Jewish identity, and therefore it made sense to support the State of Israel's policies towards what it deemed to be intruders. Then other American Jews are stuck in the middle. They grew up in the Jewish American establishment: they went to Sunday school and Hebrew school every week, they are 'culturally' Jewish, or they never stepped foot inside a temple but lit the menorah every Hanukkah. These Jews may feel betrayed by the religious institutions they grew up in, to have been taught a Zionism that contradicts what they see in the media. They may believe in Israel's right to exist, but do not agree with its policies or the American relationship to the country. How did Oct. 7 change their identities?

The Jewish American experience is not a monolith, nor can it be studied as one; however, Jewish American organizations and individuals exist along a broad spectrum of support for Israel. Two trends are apparent, and surveys conducted after October 7th, 2023, reflect the

evolving landscape of Jewish American political thought. For some Jews, Oct. 7th affirmed the ‘status quo’ of the Jewish American establishment, that is, unwavering support for Zionism and the right of Israel to exist. That said, for other Jews, October 7th grew the movement of Jewish Americans who reject Zionism for various reasons, whether that be in the spirit of collective liberation or a refusal to conflate Jewishness with the State of Israel. It is a movement that has taken shape at the grassroots level within the past few decades in response, in part, to Israeli policy responses. Survey data finds widening polarization between Jewish Americans, particularly between those older and younger. Older Jewish Americans are more likely to identify as Zionists and support Israel’s actions, while younger Jewish Americans are increasingly questioning or rejecting these positions.<sup>1</sup>

Between these two extremes is a Zionism that is more malleable; its advocates desire a “progressive” Zionism that may be reminiscent of a two-state solution. They imagine a Zionism that promotes democracy in a way that advocates for equal rights between Israelis and Palestinians with support from the US government. A survey done in October 2024 by Pew Research Center shows Jewish Americans divided on Israel’s military operation against Hamas after October 7th. 28 percent of Jewish Americans said that Israel’s military operation has gone too far, 24 percent said it has not gone far enough, 32 percent said Israel is taking the right approach, and 13 percent were unsure. Confidence in Netanyahu as a leader is split between Jewish Americans, with 42 percent expressing support for him.<sup>2</sup> A separate study done by Israel’s Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism found that 94% of young American Jews ages 14-18 stated that they still have an emotional connection to Israel after

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Kamarck and Jordan Muchnick, “The Generation Gap in Opinions Toward Israel,” Brookings, November 9, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/>.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Schaeffer, “Slight Uptick in Americans Wanting US to Help Diplomatically Resolve Israel-Hamas War,” Pew Research Center, October 3, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/01/slight-uptick-in-americans-wanting-u-s-to-help-diplomatically-resolve-israel-hamas-war/>.

October 7th. Of this majority, however, 41.3 percent of young Jewish Americans believe that Israel is “committing genocide” in Gaza, 62 percent of respondents consider themselves to be Zionists, and 66 percent said they sympathize with the Palestinian people as a whole.<sup>3</sup> This study and those alike show the deep nuances of Jewish Americans’ beliefs towards Zionism and Israel, particularly since October 7th.

This paper describes the changing dynamics of Jewish American support for Israel before and after October 7th, 2023. The paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the methodology—case selection and interviews—for the project. The subsequent section details the argument that October 7th polarized the Jewish American community, deepening trends that were already underway. Before moving to the case studies, the paper provides background on trends in Jewish American relationship to Israel since the 1940s. Those trends are brought into the present using the case studies of three prominent Jewish organizations in the US: Taglit-Birthright Israel (Birthright), Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), and the American Council for Judaism (ACJ). The first case study analyzed is JVP, followed by Birthright and ACJ. For each case study, its background and purpose is examined, as well as various elements like its structuring, programming, and membership before October 7th. Each respective case study is followed by a dissection of findings that are particular to these elements. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings’ significance and implications for future research within the Jewish American community and with regard to various fields of study. By analyzing these shifts, this project contributes to broader discussions on Jewish identity and how war impacts identity. These findings also offer a framework for future research in how transnational identities adapt to crises and conflicts.

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<sup>3</sup> Yuval Paladi and Ido Liberman, “Mosaic Teen Israel Survey: Antisemitism and Attitudes Post-October 7th,” Mosaic United, September 2024, <https://mosaicunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Mosaic-Teens-Survey-Full-Report.pdf>.

## **Methodology**

### *Case Selection*

For the case selection, three organizations were selected according to their stances on Zionism and their histories in the context of Jewish American organizing. Each organization chosen has aligned itself somewhere along the spectrum of Jewish American support for Zionism. This includes a movement that vies for consistent support of Zionism, one that argues for a new, progressive Zionism, and one that rejects Zionism in favor of an identity without. These three movements towards Zionism are reflective of a greater political and sociological shift within the Jewish American public, which have grown within the past two decades. It has fomented into a widening polarization between Jewish Americans that support or oppose Zionism and the State of Israel. Jewish American organizations like the case studies chosen are solidifying their stances within this growing gap.

Taglit-Birthright Israel and its foundation serves as a pro-Zionism case study that advocates for the continuation of the ‘status quo’ Zionism supported by the US government. Birthright Israel is the largest Jewish educational tourism organization targeted towards young Jews, the most prominent in the US. Twenty percent of American Jews ages 18-46 have participated in the program since its inception in 1999.<sup>4</sup> It serves as one of the primary methods within the Jewish American mainstream in promoting a connection between American Jews and the State of Israel. The program aids in the identity exploration of young American Jews in the major formative years of a person’s life. This is particularly significant given the persistent ethno-religious violence and conflict that Israel has engaged in, which then produces sociopolitical consequences in the Jewish diaspora. Identity then becomes a politicized tool in

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<sup>4</sup> Leonard Saxe, Graham Wright, and Shahar Hecht, “The Reach and Impact of Birthright Israel: What We Can Learn From Pew’s ‘Jewish Americans in 2020,’” *Contemporary Jewry* 43, no. 2 (December 2, 2022): 321–41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-022-09467-6>.

promoting various narratives within the Jewish American establishment and its infrastructures. Studies on the Birthright program have consistently shown that the trip “increases participants’ sense of Jewish identity and attachment to Israel.”<sup>5</sup> It is an example of homeland tourism, which is used to promote an attachment between the “homeland”—Israel—and the Diaspora, with Zionism serving as the strategic link.<sup>6</sup> Birthright-Taglit’s changes as an organization post-October 7th are reflective of a changing and uncompromising landscape within the Zionist movement in the US.

JVP was founded as a grassroots membership organization in 1996 by a group of college students with an immense influx of students joining after the Second Intifada began in 2000. Culturally, JVP had always been a US-based organization with a largely queer, feminist, left-leaning base. It was in 2002 when the Second Intifada reached its peak that JVP began working towards building a national network with financial backing to support its initiatives.<sup>7</sup> JVP’s stated goal continues to be to mobilize American Jews towards “building a Judaism beyond Zionism” and end the US support for Israeli policies towards Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> JVP describes themselves as “the world’s largest Jewish organization standing in solidarity with Palestine,” with various councils and networks in 36 states. Given the significantly large size of the organization and its prominence in Jewish anti-Zionist circles, its organizational changes—particularly in regards to membership and reach—can provide some indication of greater shifts in attitude within the Jewish American community. JVP has remained consistent in

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<sup>5</sup> Ella Ben Hagai, Adam Whitlatch, and Eileen L. Zurbriggen, “‘We Didn’t Talk About the Conflict’: The Birthright Trip’s Influence on Jewish Americans’ Understanding of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict.,” *Peace and Conflict Journal of Peace Psychology* 24, no. 2 (February 1, 2018): 139–49, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000289>.

<sup>6</sup> Yehonatan Abramson, “Making a Homeland, Constructing a Diaspora: The Case of Taglit-Birthright Israel,” *Political Geography* 58 (January 8, 2017): 14–23, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.01.002>.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Vilkomerson and Alissa Wise, *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love: Lessons from Anti-Zionist Organizing* (Haymarket Books, 2024), 15-17.

<sup>8</sup> “FAQ,” Jewish Voice for Peace, September 30, 2024, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/faq/>.

its messaging and goals of the organization since its inception, so tracking such changes in membership and engagement can be indicative of a changing dynamic.

Although the ACJ has also held both an anti-Zionist and non-Zionist position, it has opposed Zionism on religious grounds based in Reform Judaism. Formed in the early 1940s by a group of Reform rabbis, the Council's opposition to Zionism caused immense concern among the Jewish American mainstream, which had been dominated by Jewish groups that had promoted Zionism as a way to create a perceived sense of unity. Throughout the ACJ's existence, mainstream Jewish groups like the Anti-Defamation League and, in particular, the American Jewish Committee, continuously challenged the ACJ's public statements and positions: "the Council's history offers us evidence of the contentious debates over Zionism and of the anti- and non-Zionist ideas held by American Jews."<sup>9</sup> The Council's longstanding anti-nationalist position on Zionism and its historical engagement with the Jewish American mainstream show the diversity of thought within American Jewry regarding Zionism. Its history also shows how Jewish leaders began to slowly outcast anti-Zionists from an "emerging Zionist consensus."<sup>10</sup> The ACJ's current restructuring process after October 7th raises greater inquiry about how the relationship between American Jews and their view of Israel and Zionism has changed.

### *Interview Methods and Design*

Research conducted was determined exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board. The purpose of the interviews conducted with spokespeople from each organization differed due to the various statuses of the members that were interviewed. Nonetheless, the responses obtained from members served to emulate the shifting landscape and polarization

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<sup>9</sup> Marjorie N. Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: a History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism* (New York University Press, 2024), 24-47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

within the Jewish American community, rather than be conflated as an explanation for the shifting dynamic. Interviews took place between October and November 2024. Each interview had a similar set of questions to maintain consistency for comparison between the organizations. These questions pertained to changes in programming and structure; membership and subscriptions; messaging and advertising; donorship and funding; and goals of the organization. Answers varied due to the different statuses of those that were interviewed. All interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted no longer than half an hour with one or two interviews per organization. Initially, only official spokespeople—like executive directors and other leaders—of each organization were going to be interviewed, but the scope changed due to limited availability of potential interviewees. Although the initial purpose of the interviews was to primarily receive quantitative information about organizational changes before and after October 7th, the purpose then expanded to include shifting member sentiments.

The decision to expand the scope of the interviews as also serving as quantitative research was to gather and emphasize personal narratives. Doing so could develop an understanding of individualized experiences, which better contextualize research from secondary sources. For example, two members of JVP Boston—one that joined after October 7th and one that had been at JVP since 2015—were interviewed, which supplemented information from *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love: Lessons from Jewish Anti-Zionist Organizing*, written by past JVP executive director Rebecca Vilkomerson and past staff leader and rabbi Alissa Wise. Interviews for the ACJ occurred with Stephen Naman—board president for 24 years and member for 50 years—and Rabbi Andy Kahn, who had recently been hired as executive director of the organization in September 2024. Director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Leonard Saxe PhD, is the “principal investigator” of various publications about the impact of

Birthright Israel on American Jews since the program's launch in 1999.<sup>11</sup> Saxe was interviewed about the most recent publication as of November 2024, as well as changes in the program after October 7th.

*News and Media Sources, Survey Data, and Internet Archive*

Research for this project ceased on February 1, 2025. Given the novelty of the research topic and the limited literature available, much of the research done relied on secondary media sources. The purpose of this research was to gather the sentiments of other individual American Jews in the aftermath of October 7th to supplement the interviews done for this project both within and outside of the case studies chosen. Survey data, primarily from Pew Research Center—a nonpartisan think tank—also contributed to the general argument. Survey data and information from news articles was carefully selected to avoid potential biases. The Internet Archive's digital library, archive.org, was also utilized to follow changes in the case studies' websites to indicate broader changes within the organizations themselves. Website changes like a shift in messaging on a home page or minor ones like an addition of options on a sidebar were documented. Rather than serve as an explanation for why American Jews' relationship with Israel has changed—if at all—the research gathered in this project, along with the interviews conducted, serve as examples of a trend of polarization within the Jewish American community and its views towards Zionism and Israel after October 7th.

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<sup>11</sup> "Leonard Saxe," Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, accessed January 18, 2025, <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/about/people/saxe.html>.

### Theory: What Changed After October 7th?

How has the relationship between Jewish American identity and Israel shifted since October 7th? To answer this question, we need to start with history. Much of why American Jews care about Israel today is a reflection of emotional norms within Zionism's institutionalization: the State serves as a safe haven if Jews ever need to flee their countries should they have to in the face of persecution.<sup>12</sup> Although this way of thinking appears alarmist, older American Jews in particular are reminded "of the precariousness of being a Jew in a Christian culture" when waves of antisemitism occur. The intense efforts to assimilate and integrate into the US' Christian culture reveals concerns about maintaining a Jewish identity in the Diaspora among such efforts. Additionally, the idea of a Jewish homeland remains a fundamental belief, despite various interpretations in different strands of Judaism: "living outside the Land is a sign of Jewish failings, and an eventual return to Zion is viewed as an integral part of God's plan."<sup>13</sup> These emotional norms are an integral part to understanding one of the primary ways in which Jewish Americans engage with Zionism and Israel. These norms influence not only individual identity formation but also the greater discourse surrounding Jewish self-determination and the security and perseverance as a people.

How American Jews interact with and challenge these norms is changing, especially since October 7th. Specifically, American Jews engaged in record fundraising and a "rally-around-the-flag" effect in the months immediately after October 7th. Discourse around antisemitism in relation to criticism of Israel also increased and became a primary issue within Jewish circles. Additionally, there has been increased Jewish American engagement in Jewish or

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<sup>12</sup> Chloé Vincent, Matthew Bolton, and Hagen Troschke, "Denial of Israel's Right to Exist," in *Decoding Antisemitism*, 2024, 449, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49238-9\\_34](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49238-9_34).

<sup>13</sup> Yossi Shain, "American Jews and the Construction of Israel's Jewish Identity," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2000.0021>.

Israel-related affairs, whether that be in the form of new initiatives that center Palestinian liberation through Jewish advocacy or ones that promote continued US bipartisan support for Israel. As Jewish Americans continue to navigate the shifting landscape of Jewish identity and Zionism in the wake of October 7th, these evolving emotional norms continue to shape their engagement with Israel, influencing both solidarity efforts and critical reassessments of long standing beliefs.

### *Record Fundraising and The “Rally-Around-the-Flag” Effect*

The immediate aftermath of October 7th resulted in a ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effect in which Jewish American support for Israel peaked, which is typical for a social group’s response to an act of terrorism.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon reflects the unifying power of collective trauma, prompting heightened solidarity and action. A slight comparison can be made to the American public’s increased support for President George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism after 9/11, where shared grief translated into national cohesion and policy support.<sup>15</sup> Immediate support for Israel came in the form of donations to Jewish organizations, those of which are primarily Israel-related. In the months following October 7th, the Jewish Federations of North America raised about 855 million dollars.<sup>16</sup> Immediately after October 7th, about forty percent of Jewish organizations in the US gained new donations. For many Jewish Americans, these donations were not only a way to provide financial aid but also a symbolic act of defiance against terrorism and a demonstration of unity with the Israeli people.

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<sup>14</sup> Colin R. Kuehnhauss, Joshua Holm, and Bram Mahieu, "Rally 'Round Which Flag? Terrorism's Effect on (Intra)National Identity," *Public Choice* 188 (2021): 53–74, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-020-00803-8>.

<sup>15</sup> Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, "Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36, no. 1 (2003): 37–42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3649343>.

<sup>16</sup> Sue Surkes, "Huge Post-October 7th Giving Boom from Overseas Brings Hope to Battered Frontlines," *The Times of Israel*, December 7, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/huge-post-october-7-giving-boom-from-overseas-brings-hope-to-battered-frontlines/#:~:text=As%20part%20of%20a%20post,15%20and%20Keren%20Hayesod%20ten>.

In October and December 2023, respectively, 56 percent and 47 percent of Jewish organizations reported philanthropic increases. In particular, Israel-related organizations had more stability and donation increases than non-Israel-related organizations between October 2023 and May 2024. In a survey done by CCS Fundraising, a quarter of donors noted “supporting Israel” as their primary motivation for donating. “Combating antisemitism” was highlighted, with 61 percent of donors listing it as their primary cause for giving. This shows a dual focus on supporting Israel and addressing broader social concerns within the Jewish community. Additionally, the survey notes that since the event, 64 percent of the Jewish organizations surveyed found a “positive change” in crisis-related funding.<sup>17</sup> These statistics indicate a profound impact that October 7th had on Jewish American philanthropy, specifically with a focus on measures creating a sense of solidarity, a commitment to combating antisemitism, and unwavering support for Israel in times of crisis.

### *Increased Discourse on Antisemitism*

October 7th also increased discourse among Jewish Americans regarding antisemitism, which prompted a further polarization of the Jewish American mainstream reflective of various political and Zionist strands. The definition of polarization as applied to this population is identified by the following: “...a population divides into a small number of factions with high internal consensus and sharp disagreement between them.”<sup>18</sup> This polarization is reflected by the ways in which Jewish Americans have interacted within the community and its primary institutions. Some Jews have expressed feelings of isolation from progressive social justice

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Abel, et al., “Jewish Philanthropy Since October 7th,” CCS Fundraising, July 2024, <https://hub.ccsfundraising.com/hubfs/Images%20and%20Files/Corporate%20Marketing%20Team/Publications/Philanthropy-Since-October-7-CCS-Report.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Andreas Flache and Michael W. Macy, "Small Worlds and Cultural Polarization," *The Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 35, no. 1–3 (2011): 146–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022250X.2010.532261>.

movements for their self-identification with Israel, while other Jews within these movements have expressed isolation from Jewish communities for their anti-Zionist stances.

Either way, antisemitism is a highlighted issue that has been at the forefront of the contention that has created such polarization. Although the general consensus among American Jews is that antisemitism has increased, its relation to criticism of Israel and Zionism varies among Jewish circles. Zionist organizations like the Anti-Defamation League have reported a significant rise in antisemitic incidents, including harassment and violent threats, with a notable increase on college campuses.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, anti- or non-Zionist Jewish groups like Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) directly oppose the ADL and argue that these accusations of antisemitism are sometimes used to silence criticism of Israel, further complicating intra-communal debates about antisemitism.<sup>20</sup> In a poll conducted by Pew Research Center, nine-in-ten American Jews said they think discrimination against Jews in the US has increased since the Israel-Hamas war started.<sup>21</sup> In a 2024 JStreet survey of 800 Jewish voters in the US, 71 percent said that criticism of Israel's policies in Gaza is not antisemitism, and 54 percent said that opposing Zionism is antisemitic.<sup>22</sup> Such discourse existed before October 7th; however, the event highlights the ongoing polarization within the Jewish American community regarding the complex relationship between Jewish identity, Zionism, and antisemitism.

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<sup>19</sup> "The Alarming Surge of Antisemitism on College Campus," Anti-Defamation League, September 17, 2024, <https://notoleranceforantisemitism.adl.org/resources/article/alarming-surge-antisemitism-college-campuses>.

<sup>20</sup> "The ADL is not a credible source on antisemitism and racism," Jewish Voice for Peace, July 15, 2024, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/resource/adl-one-pager/>.

<sup>21</sup> Becka A. Alper, "How US Jews are experiencing the Israel-Hamas war," *Pew Research Center*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/how-us-jews-are-experiencing-the-israel-hamas-war/>.

<sup>22</sup> "J Street: National Jewish Voters Survey," GBAO Strategies, 2024, <https://jstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/J-Street-2024-National-Jewish-Voter-Survey-Topline-Results-110524.pdf>.

*Increased Jewish American Engagement in Jewish and Israel-Related Affairs*

This polarization has also been aided by an increase in Jewish American involvement in both political and religious activities and institutions. The Jewish Federations call this “the surge”, in which an influx of previously uninvolved American Jews, regardless of age, have become involved in Jewish life.<sup>23</sup> Younger Jews in particular have shown greater interest in Jewish involvement. The largest Jewish campus organization, Hillel International, experienced its greatest participation rate after October 7th.<sup>24</sup> Some argue that a generational gap between older and younger Jews has been exposed as a result. Younger Jews tend to view the Israeli people less favorably than older Jews, and more favorably towards the Palestinian people. Jews between the ages of 50 and 64 “are the only age group in which a majority express a favorable opinion of the Israeli government (64%).” Older Jews also tend to more likely favor the US giving military aid to Israel than younger Jews.<sup>25</sup> These numbers are similar to another study done in 2021, in which Jews ages 18 to 29 were found to be less likely to say they are “at least somewhat emotionally attached to Israel” than Jews 65 and older are and are less likely to “say they have a lot or some in common with Jews in Israel.”<sup>26</sup> October 7th revealed this generational gap as a larger issue within the Jewish community.

Regardless of age, some Jews have become more involved in activism for Palestinian liberation by engaging in protests, while other Jews have traveled to Israel to volunteer.<sup>27</sup> In

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<sup>23</sup> Mimi Kravetz, Sarah Eisenman, and David Manchester, “‘The Surge,’ ‘The Core’ and more: What you need to know about the explosion of interest in Jewish life,” eJewish Philanthropy, May 9, 2024, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-surge-of-interest-in-jewish-life/>.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Dias, “How Oct. 7 Changed American Jews,” The New York Times, October 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/06/us/jews-amas-attacks.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Alper, “How US Jews are experiencing the Israel-Hamas war.”

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Diamant, “How younger US Jews are similar to—and different from—older US Jews,” Pew Research Center, June 8, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/08/how-younger-u-s-jews-are-similar-to-and-different-from-older-u-s-jews/>.

<sup>27</sup> Robin Buller, “‘People Hold Me Accountable for a Fanatical Right-Wing Government’: Jewish Americans on How Their Lives Have Changed Since 7 October,” The Guardian, October 7th, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/07/jewish-americans-gaza-october-7>.

either case, October 7th has led to a greater awakening of the consciousness of American Jews, not only among individuals, but also among Jewish institutions and how they interact with each other. For example, Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) withdrew funding from the Boston Workers' Circle, a self-described secular and progressive Jewish organization, for partnering with anti-Zionist groups towards ceasefire advocacy efforts.<sup>28</sup> Some organizations have launched initiatives that reinforce their stances on Israel, such as the 10/7 Project. The Jewish American Committee (AJC), the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Jewish Federations of North America, and other leading pro-Israel Jewish groups began the initiative as a “new centralized communications operation to promote continued US bipartisan support for Israel.”<sup>29</sup> Other initiatives, like Rabbis for Ceasefire—a group of rabbis that advocate for a permanent ceasefire and arms embargo—arose in response to October 7th.<sup>30</sup> These new initiatives reflect the profound impact of October 7th on Jewish American political and religious engagement, increasing activism and institutional shifts that underscore the divisions and evolving priorities within the community.

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<sup>28</sup> Rachel Slade, "In the Aftermath of Hamas Attacks, Boston's Jewish Community Grapples with Trauma and Identity," Boston Magazine, October 2024,

<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2024/10/03/october-7-jewish-community/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Leading US Jewish Organizations Launch the 10/7 Project," AJC Global Voice, December 5, 2023,

<https://www.ajc.org/news/leading-us-jewish-organizations-launch-the-107-project>.

<sup>30</sup> "Statement & Signatories," Rabbis for Ceasefire, October 20, 2023, <https://rabbis4ceasefire.com/statement-2/>.

## **Background: Israel's Changing Role in Jewish American History**

### *The "Zionization" of American Jewry*

The current established relationship between the Jewish American identity and the State of Israel has undergone significant transformations since Israel's founding in 1948. Although Israel initially was not a central component of Jewish American identity, the process of "Zionization" shifted Jewish American support from a primarily humanitarian standpoint to one that is ideological. The following discussion traces the early detachment of American Jews from Zionism, the gradual transformation of their relationship with Israel, and the eventual integration of Zionism as a core tenet of Jewish American identity. This occurred as a shift from mass mobilization to direct engagement, and concretized as the 1967 Six-Day War fomented immense Jewish American support.

In the early days of the State of Israel's establishment until the early 1960s, American Jews had given little thought to Israel's position within their Jewish identity. Many focused on achieving upward mobility through integration within American public life. They admired Israel as a safe haven for Jewish refugees after the Holocaust, but this was separate from their identity as American Jews. The Zionization of American Jewry had not yet taken hold, that is, the formation of Jewish American life and identity in relation to the State of Israel.<sup>31</sup> The state was only a "benign presence" in US foreign policy at the time, and Israel's focus was on domestic issues like its own development as a new nation.<sup>32</sup> Still, efforts had been made by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and other prominent groups of the establishment in fostering a relationship between American Jews and Israel. In particular, the Blaustein-Ben-Gurion understanding of 1950 was monumental in developing a relationship between American Jewry

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<sup>31</sup> Shain, "American Jews and the Construction of Israel's Jewish Identity," 168.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-174.

and the Israeli government. At this meeting, Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion assured AJC's leader, Jacob Blaustein, that diaspora Jewish communities still had autonomy and "American Jews were not exiles who should emigrate to Israel." The purpose of this meeting was to encourage American Jews, who were largely non-Zionist at the time, to provide financial and political help to Israel in its state-building. American Jews gained the understanding that such help came with no strings attached and no obligation in supporting Israel on an ideological basis. However, with the process of Zionization in the coming years, support for Zionism grew in place of non-Zionism and Jewish American dissent to Zionism was repressed.<sup>33</sup>

The Zionization of American Jews was a nationalist phenomenon that occurred from the middle of the 1960s into the late 1970s. The 1967 Six-Day War was a turning point in the US-Israel relationship, which mostly had not solidified until the war's end when Israel's dependence on the US began to primarily manifest in the form of lobbying and organizing. Between the early 1980s and early 1990s, the relationship between Israel and American Jews solidified alongside US-Israel relations, despite some tensions related to the Cold War and other political realities at the time.<sup>34</sup> By the late twentieth century, Israel was no longer a peripheral concern for American Jews. It had increasingly become a defining element of their collective identity and political engagement. The initial process of Zionization created a foundation for the increasing centrality of Zionism and Israel in Jewish American life, despite persisting tensions over the nature of this relationship.

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<sup>33</sup> Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: a History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism*, 38-39.

<sup>34</sup> Shain, "American Jews and the Construction of Israel's Jewish Identity," 180.

*Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement*

Jewish American engagement with Israel had a major shift from the latter half of the twentieth century into the first decade of the twenty-first century. This shift is characterized by Theodore Sasson's analysis of this change from a mass mobilization to direct engagement model; that is, Jewish Americans transitioned from collective action and idealistic support to a model in which Jews engage with Israel in more individualized ways. American Jews are engaging with Israel in ways that reflect their own personal political views, which has been supported by the rise of private US-Israel advocacy organizations. For example, more young Jewish Americans are visiting Israel, but under private tour companies instead of through their home synagogues. Political activity among diaspora Jews—which is primarily US based—has become “partisan and plural” with an emphasis on diverse, individualized relationships with Israel rather than a centralized one that promotes collective action.<sup>35</sup> Essentially, Jewish Americans are engaging with Israel in more individualized and diversified ways rather than through a singular, unified approach.

The integration of Zionism into Jewish American identity was not an organic process; rather, it was one shaped by institutional influences and geopolitical events. Sasson traces the mass mobilization model to coincide with the Zionization of American Jewry. Initially, the relationship between Israel as the Jewish homeland and the Jewish diaspora was the responsibility of Zionist-based organizations. But this responsibility transferred to central Jewish American organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Council of Jewish Federations, and the American Jewish Committee (AJC).<sup>36</sup> Zionism became integrated into Jewish American identity by positioning itself within the framework of these core institutions

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<sup>35</sup> Theodore Sasson, “Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews’ Changing Relationship to Israel,” *Israel Studies* 15, no. 2 (2010): 173-174, <https://doi.org/10.2979/isr.2010.15.2.173>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

that Jews attended to. This was not without reason, as the 1967 Six-Day War had provided American Jews a newfound sense of pride and unification in their identity: “it was a redemption from the image of the weak Jew.”<sup>37</sup> Israel’s victory gave more power to the efforts of new Israel advocacy organizations like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Jewish Community Relations Councils. The goals of these organizations were to fundraise and promote political advocacy for Israel by emphasizing US alignment with Israel. Still, during this period of mass mobilization, Jewish Americans preferred to view Israel as a symbol instead of a political entity. Despite large-scale mobilization efforts, Israel stood in the background of Jewish American discourse as an idealized vision rather than within the context of personalized relationships with the State.<sup>38</sup> Mass mobilization efforts strengthened Jewish American support for Israel, but this support was primarily a symbol and Israel was not a direct political concern.

The shift to direct engagement deepened the polarization between the left and right political factions within the Israel lobby, defined as “a loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to influence US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction.”<sup>39</sup> This split translated into similar gaps within the Jewish diaspora. According to Sasson, the shift from a mass mobilization model to direct engagement with Israel can be understood through multiple methods of engagement, primarily through fundraising, travel, and immigration. The first fractures in the unified Israel lobby occurred directly after the Oslo Accords, which exposed tensions between the right and left wings of the lobby. Although right-leaning groups like the Zionist Organization of America supported opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu’s efforts to lobby Congress against the peace agreement, other groups like Americans for Peace Now

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<sup>37</sup> Shain, “American Jews and the Construction of Israel’s Jewish Identity,” 180.

<sup>38</sup> Sasson, “Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews’ Changing Relationship to Israel,” 175-176.

<sup>39</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 5.

advocated for it. The competing lobbying efforts fostered separate alliances with new right and left partisan organizations. As a result, advocacy organizations began targeting both the US and Israeli governments.<sup>40</sup> At the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, the split of the Israel lobby exposed a deeper polarization between opposing political factions within. As a result, Israel politics began to shape the Jewish American mainstream. Religious organizations attached themselves to partisan alignments and maintained a greater focus on right and left causes related to Israel, in turn decreasing the prominent position of central, core institutions that had once dominated Jewish life in the US. For example, Jewish Americans began donating to Israel-advocacy organizations instead of Jewish federations.

Although the Jewish Agency for Israel was the central organization that coordinated youth trips to Israel, the introduction of Taglit-Birthright Israel in 1999 replaced the role of the Jewish Agency as the primary coordinator of these trips.<sup>41</sup> But the split of the Israel lobby is not the only reason for such polarization; it is also the result of an increased reliance on social media and the internet, increased travel, a political polarization within Israeli politics that fostered the same within the Jewish diaspora, and a stronger sense of nationalism among diaspora Jews: “American Jews are less anxious today about the charge of dual-loyalties and hence more willing to engage in citizenship-like behavior in relation to their ethnic homeland.”<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, the fragmentation of the Israel lobby, which transcended into the Jewish American community, reinforced divisions that continue to exist today within Jewish American political and communal spaces.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

<sup>41</sup> Sasson, “Mass Mobilization to Direct Engagement: American Jews’ Changing Relationship to Israel,” 180-182.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 189-190.

*The 1967 Six-Day War's Impact on American Jews and Israel*

The shifting dynamic between Jewish Americans and the State of Israel has also been shaped by Israel's historical conflicts and contemporary peaks in the Israel-Palestine conflict. In particular, the 1967 Six-Day War was a major transition point in the relationship between Jewish Americans and Israel. The war provided Jewish Americans with a newfound sense of pride in their Jewish identities. Immediately prior to the war, diaspora Jews were struck by fear over another potential annihilation of Jewry due to war. It was reminiscent of the Holocaust, which was not so far from recent memory, particularly for survivors of the tragedy.

When the war resulted in quick victory for Israel, Jews felt a religious pride that had been stifled by traumatic memories and fears of being outcasted or collectively killed again.<sup>43</sup> It provided Jews with a strong unifying factor that shaped how they viewed themselves in context of the rest of the world. Unity coincided with an isolation that emphasized the need for Jewish safety and protecting Israel from destruction. Israel began to be viewed as a panacea to Jewish survival, contributing to the conflation of Israel's identity with Jewish American identity. The Jewish American establishment, defined as a "coalition of community action organizations and religious groups that worked in tandem to represent American Jewish interests," began to shift towards an identity that prioritized Jewish American interests specifically in relation to Israel. These organizations, viewed as the primary voice for American Jews, began to emphasize a commitment to Israel as necessary to Jewish American identity.<sup>44</sup> The war motivated Jewish American individuals and communities to foster a greater connection with their perceived homeland.

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<sup>43</sup> Lawrence Grossman, "Transformation Through Crisis: The American Jewish Committee and the Six-Day War," *American Jewish History* 86, no. 1 (1998): 27, <https://doi.org/10.2979/isr.2010.15.2.173>.

<sup>44</sup> Joshua M. Zeitz, "If I am not for myself...': The American Jewish Establishment in the Aftermath of the Six Day War," *American Jewish History* 88, no. 2 (2000): 253-256, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2000.0045>.

Jewish organizations in the US reflected the shifts in Jewish American sentiment and commitment towards Israel as a Jewish state. The American Jewish Committee (AJC), which had established itself as a non-Zionist central organization of American Jews as a collective, immediately changed its position on Israel. Prior to 1967, the AJC was apathetic towards Israel as it was viewed as an issue beyond the consciousness of American Jewry. AJC was not only apathetic towards the State of Israel, but it was also critical towards it. Before the war, the organization had declared Israel as having no “Jewish implications for them” because of the differences between Israeli and American Jews. They argued that Israel and the US were a continent apart and American Jews were integrated within a separate culture that did not give them preferential treatment upon an ethno-religious basis.<sup>45</sup>

Given that the 1967 war gave Jewish Americans a greater commitment to advocacy and activism surrounding Israel, the continued existence of the AJC as a core Jewish organization in the US would only be plausible by catering to this trend within the Jewish American consciousness. The firm non-Zionist stance that had existed prior to the creation of the state, and even more so before the 1967 war, had to be replaced by a stronger stance that promoted Zionism and advocacy surrounding Israel. The AJC chose this stance due to its stagnant membership, which was not growing due to the committee’s adamant position against Israel.<sup>46</sup> When the war broke out, the AJC launched initiatives to combat antisemitism in Arab countries, which had arisen as a result of the war. The AJC’s office in Israel, which had opened previously in 1964, shifted its focus towards programming that connected Jewish Israelis with American Jews.<sup>47</sup> The war pushed organizations like the ACJ to solidify their stances on Zionism and Israel.

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<sup>45</sup> Grossman, “Transformation Through Crisis,” 28-35.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

The war also prompted immense fundraising for Israel as a result of inflammatory newspaper ads. The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) in particular said “Give As You Never Gave Before” in their ads, which created an immediate response among American Jews. One of UJA’s emergency meetings led to its attendees pledging a million dollars per minute for 15 minutes to the Emergency Israel Fund. Immediately in the weeks following the beginning of the war, American Jews had raised about \$490 million in humanitarian and economic aid towards Israel, an amount unprecedented at the time.<sup>48</sup> American Jews had assumed a responsibility for providing assistance towards Israel in the form of donations towards health, education, and other needs for immigrants and residents.<sup>49</sup> The mobilization of American Jews decentralized the majority of fundraising for Jewish causes, particularly between the State of Israel, the UJA, and the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF).

The increased involvement of diaspora Jews in causes around Israel set a precedent for how Jewish American organizations would participate in boosting Israel’s social and economic desires.<sup>50</sup> The war also increased younger Jewish Americans’ involvement in Israeli life and culture, particularly in the form of travel. By the end of the summer in 1967, around 10,000 Jewish American students left the US to volunteer and work in kibbutzim and factories, which had been abandoned by Israelis that left for the war effort. Jews on college campuses mobilized by rallying and campaigning through letter-writing and physical gatherings. This led to a “new consciousness of Israel’s vulnerability and centrality to Jewish life and culture,” which was supplemented by the American public’s general support for the cause.<sup>51</sup> This surge in engagement concretized the connection between Jewish American communities and the State of

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<sup>48</sup> Zeitz, “If I am not for myself...,” 259.

<sup>49</sup> Marc Lee Raphael, *A History of the United Jewish Appeal*, Brown Judaic Studies, 2020, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.73986>.

<sup>50</sup> Menahem Kaufman, “From Philanthropy to Commitment: The Six Day War and the United Jewish Appeal,” *Journal of Israeli History* 15, no. 2 (1994): 161–91. doi:10.1080/13531049408576035.

<sup>51</sup> Zeitz, “If I am not for myself...,” 260.

Israel, shaping Jewish American political activism and cultural identity for future generations. At the same time, as Israeli politics became more prevalent within Jewish communities, so too did a growing movement of Jewish American advocacy opposing Zionism and Israel.

## **Case 1: Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)**

### *Background and Purpose: Initial Goals and Anti-Zionist Stance*

JVP is one of the primary organizations at the forefront of the Jewish American movement for Palestinian liberation. It has evolved into a firmly anti-Zionist organization, creating an alternative communal space for Jews and non-Jews that do not identify with or outrightly reject the dominant narratives within the Jewish American establishment. JVP is a self-identifying grassroots movement with a focus on base-building as a supportive structure for acquiring an increasing number of members. Initially, it was a “small organization with a mixed membership of anti-Zionists and ‘soft’ Zionists’ which then became an explicitly anti-Zionist organization.<sup>52</sup> Its stated goal, which is the same as now, is to create a communal space where Jews can find a sense of belonging and be fully expressive of themselves: “Jewish Americans can disabuse themselves of the heavy burden of moral inconsistency—of living the PEP contradiction—as a price they must pay to stay in relative harmony with their families and traditional Jewish communal spaces.”<sup>53</sup> JVP operates as an alternative space for the Jewish community and non-Jews that diverge from the status quo of the Jewish American establishment.

Another goal the organization had before October 7th was in advocating for collective liberation between Jews and Palestinians, against antisemitism and for Palestinian liberation. Additionally, it aims to refute the conflation of Jews and Judaism with Israel and Zionism.<sup>54</sup> It announced its anti-Zionist stance in 2019, which drastically increased the organization’s membership. Over time, the average age of members has decreased due to the increased

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<sup>52</sup> Vilkomerson and Wise, *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love*, XV.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.

membership of younger Jews.<sup>55</sup> JVP views Zionism as an ideology that “was a false and failed answer to the desperately real question many of our ancestors faced of how to protect Jewish lives from murderous antisemitism in Europe.”<sup>56</sup> In their perspective, Zionism teaches fear rather than being a solution to antisemitism. The perpetuation of Zionism as a religious nationalist ideology within the Jewish American establishment is harmful to Jews and Jewish liberation from antisemitism.<sup>57</sup> By positioning itself against Zionism and advocating for a shared goal of Jewish and Palestinian liberation, JVP challenges traditional Jewish communal structures and offers a space for those seeking to reconcile their Jewish identity with anti-Zionist values.

#### *Background and Purpose: Key Groups and Core Values*

The organization is composed of various specialized groups and networks that cater to different communities, all working toward JVP’s goal and mission of anti-Zionist activism and solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement. JVP has various groups within the organization, including the Academic Council, Student Network, Havurah Network, Rabbinical Council, BIJOCSM Network, and Health Advisory Council. The Academic Council is for scholars “who work to build solidarity with Palestinians and protect academic freedom on college campuses.” It is a form of campus organizing that includes “tenured professors, contingent faculty, independent scholars and graduate students.” The purpose of the network is to defend speech critiquing Israel on college campuses.<sup>58</sup> The Student Network is a coalition of JVP chapters across college campuses, and the Havurah Network is a coalition of various Jewish

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<sup>55</sup> Vilkomerson and Wise, *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love*, XVI.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>58</sup> "Campus Organizing," Jewish Voice for Peace, September 3, 2024, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/campus-organizing/>.

spiritual communities that focus on the separation between institutionalized Zionism and Jewish ritual.

The Rabbinical Council is “a network of rabbis, cantors, and rabbinical students that support the mission of JVP,” and the BIJOCSM Network is a “cross-pollination space” for Black, Indigenous, Jews of Color, Sephardi, and/or Mizrahi Jews as a way to build specific spaces for various identities within the organization. Finally, the Health Advisory Network is a group of physicians, nurses, mental health workers, and others in the healthcare field that advocate for “equal access to high-quality, affordable health care for all members of society in Palestine/Israel.”<sup>59</sup> JVP’s sister organization is JVP Action, which is its political arm that promotes various politicians and candidates that support JVP’s core principles.<sup>60</sup> Through these diverse networks and its political arm, JVP Action, the organization is fostering a coalition of scholars, students, spiritual leaders, healthcare professionals, and activists, reinforcing its commitment to justice and liberation for both Jews and Palestinians.

JVP has three primary “core values” that it is guided by: accountability to Palestinian partners, commitment to Jewish communities, and racial justice & collective liberation. Accountability to Palestinian partners is “a set of principles, commitments, and structures that serve as the foundation of [JVP’s] work.” It is an “ongoing process” that requires continuous discussion and relationship-building with partners as to break down barriers that inhibit Palestinian representation and uphold the “privileging of Jewish voices.” Commitment to Jewish communities refers to honoring the “long lineage of Jewish freedom fighters” and safeguarding Jewish communities by unifying Jewish liberation with the Palestinian cause. JVP is striving to

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<sup>59</sup> "Health Advisory Council," Jewish Voice for Peace, February 12, 2024, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/health-advisory-council/>.

<sup>60</sup> "Support JVP Action PAC," JVP Action, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.jvpaction.org/support-jvp-action-pac/>.

do so by building a “political home” for Jews in an explicitly anti-Zionist setting. Racial justice and collective liberation is a “core praxis” in JVP, which is an “ongoing cycle of action and reflection within which we are striving to dismantle racism.” It acknowledges how various forms of oppression are intertwined and require the recognition of all of them in order to address and combat them.<sup>61</sup> By centering Palestinian voices, fostering a Jewish anti-Zionist political home, and integrating such work into a broader vision of racial justice, JVP seeks to work towards collective liberation.

### *JVP After Oct. 7th: Expansive Messaging Across Platforms*

JVP’s shift in its messaging after October 7th and mobilization of supporters through campaigns is indicative of a greater interest of Jewish Americans in the Israel-Palestine conflict, whether that be fueled by political, religious, or alternative motivations. JVP’s expansion in its messaging accommodates a broader audience that includes Jews who joined after October 7th. Since its inception as a non-profit organization, JVP’s messaging and advertising has primarily stayed consistent, shifting only to reflect changes in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Soon before October 7th, its home page stated that JVP is the “largest progressive anti-Zionist organization in the world.”<sup>62</sup> After October 7th, however, the statement changed and JVP referred to themselves as the “world’s largest Jewish organization standing in solidarity with Palestine.”<sup>63</sup> The shift in messaging emphasizes the organization as a Jewish one while removing the terms “progressive” and “anti-Zionist,” perhaps as to expand its audience to invite a broader Jewish one.

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<sup>61</sup> "JVP's Core Values," Jewish Voice for Peace, September 3, 2024, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/core-values/>.

<sup>62</sup> "Home," Jewish Voice for Peace (archived October 4, 2023), accessed November 2024, <http://web.archive.org/web/20231004110427/https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>.

<sup>63</sup> "Home," Jewish Voice for Peace, February 20, 2025, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>.

Additionally, JVP has launched various campaigns since October 7th, 2023. The “Break the Bonds” campaign was launched on October 30, 2024, “to demand that community institutions stop buying Israel bonds.” More than a thousand people signed onto an individual pledge.<sup>64</sup> On September 12, 2024, JVP launched its “Not in my Name” campaign, which aims to encourage American Jews to divest from “Israel Bonds,” and invest in Palestinian freedom by contributing to Palestinian-led organizations as much as one can and without conditions.<sup>65</sup> On July 15, 2024, JVP launched a campaign called “Fight antisemitism, reject the ADL,” which calls on local school boards to end partnerships with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and replace any resources that have been provided by the ADL.

JVP states that the ADL “operates as a pro-Israel lobbying group, focused on co-opting and abusing accusations of antisemitism to smear critics of Israel as bigots.”<sup>66</sup> These campaigns exemplify JVP’s efforts to engage its supporters and expand its outreach in similar ways that it had prior to October 7th, specifically at times when the Israel-Palestine conflict peaked. This is also exemplified by JVP’s statement on October 7th, titled “The Root of Violence is Oppression”: “We commit to escalating our campaigns for boycott, divestment, and sanctions...”<sup>67</sup> These initiatives reflect the organization’s continued efforts to mobilize its supporters at pivotal moments in the conflict, specifically regarding October 7th. After an influx of supporters joined post-October 7th, JVP’s sway increased and allowed for a broadening of campaigns.

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<sup>64</sup> “Break the Bonds: Divest,” Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/resource/break-the-bonds-divest/>.

<sup>65</sup> “Not in My Name: Divest,” Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/resource/not-in-my-name-divest/>.

<sup>66</sup> “Reject the ADL,” Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/resource/reject-the-adl-landing/>.

<sup>67</sup> “The Root of Violence Is Oppression,” Jewish Voice for Peace, October 7th, 2023, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/10/07/statement23-10-07/>.

*JVP After Oct. 7th: Increased Engagement Among New and Longtime Supporters*

JVP's expansion of its programming also reflects its increased engagement with its audience and its ability to adapt to a growing mobilization of anti-Zionist Jews. In 2022, JVP acquired a total of 1,223,000 social media followers.<sup>68</sup> In 2024, this number grew to 2.3 million. Since October 2023, there have been 1.1 million total deliveries of JVP's email publication, The Wire. In 2024, JVP acquired a total of 750,000+ members and supporters. As for local and student organizing in 2024, JVP had 100+ local organizing formations, 50 campus chapters, 5 new organizer hires, and 50,000+ emails sent to university administrators. JVP expanded to 25+ cities across the country and contributed to a total of 68,400+ media pieces.<sup>69</sup>

A few months after October 7th, JVP updated its "Join Us" page by stating that it was no longer accepting new chapters or pods due to "overwhelming interest."<sup>70</sup> Before October 7th, JVP's website stated that it had a total of 70 local organizing groups, 443,421 members and supporters, 1.4 million digital actions taken, and 33 dollars as the average donation it has received.<sup>71</sup> About six months after October 7th, however, these numbers increased to 83 local organizing groups, 747,803 members and supporters, 2.64 million digital actions taken, and 60 dollars as the average donation.<sup>72</sup> The increase in digital and mobile numbers show the interconnected relationship between the expansion of JVP's programming and increased exchange as the two reinforce each other.

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<sup>68</sup> "Annual Report 5782," Jewish Voice for Peace (archived October 11, 2023), accessed November 2024, <http://web.archive.org/web/20231011062025/https://report.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>.

<sup>69</sup> "Annual Report 2024," Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/resource/annual-report-2024/>.

<sup>70</sup> "Local Organizing," Jewish Voice for Peace, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/local/>.

<sup>71</sup> "Home," Jewish Voice for Peace (archived October 4, 2023), accessed November 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231004110427/https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>.

<sup>72</sup> "Home," Jewish Voice for Peace (archived April 4, 2024), accessed November 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240411152723/https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/>.

Individual JVP members and leaders emulate this interconnected relationship. Two former leaders of JVP National and authors of *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love*—a book on the history of JVP and its changing political landscape—state that October 7th revealed the “festering fractures in the Jewish world” and has allowed Jewish anti-Zionist organizing to dramatically erupt “on an unprecedented scale.”<sup>73</sup> Jill, a member of JVP Boston since 2015, saw a “massive” increase in membership since October 7th, particularly with an influx of younger adults. Jill had joined JVP Boston after she had visited Israel on a trip with her husband. She had grown up in a progressive and culturally Jewish family, and was deeply affected by her trip to Israel with her husband prior to joining JVP: “I realized I could not unsee what I saw, and I felt responsible and committed, especially because Israel conflates the State of Israel with being a Jew. I felt like I could not do [nothing], and I was on the verge of retiring from my full time job. And it was an opportunity.”

She says that JVP’s goals did not change after October 7th, but became expansive and deeper with more “person power.” JVP’s focus after October 7th shifted based on the realities of the Israel-Palestine conflict, as it had done previously, so its advocacy began to focus on a ceasefire in the conflict. Nonetheless, JVP’s primary goal has stayed the same: “...our mission has always been the same, to really disrupt and weaken the bonds—the financial, cultural, and political bonds—between the US and Israel.” Something that had changed after October 7th was JVP’s growing focus on base-building, which coincided with the surge of newer members.

For many new members, October 7th served as a turning point in their political awareness, in part due to exposure to the event on social media. JVP Boston member Stephanie, a young adult, joined the organization a couple weeks post-October 7th after receiving an influx of on-the-ground posts and stories on social media from organizations like JVP. Stephanie grew

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<sup>73</sup> Vilkomerson and Wise, *Solidarity is the Political Version of Love*, 2.

up Zionist in a Jewish household in New England, went on Birthright, and spent another summer in Israel as part of an extended program. She recalls thinking that what she saw on social media after October 7th from organizations like JVP contrasted the beliefs that she had been raised with: “that disconnect kind of changed my mindset.” This prompted Stephanie to join JVP’s Power Half-Hours for Gaza and New Member meetings, and then eventually join JVP Boston.

Regarding why Stephanie joined JVP specifically, she said, “It resonated with me that there were Jews that still held on to their Jewishness, but also saw the injustice and the apartheid that was happening because in my family and in my community, that's not a belief that they hold.” Stephanie’s personal journey joining JVP shows how exposure to alternative narratives and activism can challenge perspectives influenced by a person’s relationship to the norms that they may have grown up with or relied upon in their identity. For many young Jewish Americans, October 7th prompted them to reevaluate nationalistic beliefs about Israel and Zionism.

### *JVP After Oct. 7th: Conclusion*

JVP’s shifts in its messaging and base-building is representative of the organization’s need to accommodate a greater diverse base of members. Prior to October 7th, JVP had expanded into an organization that seeks to provide a political home for Jews and non-Jews that do not align with the norms of the Jewish American establishment and its institutions. The changes in JVP after October 7th—like expanded messaging, the broadening of campaigns, and increased membership—represent various trends. The influx of young American Jews participating in JVP is particularly noteworthy, as JVP has a diverse base regarding the ages of supporters. JVP’s expansion of its messaging, which paints the organization explicitly as a

Jewish organization, indicates a desire to include more Jews in its outreach. Perhaps this is the result of more Jews becoming involved in Israel-related efforts after October 7th, whether they had been involved prior or not. Nonetheless, for JVP, October 7th allowed the organization to engage its “people power” in a way more far-reaching than before.

## Case 2: Taglit-Birthright Israel

### *Background and Purpose: Impetus and Goals*

Taglit-Birthright Israel is one of the primary ways in which young American Jews foster an individual and communal connection to the State of Israel. As a form of homeland tourism, Birthright instills a sense of nationalist pride and identity within young adult Jews by tying their Jewish identity to the national identity of Israel. Birthright was established, in part, to curb the increasingly high intermarriage rate between American Jews and non-Jews. In the 1980s, and more so in the 1990s, North American Jewish institutions held concerns about continuity and demography. Birthright was viewed as a solution to the “threat” of assimilation among American Jews at a time when the intermarriage rate was drastically growing. Charles Bronfman, a North American Jewish philanthropist, said that he sponsored the trip because he “believed in the impact of the ‘Israel Experience’ on the identity of young Jewish adults.” The Israeli government agreed to financially support the project.<sup>74</sup>

Organizers of the program consider it as a success as over a quarter of a million young Jewish adults have participated in it. According to some studies, young Jews who participate in the program as a peer trip to Israel are more likely to marry a Jew, are more connected to Israel and their Jewish identity, and are more involved in Jewish activities in their home countries in comparison to Jews that do not participate in the program.<sup>75</sup> As a form of homeland tourism, Birthright is a “diasporization strategy” that creates and sustains a diasporic identity. Birthright fosters an attachment between the participant and the State of Israel by homogenizing diaspora Jews outside of Israel and nationalizing them through particular historical and political narratives.<sup>76</sup> The program’s initial goal—to ensure Jewish continuity by fostering connections to

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<sup>74</sup> Abramson, “Making a homeland, constructing a diaspora,” 17.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-16.

the State of Israel—continues to be supported through elaborate infrastructure and annual studies that show the effectiveness of Birthright and its many components.

*Background and Purpose: Program Operations and Studies*

Birthright’s programming is designed to be multifaceted in order to accommodate its typically large applicant pool. The program itself operates through various trip organizers, all of which must meet particular requirements of Birthright. These requirements fall within four core themes: “educational platform,” historical narratives, contemporary Israel, and “ideas and values of the Jewish people.” The goal of the program is to “foster attachment to the land” and create a sense of belonging among and between participants, tour guides, soldiers, students, and others on the trip. The educational aspect of the program includes mythmaking and storytelling as to create a connection between the individual participant on the trip with the historical narrative of the Jewish people’s link to the State of Israel. This narrative is presented as fact which ties the participant into a particular social and political sense of solidarity. It is reinforced by various educational components of the trip, like visits to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, and the story of Masada.<sup>77</sup> Hence, the trip creates a sense of collective memory for the participant.

To ensure that these core themes and educational aspects are being met, studies are conducted annually. These studies have been conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University since Birthright’s establishment. They are also, in part, funded by the program’s foundation,<sup>78</sup> which rely on the studies for understanding the program’s impacts and making changes to it. Its 2022 report claims that Birthright is able to “educate participants

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<sup>77</sup> Abramson, “Making a homeland, constructing a diaspora,” 18.

<sup>78</sup> “Home,” Birthright Israel Foundation, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://birthrightisrael.foundation/>.

about the history, culture, and politics of Israel without advancing a particular political line about the country's conflicts or life in Israel."<sup>79</sup> These reports rely on questionnaires and surveys of Birthright's cohorts in the respective year that they are given. "Knowledge" quizzes are an example, given before and after the Birthright trip. In 2022, there was an increase in "correct" answers by participants after the trip. Separate questions about AIPAC and other Israel advocacy groups, as well as BDS, were also included.<sup>80</sup> The study also claims that Birthright does not foster nationalist political views, but still creates an emotional attachment between the participant and the State of Israel.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, Birthright studies are shaped by current events related to Israel while maintaining the integrity of the organization's initially stated goals.

*Birthright After Oct. 7th: Post-Survey Attitudes Towards Israel and Antisemitism*

October 7th played a significant role in the formation of the study for participants of that year. The study, which focused on the summer cohort for Birthright and was published in 2024, held the post-survey between November 19, 2023, and January 2, 2024. Hence, the post-survey was immensely shaped by the impact of October 7th on participants. It introduces the study with the following question: "How did participation in Birthright impact Jewish identity and Jewish connections in a world of heightened antisemitism, where 'being Jewish' meant something very different than it did in the summer of 2023?"<sup>82</sup> The study emphasized the participants'

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<sup>79</sup> Leonard Saxe et al., *Birthright's Impact in 2022: Knowledge, Views, and Feelings Towards Israel* (Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, May 2023), 2, <https://scholarworks.brandeis.edu/esploro/outputs/report/Birthrights-Impact-in-2022-Knowledge-Views/9924224476901921>.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>82</sup> Leonard Saxe et al., *Birthright Israel's Impact in the Shadow of the Israel-Hamas War: Findings from the Summer 2023 Cohort* (Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, April 2024), 1, <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/birthright/birthright-summer-2023.html>.

perspectives on antisemitism, criticism of Israel, and animosity towards Israel in the wake of October 7th.

In particular, the study claims that Jewish undergraduates became more concerned about rising antisemitism and its fomentation as criticism of Israeli policy. The study revealed that Birthright continued to have a strong impact on participants' connection to Israel, regardless of their political affiliations and despite concerns about a widening political divide among Jewish Americans and the hostility toward Israel from the political left following October 7th. Nonetheless, the study showed that participants were more sympathetic towards Israel's efforts and more engaged about the conflict. As past studies also suggested, Birthright participants were more likely to be involved in Jewish and Israel advocacy activities after the trip: they were "more likely to closely follow the news about the war, were more concerned for the lives of Israelis, and more likely to say they 'supported' Israel." Such advocacy came in the form of social media engagement and other forms of action. The study concluded that facilitating meaningful dialogue about the conflict on future Birthright trips will be a significant challenge as the war's effects continue to unfold, however Birthright continues to play a significant role in shaping young adult Jews' perspectives of their identity and attachment to Israel.<sup>83</sup> This study indicates that October 7th was deeply influential in participants' post-survey answers and attitudes towards the survey's prompts.

#### *Birthright After Oct. 7th: Shifting Participant Demographics and Program Focus*

Although the 2023 study is significant for its post-survey answers, which were shaped by October 7th, that particular focus group had attended Birthright prior to the event. As the report on Birthright comes to be published for the 2024 cohort's participants, various trends can already

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<sup>83</sup> Saxe et al. "Birthright Israel's Impact," 13-20.

be noted by the study's researchers. Participants on the trip were already more engaged with their Jewish education than past participants. Included were Jewish students that had gone to a Jewish summer camp, went to Hebrew school, attended Jewish day school, or had been involved in other Jewish education. The 2024 cohort had fewer Jews that had mostly no experience in Jewish formal or informal education prior to participating on the trip. Applicants that already had connections to Israel through family or through their own were more likely to participate on the trip.<sup>84</sup> Notably, one Jewish Israeli student at the University of Maryland participated in Birthright because he felt isolated from non-Jews and had a desire to explore and embrace his Jewish identity in the aftermath of October 7th.<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, safety concerns were a major aspect of the trip, particularly among parents. October 7th exacerbated recruitment issues due to concerns over safety, which resulted in revising and emphasizing safety protocols on the trip. Volunteer programs have also become a more essential part of Birthright in which participants volunteer in the economy towards the war effort, whether that be on farms or by other means.<sup>86</sup> As an addition to the program, participants visit "Hostage Square" in Tel Aviv and do not "spend time near the border conflict zones or in the Golan Heights." Birthright has also introduced volunteer-based programs for Jews ages 18-40; since November 2023, over 1,200 Birthright alumni have visited Israel to volunteer.<sup>87</sup> October 7th not only expanded the program's operations regarding the activities provided on the trip, but it also influenced the group of applicants that ultimately participated in the program.

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Leonard Saxe, October 2024.

<sup>85</sup> "How My Birthright Trip Gave Me Strength Post-October 7th," Hillel International, February 6, 2024, <https://www.hillel.org/story/how-my-birthright-trip-gave-me-strength-post-october-7/>.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Leonard Saxe, October 2024.

<sup>87</sup> "Birthright Israel Trippers Find Visiting Israel During War Is a Unique and Invigorating Experience," Birthright Israel Foundation, February 20, 2024, <https://birthrightisrael.foundation/blog/birthright-israel-trippers-find-visiting-israel-during-war-is-a-unique-and-invigorating-experience/>.

*Birthright After Oct. 7th: Conclusion*

Birthright initially shifted its programming after October 7th to take into account the political and wartime realities within Israel. New safety protocols became essential to Birthright's programs and new volunteering opportunities included alumni from previous trips. At the same time, these new opportunities are shaped by Birthright's inherent goal of fostering a connection between diasporic Jews and the State of Israel as their perceived homeland. The addition of "Hostage Square" as a location for participants to visit encourages this connection and provides a strong sense of national identity. After October 7th, the cohort that had participated prior to the event and were included in the post-survey generally had attitudes similar to previous cohorts. But in its prompts, the survey particularly emphasized antisemitism, criticism of Israel, and animosity towards Israel.

Participants' answers were more sympathetic to Israel's war efforts and showed the participants as being more engaged with the conflict and Israel in general. In the cohort that was the focus of the 2024 study, October 7th was found to have an immense impact on the demographics of those that participated. Compared to past participants, those in the 2024 study had already been more involved in their Jewish identity prior to the trip. This included Jews that had attended Hebrew school, Jewish day school, or had other forms of Jewish education. There were fewer Jews in the 2024 cohort that had little to no formal or informal Jewish education prior to the trip, so most of those that were involved had been raised within Jewish communities and institutions. Ultimately, Birthright's programs evolved in response to October 7th and Israel's war efforts, with most participants already having a strong existing connection to their Jewish identity.

### **Case 3: American Council for Judaism (ACJ)**

#### *Background and Purpose: Anti-Zionism During the Holocaust*

The restructuring of the ACJ since October 7th comes after decades of being a leading voice against the growing support of Zionism within the Jewish American community. The ACJ continues to be one of the most prominent non-Zionist religious organizations for US Jews. Established in 1942 by a group of rabbis, its initial purpose was to organize opposition to Zionism in the midst of its growing movement. Prior to the establishment of Israel, the ACJ had opposed Zionism primarily on a religious basis; according to the organization, Zionism opposed the anti-nationalist tenets of Reform Judaism, which had been brought to the US by German Jews in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Anti-nationalism was viewed as a prophetic principle in Reform Judaism and seen as contradictory to one's spirituality.<sup>88</sup>

The group of rabbis, led by Rabbi Elmer Berger, decided to found the Council after a pro-Zionist resolution supporting the creation of a Jewish army in Palestine had been passed in Reform Judaism's Central Conference of American Rabbis. As a Jewish state was coming to fruition and Zionism gained more supporters, Reform anti-Zionism became more political. In Berger's paper he delivered at the Council's founding conference, he stated that the Council opposed Zionism for two primary reasons: Zionism stood in contrast to the founding principles of Reform Judaism and it would disrupt Jewish integration in the US as more Jewish resources go towards the Zionist cause instead.<sup>89</sup> As Zionism gained momentum and the establishment of a Jewish state became imminent, the ACJ solidified its stance. It framed anti-Zionism as both a religious principle and a safeguard for Jewish integration in the US.

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<sup>88</sup> Sheldon L. Richman, "Jews Against Zionism: The American Council for Judaism, 1942–1948," no. 34 (1990): 136, ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/219440672>.

<sup>89</sup> Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: a History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism*, 25-26.

As part of the ACJ's stance, the Council embraced diasporization and called for a Judaism free of nationalism and integration within the societal construct of American institutions and Jewish Americans.<sup>90</sup> The tragedy of the Holocaust and Zionism's subsequently increasing presence in European politics further motivated the ACJ's position. The Jewish refugee crisis in Europe and rising Nazi power drove leading American Zionists to push Palestine as a potential refugee for those fleeing. Rabbi Lazaron, one of the founders of the ACJ, rejected the World Zionist Congress's conflation of Jews with Zionism and Palestine as an impetus for Jewish safety. Lazaron stated that establishing a Jewish state in Palestine would deprive diaspora Jews of their autonomy by promoting religious nationalism in a country other than their own.<sup>91</sup> In advocating for diasporization and opposing the conflation of Judaism with Zionism, the ACJ sought to preserve Jewish autonomy and integration, challenging the notion that a Jewish state was the only viable path to the security and safety of the Jewish people.

*Background and Purpose: Diasporization and Collective Liberation*

As Zionism gained immense traction and the State of Israel was coming to fruition in the 1940s, the threat of Arab displacement loomed. The ACJ advocated for collective liberation through the embracement of the Jewish diaspora. The ACJ's original Statement of Principles identifies collective liberation as the primary means by which the Jewish people should combat antisemitism: "the solution of the social, economic, and political problems of one people are inextricably bound up with those of others." Additionally, the Statement of Principles emphasizes the importance of liberation through diasporization: "the Jewish people have the

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<sup>90</sup> "A Finding Aid to the American Council for Judaism Records, 1937-1989 (bulk 1957-1968)," American Jewish Archives, <http://collections.americanjewisharchives.org/ms/ms0017/ms0017.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: a History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism*, 27-28.

same right to live securely anywhere in the world and to enjoy the fruit of their labors in peace as have men of every other faith and historic background.”<sup>92</sup> The ACJ still continues to reject Zionism by upholding the values of diasporization and collective liberation. But as the ACJ grew in numbers and its voice grew alarmingly louder, Zionist opposition to the Council also grew.

The ACJ became more prominent within the Jewish American mainstream as a threat to the establishment. The Zionist Organization of America formed a group initially called the Committee to Combat the American Council for Judaism, later called the Committee on Unity for Palestine. The group had 112 local branches that “kept watch on the Council and wrote ‘hundreds of thousands of pro-Zionist literature.’” Attempts to delegitimize the Council like this one were part of a greater effort of Zionization by Jewish American leaders in the mainstream. The ACJ loudly protested the idea that Zionism was a unifying factor among all Jews, and the idea that there was little to no Jewish opposition to Jewish emigration to Palestine.<sup>93</sup> The ACJ also delivered a speech at the Bandung Conference of Nonaligned Nations in April 1955, which reinforced its anti-Zionist position and emphasized Zionism as an extension of colonization and imperialism. The ACJ’s sentiments at Bandung—at which Israel was not allowed to participate—alarmed American Zionists and was used as additional reasoning for pushing for US support of Zionism and Israel.<sup>94</sup>

In its first few decades as an organization, the ACJ spearheaded pushback against US support for Israel and Zionism: “the [ACJ] rose to prominence when there was still room for criticism of Zionism in Jewish American life.” Still, the Council was a relatively small group with about 20,000 members.<sup>95</sup> Despite its limited size, the ACJ played a significant role since its

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<sup>92</sup> Richman, “Jews Against Zionism,” 136.

<sup>93</sup> Feld, *The Threshold of Dissent: a History of American Jewish Critics of Zionism*, 33.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

inception in challenging the growing influence of Zionism in Jewish American life. Within the past few decades, it has positioned itself as a vocal counterforce to the mainstream narrative that has equated Jewishness with support for Israel.

*The ACJ After Oct. 7th: Shifting from Dissolution to Revitalization*

Despite intentions to sunset the organization in the coming years, a surge of interest from young Jewish adults changed the Council's plans. Board President Stephen Naman, a member of ACJ for about fifty years, notes that more young Jewish adults began to engage with the Council in December of 2023. Most of the ACJ's "associates"—as it does not have a membership model—had been senior citizens that are legacy members. Although its initial plan was to dissolve the organization within the next few years, the Council is collaborating with these young Jews to restructure the organization by bringing in new leadership, discontinuing the printing of newsletters, and revitalizing its website. In doing so, Naman hopes to reinforce the organization's anti-Zionism while focusing on revitalizing Judaism as a religion: "these young people, while they declare themselves as anti-Zionists, are really focused on revitalizing Judaism as a religion and to promote the moral and ethical values of Judaism, as opposed to what we all see as the lack of moral clarity within the Israeli government and the colonization and supremacy of Israel over the Palestinians." At the time of the interview, the ACJ had mostly no staff, had about 100 people on its email subscription list and 1000 people on its printed copy list, and Naman was responsible for most of the organization's operations.<sup>96</sup> The ACJ had a limited basic structure with few subscribers, but it had a foundation it could build off of. With a renewed influx of young Jews eager to reshape its future, the ACJ is shifting from dissolution to a renewal of the organization.

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Stephen Naman, October 2024.

*The ACJ After Oct. 7th: The Council as an Umbrella Organization and its Components*

As part of its restructuring process, the Council’s website discontinued its printing at the end of 2024, and is now only publishing online. In 2024, prior to its restructuring, the ACJ gained fifty new mailing list subscriptions, however it is unclear whether these subscriptions are a direct result of increased engagement after October 7th or not. For the past two decades, the ACJ’s homepage has primarily been a stream of articles published by the Council; in 2024, however, the homepage said “OUR MISSION IS BEING REFORMED: The Council has begun a process of renewal in order to effectively reinvigorate the spiritual principles and values of our sacred inheritance.” It states that it strives to “be a pillar for the emerging new ecosystem of Judaism in America and beyond.”<sup>97</sup> ACJ’s purpose is shifting into acting as an entity that links Jewish anti- and non-Zionist groups and individuals that are focused on practicing a kind of Judaism beyond Zionism. There is a lack of resources for these groups and individuals, yet the ecosystem “continues to inevitably create itself.” The ACJ is aiming to uplift the ecosystem by providing resources, ensuring that people are not creating competing institutions, and avoiding recreating the problems of the past within Jewish institutions.<sup>98</sup> The ACJ is striving to rebuild itself as an umbrella organization that can centralize resources and institutional support for other Jewish anti- and non-Zionist communities.

The Council’s restructuring process is significant because October 7th did not directly cause it, but the event did influence it. The organization did not change its structure or programming as a result of October 7th; rather, it was the influx of engagement from young Jews in December 2024 that initiated a restructuring process. These young Jews include working

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<sup>97</sup> "Home," American Council for Judaism (archived January 23, 2025), accessed November 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250123010825/http://www.acjna.org/>.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andy Kahn, October 2024.

professionals and college graduates—aged 26 to 40—with a diverse range of jobs, from filmmakers to psychologists. They are children of rabbis and other leaders within the Jewish community: “they were very eager, and they said they wanted to try to rejuvenate the Council because of its history and because of its long position against Zionism.”<sup>99</sup>

Brooklyn-based Reform Rabbi Andy Kahn initiated this meeting with the Council after discovering that the Council existed through word of mouth from a mentor. As a leader of Rabbis for Ceasefire, an ad-hoc group of rabbis and rabbinical students,<sup>100</sup> Kahn had been involved in organizing with other committed Reform Jews in trying to move the Reform Jewish movement politically with regard to its relationship to Zionism and Israel. For Kahn, October 7th did not change his political views in regards to Israel or Zionism, but it changed the way he engaged with the changing Jewish American mainstream:

“What did change was the narrative in the mainstream Jewish world and the more widespread and vocal presence of significantly more Jewish people who aligned ideologically with organizations that were looking to levy Jewish values and Jewish history to combat the ongoing violence of the State of Israel. After October 7th, there was a very large uptick publicly, of people involved in that, which led to me realizing that more infrastructure was needed to support a new Jewish ecosystem... And so I started thinking about what that would look like.

And it just so happened that as I was thinking about that, I discovered the ACJ.”<sup>101</sup> Kahn, who became the executive director of the ACJ in August 2024, led the restructuring process by focusing on the “needs of today” within the Jewish community while staying rooted in the history of the organization. In the process, the ACJ worked with an outside consultant to rewrite the mission statement, vision statement, and rethink what the organization’s programmatic plans are.

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Stephen Naman, October 2024.

<sup>100</sup> “Home,” Rabbis for Ceasefire, accessed March 19, 2025, <https://rabbis4ceasefire.com/>.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andy Kahn, October 2024.

For the past few decades, the ACJ has primarily been a newsletter, so its restructuring includes an expansion of the programs of the organization. These programs are broken down into three components, the first being public education. This includes the promotion of accessible education around the history of Jewish anti-nationalism in the US, and doing so primarily through webinars and other digital content. This content is meant to “engage in a Judaism that does not center Zionism at all, and in some ways, is inherently counter to [the] framing of the Jewish people as a nation and the core concept of Judaism as Jewish nationalism.”<sup>102</sup> With Kahn as a major figure in the ACJ’s restructuring, the Council is transforming from a primarily newsletter-based organization into a dynamic educational hub that promotes a Judaism independent of Zionism.

*The ACJ After Oct. 7th: Providing Institutional Support and Diversity of Thought*

The new programming, which focuses on creating the ACJ as an umbrella organization for Jewish communities that are struggling with integrating these concepts, targets mostly synagogues but also other Jewish communities: “[There] are communities that would want to be a part of a community of practice, of leaders and thinkers, and communal conveners that are trying to build a Jewish community for themselves and their neighbors...that does not center Zionism, that does not center nationalism, and that is focused on a Judaism beyond nationalism.”<sup>103</sup> The third aspect of programming is creating resources for individuals and groups of people that are looking to develop leadership skills to build their own Jewish communities around Jewish practice. This includes grappling with questions like, what does it mean to pray or to *daven* as a Jew? How do Jews relate to the Torah in a way that does not integrate any form of

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andy Kahn, October 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

nationalism? What would it mean to help lead a community that centers itself on Jewish practices like that without having any form of nationalism within it? This new programming and these questions serves as a guiding framework for Jewish communities and individuals seeking to build Jewish spaces that reject nationalism and foster a Judaism rooted in practice instead.

To foster a diversity of thought within the Council's restructuring, the ACJ is also in the process of creating a steering committee of a diverse group of people that relate more broadly to progressive Judaism, rather than a group of only Reform Jews. This group will be composed of people from a variety of ethnic, racial, class, and gender backgrounds who have expressed interest in the restructuring project and will provide feedback to the ACJ. This decision was made because the cohort of Jews joining this project are primarily middle-to-upper-middle-class white young adults. They do represent the primary constituency of the Reform Jewish movement, but Kahn is looking to break down those barriers that are inherent in the movement around race, class, and gender. Nonetheless, the group is composed of [people] with different individual relationships with Judaism. Some are deeply involved in Jewish activism, while some are not. Some are looking for a Jewish community that does not identify explicitly as Zionist. The Council is seeking to restructure its organization by integrating these younger Jews.<sup>104</sup> In doing so, the ACJ aims to expand beyond its traditional Jewish base as to foster a more inclusive movement representative of a broader spectrum of Jewish identities and perspectives.

### *The ACJ After Oct. 7th: Conclusion*

Although the ACJ's restructuring process was not created as a direct result of October 7th, the event influenced Kahn and other young Jewish adults in initiating the Council's restructuring. The goal of the process is to establish the ACJ as an umbrella organization for

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Rabbi Andy Kahn, October 2024.

other anti- and non-Zionist Jewish synagogues and communities, while maintaining and honoring the integrity of the Council's history and its previous work. In the Jewish American mainstream, where Ashkenazi voices and practices are dominant, the diverse steering committee aims to challenge existing norms that marginalize other perspectives and reinforce Zionism. By leading these initiatives, Kahn, Naman, and the young Jewish adults involved are building a strong backbone for providing resources and institutional support to other Jewish organizations and individuals apart of the growing movement of Jewish Americans that reject nationalism in favor of a Judaism beyond.

## **Significance and Conclusion**

October 7th serves as a turning point in Jewish history. Its immediate and short-term impacts were monumental in revealing the hidden cracks within the Jewish American community. Before October 7th, American Jews had already faced internal political and social polarization particularly regarding Israel and Zionism. After October 7th, this still rings true—but such polarization is even more apparent. Jewish organizations in the US must grapple with determining where they fit within the pro- and anti-Israel camps. Organizations like Taglit-Birthright, which were already committed to a supportive stance on Israel, have created programs and integrated more initiatives in the context of combating antisemitism or supporting Israel.

Other organizations that are in the anti- or non-Zionism camp are pushing initiatives that reject Zionism on a religious or anti-nationalist basis, or in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) is supporting its influx of members after October 7th by expanding its base through additional programming and initiatives, while the American Council for Judaism (ACJ) uprooted its organization to create a structure that better accommodates young Jews seeking an alternative to mainstream Zionist organizations. Jewish organizations navigate their position within these two extremes, shaped by the political realities of the Israel-Palestine conflict both within and beyond the Jewish American community. The question of Israel and Zionism has become central to Jewish American identity, whether through full rejection or full embrace. Complicating this further is the role of fundraising and donor influence, as organizations struggle to survive amid financial, political, and social pressures to align with dominant Zionist narratives within the American Jewish mainstream.

JVP, Birthright, and the ACJ's shifting structures and participants emulate this polarization, but the long-term impacts of October 7th require greater research targeting Jewish American individuals. Although this project has traced the effects of October 7th on three prominent organizations in Jewish American history, generalizations can not be so surely made about the event's effects on American Jews individually and collectively. Research on this topic was limited by its novelty, the sensationalism of news sources, and the politicization of existing studies, whether in their content or funding. Avoiding bias proved impossible at times, making it necessary to include multiple contrasting sources in the project to reflect the range of contemporary research available, given the scarcity of unbiased sources. Research after October 7th relied heavily on first-hands accounts and qualitative studies, but future research that involves longitudinal studies can capture the evolving impact of the event on Jewish American identity, political engagement, and community dynamics.

This project also serves as an extension to the study of ethnic and religious nationalism and diaspora studies. The impact of October 7th on American Jews serves as an example of how war affects a group and their diasporic counterparts' perception of a homeland. It highlights the ways in which transnational identities are shaped by geopolitical events, which influences not only political affiliations but also cultural and community ties. October 7th acts as a case study for future research on how war reshapes diasporic identities, collective memory, and becomes a tool in nation-building. Elements like intergenerational trauma, religious denominations, and political orientations within the Jewish American community further provide guidance in understanding the fluidity of diasporic identity in states of crisis.

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