

The Future of American Jewry After October 7

How to find purpose and clarity in horror's wake

By Dan Senor

For many of us, October 7 was a wake-up call of sorts, which gave birth to what some have taken to calling "October 8 Jews." I prefer not to use that term, as it implies that they suddenly became Jews on October 8.

Nonetheless, there was a crack in Jewish consciousness on October 8, 2023. Suddenly, many Jews began to think differently about their Jewish identity, their Jewish community, and their connection to Jewish peoplehood everywhere—especially in Israel. Sociologists and Jewish leaders heralded a "surge of interest" in Jewish life.

People started wearing Jewish stars for the first time. They went to rallies. They donated hundreds of millions to emergency campaigns and sent supplies to IDF units. And the new openness to Jewish identity opened them up to indignation and shock. Over WhatsApp,

people forwarded articles by the score in chat groups. I call them the "Can You Believe!?" groups, as in: "Can you BELIEVE Christiane Amanpour aired that segment?" Or "Can you BELIEVE Thomas Friedman trashed Israel *again* in his column?" In truth, this wasn't as much a Jewish awakening as an outpouring of Jewish adrenaline.

And as with adrenaline, I think we can all feel the moment fading with the passage of time. It would be dangerous for us to return to the false sense of security we felt on October 6.

Since October 7, I have heard the following two comments more than any other from American Jews.

First: *Jews have played key leadership roles in so many pillars of society: finance and Hollywood, hospitals, the environment and civil rights, the arts, symphonies, museums and elite universities. How could they turn on us?*

We hear this all the time. We Jews have collectively spent so much, even named wings after ourselves at these institutions. But, historically speaking, none of this has mattered in stemming the tide of anti-Semitism. No, in fact, our perceived power is deployed against us in these periods. Jews in the Diaspora have too often been, as Douglas Murray says, prominent but weak.

Murray's observation calls to mind *The Pity of It All*, Amos Elon's 2002 chronicle of German Jews from the mid-18th century until Hitler's rise in 1933—timely today because it shatters so many of our comfortable narratives about progress, assimilation, and the supposed safety of living in an educated society. Elon shows how, over nearly two centuries, German Jews transformed themselves from marginalized peddlers and cattle

dealers into the intellectual, cultural, and economic backbone of German society. They didn't just assimilate—they excelled. A community that never was more than 1 percent of the German population produced bankers, journalists, artists, industrialists, and academics whose contributions to the flourishing of Germany are well documented.

They believed in Germany. They believed in Enlightenment values. They believed that reason and education would triumph over prejudice. They were wrong.

What's so piercing about Elon's account is that he shows how the very success of German Jews became weaponized against them. Their visibility in commerce and banking and in cultural and intellectual life was recast as evidence of a sinister influence. Their patriotism was questioned as dual loyalty. German Jews watched their neighbors—people they'd known their entire lives—turn against them. Many thought that by downplaying their Jewishness or converting to Christianity, they could secure their place in society. But anti-Semitism proved remarkably adaptable.

We've seen this—Jews contributing to their societies, only to be turned on—throughout Jewish history. Spain, in the 15th century. Iraq and the broader Muslim world, the early 20th century. Russia, the 19th and 20th centuries. France, the 19th century. And now, we're seeing echoes of it in our own time.

And if indeed this is the historical norm, which I argue it is—and that philanthropy to certain institutions can backfire, how might we reorient, reorganize, and reprioritize our commitments? What is the new wing at the University of Pennsylvania or Harvard really going to achieve for our community and our legacy in our community?

The second major question I hear is: *Why can't Israel just tell its story better to the world? If only we could get the facts out, right?*

We want to believe that the way to counter the lie is with a better story, media tools, and distribution of content. People think: *If we can just hack the algorithm, tweet that viral tweet, our kids won't have to view those toxic reels on TikTok attacking Israel*.

Now, the algorithm spreading the lie is a problem. But the bigger problem is the popularity of the lie itself. It's a lie that has stood the test of time. An earlier communications innovation spread similar lies—not on a social media platform but with Guttenberg's invention of the printing press in 1440, which led to a spate of books in Europe trafficking in anti-Semitic blood libels. Did the printing press enable the spread of anti-Semitic ideas? Yes. As innovations before it and after have as well. The reality is that today there are 16 million of us and 8 billion people in the world. I don't care how good we are, the reel telling a story of a supposed Zionist genocide will get a ton of engagement.

If we can agree that Israel isn't going to win the information war, and we can't make the anti-Semites less anti-Semitic, and that simply investing in non-Jewish causes will never be enough to grant us a get-out-of-the-pogrom-free card, then what are we to do?

I think the answer is shockingly simple: We must lead Jewish lives. For this is what has sustained Jewish life, and Jewish existence, in every century.

Who leads a Jewish life? For the past year and a half, I've been on what you might call a college tour, but not the kind parents take with their high school juniors. I've visited Michigan, Brown, Tulane, UT, Duke, Vanderbilt, Wash U, Florida, and others, usually to connect with Jewish students navigating a difficult time.

I went to help educate about Israel and the Middle East. I went to show solidarity. And in conversation after conversation with these remarkable young people, I noticed that, almost without exception, the students who were leading Jewish and pro-Israel communities on

these campuses shared one formative experience: They had attended parochial school, or what we call “Jewish day schools.”

The data here are not complicated: Day school alumni are more than twice as likely to feel deeply connected to their Jewish identity compared with their peers. They’re four times as likely to feel a strong connection to Israel. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said: “To defend a country, you need an army. But to defend an identity, you need a school.”

Day schools strive to be living, breathing Jewish communities where students absorb Judaism through every sense—where they learn not just Jewish ideas, but how to think, how to argue respectfully across differences, how we build community. They learn Hebrew and how to pray, they learn how to be a mensch. At Jewish day schools, practicing Judaism is normative. Studying Jewish texts, caring about Israel—it’s all the norm. It’s not weird. There’s no baggage, no connotations, and no apologizing for it. Day schools build Jewish confidence and pride.

They develop what I can only describe as Jewish muscle memory. I’ve seen this in my own family after sending our children to the Heschel School in Manhattan. What’s been most surprising isn’t just how it’s shaped our kids, but how it’s transformed our entire family. Their school has become our Jewish community, too.

Increasingly, day schools offer answers to some of this age’s most vexing challenges. Jonathan Haidt has pointed to Jewish day schools as the vanguard of the phone-free schools movement. “One of the best examples of collective action” he says, “is the way Jewish day schools banded together to go phone-free and restore play, book-reading, learning, and fun.”

And I've witnessed how these schools respond in moments of crisis. After October 7, there was no equivocation, no confusion about values. For our kids' school, displaying hostage posters wasn't controversial; it was simply what you do when members of your extended family are suffering. These schools demonstrated what Jewish resilience looks like in real time.

But here's what keeps me up at night: Only about 5 percent of non-Orthodox Jewish children in America attend Jewish day schools. For the Orthodox, Judaism is the center of their lives, as much a part of their moment-to-moment existences as breathing. For the non-Orthodox, living a Jewish life is a moment-to-moment *choice*. And it should be easier to choose.

Take schooling. Two decades ago, Jewish schools were opening across the country. Over the past decade, schools have been merging, downsizing, and closing. Day schools matter, and day schools are in crisis. The question is: What will it take to make them accessible, affordable, and even competitive with the best independent schools for far more than just 5 percent of Jewish American students?

I am hopeful here, because interest in Jewish day schools is actually increasing for the first time in years. The Ades family has almost single-handedly built Miami's new Jewish Leadership Academy. The Tikvah Fund created Emet Academy in New York City. Tamim Academy is opening elementary schools across the country—in Portland, Austin, Salt Lake City. A Cleveland foundation committed $90 million to grow five local day schools. Yavneh Academy in New Jersey has built an innovative program to integrate students with little to no Jewish background into a dual curriculum (teaching in Hebrew and in English). Existing Jewish day schools are looking to expand to keep up with new demand. The beginning of a renaissance in Jewish education is already happening.

There's only one environment in America that's even more immersive than day schools: the Jewish summer camp. Jewish camps have a similarly profound impact. One survey showed that 92 percent of parents said it directly strengthened their child's Jewish identity. Participation is growing, too, as families double down on their Jewish identities amid rising anti-Semitism. Last summer, 189,000 kids, teens, and young adults attended Jewish camps—a 5 percent increase over 2023. Camp is not just a seasonal touchpoint; it's frequently the beginning of a lifelong Jewish journey. And yet, despite everything we know about the value of Jewish camp, it remains dramatically underfunded. Costs are rising—Jewish overnight camp alone costs $500 million annually—but philanthropic giving to camps has not kept pace.

Simply put, we can no longer view day schools and Jewish camps as nice-to-haves. In today's environment, they're indispensable.

It's never too late. Too often I hear from my adult friends, *It's too late for me. I missed my chance.* And so the very people raising Jewish children, leading our institutions, and writing the checks that keep our community humming have quietly decided that Jewish learning—and even real communal involvement—is for someone else. But it's not. This is a tale as old as time: Famously, Rebbi Akiva, the Talmudic sage, did not begin studying Torah until he turned 40.

My friend Dan Loeb—a hedge fund manager and a late Jewish learner who did not have a bar mitzvah at age 13—took up this mantle after October 7 when he issued a very simple challenge: Read the weekly Torah portion each week in memory of the murdered. He set up a website to get people started. The Simchat Torah Challenge was born. In just a few months, 15,000 people signed up. Most of them weren't Orthodox. Many learn on their own. And the challenge has spawned learning groups and community events nationwide.

I'm reminded of a line in Jonathan Safran Foer's book *Here I Am*. "Jewish Americans," he wrote, "will go to any length, short of practicing Judaism, to instill a sense of Jewish identity in their children." Foer's sarcasm reveals a deep truth: We look at the next generation and say, *Why don't they care?* We know that they watch what we do.

Redefine the college experience. We must also help them choose to live in a way that will make leading a Jewish life easier. And that takes me to higher education. Jewish students and parents are beginning to rethink the conventional metrics of excellence in college and beyond. Is where a school sits in the college rankings still impressive if large groups of masked students can literally invade the college library in the middle of finals?

And yet, because we Jews were seeking prestige, we willfully ignored what many of us had a sense was going on at America's top universities. We found prominence—and became weak. But only now do we know how pervasive and entrenched anti-Semitism has been and that it was spreading and getting entrenched long before October 7.

As the historian Niall Ferguson explained to me on my podcast, *Call Me Back*, "Like all elites in history, our elites are obsessed with the impossible challenge of passing their achievements on to their children. And, because we're not that good as a species at transmitting intellectual firepower and the work ethic from generation to generation, there is this race by high-achieving people to get their children to achieve as much as they did. And this is done through educational credential-seeking."

This post–October 7 reevaluation is overdue—and it has created space for universities outside the so-called super-elite to stand out. Smart institutions have begun to seize the moment.

The chancellors of Vanderbilt and Washington University recently released guiding principles that push back against the dual erosion of academic excellence and ideological diversity in higher education—two pillars that have served American Jews so well over the past half century. Dartmouth College deserves mention here, too.

We're also seeing large public universities standing apart from the groupthink dominating so many elite campuses. Some are dismantling administrative offices that, under the guise of promoting inclusion, have become sources of division. Most important, they're launching new academic initiatives—and, in some cases, entirely new schools—committed at the outset to civil discourse and viewpoint diversity.

The Hamilton Center at the University of Florida, for example, aims to become the world's premier school for the study of Western civilization, with a heavy focus on the study of Jewish texts and history as core to the evolution and enduring strength of Western civilization. The new school of Civic Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin is built on the same principles. There's the audacious effort under way in Austin to build an entirely new university from the ground up: the University of Austin. UATX admitted its first undergraduate class last spring—with average test scores in the 95th percentile. There is a growing hunger for alternatives. Even radical ones.

In each case, the leadership of these institutions is also making serious efforts to reintroduce the study of Jewish thought. They are building large kosher kitchens. They're building Jewish life on campus in partnership with Tikvah. They're working on study-abroad programs in Israel and forming partnerships with Israeli universities—while students on other campuses debate the fastest way to divorce their institutions from the only Jewish state.

The gap year. And regardless of where you go to college, I would add, especially if you have not gone to a Jewish day school or a Jewish camp, there is a very good way to prep: Spend a gap year in Israel.

In Israel, such gap years are already well established. They're called *mechinot*. Thousands of young Israelis choose to delay enlisting in the army for a year of learning, training, and volunteering. Eighteen-year-old Israeli and American kids are preparing for very different life experiences. What if more American Jews spent a year learning and living among their peers in Israel?

There are already programs—Young Judaea Year Course, Kivunim, Bar Ilan, Masa—that offer this kind of experience. Many even provide college credit. But we need more. And we need to reframe the way we talk about this year, not as a delay—not as "putting off" college—but as a foundation for living a Jewish life.

And here again, Jewish living and giving are not keeping up. I know too many American Jews graduating high school who say they'd love to do a gap year in Israel, but they can't afford to go into more student debt. For every Jewish kid heading to a U.S. campus who wants to first spend a year in Israel, and wants to develop that Jewish and pro-Israel muscle memory, our community should do whatever necessary to make it happen.

So: Day schools. Camps. Adult Jewish education. Innovations in higher education. Gap years. Scaling these immersive Jewish experiences would amount to nothing short of a Jewish renaissance. We should experiment with the most ambitious and creative efforts to bolster identity and fight assimilation.

But this renaissance will not come cheap. These programs are expensive. Just who is going to pay for it?

The givers. The Jerusalem Talmud expresses amazement at the generosity of the Jewish people. “One cannot understand the nature of this people,” one clever text reads. “If appealed to for the Golden Calf, they give. If appealed to for the Sanctuary, they give.”

Jewish philanthropists are extraordinarily generous. In just the past year, one generous donor committed $1 billion to Einstein Medical School to make it tuition-free. Another made a similar gift to Johns Hopkins for the same purpose. Jews are disproportionately represented on every list of prominent philanthropists. The Talmud was right: This is a giving people. When asked, we say yes.

But here’s the uncomfortable truth: The overwhelming majority of Jewish philanthropic dollars go to non-Jewish causes. I saw one statistic: Of 33 Jewish individuals on a Forbes 400 list with publicly reported charitable giving, no more than 11 percent of their giving went to Jewish causes.

I am not suggesting that Jewish generosity to the broader civic square come to an end. But I am arguing that it is time for a recalibration in favor of our community’s needs. We need to strengthen the core specifically so we can play the role we are meant to play beyond it.

If the goal we seek is the safety, growth, and flourishing of the Jewish people, then we need to spend like we really mean it. We need to invest—in amounts big, and small, and really, really big—so that we can look back on this moment in 10, 50, 100 years and say: American Jewish life was not the same after that. It was better.

Two philanthropists, Mindy and Jon Gray, made a big bet last week: $125 million to Tel Aviv University. This kind of giving is inspiring and will make an enormous difference in Israel. And now I wonder: Who will be next, and here in America? Who will make that bet on American Jewish life?

'The time is now.' In January 1948, Golda Meir delivered a famous speech to a group of Jewish leaders in Chicago a mere four months before the establishment of Israel. Her message was clear: The future of the Jewish state hung in the balance. The Jews in Palestine needed every cent American Jews could spare.

"I beg of you—don't be too late," she said. "Don't be bitterly sorry three months from now for what you failed to do today. The time is now." She intended to raise $25 million; by the end she had raised $50 million. (In today's dollars, that would be nearly $700 million.)

The tables have turned. Israel is going to be fine, in part because of Israeli strength and resilience, backed up by the Diaspora's continued commitment. But I do think the future of American Jewish life hangs in the balance. And I don't want any of us—whatever our resources—to regret not doing more.

We really do have the tools to rebuild American Jewish life. The question is: Do we have the sense of purpose—the *why*—to match?

Hersh Goldberg-Polin spent just three days with a fellow hostage named Eli Sharabi in the tunnels of Gaza. In that time, Hersh taught Eli a lesson that would change his life. He quoted the psychologist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl: He who has a "why" will find the "how."

Israelis have a why. Many who may have forgotten it were reminded of it on October 7, when everything changed. Since then, Israelis have seen the why come roaring back.

Agam Berger, held in captivity for 450 days, had a why. "I learned," she said after her release, "as my forebears did, that imprisonment can't overwhelm the inner spiritual life. Our faith and covenant with God—the story we remember on Passover—is more powerful

than any cruel captor. Even as Hamas tried to coerce me into converting to Islam—at times, forcing a hijab on my head—they couldn't take my soul." Her friend, Liri Albag, fashioned a Haggadah out of whatever materials she could find in captivity, and they marked the Passover Seder together, yearning for redemption.

Aner Shapira had a why. In a bomb shelter beside Hersh on October 7, he faced a death squad and chose to act. He hurled seven live grenades back at the terrorists before the eighth took his life. He died saving his friends—and strangers—because he knew he served a people greater than himself.

Ben Zussman had a why. A reserve officer in the IDF, he wrote a letter before heading to the front lines in case the worst came to pass. And when his parents opened the letter after his death, they found these words: "If you're reading this, something must have happened to me. As you know about me, there's probably no one happier than me right now. I'm happy and grateful for the privilege to protect our beautiful land and the people of Israel."

We—the Jewish people—should look to Israel not simply for its defense innovation or health care advances. We should look to Israelis for their clarity, their purpose, their deep sense of identity. Hersh, Eli, Agam, Aner, Ben—very different people, very different lives. But each of them met this moment with courage. With faith. With an unshakable sense of *why*.

The deepest question. What is our why? Why are we here? Are we truly owning the story we're living in? These are not theoretical questions. They are practical and will determine the future of our families and our communities.

The state of World Jewry depends on how we answer.

If we answer in the way I'm suggesting, by resolving to live Jewish lives, and making sure our children do as well, we will begin to find that answer. The road in the near term will not be smooth. We know enough to know that we are witnessing another story, another chapter in Jewish history. There will be libraries invaded by campus mobs, there will be Nazi graffiti scrawled on the walls of subway cars, there will be another podcaster spreading libels about the Jewish people. Of this, we can be sure. I am confident, however, that in the long term, if we strengthen our Jewish identity, our people will not be prominent but weak. They will be Jewish and strong.

Many young American parents over the past 18 months have chosen to pay tribute to some of the Israeli heroes we lost in this war. Everywhere you look, it seems, you might meet a young baby Hersh—named for Hersh Goldberg-Polin—or baby Carmel, for Carmel Gat, or Ori, for Ori Danino, or Maya, for Maya Goren.

These young American Jews will carry their names into the future. I imagine, 18 years from now, young Hershs and Carmels and Oris and Mayas walking onto the quad together, on one of a thousand American campuses. And my prayer is that as much as they carry their names, they will also carry their courage, their essence. That they will know who they are, where they come from—and where they're going.

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