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Diaspora Solidarity and Identity: Shifting Bonds Between Europe's Jewish Officials and Israel After 7 October

In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie sich der Angriff auf Israel am 7. Oktober auf die Beziehungen zwischen den Vertreter:innen der jüdischen Gemeinden in Europa und Israel auswirkt. Dazu wurden Interviews mit Repräsentant:innen jüdischer Gemeinden und Institutionen geführt. Die Auswertung ergab, dass die Ereignisse zu einer größeren Unterstützung und Solidarität mit Israel geführt haben. Darüber hinaus wurde eine stärkere Beteiligung an Hilfsaktionen ebenso wie eine stärkere Verbindung mit Israel beobachtet. Der Angriff veränderte die Wahrnehmung Israels als «sicherer Hafen» und führte zu einer verstärkten Auseinandersetzung mit jüdischen Identitätsparametern.

This article examines the impact of the October 7 attack on Israel on relations between officials of the Jewish communities in Europe and Israel. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with representatives of Jewish communities and institutions. The analysis showed that the events have led to increased support and solidarity with Israel. In addition, increased participation in aid campaigns and a stronger bond with Israel were observed. The attack changed the perception of Israel as a “safe haven” and led to a deeper exploration of Jewish identity.

Topic and Method

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, along with civilians from Gaza, invaded Israeli territory and massacred approximately 1,200 people, including around 700 civilians. Among the victims were infants, children and Shoah survivors. Additionally, 251 people living in Israel were taken hostage and abducted to Gaza.¹

In response, the Israeli army launched a ground invasion of Gaza on October 27.² The aim was to destroy Hamas's military capabilities and free the hostages. The Israeli offensive led to massive destruction and casualties in Gaza. At the end of November 2023, Israel and Hamas reached a temporary ceasefire, during which hostages and Palestinian prisoners were exchanged.³ When the ceasefire broke down in December, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza continued to worsen as a blockade severely restricted basic

¹ Livni, Ephrat/Gupta, Gaya: What We Know about the War Between Israel and Hamas, in: The New York Times, November 20, 2023: www.nytimes.com/article/israel-gaza-hamas-what-we-know.html?searchResultPosition=19 [January 4, 2025].

² Boxerman, Aaron: Israel Confirms Deaths of 15 Soldiers in Ground Invasion of Gaza, in: The New York Times, November 1, 2023: www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/world/middleeast/israel-ground-invasion-gaza-soldiers.html [January 3, 2025].

³ Massoud, Bassam/Rose, Emily: Gaza Hostages Release Will Not Start before Friday, Israel Says, in: Reuters, November 22, 2023: www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-government-debates-deal-release-gaza-hostages-truce-2023-11-21/ [January 3, 2025].

supplies such as food and medical aid. Health authorities on site reported approximately 30,000 deaths⁴ by February 2024.⁵ The situation remained tense and violent while international efforts to find a diplomatic solution or permanent ceasefire made little progress. As of February 2024, there were still over 130 Israeli hostages being held in Gaza,⁶ and Israel was still experiencing rocket attacks, both from Iran and particularly from Hezbollah in the northern regions of the country.⁷

Against this background, my research focuses on those not directly affected by the events of October 7: the Jewish diaspora in Europe. To research and explore how the attack of Hamas and the following war in Israel impacted livelihoods, emotional wellbeing and views of Jews outside of Israel, I conducted 27 interviews with representatives of Jewish communities and organizations in Europe between November 2023 and February 2024 about their experiences following October 7. An open-ended interview guide served to cover a range of topics. After the interviews, mainly conducted in English, some in German, were completed, the collected data was analyzed and categorized thematically to identify key developments and insights. In this study, 19 out of the 27 interview partners are quoted. The interviewees include 10 representatives of Jewish communities, frequently the largest in their respective countries, most of whom are serving as executive director or secretary general, and two as community president. Five other interviewees represent national umbrella organizations of Jewish communities, four as executive director or secretary general, and one as president. In addition, the study includes interviews with the President of the European Council of Jewish Communities (ECJC) and the President of the European Jewish Congress (EJC). Further, I interviewed an employee at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, and the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland.

In this article, I focus on the changing relationships of diaspora communities' officials to Israel and to Israelis in the diaspora during the four months following the attack on Israel and the subsequent military intervention in Gaza. This research describes the immediate reactions and changes in the diaspora officials during this period. Whether these developments will persist and lead to longer-term changes cannot be conclusively assessed at this stage. Nevertheless, the interviews are essential as they shed light on personal experiences, fulfil a documentary function and provide eyewitness accounts of the immediate aftermath of the events.

⁴ The issue of the number of fatalities must be approached with a degree of caution, as the totals include both Hamas militants and natural deaths. It could be argued that the rise in fatalities is a result of the military action, but this has to be filtered through the fact that the Gaza health ministry figures include all deaths, regardless of cause. Compare: Stone, Lewi/Rose, Gregory L: When Military Targeting of Hamas Combatants Was Misrepresented as Genocide: An Open-Source Data Analysis with a Focus on Israeli Airstrikes in the Gaza Urban Warfare 2023-24, May 1, 2024: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4960823> [March 30, 2025].

⁵ At the time of writing (January 2025), the war in Gaza is still going on. Events are described up to February 2024, as the interviews were conducted up to that point.

⁶ Staff, Toi/Berman, Lazar/Fabian, Emanuel: At Least 32 of the 136 Hostages Held in Gaza Killed, 20 Others Feared Dead – NYT, in: The Times of Israel, February 6, 2024: www.timesofisrael.com/at-least-32-of-the-136-hostages-held-in-gaza-killed-20-others-feared-dead-nyt [January 12, 2025].

⁷ Bergman, Ronen/Kingsley, Patrick/Levenson, Michael: Israelis Broach a Concession in Hostage Talks With Hamas, in: The New York Times, February 26, 2024: www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-cease-fire-talks.html?searchResultPosition=1 [January 4, 2025].

It should be noted that I hold the position of executive director of a Jewish community in Switzerland. Contacts for the interviews were made primarily through my professional network. While the community I work for was not a direct subject of the study, my position provided valuable context and reference points for the experiences shared by interviewees, particularly regarding broader trends emerging after the events after October 7.

Shifting Engagement, Commitment and Connectedness

October 7 and its aftermath affected not only the Israeli population but also Jews around the world as well as their affiliation with Israel itself.⁸ From the qualitative interviews conducted, three significant results emerged as particularly relevant to the relationship between Israel and the Jewish diaspora in Europe:

First, there has been a high level of participation in various aid and support activities in the communities for Israel. Second, October 7 was perceived as an attack on Israel's security and has shaken the sense of Israel as a "safe haven." And third, we have seen a strengthening of the connection between Israelis in the diaspora and Jewish communities in the diaspora.

It is important to note that the relationship between Jewish communities and Israel is complex. Before October 7, for example, many Jewish communities did not comment on Israeli policy when asked by the media to emphasize that they do not represent Israel. One interviewee said:

We are very careful about when we comment on the topic of Israel as a Jewish community because we are after all the Jewish community and not the Israeli Embassy [...]. [In this sense] we actually have little to do with Israel in our daily business. Because we are Jews in Germany and we are here for the Jews in Germany, or in Munich. And October 7 changed that, you have to say that clearly. Since then, we have Israeli flags standing in front of the door, because we want to show our solidarity with Israel. Israel was attacked because it is a Jewish state. It is what we always describe as a "safe haven." Where we can go with our packed suitcases in case of emergency. And that [reassurance] was somehow, I don't want to say destroyed, but shaken on October 7. And every Jew, not only in Munich, but probably everywhere, feels affected by that. And that's why we have had a different understanding since then of how one should show solidarity with Israel, Jewish or not.⁹

⁸ In addressing the relationship between the diaspora and Israel prior to October 7, reference should be made to the 2024 study of the International Center for Community Development of the Joint Distribution Committee, conducted approximately every three years. In response to the question of the top 10 priorities, the response "Supporting the State of Israel" on a scale of 1-10 increased from 7 (2011 and 2015) and 7.4 (2018 and 2021) respectively to 8.2 (see figure 2, p. 8). In 2021, this issue was not even in the top ten (14th place); after October 7, it is now in fifth place (p. 16). The importance of Israel for the European diaspora and commitment to Israel after October 7 received 83% and 82% approval respectively (see figure 5, p. 11). ICCD: Sixth Survey of European Jewish Community Leaders and Professionals, 2024, July 2024: <https://www.jdc-iccd.org/publications/sixth-european-jewish-leaders-survey-2024/#:~:text=The%20Sixth%20Survey%20of%20European,and%20their%20evolution%20over%20time> [January 19, 2025].

⁹ Interview Steven Guttman, executive director of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria, November 30, 2023, 00:33:06f.

Another quote from a representative of an umbrella organization for Jewish communities describes it in the following way:

[...] on the judicial reform [in Israel] we all agreed that it's not a good thing. We wrote a letter to the [Israeli] ambassador. But it was clear to me now, we can't be silent here [after October 7]. [...] I said, it affects us, too. Not just because of antisemitism. I mean, Israel, that's the final retreat, it's the life insurance for Jews. And if this itself no longer seems secure, then we are all affected. I have the opinion that if Israel is doing badly, really badly, then we are doing badly too.¹⁰

Relief Actions and Support for Israel

After the initial shock, many communities wanted to help Israel. As the president of the European Council of Jewish Communities (ECJC) put it:

The first feeling I had, [...] was that every Jew in the world felt like they had to do something. We didn't know exactly what to do, but we felt like it was a way of helping Israel be interconnected with Israel, but also to help ourselves.¹¹

Help was needed, especially because the state was not functioning well,¹² and it was also necessary for many Jews outside of Israel to act against the feeling of powerlessness. One interviewee asks: "How do we now stand by our brothers and sisters in Israel? How do we help Israeli politics in this onslaught?"¹³ And another reports: "And shortly after, we [...] had the first meetings about what we could do to support Israel."¹⁴

The European Jewish Congress (EJC) launched several solidarity trips to Israel¹⁵ and an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Israel confirmed that Israel has seen a significant influx of Jewish visitors since October 7. The first organized solidarity delegations arrived from all over the world¹⁶ and private individuals came to help and show support, for example, as harvest workers or by joining the army.¹⁷

What was most striking, however, was the strong commitment to relief work: Many communities were approached by members and non-members asking how they could help. Donations of money and materials to Israel were widespread¹⁸ and even military defense equipment for the Israeli army¹⁹ or armored ambulances were sent or donated.²⁰ Lists were distributed of established and trusted organizations like Keren Hayesod, Keren Kayemet LeYisrael (Jewish National Fund), Magen David Adom or Women's International

¹⁰ Interview Ralph Lewin, president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (SIG), January 12, 2024, 00:22:40f.

¹¹ Interview Claudia Fellus, president of the European Council of Jewish Communities (ECJC), December 24, 2023, 00:21:54f.

¹² Kershner, Isabel: For Many Israelis, Oct. 7 Never Ended, in: The New York Times, October 8, 2024: www.nytimes.com/2024/10/08/world/middleeast/oct-7-israel.html [January 4, 2025].

¹³ Interview Dr Ariel Muzicant, President of the European Jewish Congress (EJC), January 11, 2024, 00:16:02f.

¹⁴ Interview Guttman, November 30, 2023, 00:04:30f.

¹⁵ Interview Muzicant, January 11, 2024, 00:33:19f.

¹⁶ Interview anonymous, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel, January 25, 2024, 00:15:28f.

¹⁷ Interview Muzicant, January 11, 2024, 00:07:00f.

¹⁸ Interview anonymous, February 27, 2024, 00:11:25f.

¹⁹ Interview anonymous, 00:04:30f.

²⁰ Interview anonymous, 00:45:55f.

Zionist Organization (WIZO).²¹ Others mention newly founded associations²² and some communities have raised funds to send directly to Israel, for example, to hospitals or destroyed kibbutzim. Clothes for civilians as well as equipment for soldiers were collected or bought and sent to Israel. The ECJC also tried to identify Israel's specific needs through direct exchanges to make their aid more effective.²³

Shifting Engagement

For many Jews in the diaspora, Israel is an important point of reference for their identity even if they do not intend to emigrate there. Their attachment to the country is often expressed in solidarity and emotional sympathy.²⁴ It should also be noted that many Jews in Europe have family and friends in Israel, which further increases the connection on a personal level.

The statements made in the interviews underscore that in times of crisis, Jews around the world feel even more obliged to support Israel. This strengthens not only Israel's situation, but also their own sense of belonging. Israel's vulnerability has led many members of Jewish communities around the world to reconsider and intensify their support for Israel. Many feel compelled to take action and build a stronger connection: "I've never really seen myself as this huge Israel champion before. It was a bit of a turning point,"²⁵ says one interviewee.

The crisis has led many people in the diaspora to rethink their identification with Israel and Judaism as a whole. The interview statements indirectly suggest that there was a greater distance to Israel before October 7, specifically in terms of politics, but now many seem to want a closer connection with Israel, raising hopes for a new dynamic of closeness and a new generation of supporters:

[...] I do think people are going to be much more connected and supportive of Israel. I think they were becoming increasingly disconnected from Israel before this. We had a lot of people who didn't really associate their Judaism with Israel. I think that's changed now. Previously, we could see that the next generation was beginning to disconnect their Judaism from Israel. However, the horrific events of October 7 seem to have shifted this. We are seeing a new generation emerging that is more passionate about engaging in trips to Israel and embracing Israeli education.²⁶

²¹ Mentioned by several interviewees: e.g., J.M., Frankfurt am Main, January 4, 2024, 00:23:09f.

²² Interview Fellus, December 24, 2023, 00:39:00f.

²³ Interview Fellus, December 24, 2023, 00:21:54 and 00:27:34f.

²⁴ Jews in different European regions show varying levels of attachment to Israel, compare DellaPergola, Sergio/ Staetsky, Daniel: Grounding Jewishness: How Attached Do Jews Feel to Israel, Europe and the Countries in Which They Live?, February 28, 2023: www.jpr.org.uk/reports/grounding-jewishness-how-attached-do-jews-feel-israel-europe-and-countries-which-they-live [March 30, 2025].

²⁵ Interview Susie Gordon, CEO of Leeds Jewish Representative Council, December 22, 2023, 00:13:00f.

²⁶ Interview Gordon, December 22, 2023, 00:55:41f.

Attack on Security and the Idea of the “Safe Haven”

The attack on Israel aggravated the security of Jewish communities in the diaspora: Antisemitic acts and statements increased sharply in Europe after October 7.²⁷ At the same time, for many Jews it has heightened awareness of Israel's vulnerability and the need to stand in solidarity. Many in the diaspora feel more connected to Israel and recognize that Israel's fate affects all Jewish communities worldwide: “All of us understand that the death or life of Israel is the death or life of the Jewish community all around the world,”²⁸ explains the president of the ECJC. An official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Israel says:

Something shivered in the Jewish world: First of all, it's the possibility of Israel being vulnerable, really vulnerable, and really fragile. If Israel could not protect its children, what does it mean for the Jewish communities all over the world? If Israel was not able to save its Holocaust survivors on its own land, what does it mean to Jewish people all over the world?²⁹

October 7 is seen by many as the destruction of the “safe haven,” which is mentioned several times in the interviews: “As far as mentality changes are concerned, it was such a secure place that we could all go to and we were all safe there. The state would protect us.”³⁰ Another observes:

Even though I don't have such an extremely close connection to Israel, it was always my ‘safe haven’ and [the situation] kind of pulled the rug out from under my feet. Psychologically, it meant: I no longer have a haven. It's gone. That really affected me to a great extent in the first three or four days.³¹

One of the ambassadors of Israel conveyed a deep emotional connection and solidarity between the diaspora and the residents of Israel: “[...] it's the fact that you care about people in Israel, which goes right to the heart of people. They feel that they are not alone and that they have brothers and sisters around the world who hug them and love them.”³²

Shifting Commitment

The interviewees' statements make it clear that the connection of Jewish communities becomes intensified at times when Israel is in danger. The dismay caused by the situation in Israel is perceived as more personal than in other global crises such as Covid 19 or the war in Ukraine,³³ as it is closely linked to the identity and familial relationships of many members of the Jewish communities.

²⁷ European Commission: First Progress Report of the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life, p. 2, October 14, 2024: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/40128efc-6203-4002-b7a5-8f26882930f6_en?filename=First%20progress%20report%20of%20the%20EU%20Strategy%20on%20combating%20antisemitism%20and%20fostering%20Jewish%20life.pdf [January 4, 2025].

²⁸ Interview Fellus, December 24, 2023, 01:09:53f.

²⁹ Interview anonymous, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel, January 25, 2024, 00:08:49f.

³⁰ Interview Dr. David Joffe Botelho, president of the Lisbon Jewish Community, January 4, 2024, 00:33:12f.

³¹ Interview M., January 4, 2024, 00:15:13f.

³² Interview Ifat Reshef, Ambassador of Israel to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, January 16, 2024, 00:29:51f.

³³ Interview anonymous, February 27, 2024, 00:21:38f.

This perception led to increased identification with Israel and a deeper examination of their own role in the global Jewish community. At the same time, concerns rose about an increase in antisemitic violence in their home countries. Many suddenly felt more vulnerable and the importance of Israel as a potential refuge – commonly phrased as “safe haven” – was emphasized anew.

There is a mutual understanding that Jewish communities in the diaspora stand up for Israel and vice versa. This is presented as a fundamental part of Jewish identity: “We are here for you, and you are here for us,”³⁴ says the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland. The profound nature of this is expressed by the president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (SIG): “I think there’s an antisemitic element if you expect Jews to distance themselves from Israel.”³⁵ The Israeli ambassador stresses further that the Jewish communities are acting decisively and offering unwavering support:

At times of crisis, not least such a crisis when Israel and Israelis come not just under fire but under danger, I feel that this is when the manifestation and the proof of it is at its strongest point.[...] in times when Israel and Israelis are in danger, you, as a Jewish community, act exactly as any Jewish communities all around the world that, God forbid, are in danger, would have done. Full solidarity, full support, and no questions asked [...].³⁶

This underlines the importance for the Jewish communities to not feel isolated, especially in times of hardship. Such a connection can provide significant psychological and moral support to the people of Israel and Jews in the diaspora. It shows that despite geographical distance and possible differences, compassion and human care prevail and provide a form of emotional security.

Bridging Israelis and Diaspora Jewish Communities

The interviews suggest that Israeli Jews living abroad also felt a change. The attack of October 7 and the aftermath created a new dynamic in their relationship with local Jewish communities: The crisis led Israeli Jews, who had often been on the sidelines, to discover local Jewish communities as allies, often for the first time³⁷:

And suddenly in the first month after this, we saw a number of Israelis who contacted us and said, ‘How can we help? What can we do? How can we be connected?’ And they saw it as an opportunity to have a community. They understood that it’s not just about religion or traditions or holidays. It’s more about being Jewish and the need to find people who can understand you.³⁸

One reason Israelis gravitated towards these communities was the ability to engage without needing to explain their emotions or cultural background, facilitating exchanges

³⁴ Interview Reshef January 16, 2024, 00:12:48f.

³⁵ Interview Lewin January 12, 2024, 00:26:30f.

³⁶ Interview Reshef January 16, 2024, 00:06:07f.

³⁷ In the JDC-ICCD study, 45% of leaders said that Israelis in the city had contacted them for help, in: ICCD, Sixth Survey, 2024, p. 23.

³⁸ Interview Maxim Delchev, executive director of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria SHALOM, February 22, 2024, 00:04:24f.

at a more profound level compared to non-Jewish settings. One interviewee states: “[...] you need to go somewhere where people say, ‘I know exactly how you feel. I know what the pain is. So, come to us, be with us. We understand each other.’”³⁹

The communities supported organized and spontaneous interactions, with activities such as singing, discussions or just talking and quiet reflection. Some communities recognized the specific needs of Israeli members by creating spaces where they could converse in Hebrew and engage in familiar, comfortable surroundings.⁴⁰ Practical support measures, such as providing rooms, snacks and other resources⁴¹ underlined the community's commitment to supporting all Jews, even those who are not members. As one interviewee explained: “The main goal was just to try to support those people emotionally, to give them a sense of community, and sense of belonging.”⁴²

In addition to the pull factor mentioned above, there was also a push factor that was mentioned in many interviews: The increasing hostility in their neighborhood made the Israelis feel isolated:

However, now there's so much hostility towards Israel and towards Israelis that I think they are very surprised, and not in a good way. They understand that they also need the support of the community and the politicians to secure their ability to have normal lives.⁴³

A Jewish community in the diaspora seems to function as a “safe space” between Israel and the host society:

I think they suddenly lost connection with Bulgarian society. Before that, they were happy to be part of Bulgarian society. For example, now, most of them want to move their kids to the Jewish school. They want to have events in Hebrew in the Jewish community center because first of all, they felt disconnected to Israel and now they feel more connected, and they need a connection.⁴⁴

The secretary general of the Jewish umbrella organization in Italy describes it like this:

It was sexy to be Israeli on the fifth of October, and you were looked at as a criminal on the eighth of October. They [Israeli students] were witnessing a tragedy in their country. They were far from their family and with a hostile environment, therefore we sensed the urgency of doing something for them.⁴⁵

Yet another remarks:

[...] it was their first time since they moved from Israel that they felt how it is to be a minority in a place. They were a bit shocked that suddenly some of their Greek friends positioned themselves against them and saying things like ‘what were you doing to the poor Palestinians,’ et cetera.⁴⁶

³⁹ Interview Delchev, February 22, 2024, 00:16:48f.

⁴⁰ Interview Hanna Halpern, secretary general of the Jewish Community Stockholm, January 4, 2024, 00:33:41f.

⁴¹ Interview Halpern, January 4, 2024, 00:32:30f.

⁴² Interview Patrycja Dołowy, CEO of Jewish Community Center (JCC) Warsaw, December 19, 2023, 00:16:19f.

⁴³ Interview Tina Schwarz, executive director of the Jewish Community of Denmark, November 28, 2023, 00:24:55f.

⁴⁴ Interview Delchev, February 22, 2024, 00:16:48f.

⁴⁵ Interview Uriel Perugia, secretary general of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, January 4, 2024, 00:19:30f.

⁴⁶ Interview Taly Mair, director of the Jewish Community of Athens, December 4, 2023, 00:31:04f.

Besides the emotional and practical support, many realized they needed the communal protection and representation that Jewish organizations could offer: To organize events, protests, and advocacy efforts, many Israelis turned to local Jewish communities for their infrastructure and connections. These collaborations helped foster relationships that hadn't existed before:

[...] we saw [...] that they realized that in order to do this demonstration, to organize these types of events with the authorities, these protests, and these types of things, there needs to be a structure. The Jewish community of Madrid was the path to get that. It was a way to be closer to the community and to work on all these demonstrations and so on.⁴⁷

Many Israelis joined Jewish communities to advocate for Israel, participate in demonstrations, and organize public awareness campaigns. The events brought a shared mission that bridged previous divides: "It's better to connect with the community and have legal representation towards the government and the media than to be Israeli scattered around Athens and Greece."⁴⁸ And also:

When you look at solidarity activities there is a mutual thinking together and we also consult with world Jewry. What should we do to keep the issue of the hostages high on the public agenda?⁴⁹

It should be noted that there were Israelis with differing opinions and other needs that the communities could not or did not want to fulfil. Even though there were some Israelis who sought closeness to the Jewish community, for some Israelis their feelings were different from those of the local Jewish communities. While the Jewish communities felt more sadness, Israelis were angry with the Israeli government who failed to prevent October 7 and to protect their inhabitants:

We [as members of a community] are very sad for what happened. [...] For the Israelis, I don't feel only a sadness. I also feel a reason to fight [...]. They want that it never happens again: 'Now we go to war. Now we show them what's what; it is inhuman what they did – it shouldn't have happened.'⁵⁰

Another interviewee reports:

Then I got this rebellion, I guess, from the Israeli community, who basically said our commemoration felt very English and they wanted something else. We were trying to work out what that could look like.⁵¹

The influx of Israelis raises hopes for the Jewish communities:

Now, we need to reach out and invite them in. Then eventually, if they see the meaning in an active role here, they can hopefully be part of volunteering for different things. Some of them will also find it attractive to become members.

⁴⁷ Interview Estrella Bengio, president of the Jewish Community of Madrid, February 22, 2023, 00:28:02f.

⁴⁸ Interview Mair, December 4, 2023, 00:32:51f.

⁴⁹ Interview anonymous, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel, January 25, 2024, 00:30:33f.

⁵⁰ Interview anonymous, February 27, 2024, 00:12:13f.

⁵¹ Interview Gordon, December 22, 2023, 00:04:14f.

Some of them are becoming members. You can't start asking people to become members. You have to show that there is a meaning first.⁵²

Shifting Connectedness

The events of October 7 created a moment of reflection and connection, pushing Israelis closer to Jewish communities for emotional, cultural and practical reasons. This shift, coupled with changing societal perceptions, prompted more Israelis to enroll their children in Jewish schools and partake in cultural events, enhancing their community participation and emphasizing its role as a crucial stabilizing force during uncertain times: "They were not engaged in the local Jewish community before. At the moment when the war started, they needed this sense of connection, and they came to us."⁵³

Reflection

Interviews as a Research Method

The research conducted through interviews about the events of October 7 highlights various facets. It deepens the understanding of personal experiences, capturing subjective perspectives absent in quantitative data. It also serves as a documentation tool, preserving diverse reactions and representations. Interviews provide eyewitness accounts that can verify or challenge official narratives or perceived truths. Analyzing multiple interviews helps detect common experiences or views, revealing social or cultural patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed.

However, interviews cannot yield universal conclusions; their subjective nature and data collection methods limit generalizability. Results depend on the sample and questions, and are prone to biases such as selection or recall bias. They reflect only past and present views and are not predictive tools. Interpreting interviews demands caution, with attention to the cultural, social and historical contexts in which they are conducted. Understanding the data within these circumstances is crucial to avoid sweeping generalizations.

Precisely for this reason, I see great value in these interviews: Speaking with Jewish community representatives brings together both individual insights and broader perspectives. Each individual offers a unique view shaped by personal experience, while also reflecting collective concerns. As leaders, they are in close contact with their communities, balancing varied voices in their roles. These conversations are rich and meaningful, providing both personal depth and a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and realities Jewish community officials face.

⁵² Interview Schwarz, November 28, 2023, 00:27:30f.

⁵³ Interview Dolowy, December 19, 2023, 00:28:24f.

Relationship between the Diaspora and Israel: Before and After Israel's Founding

The relationship between Israel and the Jewish diaspora is complex and has evolved over time. Zionism, aiming to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, initially faced limited support and notable resistance from many diaspora Jews. Early Zionists often portrayed diaspora life negatively, seeking to replace it with a new, pioneering Jewish identity.⁵⁴

Jewish opposition to Zionism dates back to 1897, the year of the first Zionist Congress. Orthodox Jews opposed it as a premature, human-led messianic effort, while liberals and socialists criticized it as reactionary. Assimilated and affluent Jews in Western and Central Europe largely saw no need for Zionism—until the catastrophic events of the 1930s and 1940s, including the Shoah, shifted perspectives and increased support for a Jewish homeland.⁵⁵

The Shoah, which claimed six million Jewish lives and decimated cultural and religious centers, exposed the depths of global antisemitism and the need for a safe refuge. This need, reinforced by Zionist activism, culminated in the founding of Israel in 1948, which rendered much of the previous anti-Zionist sentiment obsolete.⁵⁶

Israel became a symbol of renewed Jewish self-determination and security. The 1950 “Law of Return”⁵⁷ granted every Jew the right to immigrate and receive citizenship, strengthening Israel’s role as a homeland and linking Jews worldwide to the state. Its founding also provided the Jewish people with a voice on the global stage and a means to protect vulnerable communities.⁵⁸

Though the relationship has evolved, especially after the 1967 and 1973 wars, the Zionist idea that living in Israel is the ideal form of Jewish life persists.⁵⁹ While many diaspora Jews—especially in the U.S.—offer strong financial and political support, criticism of Israeli policies, particularly under leaders like Netanyahu, is significant. Nevertheless, Israel remains a powerful source of identity and connection for Jews across the world.⁶⁰

Israel as a Part of Jewish Identity and in Jewish Communities

The place of Israel for the identity of Jewish people in the diaspora is important for three reasons: First, a strong identification with Israel corresponds with a strong Jewish identity and vice versa. Second, the way and the degree to which diaspora Jews identify with Israel are crucial for shaping the concept of Jewish peoplehood. Third, the role of

⁵⁴ Silver, Matt/Shenhar, Aliza: Education in Israel about the Diaspora, in: Ehrlich, M. Avrum (ed.): Encyclopedia of The Jewish Diaspora, Origins, Experiences, and Culture (Vol. 1 Themes and Phenomena of the Jewish Diaspora), Santa Barbara/CA 2009, p. 345–350, here p. 345f.

⁵⁵ Kolsky, Thomas A.: Diaspora Anti-Zionism, in: Ehrlich (ed.): Encyclopedia of The Jewish Diaspora, 2009, p. 333–340, here p. 333f.

⁵⁶ Kolsky, Diaspora Anti-Zionism, in: Ehrlich (ed.): Encyclopedia of The Jewish Diaspora, 2009, p. 339.

⁵⁷ The Law of Return, 1950, in: Website of Prime Minister’s Office “Nativ”: www.gov.il/en/pages/government_law_of_return_nativ [December 28, 2024].

⁵⁸ Seltzer, Robert M.: History of Jews as a Minority, in: Ehrlich (ed.): Encyclopedia of The Jewish Diaspora, 2009, p. 72–78, here p. 75.

⁵⁹ Silver/Shenhar: Education in Israel, 2009, p. 345f.

⁶⁰ Ben-Moshe, Danny/Segev, Zohar: Israel, the Diaspora and Jewish Identity, Brighton, Portland 2007, p. 1.

Israel in defining the identity of diaspora Jews is critical for understanding Judaism, Zionism and the very concept of Jewish peoplehood within the Jewish state.⁶¹

Looking at the Jewish communities in the diaspora, Israel is a fundamentally important element of the program offered: Israel is present in prayers, education (teaching about Zionism and learning Hebrew), charitable efforts (like the “Blue Box,” a donation box by KKL/JNF present in many communities),⁶² Zionist youth movements, organized visits to Israel and celebrating Yom haZikaron and Yom ha’Atzma’ut, the latter often being one of the biggest festivities in a Jewish community.⁶³ After October 7, several of those areas increased their engagement significantly.⁶⁴

Israelis in the Diaspora

Every year, an average of 35,000 Israelis move abroad.⁶⁵ However, they often do not join Jewish communities in the diaspora, despite outreach efforts. The reasons lie in differences in cultural, religious and national identity. Many Israeli Jews identify as secular, viewing Jewish identity more as a national or cultural trait than a religious one. This secular outlook often goes hand in hand with aversion to the Orthodox religious establishment, seen by many as overly dominant in Israel – and perceived to influence diaspora communities as well.

In Israel, where religion and state are closely linked, religious services are mostly state-provided. This reduces the need to join separate communities for religious access — a common diaspora motive. Moreover, Jewish identity in Israel is deeply patriotic, often associated with citizenship in a Jewish state, whereas in the diaspora it is more tied to religion or heritage.⁶⁶ This difference in identity perception is crucial; in Israel, being Jewish is often first associated with citizenship in a Jewish state, overshadowing religious or ethnic affiliations.⁶⁷

Israeli Jews often express their identity through national holidays and cultural traditions rather than religious observance. This allows for a sense of belonging that does not necessarily depend on community affiliation as it does in the diaspora.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Ben-Moshe/Segev: Israel, the Diaspora and Jewish Identity, 2007, p. 1f.

⁶² The Blue Box, in: Website of KKL/JNF: www.kkl-jnf.org/about-klk-jnf/the-blue-box [December 31, 2024].

⁶³ Ben-Moshe, Danny: Jewish Diaspora Engagement with Israel, in: Ehrlich (ed.): Encyclopedia of The Jewish Diaspora, 2009, p. 340–345, here p. 340–344.

⁶⁴ For a more contemporary insight, compare the JDC-ICCD study, chapter VII. Israel and European Jewry (p. 30–34), in: JDC-ICCD, Sixth Survey, 2024.

⁶⁵ Staff, Toi: End-of-2024 Stats Show Spike in Israelis Leaving, as Population Growth Slows, in: The Times of Israel, December 31, 2024: www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-population-growth-slows-as-stats-show-spike-in-residents-moving-abroad/ [January 4, 2025].

Staff, Toi: End-of-2024 Stats Show Spike in Israelis Leaving, as Population Growth Slows, in: The Times of Israel, December 31, 2024: www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-population-growth-slows-as-stats-show-spike-in-residents-moving-abroad/ [January 4, 2025].

⁶⁶ Ben-Moshe/Segev: Israel, the Diaspora and Jewish Identity, 2007, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Sicher, Efraim: Re-envisioning Jewish Identities. Reflections on Contemporary Culture in Israel and the Diaspora, Leiden, Boston 2021, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Interview Bengio, February 22, 2023, 00:28:02.

Summary

The events of October 7, 2023, and their impact on Jewish communities worldwide illuminate profound and complex relationships. The Hamas attack has not only deepened relations between Israelis and the diaspora but has also given rise to new forms of engagement and solidarity within the global Jewish community.

To conclude on the shifting focus in relation to topics such as engagement, commitment and connectedness, I summarize:

1. After October 7, the engagement of Jewish communities worldwide with Israel amplified, encompassing various forms of support such as educational activities, philanthropy, political activism and personal visits. This increase in engagement was driven by a strong desire within these communities to overcome a feeling of helplessness and to support Israel in its time of crisis, reflecting a profound connection and commitment to the state and its people.
2. The solidarity among Jews with Israel intensified worldwide following the attack. This shows how the incident heightened the perceived vulnerability of Israel, which in turn reinforced the commitment of Jewish communities globally to support Israel unconditionally. The sense of shared fate and the inherent interconnectedness of Jewish identities with the state of Israel are emphasized, underlining a collective response to support and protect Israel amidst a global crisis.
3. In the aftermath of October 7, there was a notable increase in the involvement of Israeli Jews with diaspora communities. This engagement was often driven by a newfound need for connectedness in the face of adversity and isolation. It shows how these crises led to a reevaluation of community ties, with Israelis seeking out local Jewish communities for emotional and practical support, thereby strengthening the bonds between Israelis and the Jewish diaspora.

It became evident that Israel's fate cannot be viewed isolated from the global Jewish community. The attacks and subsequent events have affected the physical and emotional safety of Jews worldwide and have thus triggered a wave of solidarity and collective action. This demonstrates that even across vast geographical distances, diaspora communities are not only vulnerable to traumatic events in their respective countries, but they are also critically exposed to events in Israel.

In conclusion, the events of October 7 have triggered a wave of reflection for Jewish community officials worldwide. They have emphasized not only the need to support Israel, but also the deep, often complex ties that bind Jewish people across national and cultural boundaries. The reactions to these events demonstrate the strength and resilience of Jewish communities and their unwavering commitment to the well-being and security of their members and to Israel.

Outlook

It should be noted that this article provides the first fragmentary results in a field that needs to be analyzed much more systematically and across countries in the longer term. The interviews allow for further research, e.g., with a focus on how the Jewish communities dealt with October 7 internally or the reaction of the outside world towards the Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

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