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Religion

From pop stars to tefillin pop-ups, Oct. 7 changed how Israel's 'somewhat observant' practice Judaism

Polls suggest that Noa Kirel's pre-wedding "hafrashat challah" was part of a trend.



The Israeli TV host Ofira Asayag is secular but lit Shabbat candles on air in 2024, during the Israel Hamas war — reflecting a trend among Israelis. (Screenshot)

By [Deborah Danan](#) January 9, 2026

TEL AVIV — In the weeks after Hamas's Oct. 7 attack, religiously charged videos started circulating on social media. Dozens of young women posted videos of themselves cutting up their "immodest" clothing, jeans, crop tops, minidresses, vowing to replace them with modest skirts and head coverings.

In one viral TikTok clip, a young influencer solemnly shears her wardrobe to shreds, declaring it an offering for national deliverance. "Creator of the world, as I cut these clothes, cut away the harsh decrees against Israel," she says, explaining that she would not even donate the garments lest she "cause someone else to stumble" by wearing them.

Other images circulated too, of tefillin pop-ups, neighborhood challah-bakes and, on both social media and the street, a noticeable rise in religious amulets and pendants. Hamsas, Stars of David and necklaces shaped like the map of Israel or the ancient Temple in Jerusalem appeared everywhere.

Two years later, as the grinding war in Gaza largely wound down, those early scenes have taken on the feel of a specific moment in time. Still, the spiritual jolt of those first weeks has not fully faded, and increased religious practice has become part of the country's daily rhythm.

A poll released in November by the Jewish People Policy Institute found that 27% of Israelis have increased their observance of religious customs since the war began. Roughly a third of Jewish Israelis say they are praying more frequently than before the war, and about 20% report reading the Tanach or psalms more often.

JPPI head Shuki Friedman said that many Israelis, and especially the young, felt the war had reconnected them to tradition and Jewish identity “not necessarily in a halachic way, but in a way that shows up very strongly in their lives and in the public space.”

Crucially, the shift has been most dramatic among Israelis who already had one foot in tradition — those raised in “masorti” or traditional but not strictly observant, homes. While the masorti category has its roots in Middle Eastern and North African (Mizrahi) communities, where religious observance was historically more integrated into daily life but less rigid than in European Orthodoxy, today masorti Israelis span all sectors of Israeli society. (The category is distinct from the Masorti movement, the name for Conservative Judaism in Israel and Europe.) Roughly one-third of Israeli Jews identify as masorti, with JPPI breaking the group into two categories: “somewhat religious” and “not so religious.”



A rabbi mans a stand to pray with tefillin in south Tel Aviv, Oct. 8, 2023. (Yahel Gazit / Middle East Images / Middle East Images / AFP via Getty Images)

The Jewish demographer Steven M. Cohen once quipped that masorti Israelis are those who “violate the laws that they do not wish to change” – meaning they accept traditional Jewish law, known as halacha, as valid, but selectively observe it in practice. Cohen also noted there’s no real American equivalent, though the closest parallel might be “non-observant Orthodox.”

Among young Jews who identified as “somewhat religious” masorti, 51% of respondents in the poll reported deepening their religious practices during the war.

David Mizrachi is one of them. Raised in a masorti home, Mizrachi had never been consistent about synagogue attendance, Shabbat observance or laying tefillin. Since Oct. 7, he said, he does all three — religiously.

For him, the change grew out of the shock of the attacks and the losses that touched his own circle. He personally knew the Vaknin twins, killed at the Nova party, and Elkana Bohbot, the hostage snatched from the rave who was released after two years in captivity. Those events, he said, pushed him into “chesbon nefesh,” a Jewish reckoning with his identity.

“I understood that these enemies and terrorists came because we were Jewish, not because we were Israelis,” he said.

In some households the response went further still. Rozet Levy Dy Bochy, raised masorti and married to a non-Jewish Dutch man who decided after Oct. 7 to convert, said Oct. 7 drew her deeper into observance.

“It felt like we were in a horror film, but faith provided an anchor,” she said. “Knowing that everything was part of God’s plan and in the end something different, something good, was waiting for us was comforting.”

The dynamic experienced by Mizrahi, shaped by the violence that afflicted people he personally knew, aligns with another survey released in September by the Hebrew University, which found that direct exposure to the war, whether through bereavement or injury, was closely associated with changes in religiosity and spirituality. Roughly half of respondents reported higher levels of religiosity and spirituality, including a quarter who said they had become more religious and a third who described a rise in spirituality.

That trend has been reflected most vividly in the accounts of released hostages that have filled Hebrew media over the past year, with former hostages describing making kiddush on water, keeping Shabbat for the first time or rejecting pitas during Passover in the tunnels beneath Gaza.

It has rippled through pop culture, too. Actor Gal Gadot told her 106 million followers on Instagram that while she’s “not a religious person,” she had decided to light a candle and pray for the safe return of all the hostages.

Israel’s biggest pop star Noa Kirel, not known for religious observance, marked her November wedding with a mikveh immersion, a hafrashat challah (challah-separation) gathering, along with a henna party of the type that is common among Mizrahi Jews.



Another of Israel's most popular singers, Omer Adam, long considered secular, now wears tzitzit, studies Torah, and keeps Shabbat.

It's now common to see Israeli celebrities sharing Shabbat candle-lighting rituals, including secular TV host Ofira Asayag, who, a year into the war, pledged to do so on-air until the hostages came home.

For sociologist Doron Shlomi, who studies Israeli religiosity, none of this is surprising, because collective crises often produce similar effects. Drawing on research from earthquakes, wars and the Covid-19 pandemic, he described the two years of war as "a kind of laboratory" for seeing how people turn toward faith.

"War always brings two things," he said. "More religiosity and more pregnancies."

Shlomi argued, however, that the hostages and their families sit apart from the rest of the population. For many of them, he said, a turn to religion was a survival tool, and he expects some will go on to live fully observant lives.

But in the broader public he sees two main patterns. The first is piety as a form of public service and solidarity that manifests in personal habits, like observing a single Shabbat or donning tzitzit in honor of the hostages, the fallen, and the soldiers.

The other pattern runs through institutions and organizations that seized on the moment, from ultra-Orthodox groups like Chabad hosting barbecues on army bases to Christian evangelicals joining support efforts.

Although increases outnumbered declines, the Hebrew University and JPPI studies both found a smaller counter-current. About 14% of secular respondents in both surveys said their religiosity had weakened, and 9% of Jewish respondents in the JPPI poll reported a drop in belief in God, a figure that rose to 16% among secular Jews.

The Hebrew University researchers framed their findings through a psychological lens, drawing on terror management theory, which argues that confronting mortality pushes people to double down on their existing worldviews — deepening religious practice for some and weakening it for others.

“During periods of prolonged stress, individuals may reorganize their religious or spiritual orientations by either increasing or decreasing their importance,” said Yaakov Greenwald, who led the study.

It’s not the first time war has nudged Israelis toward faith. After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel experienced a notable uptick in people returning to religion, including high-profile secular figures. Film director Uri Zohar shocked the nation by becoming ultra-Orthodox in 1977. A year later, Effi Eitam, a decorated brigadier general and later a politician, did the same.

Historians debate how large that post-’73 wave really was, but at the time the narrative took hold that the near-death experience of the state — Israel was caught off guard and feared annihilation in the first days of that war — followed by an against-all-odds turnaround felt to many like a miracle.

Shlomi said it is still too soon to make firm predictions about how long the current trend will last, given that the country is only now emerging from the crisis. Even so, he believes the scale of the war and the religious wave it produced were deep enough that, a decade from now, it will still be there.

And if the experience of Rozet Levy Dy Bochy's husband, Peter Griekspoor, is any indication, the war may leave the country not only more observant down the line but with more Jews altogether.

At first, Rozet said, her husband responded in a "very European" way, seeking balance and "both-sides-ing" the situation. She told him that was a luxury of not being Jewish, but that "for us, something in our DNA reacts in moments like this. We've been here before."

But it did not take long for the balance to tilt. As protests spread across Europe and North America and conspiracy theories about Israelis and Jews circulated online, Peter said he was "starting to feel like part of the narrative."

"I felt the antisemitism was personal," he said. "Now I actually feel like I'm Jewish. I feel like I want to be part of this people. They are beautiful, they are strong, they are resilient," he said, before adding with a laugh, "and they are horrible also. Always arguing, always fighting each other."

Shlomi said that while much of the revival grew out of a real desire for unity and belonging, some of it acquired a coercive edge, with some rabbis and others treating "returning" to faith as the only legitimate response and investing significant funding in amplifying it. "Tefillin and barbecues cost a lot of money," he said.

He also noted that the rise in religious practice often moved in tandem with a political realignment, with some public figures openly embracing observance. On Channel 14's flagship "Patriots" current-affairs show, rightwing host Yinon Magal now speaks frequently about becoming more observant since the war, a change that links faith with nationalist politics.

A number of survivors from the traditionally left-leaning kibbutzim on the Gaza border that were attacked on Oct. 7 have described similar movement in their own lives, adopting more religious practices, like remarrying in an Orthodox ceremony, and identifying more strongly with the right. JPPI survey data shows the same trend among Jewish youth, with a clear rightward drift across most political camps.



Mizrahi, however, bucks that trend. A peace activist and board member of Standing Together, a grassroots Jewish-Arab movement that campaigned against the war, he has grown more observant without changing his politics.

"I am a Jew first, then an Israeli, then a democrat, then a Mizrahi," he said. "I see God in every aspect of life. But I also ask, until when will we live by the sword and be filled with hate for Gazans? This isn't the Jewish way."

For Griekspoor, the Jewish way meant the halachic way, and for the past six months he has been enrolled in an Orthodox conversion program under the Israeli rabbinate, a track that mandates full observance of Jewish law. He says he knows his choice in becoming Jewish defies logic.

“You have the persecution, the hatred, the antisemitism — and you can’t eat cheeseburgers,” he said. “But there is no rational explanation. It’s stronger than me.”