HOW TO TALK WITH CHILDREN ABOUT THE WAR IN ISRAEL

• **Take a moment to step back and reflect**
  Before you engage in a discussion with your students, it is important to acknowledge your own beliefs, biases, and fears. How many types of emotions do you have about the unfolding disaster? About the deaths and losses, the horrific scenes, the slow government response? Acknowledge that how you interpret these events will influence how you speak to your students. You are here to take in the feelings, the questions, and concerns of your students.

**Listen to Children**

• Create a safe environment and a time and place for children to ask their questions and express their feelings. This is the mitzvah of Shema v’ahavta, listening and loving.
• Begin by asking them what they have heard and seen.
• Some children will find it easier to draw pictures or write stories or poems.
• Ask what is worrying them about what they have heard.

**Answer Children’s Questions**

• It might be helpful for you to write a paragraph explaining in the most direct simple way what happened. This is not to read to them, but to help you organize your thoughts.
• Use words and concepts that are appropriate for the level of the children you teach.
• Give children honest answers to their questions. Children will usually know if you are not being honest with them.
• Acknowledge and support the students’ feelings and thoughts. Let them know that their questions are good, and their concerns are important.
• It is important to differentiate between Hamas terrorists and Moslems or Arabs in general. Jews have historically been lumped together and persecuted as a group.
• Differentiate between war and terrorism. (According to James Poland, author of *Understanding Terrorism*, “Terrorism is the premeditated, deliberate, systematic murder, mayhem, and threatening of the innocent to
create fear and intimidation in order to gain a political or tactical advantage,” and to influence those who are looking on in the world or on TV.)

- Remember that children learn from watching their parents and teachers. They are very influenced by your responses to what is happening now. It is important to share your concerns and emotions with them after you’ve heard theirs.
- Don’t be afraid to tell your students that you don’t know the answers to all the questions they are raising.

**Action Plans**

Many children will want to find a way to help. One way is to pray for peace and for the return of the hostages. You can find the prayers for peace in your prayerbooks. Here is also a short prayer for hostages:

אוהנה כל ביה ישראל הנוהים דברת ובשしば
местום רוחע עליהם ורגלם מצרה
לראות, מאפתה לאוארה, ומשמיוד לאוארה
שמח י_PULLון חומץ קריב
May G-d be merciful to our fellow Jews who suffer persecution and imprisonment.
May G-d soon bring them relief from distress and deliver them from darkness to light, from being held to being free.
And let us say: Amen.

- Giving money is another way to help. Your local community Federation will be able to guide you. Children can collect tzedakah or earn the money to contribute.
- They can make cards or send emails to family and friends of people in your community who are in Israel.
- They can each write a prayer for peace, or write one together with all the children in your class.

**Reassure the students**

- You might want to use music. Here are a couple of suggestions:
  a. Shlomo Carlebach song “Shalom” (YouTube)
  b. Oseh Shalom (any melody)
  c. Kol Ha-Olam kulo—All the world is a narrow bridge (YouTube)
d. Olam Chesed Yibane (Menachem Creditor) (YouTube)
e. Am Yisrael Chai

- If they are concerned about their own safety, tell them the ways that we protect our synagogues, schools, centers etc.
- Don’t question their way of handling events. If a child feels reassured by saying unrealistic things, it may be their way of coping.

This is not the time to teach about the history, geography, and politics of this event.

- Now is time for processing
- Now is time for praying
- Now is time for helping
- Teshuva, Tefilla, Tzedakah – Close Consideration, Prayer, and Charitable acts are what we have been taught to do in times of trouble.

Be reassured that it is normal to have a multitude of emotions after an event of this nature. Confusion, disorientation, anger etc. are normal.

A word about theology: If someone asks why God would cause this to happen, ask them what they think, and tell them your opinion, or that you don’t know. It might be helpful with older children to review texts such as Lamentations, Job, or Psalms that reveal that Jews have always asked that question.

It is important to remind older students that we have gone through much suffering as Jews, and we have not only survived but learned how to respond to the suffering of others in humane and caring ways.

Heschel once taught that a Jewish teacher is the rabbi to their students. It is important in any Jewish setting that discussions of this kind are conducted so that children learn how to use Jewish wisdom to live a better life in a complicated world.

Some of this material was taken in part from:
Reclaiming Judaism
Save the Children
CAJE publications
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
The Jewish Virtual Library