Experiences and Insights in the Glow of the Furnace
*The Global Jewish Education Leadership Solidarity Mission*

# A Mission in the Midst of Grief

In a famous psychological model, the Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross depicted the process that patients with terminal illness go through as they come to terms with their own deaths.[[1]](#footnote-1) She subsequently applied the model to grieving friends and family and to those who experience any kind of personal loss. Kübler-Ross insisted that the stages she depicted—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—were neither linear nor inevitable; they mutate over time. Although the model has been critiqued for its lack of empirical grounding, it retains great appeal for conveying the ebb and flow of responses to trauma and the emotional processes along which people travel as they come to terms with trauma.

Just under four months after the dreadful events of October 7, 2023, a group of 25 Jewish day school leaders from eleven different countries came together in Israel with Israel-based educators for a four-day program: **The Global Jewish Education Leadership Solidarity Mission**. At the start of the Mission, both visitors and Israeli participants were still in the midst of a grieving and meaning-making process; many were angry, some depressed, and maybe a few had arrived at acceptance.

This chapter documents their experiences in the country, their responses to those experiences, and then seeks to derive from their responses potential implications for the field of endeavor they share: Jewish day school education. To be clear, these implications are tentative at best, and are liable to mutate over the coming months in response to changing events and as the grieving process continues to evolve.

# Getting Bearings

The mission’s schedule included three key components: first, it provided opportunities for participants to witness with their own eyes sites where some of the terrible events of October 7 took place: in Ofakim, Kfar Azza and at the site of the Nova Festival. Second, it included opportunities to meet with individuals who either had experienced these events or were at the forefront of responses to them. This included meeting with educators in Jerusalem who were working with children and families displaced from Israel’s northern region, and visiting the pop-up school they have created; spending a morning with educators and students in Ofakim and accompanying them to sites of terror in their neighborhood; meeting with family members of some of the 136 hostages still being held captive in Gaza, and visiting *Kikar Chatufim* (Hostages Square) in Tel Aviv; meeting with the parent of a fallen soldier; talking with educators from across Israel; visiting the ANU museum and learning about its response to the present moment; and hearing from senior civil servants and politicians about their responses to these events as well as the surge of antisemitism worldwide. As a last component, the schedule provided time for group members to reflect individually and collectively about what they were seeing and hearing, and to share their emerging ideas with one another both at the start and end of each day, and at the start and end of the program as a whole. Participants stayed at a Jerusalem hotel where they shared the space with displaced families from Israel’s north who by this time had been uprooted and living out of suitcases for many months. Encounters with displaced children and adults in the hallways, elevator and lobby proved to be an important part of coming to understand Israel at this time.

The reflections that follow derive from conversations with the Mission participants in the course of these experiences, from statements participants made or wrote as part of the program’s reflection components, and from fieldnotes recorded over the course of the four days. The identities of individual participants are disguised, but where they are quoted, an effort has been made to preserve their words.

# Making Meaning

Reflecting the trajectory of the meaning-making process, the participants’ responses can be viewed as playing out along five continua: from solidarity to identity; between confusion and clarity, from crisis to opportunity; from institutional leadership to inspirational leadership; and from isolation to integration.

## From Solidarity to Identity

The participants came to Israel with a deep desire to express solidarity with Israelis. Most had long-standing personal and professional relationships with Israel and Israelis; some have children living in the country. They simply wanted to be together with actual and metaphorical family during a time of pain. They also wanted to see for themselves what it was like in Israel right now, to see how full the streets are, and to see what the mood of the country is. Some expressed concern about what they would find. Many had never been in Israel during a time of war, and none had been in the country after such traumatic events. They did not know how fragile Israel might be. Finally, they wanted to show that they cared. As one participant expressed it on the first day, he was not sure if he was engaged in *bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick) or *nichum aveilim* (comforting mourners). Either way, he wanted his presence to convey his concern.

The underlying sentiment behind all these emotions was that of coming from afar to learn, show support and offer love. This was part of the force behind a very strongly expressed sentiment at the start of the mission: a commitment to bear witness, and not just for themselves but on behalf of others in their communities. Before heading to the Gaza Envelope on the second day, the participant tasked with sharing an opening thought for the day, expressed this commitment well: “It is our task to bear witness in any way we can, and to share that with the world."

 By definition, the witness is not the victim. Witnesses see things from a different vantage point. They do not suffer, they observe suffering. Of course, bearing witness can be hard in itself. The verb *to bear* conveys that a weight must be carried. Standing amidst awful scenes of destruction, one participant explained that he didn’t want to take photos but felt that he must do so in order that others could also see. Another was deeply ambivalent about entering a house whose occupants had been murdered, and that had been turned by the victims’ families into a site of testimony. He entered so others would know what he had seen. This is what it meant to fulfill the responsibilities of the witness.

Over the course of four days, however, something changed. Being present at these sites, sharing space in unexpected ways with the displaced, coming close to the still glowing furnace that is Israel today, participants expressed a sense of having been changed. It was not just that they now understood, or had seen with their own eyes, they had become part of something. Having entered a simulation at *Kikar Hatufim* of the tunnels in which hostages are being held in Gaza, and knowing full well that this simulation came nowhere near the real thing, a participant emerged wiping tears from her eyes. She was further moved by seeing police officers who had just been through the same experience responding in the same way. What was previously part of others’ experience was now part of hers. Solidarity was mutating into identity. On the final day, one participant gave expression to this shift: “we are all displaced,” she said. Having come from afar to express support, group members found they themselves had been supported. As one participant wrote at the program’s end: “Seeing Israeli people dealing with life, post-7 Oct, has been healing for me in an unexpected way. I've now seen living proof that Am Israel Chai.” She had been a witness and had become a participant.

## Between Confusion and Clarity

Many things in Israel since the dawn of October 7 have defied logic or expectations. Many Israelis have been living with deep confusion and a loss of trust in public institutions. At various moments during the Mission, participants expressed a similar confusion about things they saw or heard. This sentiment was initially expressed during the group’s first meeting, in this instance with Karen Applebaum, an educator who, together with her peers, had created a pop-up school for displaced children in a nearby educational institution. Participants were shocked: “Where was the Ministry of Education? How could you just go and start a new school? Who’s paying you?” In Ofakim, after hearing stories about heroic but ill-equipped locals who took on the terrorists who had invaded their quiet neighborhood, participants asked (as Israelis had on October 7) “Where was the army?” “How could this happen?” Sitting in Tel Aviv at the headquarters of the campaign for the release of hostages, in a large space provided by a private company, they asked again: “why do private individuals have to do this, what happened to the government?” By the end of the trip, participants stopped asking these questions. The situation had become familiar, although still inexplicable: public systems had broken down and the space had been filled by incredibly vigorous civil society organizations. In the best cases, government was playing catch up.

A different kind of confusion was prompted by an emotionally wrenching meeting with Sarit Zussman, the mother of fallen soldier Ben Zussman. Sarit told Ben’s story and inspired the group by telling them about a letter he wrote to his family in the event he was killed. He had instructed them not to despair but to celebrate his life. His mother now talked of her pride that young people like her son, good people, had taken up the fight against evil, and how we must ensure that we see this fight through to the end. In follow-up questions, one participant expressed what was confusing to many in the room: “Why are you not angry?” “How can you not be?” Sarit responded that anger was not constructive. It was not healthy. It would make a necessary fight meaningless.

There was confusion again in Ofakim. Outside the houses of residents who had fallen in battle, families had erected mini shrines with information about those who had been killed. There were small containers in which to place memorial candles. In some cases, people had pinned prayers or inspirational poems. Outside one home, a family had pinned “*mizmor letodah*,” Psalm 100, a song of thanks. A participant gasped, “Thanks for what? A person was killed here!”

It is unlikely that participants resolved the confusion created by these incidents. But lacking complete clarity does not mean that these experiences remained meaningless. Those who live in the liminal space between confusion and clarity often find grounding in “faith,” a readiness to see meaning within uncertainty. In these instances, participants found their moorings through the faith inspired by brave, bold and optimistic individuals. The following day, after returning from Ofakim the previously bemused participant wrote a reflection:
“מי כעמך ישראל (who is like your people, Israel!) Ofakim, built by refugees into a flourishing and loving community. Attacked by nonhumans worshiping only hatred and destruction. Their response - מזמור לתודה - a prayer of thanks and belief in our future.” Confusion had given way to faith.

## From Crisis to Opportunity

In a slide show that introduced the story of how they had responded to the events of October 7, school leaders in Ofakim framed their efforts as a move *mimashber l’hizdamnut* (from crisis to opportunity). The Hebrew words convey a meaning lacking in English. *Mashber* - the word for crisis - also means a birthstool: the most terrible moments have the capacity to birth something new, something better even. The Mission participants encountered this mindset among many with whom they met: among the founders of the Jerusalem pop-up school who saw the chance to create a new more, inclusive approach to Jewish education; among members of the Arab community with whom they met in Sderot who had seen and facilitated a new spirit of coexistence between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews since October 7; and in a presentation at the ANU museum that argued for the healthy consequences of seeing how the troughs of Jewish history are often followed by better times. This gritty spirit was given the most powerful expression in Ofakim, and it made a deep impression on the group.

Ofakim is something of backwater; it was originally founded as a development town that first housed new immigrants from North Africa and then the Former Soviet Union. Before October 7, the town’s tag line had been *Ofakim, Ir Shel Anashim* (Ofakim, city of people) – about as bland a slogan as one might imagine. Following the events of October 7, and the extraordinary bravery displayed by ordinary residents, the town’s leadership quickly launched a new slogan, *Ofakim*, *Ir Shel Giborim* (Ofakim, city of heroes). These words were emblazoned on a giant work of public art, on the water bottles handed out to visitors, and on banners around town; they were everywhere. The town had been reborn; its residents had acquired a new and much more compelling identity.

This effort to seize this moment was reflected in how the Mission spent part of its morning in the town. We were taken on a guided tour of the neighborhood most affected by the events of October 7. Our guides were students from the high school who took it in turns at each location where someone had died resisting the terrorist incursion to tell us, in English, about the individuals who fell. Their English teacher had taken this sad episode and turned it into an opportunity to build the self-esteem of his charges, and the Mission participants were profoundly moved. As individuals who themselves spend so much time with young people, they were thrilled to hear directly from these young people and to connect with them. The school leaders of Ofakim gave the most vivid expression to the opportunities birthed by crisis. Back in Jerusalem, one participant wrote the following reflection: “The main impact from the first two days of the Mission is the strength I saw in the educators we met at Ofakim. Dealing with sensitivity, professionalism, respect, and dedication, even though the educators themselves were in crisis, gives food for thought about the role of education especially in times of crisis and distress, and part of this impact we saw in the students who accompanied us.”

It is worth noting that the move from crisis to opportunity is not without its problems. As one participant expressed it, it seems almost cynical to seek out opportunity in the midst of trauma. She did not doubt that crisis calls for bold action, but to view such a terrible time as an opportunity is uncomfortable. It risks being insensitive to the trauma people experience. How, for example, can one view the plight of the hostages as an opportunity? It’s hard to move forward while this matter remains an open wound. From this perspective, not every crisis is an occasion for opportunity.

## From Institutional Leadership to Inspirational Leadership

Mission participants included experienced leaders of diaspora Jewish education and of education in Israel. They lead central agencies and boards in their own communities or as part of multinational organizations, they are seasoned providers of professional development to schools, and some lead or have led major Jewish schools. They are accomplished, often seasoned institutional leaders. While they appreciated the opportunity to connect with and hear from regular Israelis at this time, they especially relished learning how their professional peers have responded to this moment. This was why they found their time with educators in Jerusalem and Ofakim so meaningful; these encounters brought into focus the difference between competent institutional leadership and inspirational leadership.

In her reflections the morning after visiting sites in the south, one participant found special relevance in insights of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the previous week’s Torah portion. Rabbi Sacks argued that a leader’s first duty is to be an agent of hope. Seeing the world exactly as it is, they do not give up the belief that it could be otherwise, and are ready to act with others to make it so. “Look down at the difficulties and you can give way to despair. The only way to sustain energies, individual or collective, is to turn our gaze up towards the far horizon of hope.” This, Rabbi Sacks proposes, is the work of leadership.

These were the traits that resonated with many in the group as a result of meeting with educational leaders in Ofakim. The leaders with whom we met were all women; *giborot* (f) not *giborim* (m), they reminded us. They moved the group with stories of how, on October 7, they first checked that their own families were safe, and then threw themselves into responding to death and dislocation in their school communities. This was impressive enough but more than that was their determination not just to restore but to exceed what was there before, to lead a process of renewal. Establishing what they called a *minhelet tekumah* (a rebirth headquarters), they were determined to remake their community as a magnet. These were astonishing words at a moment when, as one of the leaders explained, local parents are so traumatized they don’t want to let their children out of their sight. The educators must rebuild trust first before they can build a better future.

One of these women offered a profound insight into how she found the strength to play this leadership role. She described how she was able to draw on what she had learned twenty years previously, much earlier in her career, when working in Tel Aviv, and tens of her students were killed in a terror attack on the Dolphinarium nightclub. She didn’t use precisely these words, one of the Mission participants did, but she conveyed how many years later she could draw on muscle memory to find a way to see beyond the awfulness of the present moment. She modeled how inspirational leadership is not just a role, it is a way of approaching the world that is deep in the fiber of our beings.

Coming to the end of the Mission, participants took inspiration from these women in their own resolution not to be defined by the worst of these times. It was their job too to help those for whom they were responsible to look forward with hope. One wrote: “Our tragedies are an interruption to the Jewish timeline. They're essential to understanding who we are, but it can't be the main story we pass on to our children.” Or as another expressed it, “When trust is broken, despair is pervasive, there is still hope. We have a choice to write the next exciting Jewish chapter, and our students will be the creators.”

## From Isolation to Integration

A kind of alchemy occurred over the course of four days. Educators who came to Israel to be with, learn from, and show support to Israel and Israelis also found how much they shared with one another. In a concluding exercise in which they were asked to share in no more than 30 words an insight they gained from their time in Israel, almost half the participants focused on the sense they gained of shared identity and purpose with the other members of the Mission no matter how different the particulars of their circumstances.

Two processes were at work here. First, a process, fostered by both structured and informal conversations among members of the group, that enabled them to become familiar with and close to their peers, fellow leaders of diaspora Jewish education. As one participant wrote: “[I have discovered] the commonality of all our people in every corner of the diaspora. Interacting with individuals from across the globe has taken away the feeling of isolation that I have felt as a South African Jew.”

This outcome was not surprising given the composition of the group and the intense experiences in which they participated together during the Mission. What was more unexpected was the extent to which these educational leaders also saw their lives and work intertwined with those of peers and people in Israel. For some this was a pragmatic matter of partnering more effectively during challenging times. As one participant wrote, “The Diasporas and the State of Israel ought to join forces to strengthen each other and thus strengthen Jewish Zionist education using the local and global power of the Jewish communities.” Or in the words of another: “To me, the most impressive thing is the power inherent in the partnership, the joining of hands and the solidarity of Jewish leaders from Israel and the world. and especially educational leaders. This Mission and the relationships that will continue in its wake instills hope for the future of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.”

Some participants went beyond reflecting on the potential of partnership to seeing the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora in a new light. One person argued that differences between the experiences of Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora were only a question of degree, or what he called “volume”: “The gap between Israel and the Diaspora is in volume, not substance. We face similar problems - universal/particular, shared values, government trust, response to hate - but in different ”volumes” due to circumstances.” Another participant arrived at a related conclusion: “The Jewish and Israeli stories are intertwined. We cannot separate them. The amalgam that our neighbors make is not a mistake. It must be strengthened.”

This is not the place to probe how far such ideas depart from classical strands of Zionist thought that celebrated the creation of a new and different Jew in Israel and that negated the value of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Those ideas have long fallen out of fashion, but it is striking to see how the events of October 7 in Israel and their consequences around the world have fostered a sense of shared fate and shared experience. For Mission participants, this sense was only intensified by what they found in Israel, not disrupted. The participants may have come from afar, but they ended up feeling more intertwined with Israel than ever before.

# From Reflection to Action: Implications for Diaspora Jewish Education

Wherever participants found themselves in relation to the five continua depicted here, they left the country both charged and recharged. None left the country unmoved. To have come to Israel and then return home having only served as a witness would have risked the critique of voyeurism. It would have meant observing someone else’s pain without being changed in some way, no matter how well intentioned one’s presence.

It is too soon to know how the participants will translate their understandings and emotions into actions. One of the last exercises in which they participated asked them to write a commitment to themselves about something they would say and do differently as a result of their time in Israel. They were not asked to share these statements with others; these statements served as memos to themselves. We must wait to see what was birthed by this experience.

In the meantime, in this final section, some possible directions are suggested, teasing out implications from the insights and reactions collected here.

New narratives of Israel education. Over the last 15 years, the field of Israel education has seen two dominant narratives, one that centers complexity and the challenge of connecting to an Israel characterized as an occupier, and another more upbeat narrative that centers Israel as Start-Up Nation and as a model of resilience (*Isresilience*). The events of October 7, and their aftermath in Israel and around the world, make it critical to forge new narratives that make sense of Israel’s fragility and its intertwined fate with Diaspora communities. The Crisis-Opportunity continuum points towards a narrative of the “Start Again Nation,” a narrative that would speak both to those who have wrestled with Israel’s complexity and to those who celebrate its capacity to innovate.

Recentering Jewish peoplehood. In recent years, the concept of Jewish peoplehood and the practices of Jewish peoplehood education have offered a neat means for connecting diaspora Jews with Israel, without upsetting those uncomfortable with centering Israel at the heart of the contemporary Jewish story. Israel education has been domesticated as a special case of Jewish peoplehood education. The sense of shared fate and shared purpose, the move from Solidarity to Identity suggests that it is time to revisit some of the operating assumptions of Jewish peoplehood education. Israelis and Diaspora Jews share more than we imagined.

Birthing inspirational educational leaders. Mission participants experienced and affirmed the transformational potential of inspirational educational leaders. Leaders of this kind cultivate hope in difficult times. The question now is how can many more such individuals be nurtured globally and in Israel? How can capable Institutional Leaders be helped to become Inspirational Leaders? The months since October 7 have engendered educational heroes whose stories call for study. Can their stories help shape a template for a global leadership development effort in the field of Jewish education?

Building a global community of Jewish educational leaders. Educational research has long documented the lonely work of school leadership. Mission participants made clear their deep appreciation for an opportunity to be with and learn from one another and from Israeli educational leaders. Israeli leaders celebrated the opportunity to learn from their international peers. These dynamics were at the heart of the Isolation to Integration continuum. As Jewish and as educational leaders these individuals face many of the same challenges. The present moment has underlined the potential benefits in more closely networking them with one another in a more continuous fashion.

1. Kübler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2014). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. Simon and Schuster. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)