

6 Tips for Supporting Jewish Students in the Classroom



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On October 7, 2023, on the Jewish Sabbath and during the celebration of the Jewish holiday Simchat Torah, the terrorist group Hamas carried out an unprecedented surprise attack on Israel.

In an act of war, Hamas terrorists invaded Israel, entering communities near the Gaza Strip—killing an estimated 1,200 civilians so far, taking hostages (including young children and elderly people), and firing thousands of rockets and missiles at cities across the country. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned of a “long and difficult war” ahead and called for a mass mobilization of army reserves. As heavy fighting continues, the Palestinian Health Ministry reports over 1,100 Palestinian fatalities in Gaza. U.S. President Biden stressed the [U.S. stands by Israel](#) and supports its right to defend itself.

The [events taking place in Israel](#) are continuing to unfold, and may impact students who have family members in Israel or have other personal, religious or cultural connections to Israel. Talking to Jewish students about Israel and the Palestinian territories can be a sensitive and complex topic, and can involve deeply held beliefs, strong emotions, and may trigger trauma responses.

Your Jewish students could be experiencing a range of emotions and processing information and current events differently. You may already know that you have some or many Jewish students in your classroom, but it’s also possible that you have students in your classroom who are Jewish or have Jewish family members who have not shared that part of their identity. Remember that the Jewish people are more diverse than many people understand, and your Jewish students may reflect a variety of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, racial identities, religious and spiritual practices and migration backgrounds. To support the young people in your classroom:

1. **Offer empathy and support.** Check in with Jewish students in your classroom and ask how they are feeling. Be mindful not to do this in a public way as it may make them feel singled out, embarrassed or further marginalized. Jewish students may

feel isolated and disconnected from their peers who are not sharing in this experience, and as the educator, you can ensure that they feel seen and safe in the classroom. Jewish students may be feeling a range of complicated emotions, including fear, grief, anger and confusion. Validate these feelings and let students know that you are here to support them. Be mindful that Jewish students also may not be feeling any of these emotions so don't make assumptions about how they are feeling.

2. **Create options for processing emotions alone or with others.** Some Jewish students may find comfort in sharing how they are feeling with you and with others, while others may not want to process their emotions in school or may want to process alone. Create options for students to find the method that works best for them, knowing that may change throughout the day and as events unfold. You might consider offering students a designated time and place to write or draw about how they are feeling, or create spaces for small group conversation. Offering an affinity space for Jewish students during downtime, such as lunch or recess, can create opportunities for shared grieving, processing difficult emotions and mutual support.
3. **Don't put Jewish students on the spot.** When there is an escalation of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, Jewish people often have the shared experience of being asked to speak on behalf of Israel or the Jewish community. It's possible that your students of all identities will be eager to discuss this prominent current event. Recognize that discussion about events taking place in Israel may trigger emotional reactions for your Jewish students. Intergenerational and historical trauma may exacerbate students' experience of the current moment. Model an approach of seeking information from reputable sources and allowing students who may be directly or indirectly affected by the conflict, such as your Jewish students, to opt out of the conversation. If some Jewish students in your classroom express an interest in sharing more, follow their lead; otherwise, do not ask Jewish students to offer their perspectives or educate their classmates about the conflict and unfolding events. Jewish people, including young people, are not a monolith and will have a range of emotions, perspectives and opinions about what is happening in Israel.
4. **Coordinate support with your colleagues.** Many Jewish people around the world have loved ones who live in Israel and feel a connection with the Jewish state, and as events unfold, it's possible that some of your Jewish students will experience grief or trauma when someone they care about is impacted. Proactively reach out to student support professionals in your school and district to ensure that counselors, school psychologists and social workers are available to check in with students and their families and provide support.
5. **Learn about and interrupt examples of antisemitism.** Antisemitic activity typically increases during times of escalated violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Misinformation is often widespread on social media, particularly during periods of armed conflict, and individuals or groups may engage in anti-Israel activity that causes harm to Jewish people. Learn more about common expressions of [antisemitic myths and stereotypes](#) so that you can recognize them if they occur in your classroom or community. Some examples include:
 - Describing Israeli or Jewish people as bloodthirsty, evil, or other extreme and dehumanizing terms.
 - Suggesting that Israel or Jewish groups have control over the U.S. or other countries.
 - Assigning all of the blame for the conflict (or other issues) to Israel or Jewish people.
 - Asserting that civilians are deserving of violence or that the violence was justified
 - Assuming that Jewish people in the U.S. or elsewhere can't be "objective" or feel a range of emotions related to the conflict.
 - Demanding that Jewish people account for the actions of the Israeli government or take a position on the crisis in order to participate in other activities.
6. **Consider your curriculum and allow students to opt out.** In some classrooms, it may be advisable or even required to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or other related topics. For Jewish students or any students who have direct

connections to the region, this may trigger strong emotional reactions. Consider letting your Jewish students know that the topic is coming up and offering them options for how to engage. Some students may want to participate, while others may prefer to have independent time. Evaluate the biases of the sources you will be sharing in the classroom and use group agreements to ensure the discussion is respectful. Remind students that feeling a bit of discomfort when learning about something new is common, but that it's not okay for anyone to feel unsafe or unwelcome because of who they are.

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