JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

Ideas

I'm a Jewish studies professor. I wasn't trained to give pastoral care — but my students desperately need it.

A professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands says helping students after Oct. 7 has given her new insight into her own Jewish identity.

Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah January 30, 2026

A professor who teaches about Jewish topics says she finds herself frequently counseling distressed Jewish students. (Getty Images)

Most people would accept the claim that Oct. 7 was an inflection point in Jewish history. But fewer realize that it was also an inflection point for university professors of Jewish history, particularly those who are themselves Jewish.

I once wryly told an Israeli ambassador that my job is to teach Jewish history, not to defend the State of Israel. But what about defending Jewish students? I am not a diplomat, nor a politician. I am a historian and a mother. I also happen to be Jewish, which, given my field

of study and my name, is impossible to hide. It is something I have therefore chosen to publicly embrace, for better or for worse.

The consequence is that I have found myself taking on a pastoral role, something for which I have no formal training and a responsibility that feels daunting. And yet, over the past two years, in the shadow of more official structures, I have taken it on. I am not alone. In conversations with colleagues across continents, whether in large universities or small ones, in places with flourishing centers for Jewish life or, like my own at the University of Groningen in the north of the Netherlands, with little more than a simple WhatsApp group of Jewish students, we find ourselves making things up as we go along in a rapidly changing geopolitical and campus reality.

Over the past two and a half years, a wide range of students and staff have reached out to me, sometimes from the most unexpected places and even from universities that are not my own. What they share is an attachment to Judaism, often though not always an attachment to the State of Israel, and a profound unease about the climate on campus and in society more broadly.

I have spoken with anti-Zionist Jewish students upset by what they see as a lack of empathy among fellow Jews for Palestinians. I have spoken with fervently Zionist students who hoped I might give public lectures defending Israel. I have spoken with students who feel a deep connection to Israel but who are also deeply troubled by the current government and its actions and frustrated by the lack of news sources that are both critical and empathetic. But most often I have spoken with students who are simply distressed and confused by the casual remarks of peers or lecturers about Israel and Jews over the past two years.

I have considered mentally organizing them according to the four sons of the Passover seder, though it seems problematic to assign anyone the role of the rasha (loosely interpreted as the wicked son). Still, most students in some way resemble the fourth son. They do not even know what to ask. They are simply upset.

Why would a student turn to a professor of Jewish studies rather than a Hillel chaplain or a student rabbi? I think it is because they crave information grounded in scholarship and because many feel that organizations, whatever their political or religious orientation,

present a particular narrative and ultimately want something from them, whether activism or religiosity.

Yet they also want this information to come from someone who cares about Jews and Judaism and they want to feel safe in their questioning. They are seeking perspectives that help them process a lived experience that they struggle to articulate. They also want reassurance from someone whose role on campus is to teach about Jews and Judaism in a nuanced and academic way that things will be all right. And perhaps they also want a hug, though this is complicated by the fact that most universities rightly prohibit physical contact between staff and students.

Once a student asked me, “How can you stand in front of a classroom, smile, and talk about Jewish history with such passion when you know what these students are posting on social media?” I smiled and said, “That is my job,” although my heart was breaking. What I should have said was that I do it because I never know who is watching and I want to be a role model for students like you. Or I could have quoted Hillel the Elder: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Today I can offer students a wide range of resources on Israel-Palestine, Zionism, and Judaism more broadly. I have also learned that this is most helpful when paired with honesty about my own attachment to Judaism, something I have never found easy to articulate. Although I am a historian of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I have a grounding in religious thought, halacha or Jewish law, and classical Judaism from years of Hebrew school and a few graduate courses. I have come to realize that this education has sustained me emotionally over the past two years in ways I could never have anticipated.

So now I tell students this: After the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis began to codify the Oral Law, eventually producing the Mishnah and, over centuries, the Talmud. This vast body of interpretation became a kind of fence around the Torah, meant to protect Jewish life in exile. I tell them that I understand Judaism as an emotional and spiritual fence that protects me in difficult times. I explain that I have built my own fence through Jewish practice, which gives my life meaning and direction, and I challenge them to explore what Judaism might mean to them so that they too can construct their own fence to protect themselves.

Starting in early 2025 a Dutch government task force has been examining how to promote the safety of Jews in the Netherlands, with particular attention to the situation of Jewish students at universities. Next week, the task force will present its report. While I do not yet know which proposals they have ultimately adopted, the report will include my testimony. In it, I suggested (among other points) that the appointment of a dedicated confidential counselor for Jewish staff and students would be beneficial, as existing support structures often lack sufficient understanding of the complex position in which members of the Jewish community currently find themselves.

Beyond this, there are limits to what universities can reasonably do to support professors of Jewish studies beyond recognizing the additional labor we have taken on; for those of us who have taken on a broader pastoral role, this has largely been a matter of personal choice. With this in mind, Jewish communal leaders and institutions could also consider reaching out to professors directly to ask what support they need. How best to approach individual campus contexts, and what forms of support are most appropriate, will necessarily vary, as I have learned through conversations with colleagues around the world, since each situation is unique. It is also essential that any assistance comes without ideological strings attached.

Ultimately, I have come to realize that by sharing my own intellectual vulnerability and unease with these students, I have also helped myself survive this difficult period. As one of my wiser students once reminded me, Martin Buber argued that you only truly internalize a value when you are willing to expose it to another, when you risk misunderstanding, rejection, or conflict. That risk is what gives a thought weight. Without it, ideas float free of the self. Jewish students need and deserve an intellectual safe space in which to internalize their values. This is something professors of Jews and Judaism can offer, and in doing so we may also help ourselves.

* *Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah is assistant professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Groningen. She is the author "Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism" (Brill, 2021).*