



Jewish Deepening After October 7th

A Supplement

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www.JewishDeepening.org

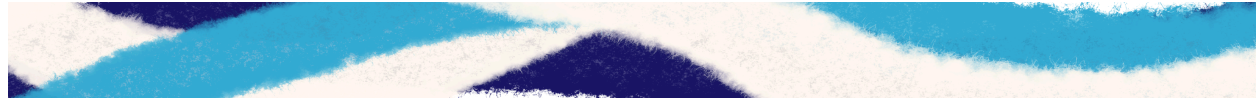
I completed the Jewish Deepening research project a few days before October 7th, and for months after, felt shocked, unsure of what it had to say about this moment. With this supplement, I will begin to explore the relevance of Jewish Deepening after October 7th. We will explore the framework of “Forces of Alienation,” asking how the post-October 7th American Jewish landscape has been a Force of Alienation for American Jews. We’ll also explore to what extent it has been an “Opening to Connection.”

Forces of Alienation

Let’s start with the Forces of Alienation. As a review, the report uncovered 5 main Forces of Alienation. They are: 1) Parental Relationships 2) Theology 3) Jewish Prayer and Ritual 4) Competing Worldviews and 5) Hostility and Discomfort because of Identity and/or Belief.

The most prevalent Force of Alienation amongst Jewish interviewees was parental relationships. This type of alienation is deeply relevant when exploring the impacts of October 7th. One finding of the research is that, “alienation can occur if the parents’ Jewish commitments cause a major conflict with their child.” October 7th and its aftermath has been a significant cause of Jewish familial conflict. The chief source of this conflict is the generational gap in terms of views on Israel and Palestine that is well known and has been extensively reported on. To cite some of these reports, Pew Research Center and Brookings have released research indicating that Millennial and GenZ Jews are much more likely than older generations to have a favorable view of the Palestinian cause, and are less likely to support Israel and its government.¹

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/>
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/younger-americans-stand-out-in-their-views-of-the-israel-hamas-war/>



There is both anecdotal data and research that this generational gap has resulted in massive conflict within families. At a talk I gave at a Conservative synagogue in the Boston-area in Summer 2024, I asked the audience how many folks had major or minor conflicts over the past year with members of their family about the war in Israel and Gaza. Around 75% of the room raised their hand. Anecdotes regarding such conflict have also surfaced in Jewish media accounts.² Another telling statistic came in a recent Pew Research report that said that 47% of Jewish adults under the age of 35 say they have stopped talking to someone in person or online because of something that person said about the war.³ It is not hard to imagine that some of the people they've stopped talking to are family members.

The data and the anecdotal accounts are clear that there is a significant amount of familial and intergenerational conflict. Based on the original research report (bottom of pg. 8), it seems inevitable that this type of conflict will lead to alienation. The main question that remains is whether the alienation is from Judaism writ large, or whether it is just alienation from a Judaism that identifies as Zionist. I am unaware of existing research that addresses this topic.

Another Force of Alienation that is relevant to American life post-October 7th is when a person feels alienation or discomfort in Jewish spaces because of a held identity or belief. In the Jewish Deepening report (pg. 16), I wrote, “hostility or discrimination can also be deployed against individuals for their belief systems. The most prominent example of this phenomenon in Jewish community in recent years is one’s views about Israel and Zionism, especially Jews who identify as non- or anti-Zionist.”

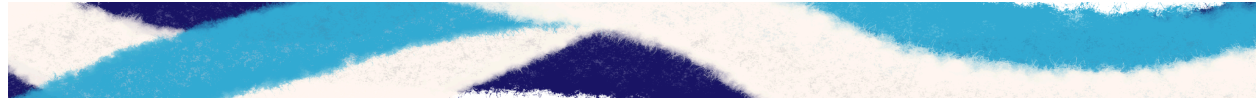
I wrote these words before October 7th, and since then, that dynamic has become significantly inflamed. After October 7th, many Jewish organizations fired anti- or non-Zionist employees, with accusations surfacing about them being fired specifically for their beliefs.⁴ This dynamic has also been replicated on an organizational level, with one prominent example being the Boston Workers’ Circle’s removal from the regional Jewish Community Relations Council for their pro-Ceasefire, anti-Zionist views.⁵ In the original Jewish Deepening research report (pg. 16), I discussed how the research seemed to indicate that it wasn’t just explicit hostility that could cause alienation from Judaism and Jewish institutions. It was also “the fear of hostility, or [the] assumption that one would be unwelcome if one showed their authentic self. [This] is enough to alienate an individual.” There is no doubt that many non- and anti-Zionists feel fear to express themselves authentically in predominantly Zionist institutionalized Jewish spaces. Given this power dynamic, there is likely also significant alienation from Judaism and organized Jewish spaces occurring.

² <https://forward.com/culture/653010/bintel-brief-israel-family-disagreement-october-7/>

³ www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/how-us-jews-are-experiencing-the-israel-hamas-war/

⁴ <https://inthesetimes.com/article/anti-zionist-israel-gaza-jewish-institutions>

⁵ <https://forward.com/opinion/567305/boston-workers-circle-jcrc-proud/>



Finally, there is likely alienation occurring connected to the idea of worldviews. We recall the quote from the interviewee on pg. 14 of the report: “I think there was very much the narrative embedded in me... that organized religion has caused a lot of violence and war and evil throughout history. And that we need to move away from that.” The intensity of the violence deployed by the Israeli government against Palestinians in Gaza in response to Hamas’ atrocities on October 7th are likely playing into this alienation dynamic. Specifically, there is likely a dynamic occurring where Jews witness the amount of violence being carried out by the predominantly Jewish Israel Defense Forces and associate that violence (and associated civilian casualties) with Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish values, which would lead them to feel aversion toward Jewishness more broadly.

Openings to Connection

There is also abundant research indicating that October 7th and its aftermath have been a Deepening event for many North American Jews. A Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) survey describes a phenomenon they call, “The Surge.” An article about The Surge was published in May 9th, 2024 by the JFNA in eJewish Philanthropy, saying that, “Of the 83% of Jews who were ‘only somewhat,’ ‘not very’ or ‘not at all engaged’ prior to Oct. 7, a whopping 40% are now showing up in larger numbers in Jewish life.”⁶ The Surge, JFNA says, includes significant representation across every demographic group. There is also significant anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon.⁷

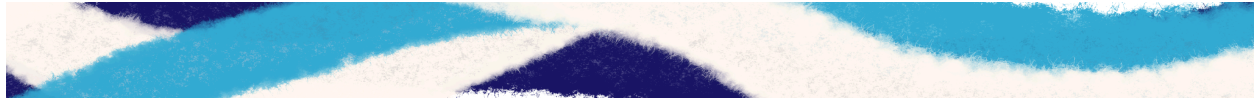
How is this phenomenon connected to the work of Jewish Deepening? In the original Jewish Deepening report, I break down the Openings to Connection into two subtypes. The first opening is when a person’s alienation is healed in some capacity. The second is an increase of urgency to be in relationship with Judaism despite a person’s alienation not being healed. As described in the original report, “This urgency outweighed the pain of the still-existent alienation, allowing the interviewee to participate in Jewish community.”⁸ It seems clear that the existential threat of October 7th to Israel and the collective fear of rising anti-semitism in the US has increased many people’s urgency to be in relationship with Judaism, Jewish communities, and Jewish practices.⁹

⁶ <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-surge-of-interest-in-jewish-life/>

⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/23/opinions/israel-gaza-protests-jews-bitton/index.html>
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/converting-to-judaism-in-the-wake-of-october-7th>

⁸ Page 28, Jewish Deepening report (www.JewishDeepening.org)

⁹ This phenomenon, interestingly enough, also applies to people whose Jewishness is already at the core of their identities. In discussions about the Surge in the Jewish online media sources, Chaim Waxman, professor emeritus of sociology and Jewish studies at Rutgers told the Jewish News Syndicate that even in the Orthodox community, “it’s not uncommon for people to take on more religious practice amid periods of crisis or major traumatic events.”



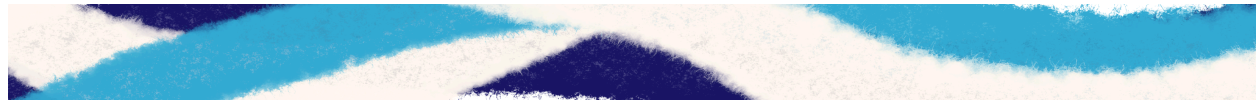
Within the framework of Jewish Deepening, there are at least two explanations of this increase in urgency. As a review, the report uncovered 5 main Openings to Connection. They are: 1) One's core beliefs and worldviews are challenged 2) One finds a place for oneself in Judaism or a specific Jewish community 3) One experiences a disorienting dilemma 4) One encounters mortality and 5) One learns they are Jewish, or recognizes anew the importance of Jewish identification.

One potential explanation of The Surge is that after October 7th, certain core beliefs have been challenged. One core belief that was challenged is the belief that Israel's defenses are impervious and that it is fundamentally safe despite threats from militant groups and neighboring countries. Another belief that has been challenged is that anti-semitism is no longer a relevant threat to North American Jewish thriving. Both of these beliefs have been fundamentally challenged, resulting in an increase to Jewish person's sense of individual and collective vulnerability and desire for in-group identification as a protective measure.

Another explanation of the Surge is an increase in urgency brought on by the disorienting dilemma of October 7th. The original Jewish Deepening report defined a Disorienting Dilemma, based on the work of sociologist Jack Mezirow, as a "confounding life event that cannot be understood or resolved... a major transitional moment... where one might feel lost, and where one needs to undertake serious re-thinking of one's worldview, beliefs, and identity."¹⁰ In the context of the original Jewish Deepening report, the idea of a disorienting dilemma is only discussed with regards to events in an individual's life. Before October 7th, I hadn't considered the idea that a disorienting dilemma could be a collective experience. However, it seems clear that October 7th has been a collective disorienting dilemma, if not a collective trauma, for the Jewish community. This collective experience of disorientation would result in an increase of urgency and motivation to participate in Jewish life.

There are some important questions related to "The Surge" that are worth exploring. One of them is whether the increase of urgency post-October 7th is a steady or a transient phenomenon. Put in another way: Will American Jews continue feeling increased urgency to participate in institutional Jewish life as the events of October 7th feel more distant? The theory of Jewish Deepening indicates that if the Forces of Alienation aren't healed, a high level of motivation is necessary for the individual to overcome these Forces. If the motivation level drops, previously-alienated Jews will be less likely to remain engaged in institutional Jewish life. The counterargument is that in their engagement with institutional Jewish life, perhaps some of their Forces of Alienation were healed. In that case, we might expect that the Surge would result in a sustained increase in participation in American Jewish institutional life.

¹⁰Tickton Schuster, Diane. (1999). Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning. Behrman House. (pg. 106)



So What?

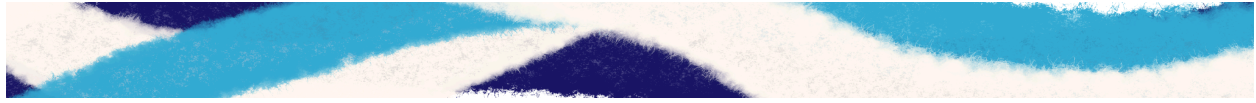
The original goal of the Jewish Deepening report was not just to understand the Forces of Alienation and Common Openings of Connection. We sought to understand these forces in order to respond to them, and adapt Jewish communal strategy accordingly. So the question beckons: How should the American Jewish community respond, specifically to the alienation phenomenon that is likely unfolding for large numbers of anti-Zionist and non-Zionist Jews in North America?

One perspective on this topic was articulated by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, who posted an op-ed in *The Forward* in May 2024 titled, “Young Jews are fleeing Jewish institutions: Here’s how to keep them.”¹¹ The subtitle of her article was, “Jewish communal groups should welcome Jews regardless of their relationship to Israel.” In the article, Rabbi Jacobs talked about the alienation of young Jews from predominantly Zionist Jewish organizations as a Jewish continuity issue. She concludes, “It will be a communal failure if a generation of young people find themselves pushed out of Jewish institutions because of their positions on Israel.” According to Rabbi Jacobs, the solution is to “welcome Jews regardless of their relationship to Israel, and regardless of the questions and challenges they bring to the conversation.” This does not mean agreeing with them and their perspectives. It just means being in relationship with them, ceasing active hostility, being open to their questions, and finding productive ways to navigate ideological conflict that might otherwise result in alienation from Jewish communities. Rabbi Jacobs does not explicitly name this, but it is clear based on our research that the continuation of the status quo will lead to additional alienation from Judaism, leading many Jews not just to leave Jewish communal institutions, but also to opt-out of Judaism entirely.

The status quo is also leading to immense Jewish communal fracturing. Many Jews, especially younger Jews, are no longer willing to remain affiliated with Zionist or pro-Israel communities. They are increasingly self-organizing and building spaces that are normatively non- or anti-Zionist. These spaces are an Opening to Connection for many. If you recall from the original Jewish Deepening report, one of the most profound moments in many interviewees’ lives was finding a Jewish community that felt like home, where they deeply resonated with the personal story or teachings of the leaders of the community or found a community whose values, beliefs, or practices mirrored their own. Many anti-Zionist and non-Zionist Jews are finding just that in communities forming around the country. Continuing the status quo will only exacerbate this dynamic of polarization and self-separation. Rabbi Jacobs’ approach, even if imperfect, could turn the temperature down on this current dynamic of polarization in the Jewish community.

If some players in the Jewish community were able to be more welcoming of anti- and non-Zionists in order to decrease Jewish alienation and polarization, what might that

¹¹ <https://forward.com/opinion/613621/young-jews-antizionism-fleeing-insitutions/>



look like in practice? I believe it would actually share many similarities to what the Jewish community has learned in seeking to be welcoming of Jews of Color, LGBTQ+ Jews, and interfaith families, including:

- Seeking to understand the experiences and beliefs of non- and anti-Zionist Jews from a place of openness, humility, and non-judgment
- Articulating your communities' values with regards to anti- and non-Zionist Jews. Explicitly communicate the red lines that define community boundaries.
- Assessing to what extent your community is actively alienating them and how
- Forming committees or working groups dedicated to addressing this issue
- Creating affinity spaces for anti-Zionist and non-Zionist Jews

There is no doubt that doing so could prevent further alienation and polarization. The question that remains is whether the institutionalized American Jewish community is ready and willing to pivot from its current stance and move toward openness and dialogue that may, in the long-term, be in the best interest of Jewish continuity in North America.