



We Teach Who We Are:

A Practical Guide for Classroom Educators

Teaching About Israel in Times of Crisis

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Introduction: The Educator at the Center

"We teach who we are." This simple yet profound statement by Parker Palmer captures a fundamental truth about education: our personal experiences, emotions, and perspectives inevitably shape how we approach our work as educators. This reality becomes even more pronounced during times of crisis, when the very ground beneath our feet seems to shift.

The October 7, 2023 invasion on Israel, the ensuing war, and the rise of antisemitism across the Western world have profoundly impacted how we teach about Israel. Whether you teach in a Jewish day school, a supplementary Hebrew school, a college classroom, or any other formal educational setting, you face unprecedented challenges in addressing this topic. Students arrive in your classroom with heightened emotions, diverse perspectives shaped by social media and family backgrounds, and urgent questions about conflict, identity, and justice.

This guide addresses the unique challenges faced by classroom educators who teach educational experiences for diaspora Jewish students. Drawing on research, interviews with veteran educators, and practical experience, it offers frameworks for thinking about, designing, and facilitating Israel education during times of ongoing crisis.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Changed Landscape

The New Reality

The events of October 7, 2023, and their aftermath have created new realities that educators teaching about Israel must navigate:

- **Personal Impact:** Teaching about Israel during wartime affects educators both personally and professionally
- **Student Expectations:** Students come to class with heightened awareness and often anxiety about current events
- **Educational Complexity:** The need to address current events while maintaining educational objectives
- **Safety Considerations:** Emotional and psychological safety protocols require constant attention

- **Community Context:** Rising antisemitism in diaspora communities affects students' prior learning and home environments

Institutional Context: Schools have varying policies about teaching controversial topics, requiring careful navigation of academic freedom and institutional expectations

Diverse Classrooms: Students bring vastly different backgrounds, from deeply connected to Israel to no connection at all, requiring differentiated and inclusive approaches

Assessment Challenges: Grading student work on controversial topics requires careful consideration of how to evaluate learning while respecting diverse viewpoints

The Ripple Effects

Crisis doesn't occur in isolation. The October 7 events have created ripple effects that extend far beyond the immediate security situation:

1. **Heightened Emotions:** Students come to class with intensified feelings about Israel, Judaism, and their own identity
2. **Political Polarization:** Increased difficulty in facilitating nuanced conversations
3. **Family Concerns:** Parents' anxieties about sending students to Israel during wartime
4. **Media Saturation:** Students' perspectives shaped by social media and news coverage
5. **Identity Questions:** Deeper questioning about Jewish identity and Israel connection

Opportunities Within Crisis

While challenging, crisis also creates unique educational opportunities:

- **Authentic Learning Moments:** Current events provide real-time case studies that make history come alive in your classroom
- **Deeper Engagement:** Students often arrive more invested in learning about Israel



- Shared experience of learning about and processing historic events together as a classroom community
- **Resilience Building:** Opportunities to model and teach coping strategies
- **Values Clarification:** Crisis often clarifies what matters most

Chapter 2: The Educator's Journey - Personal and Professional Integration

Acknowledging Your Own Experience

Before addressing your students' needs, it's crucial to recognize how the crisis has affected you personally:

Self-Reflection Questions:

- How has October 7 and its aftermath affected me personally?
- What emotions am I carrying into my educational work?
- How might my experiences be shaping my teaching approach?
- What support do I need to be effective in my role?

The Professional-Personal Interface

Crisis blurs the traditional boundaries between personal experience and professional responsibility. As a classroom educator, you must navigate your own feelings about Israel while creating space for diverse student perspectives and maintaining institutional expectations.

Authentic Vulnerability: Share appropriate personal experiences while maintaining professional boundaries and ensuring your views don't shut down student inquiry

Emotional Awareness: Recognize when your emotions might be influencing your educational decisions and classroom management. It's natural and human—the key is awareness and intentionality.

Seeking Support: Connect with colleagues, supervisors, or mental health professionals when needed. Taking care of yourself is part of taking care of your students.

Modeling Resilience



Your response to crisis teaches students how to navigate uncertainty and difficulty:

- **Demonstrate Thoughtful Processing:** Show students how to think through complex issues
- **Acknowledge Difficulty:** It's okay to say "this is hard" while maintaining hope
- **Practice Self-Care:** Model healthy coping strategies
- **Maintain Perspective:** Help students see both immediate challenges and long-term possibilities

Chapter 3: Rethinking Educational Objectives

Core Questions for Program Design

The crisis necessitates revisiting fundamental questions about educational objectives:

1. What do we want students to understand about Israel?

- Historical context and complexity
- Contemporary realities and challenges
- Multiple narratives and perspectives
- Personal connection possibilities

2. What skills do we want them to develop?

- Critical thinking about complex issues
- Emotional resilience and coping
- Dialogue and listening skills
- Identity exploration and articulation

3. What values do we want to cultivate?

- Empathy and understanding
- Commitment to justice and peace
- Jewish continuity and connection



- Global citizenship and responsibility

Balancing Objectives in Crisis Context

During crisis, educational objectives often compete with each other:

Immediate vs. Long-term: Addressing current events while building lasting connection to Israel

Emotional vs. Intellectual: Honoring students' feelings while developing critical thinking skills

Particular vs. Universal: Deepening Jewish identity while fostering broader understanding

Safety vs. Growth: Creating safe spaces while challenging assumptions and encouraging growth

Adaptive Objective Setting

Consider creating flexible educational objectives that can adapt to changing circumstances:

- **Primary Objectives:** Non-negotiable core goals that remain constant
- **Secondary Objectives:** Important goals that can be modified based on circumstances
- **Emerging Objectives:** New goals that arise from current events and student needs

Chapter 4: Designing Crisis-Responsive Programs

Foundational Design Principles

Flexibility Over Rigidity: Build curriculum that can adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining core educational goals.

Process Over Product: Focus on how students engage with content rather than predetermined outcomes.

Relationship Over Information: Prioritize building trust and classroom community as the foundation for learning about controversial topics



Questions Over Answers: Emphasize inquiry and exploration rather than providing definitive answers.

Structural Modifications

Consider these structural changes to your curriculum:

Enhanced Introduction: Spend more time at the unit's beginning addressing students' concerns, expectations, and prior knowledge about Israel and the conflict

Regular Check-ins: Build in more frequent opportunities for students to process their experiences and emotions.

Flexible Scheduling: Create space in your unit plan for addressing unexpected events or student needs that arise during instruction

Multiple Perspectives: Deliberately include diverse voices and viewpoints in your instruction.

Support Systems: Establish clear protocols for students who need additional emotional or academic support, including referrals to school counselors when appropriate

Content Integration Strategies

Current Events Integration: Develop frameworks for addressing ongoing events without letting them dominate your curriculum while still honoring their significance to students

Historical Contextualization: Help students understand current events within broader historical patterns and contexts.

Comparative Analysis: Use examples from other contexts to help students develop analytical skills.

Future Visioning: Include opportunities for students to imagine and work toward positive futures.

Safety and Risk Management

Classroom Climate: Establish and maintain classroom norms that allow for difficult conversations while ensuring all students feel safe to participate



Emotional Safety: Create guidelines for discussions and establish protocols for supporting students in distress.

Psychological Safety: Foster environments where students feel safe to express doubts, fears, and questions.

Digital Safety: Address social media use and help students navigate online information critically, distinguishing reliable sources from misinformation

Working Within Institutional Constraints

Classroom educators must navigate institutional realities that shape how they can teach about Israel:

Administrative Support: Communicate proactively with administrators about your unit plans, especially when addressing current events. Seek guidance on school policies while advocating for academic freedom when appropriate.

Curriculum Standards: Connect your Israel education to required standards and learning objectives. Frame the unit in terms of broader skills like critical thinking, perspective-taking, and primary source analysis.

Parent Relations: Anticipate parent concerns and questions. Consider hosting a parent information session before the unit, send home detailed curriculum descriptions, and establish clear channels for parent communication.

Assessment Design: Develop assessment strategies that evaluate learning objectives (understanding complexity, analyzing sources, articulating multiple perspectives) rather than specific political positions. Make rubrics transparent and focus on quality of reasoning rather than conclusions.

Chapter 5: Facilitation Strategies for Difficult Conversations

Creating the Container

Before diving into difficult topics, establish a strong foundation:

Clear Guidelines: Establish group norms for respectful dialogue and disagreement.

Shared Language: Develop common vocabulary for discussing complex issues.



Multiple Entry Points: Recognize that students come with different levels of knowledge and engagement.

Emotional Preparation: Help students prepare emotionally for challenging discussions.

Dialogue Facilitation Techniques

The Both/And Approach: Help students hold complexity rather than seeking simple answers.

- "Both the security concerns are real AND the humanitarian concerns are valid"
- "Both Israel has the right to defend itself AND civilians on all sides deserve protection"

Perspective Taking: Use structured activities to help students understand multiple viewpoints:

- Role-playing exercises
- Reading primary sources from different perspectives
- Interview simulations

Question Laddering: Move from surface-level questions to deeper inquiry:

- Start with factual questions: "What happened?"
- Move to analytical questions: "Why did this happen?"
- Progress to evaluative questions: "What are the implications?"
- End with personal questions: "What does this mean for you?"

Managing Difficult Moments

When Students Become Emotional:

- Acknowledge the emotion: "I can see this is really affecting you"
- Validate the feeling: "It makes sense that you would feel this way"
- Create space: "Let's take a moment to breathe together"
- Offer support: "What do you need right now?"

When Students Shut Down:



- Lower the stakes: Move to smaller group or individual conversations
- Change the format: Use writing, art, or movement instead of talking
- Revisit later: Not everything needs to be resolved immediately
- Respect boundaries: Some students may need time before they're ready to engage

When Students Express Extreme Views:

- Stay curious: "Help me understand your thinking"
- Ask for evidence: "What experiences or information led you to that conclusion?"
- Introduce complexity: "What other factors might we consider?"
- Return to values: "What values are most important to you in thinking about this?"

The Art of Not Knowing

Sometimes the most powerful thing an educator can say is "I don't know." This creates space for:

- Authentic inquiry
- Shared learning
- Reduced pressure to have all the answers
- Modeling intellectual humility

Chapter 6: Building Resilience and Hope

Fostering Emotional Resilience

Acknowledge Difficulty: Don't minimize the real challenges students face but help them develop coping strategies.

Celebrate Small Victories: Find moments of hope, connection, and growth to highlight and celebrate.

Build Community: Foster connections among students that can provide mutual support.



Practice Gratitude: Include regular opportunities for students to express appreciation and recognition.

Develop Coping Skills: Teach practical strategies for managing stress, anxiety, and overwhelming emotions.

Connecting to Something Larger

Help students see their experience as part of larger narratives:

Historical Continuity: Connect current events to the long arc of Jewish history and resilience.

Global Context: Help students understand how their experience relates to global challenges and opportunities.

Personal Agency: Emphasize ways students can make a positive difference, both now and in the future.

Community Connection: Strengthen students' sense of belonging to the Jewish people and broader human community.

Future Orientation

Vision Work: Help students imagine positive futures for Israel, the Jewish people, and the world.

Action Planning: Connect students' values and concerns to concrete actions they can take.

Skill Development: Focus on building capabilities that will serve students long after the unit ends.

Network Building: Help students connect with others who share their values and commitments.

Chapter 7: Practical Tools and Resources

Pre-Unit Preparation

Pre-Assessment: Develop surveys that assess students' prior knowledge, emotional readiness, family backgrounds, and learning goals for the unit

Parent Communication: Create clear protocols for keeping parents informed about unit content, especially when addressing controversial topics, while maintaining appropriate instructional autonomy

Professional Development: Ensure all fellow teachers and administrators are prepared to address crisis-related topics and support students in distress.

Resource Collection: Gather diverse, high-quality resources that present multiple perspectives on current events.

During Instruction Tools

Daily Check-ins: Simple formats for regular emotional and academic assessment:

- Scale ratings (1-10) for energy, engagement, and emotional state
- One word that captures how they're feeling
- Rose/Thorn/Bud (something good, something challenging, something to look forward to)

Processing Activities:

- Journaling prompts
- Art and creative expression opportunities
- Small group discussions
- One-on-one conversations with colleagues

Crisis Response Protocols: Clear procedures for addressing unexpected events or student crises.

Post-Unit Follow-up

Reflection Activities: Help students process their experience and plan for applying their learning.

Continued Connection: Maintain relationships and provide ongoing support as students integrate their experience.

Extended Learning: Connect students with resources and opportunities for continued learning beyond the classroom unit



Family Engagement: Provide resources for families to continue conversations about Israel at home

Assessment and Adaptation

Curriculum Assessment: Regular assessment of what's working and what needs adjustment.

Student Feedback: Ongoing collection of student perspectives on unit effectiveness.

Staff Reflection: Regular opportunities for educators to reflect on their practice and share insights.

Curriculum Updates: Systematic review and revision of unit content and methods.

Chapter 8: The Long View - Sustaining Yourself and Your Work

Avoiding Burnout

Working as an educator during crisis is emotionally demanding. Protect your long-term effectiveness by:

Setting Boundaries: Know your limits and communicate them clearly.

Seeking Support: Connect regularly with colleagues, supervisors, and mental health professionals.

Practicing Self-Care: Develop sustainable practices for maintaining your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

Taking Breaks: Step away from the work periodically to gain perspective and recharge.

Professional Development

Crisis creates new learning needs for educators:

Trauma-Informed Education: Learn about how trauma affects learning and how to create supportive classroom environments for students processing difficult current events

Conflict Resolution: Develop skills for mediating disagreements and facilitating difficult conversations.



Mental Health Awareness: Understand when and how to refer students for professional support.

Current Events Analysis: Stay current with reliable sources and analytical frameworks for understanding complex events.

Building Community

Connect with other educators facing similar challenges:

Professional Networks: Join organizations and attend conferences focused on Israel education.

Peer Learning Groups: Create informal gatherings for sharing experiences and strategies.

Mentorship Relationships: Both seek mentorship from experienced educators and offer guidance to newer colleagues.

Cross-Cultural Exchange: Learn from educators teaching other controversial topics or working in diverse communities

Maintaining Hope

Remember Your Why: Regularly reconnect with the reasons you chose this work.

Celebrate Impact: Notice and acknowledge the positive differences you're making in students' lives.

Learn from Students: Allow students to teach you about resilience, hope, and possibility.

Focus on Growth: Measure success not just by outcomes but by learning and development—both yours and your students'.

Conclusion: The Sacred Work of Education During Crisis

Education during crisis is both more challenging and more important than education during stable times. As an educator working with students during this particularly intense period, you are engaged in sacred work—helping young people make sense of complexity, develop resilience, and maintain hope in the face of uncertainty.



Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. In fact, your willingness to grapple with difficult questions alongside your students may be one of your greatest gifts as an educator. Your authentic struggle with the same issues your students face creates opportunities for genuine connection and mutual learning.

The frameworks and strategies in this guide are not prescriptions but rather tools to adapt and modify based on your specific context, students, and circumstances. Trust your professional judgment, stay connected to your values, and remember that the work you do matters deeply—not just for the students you serve, but for the future of Jewish education and the Jewish people.

We teach who we are. In times of crisis, this means teaching not just from our knowledge and skills, but from our humanity—our capacity to feel deeply, think carefully, and respond with both honesty and hope. This is the challenge and the privilege of Israel education in our time.

Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Discussion Protocols

Protocol 1: Structured Dialogue on Current Events

Time: One class period (adjust to your schedule) Group Size: Full class or small groups

Round 1 (10 minutes): Information Gathering

- What do we know about the current situation?
- What questions do we have?
- What sources are informing our understanding?

Round 2 (15 minutes): Perspective Taking

- Small groups research different stakeholder perspectives
- Groups report back on different viewpoints

Round 3 (15 minutes): Values Exploration

- What values are at stake in this situation?
- How might different values lead to different conclusions?



- What values are most important to you personally?

Round 4 (10 minutes): Future Thinking

- What would you like to see happen?
- What role might you play in positive change?
- What gives you hope?

Protocol 2: Processing Difficult Emotions

Time: 30 minutes **Group Size:** 6-8 students

Check-in (5 minutes): How are you feeling right now?

Sharing (15 minutes):

- What's been hardest for you lately?
- What questions are you carrying?
- What support do you need?

Coping Strategies (10 minutes):

- What helps you when things feel overwhelming?
- What wisdom would you share with others?
- How can we support each other?

Appendix B: Crisis Communication Templates

Template 1: Parent Update Email

Subject: Update on Our Israel Education Unit - [Date]

Dear Parents,

I hope this message finds you well. I wanted to provide you with an update on your child's learning here in Israel.

Current Situation: [Brief, factual summary of relevant current events or unit modifications]

Program Adaptations: [Description of any changes made to instruction or schedule]



Student Well-being: [General assessment of how students are doing, maintaining appropriate privacy]

Safety Measures: [Summary of safety protocols in place]

Looking Ahead: [Plans for upcoming days/weeks]

Questions or Concerns: Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have questions or concerns. The best way to reach me is [contact information].

We remain committed to providing your students with a meaningful, safe, and educational experience.

Warmly, [Your name]

Template 2: Student Crisis Support Conversation

Opening: "I've noticed you seem to be struggling today. I'm wondering how you're doing and if there's anything I can do to support you."

Listening: Allow space for the student to share without immediately trying to fix or solve.

Validation: "That sounds really difficult." "It makes sense that you would feel that way." "Thank you for sharing that with me."

Assessment: "How are you taking care of yourself?" "What usually helps you when you're feeling this way?" "Are you feeling safe?"

Support: "What would be most helpful right now?" "Would you like to talk more about this privately?" "Should we contact someone at home?"

Follow-up: "I'm going to check in with you again tomorrow." "Remember, you can come find me anytime if you need to talk."

Appendix C: Recommended Resources

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- G. Wilson (Ed.), *Constructivist learning environments: Case studies in instructional design* (pp. 11-24). Educational Technology Publications.

This guide is a living document, meant to be adapted and modified based on your experience and context. We encourage you to share your insights and lessons learned with colleagues in the field. Stay Connected - Questions? Need support between sessions? leor@sinaistrategies.com