

IDEAS

Here's how Jewish life changed (for now) after Oct. 7

Andrew Silow-Carroll December 10, 2023



A mock empty Shabbat table, representing over 200 hostages kidnapped by Hamas, was set up in Times Square by the Israeli-American Council, Oct. 26, 2023. (Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images)

([JTA](#)) — “Everything changed after Oct. 7.” It’s an axiom being heard around Shabbat tables, in rabbis’ sermons and in countless opinion pieces after the Hamas massacre in southern Israel plunged the country into war. At an emotional level, it refers to the despair and shock felt among people in mourning – for the 1,200 victims of the initial attack, for the soldiers lost in battle and perhaps for a vision of Israel as a country that could at least “manage” its conflict with the Palestinians and continue to flourish.

But for many observers, it refers to a series of ruptures in Jewish life whose effects are only just beginning to be felt. They include seismic shifts in their relationship to Israel, how they form political alliances

and their way of being Jewish in a world that feels scarier, lonelier and, in some surprising ways, more Jewish than ever.

Below are some of the major themes of change, culled from the writings of analysts, activists, rabbis and pundits. Because it has only been two months since the war began, some of their insights and predictions are provisional and perhaps premature. Some contradict each other. But together they capture a moment when old assumptions appeared to have died in the kibbutzim, villages and fields of the “Gaza envelope,” and new ones are taking their place.

“We are alone”

In the days immediately after the Hamas attacks, President Joe Biden pledged America’s support for Israel and its right to defend itself and root out Hamas. That promise has mostly held, even as the deaths of as many as 15,000 Palestinians has caused growing unease among some in his administration, and within factions of the Democratic Party.

Yet the backing of superpower didn’t alleviate a sense of betrayal for many Israelis and their supporters in the west.

“In my conversations with college students, rabbis, business leaders, Jewish professionals, and others, the sentence that everyone seems to circle around, spoken or unspoken, is ‘We are alone,’” wrote Bret Stephens, the conservative New York Times columnist, in an Oct. 10 column for Sapir, the Jewish thought journal he edits. “That’s despite clarion statements of solidarity from President Biden, Republican leaders in Congress, prominent TV anchors, and millions of ordinary Americans. Because beneath that, we sense that something is badly amiss,” including inadequate statements from university leaders and the support for Hamas among college students and the left.

The historian Sara Yael Hirschhorn also predicted that by the time the war ends, “Israel will have lost the war for world opinion. What happens on college campuses, media desks, or street protests won’t stay there — it has already eroded support for Israel within the Democratic Party, the US State Department is in revolt, the military

brass are frightened of a regional war, while the chattering class [is] demanding absolute condemnation of Israel. Most Western governments are watching restive populations marching through their streets (occasionally stopping to smash glass and beat Jews on the street in a 21st century Kristallnacht) while its legislators choose their jobs over moral clarity and their representatives can't even pass UN resolutions that use the words ' Hamas,' ' Israel' or ' hostages.' ”

Betrayal by the left

Numerous liberal Jewish activists have written about being “abandoned” by social justice allies who embraced the Hamas narrative or saw Israel as solely responsible for the attacks and criminally culpable for its response. As Gal Beckerman wrote in The Atlantic, “many of those on the left who I thought shared these values with me could see what had happened only through established categories of colonized and colonizer, evil Israeli and righteous Palestinian — templates made of concrete.”

Haviva Ner-David, an Israeli-American peace living in northern Israel, wrote in a JTA essay that “the hailing of that massacre by much of the world, including the progressive (even Jewish) left ... triggered a deep fear for our survival as Jews.” Watching pro-Palestinian protests by progressives, she saw “activists crossing a line from struggling for peace and Palestinian rights into promoting a hateful, terrifying, dangerous anti-Jewish agenda.”

Orthodox Jewish feminist Daphne Lazar Price wrote in JTA that she was shocked by putative feminist allies who refused to show outrage over Hamas' sexual crimes against Israeli women on Oct. 7.

“I can't continue to work with those who don't see me in the same light, as someone deserving of love and respect, no matter how they feel about my Judaism or Israel,” she writes. “My attempts to engage former colleagues have been hurtful and fruitless because of their unwillingness derived from ideological differences or a defensiveness of long-held views. Those groups' attempted mind games to decide who is worthy of care and who is entitled to protections need to end — or they will become irrelevant.”

A realignment among liberals

This fracture in the left has also led to predictions that the liberal American Jewish majority will modify its embrace of aspects of the social justice agenda it has traditionally supported.

Yehuda Kurtzer, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, writes that for some liberal Jews, a re-engagement with their Jewish selves “may reflect a real existential transformation away from those exact liberal values and commitments they held dear for a long time. It is something of a replay of the prior generation’s anti-Communist turn in the 1960s and 1970s, a journey inward from the universal to the particular.”

Stephens had his doubts: “My guess is that a few will make a clean break, like the brave ex-Communists of ‘The God That Failed,’ who made public their disillusionment with the Soviet Union in the famous 1949 book of that name,” he writes in the same Sapir essay. “Most others will use the pretext of Israel’s retaliation to return to their delusional sleep. People who adopt the politics of the extreme tend to double down: Rationalizations and moral equivalences come easy, and notoriety is easier than contrition.”

An embrace of the right

While some Jewish liberals complained of abandonment, others worried about Jews and Israelis embracing a hawkish, militaristic response to the Hamas attacks that makes no room for disagreement, dissent or eventual compromise. “This is leaving those of us who are committed to shared spaces, shared resistance, and a shared future grounded in equality very much alone,” writes Haggai Matar, in the leftist Israeli magazine +972. “It is, in many ways, a condensed microcosm of the rifts that have emerged within the left globally over the past month as well.”

In an essay for The Cut, a left-leaning American Orthodox Jew identified as “R.B.” writes that in their community, “Everyone is a haunted mess, and jingoism appears to be the defense mechanism of choice.”

“It is painful to watch people around me whom I have known for their inquiring minds and strong sense of morality become uncritical flag-wavers, watch them dismiss massacres as disinformation, watch them advocate more and more violence. They treat cease-fire as a dirty word,” writes R.B.

In Jewish Currents, the left-wing journal, Raz Segal criticized fellow Holocaust and genocide scholars in Israel, North America and beyond for signing a statement condemning Hamas terror and denouncing the rise of global antisemitism that he said “completely dehumanized Palestinians and made no mention whatsoever of any form of Israeli mass violence.”

The (further) poisoning of the discourse

Social media has become a toxic battleground in the war of ideas — “Antisemitic and Islamophobic hate speech has surged across the internet since the conflict between Israel and Hamas broke out,” the New York Times reported on Nov. 15. Rarely a safe space for enlightened discourse, the vitriol on X and Instagram since Oct. 7 has forced many longtime users to weigh the necessity of engaging on social media against their mental wellbeing.

Lior Zaltzman, the deputy managing editor of Kveller, has worked in Jewish social media since 2014, and writes that “I’ve also never seen it this awful, this polarizing, this ... honestly, unhinged.”

She adds: “People are so stuck in their ‘side’ and binary that they’re willing to share anything — without fact-checking, without making sure they’re not getting in bed with people whose worldview is dangerous, without asking themselves for a small second, wait, is this Islamophobic? Antisemitic? Completely detached from reality? Wondering if they sound like a conspiracy theorist, or if they’re just being cruel for cruelty’s sake?”

Reengaging as Jews

Kurtzer and others also see Jews reclaiming a sense of Jewish belonging — or having that sense of belonging forced upon them. Prior

to Oct. 7, the perennial concern among the Jewish mainstream was that the politically and religiously liberal majority of American Jews “was at risk of exiting from the Jewish community,” he writes. “Now I see signs of reengagement, reflected in higher turnout at synagogue, Hillel and Chabad events, and expressed on social media as a response to a sense of alienation from a gentile world that does not take Jewish pain and trauma seriously. This is happening at all ages.”

Boutique store owner Susan Korn and jewelry designer Stephanie Gottlieb both told the New York Times that sales of Star of David necklaces spiked after Oct. 7. In November, a Chabad poll found that the vast majority of its U.S. emissaries were reporting increased attendance at their events.

Steven Windmueller, who researches Jewish communal trends, sees signs of both retreat and engagement. “[W]e wonder about our status, even our safety,” he wrote in the Jewish Exponent. “Some of us are withdrawing from public Jewish places, uncomfortable being in those spaces where Jews gather. Others are removing the physical symbols of Jewishness, both personal and communal.

“At the same time, for instance, at the grade-school level, we are seeing a transformational moment. Now we have reports of parents moving kids from public educational settings into Jewish parochial schools.”

Solidarity around an Israel at war

In the year leading up to the war, Israel was torn apart over the government’s plan to overhaul its judicial system and, its critics said, undermine its democracy. The weekly mass protests were taken up by Jews in New York and beyond. The era of street protests ended on Oct. 7. “The judicial reform and protests of the past year had led many Israelis to start asking whether the country even had a future,” David Hazony, the Israeli-American writer and editor wrote on Nov. 1. “In the last three weeks, however, Israelis have come together with a strength and focus far beyond what anyone thought possible. When a true crisis came, politics fell away and the nation united.” One of the

groups organizing the North American protests, UnXeptable, changed its motto from “Saving Israeli Democracy” to “Saving Israel.”

That solidarity is also being seen in the Diaspora, perhaps most notably at a pro-Israel rally in Washington that drew an estimated 290,000 people. Federations are seeing a surge in donations, groups are planning solidarity trips to Israel both to volunteer where needed and to bear witness, and even the North American haredi Orthodox sector — many of whose leaders and followers keep an arm’s distance from the secular Jewish state as a matter of theology — are demonstrating what JTA called an “outpouring of support for Israel and its military at a level not seen in decades.”

Rabba Sarah Hurwitz, president of the feminist Orthodox yeshivah Maharat, says that kind of solidarity offers a glimmer of a brighter future.

“This is what we do. In times of tragedy, we rally,” she writes. We find ways to support one another with comfort, food and supplies. These acts of chesed, kindness, cannot undo the tragic loss of life. They cannot bring home the hundreds who are held hostage. They cannot heal the thousands of wounded. But digging into our humanity reminds us that there is light in darkness....

“Then, because we don’t have a choice, we will get back to the work of learning, teaching, and serving. It’s the Jewish way.”

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