



# CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES: HOW OCTOBER 7TH SHAPED THE JEWISH SUMMER CAMP EXPERIENCE IN 2024

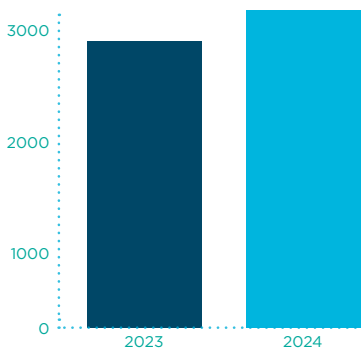
APRIL 2025 | AUTHORED BY MATT REINGOLD & NILA ROSEN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS

**In 2024, Jewish American teens entering camp were more connected to Israel, had a greater desire to visit Israel, and were more likely to feel that being Jewish is important compared to those who do not attend Jewish summer camp.<sup>[1]</sup>**

**October 7th and the subsequent war significantly impacted management priorities, decision-making processes, and the implementation of Israel education at North American Jewish summer camps. Directors engaged in courageous leadership, making decisions that were at times difficult and leading by example when signaling to their community Israel's place at camp in 2024.** Directors knew the summer would be different and they needed to plan accordingly. To do so, they proactively issued statements about the conflict and established policies about the place for politics at camp. Camp directors were interested in acquiring new resources for Israel programming but were most interested in ensuring that their camps were safe and secure from outside threats and that campers' and counsellors' mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health were prioritized. At times, directors needed to make tough choices; in summer 2024 most summer Israel trips were cancelled and there was a 70% decrease in the number of campers who visited Israel.

**NUMBER OF ISRAELI STAFF  
WORKING AT JEWISH CAMP  
IN NORTH AMERICA**



**With the help of FJC's new Israel educator grants and sponsored professional development missions to Israel, senior staff reinforced their camp's existing culture while also launching new initiatives designed to create meaningful Israel-focused experiences.** Programs were often most successful when they were targeted for specific ages of campers and when they were designed as part of an educational process. Aiding the creation of these meaningful Israel encounters were the approximately 3,100 Israelis who worked at 191 North American overnight and day camps in the summer of 2024. This is an increase of 11% from summer 2023 and even with this increase, many camps would have welcomed additional Israeli staff.

[1] (Mosaic Teens, 2024)

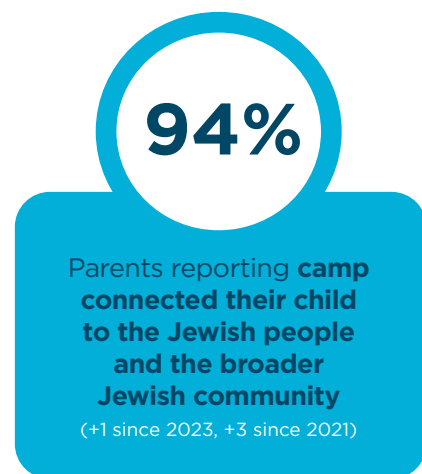
**With the assistance of grants, over four hundred Israeli campers attended North American camps.** Some of these Israelis arrived from the Gaza envelope or from Israel's northern communities, and camp staff worked hard to ensure that they had a memorable experience while supporting their mental health needs. The Israeli campers returned home feeling prouder to be Israeli and reported being more interested in telling their stories about Israel. They also gained new understandings of Jewish life in the diaspora and formed new connections to Jews outside of Israel. Interestingly, they also left camp thinking that antisemitism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were not as pressing to diaspora Jews as they had anticipated.



**Data collected about staff experiences paints a nuanced portrait of how Israeli and North American staff experienced Israel-related encounters during the summer of 2024.**

The overwhelming majority of staff from both groups had very positive summers. More than 80% of Israeli staff reported being satisfied with their summer and that they would recommend working at their camp to their friends. Israelis appreciated the opportunity to meaningfully interact with the Jewish diaspora and to share their knowledge and feelings about Israel. Though they felt emotionally supported with regard to the trauma of October 7th, Israeli staff tended to feel less professionally supported than their North American colleagues

**In the same way their Israeli peers appreciated interacting with diaspora Jews, North American staff also appreciated spending time with Israelis. Alongside these interactions, Israel-related programming led over 75% of North American staff to report that they either maintained or strengthened their connection to Israel during the summer.** This is an increase of 14% from the previous summer. A small minority of staff were unsatisfied with Israel programming either because there was too much Israel programming, not enough Israel programming, or because they disagreed with the programming.



*Many North American staff shared that after witnessing antisemitism and anti-Israel activities at home in their communities and college campuses, camp provided them the opportunity to be openly proud of their Jewish identities among other Jews.*

**Parents also described camp as a safe space after the October 7th terror attack and amid the rise in antisemitism in North America.** Many parents were impressed with how camps balanced competing perceptions about Israel. They also reported that their children returned home feeling secure in their Jewish identities.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUMMER 2025 AND BEYOND

These recommendations are based on our analysis of diverse data sources and perspectives, highlighting effective practices and areas for growth identified by camp staff and leadership. While every camp is unique in how it incorporates Israel and Israelis into camp life, we recognize that not all recommendations will apply universally, and some may need adaptation to be most effective.

That said, we believe camps and the Jewish funding community committed to strengthening camp experiences can use these insights to enhance how Israel is engaged with at camp in summer 2025 and beyond.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CAMPS

- 1. Set expectations directly and upfront, ahead of the summer.** With Israel likely to continue to be a hot-button issue at camp, directors should share the camp's Israel philosophy and programming vision with families and staff before camp begins. Staff need to also be told what is expected of them during Israel-related programming. Being clear and proactive while directly engaging with the topic of Israel is a key aspect of setting the right tone, especially when it comes from leadership.
- 2. Hire Hebrew-speaking senior staff and MESSH support.** Having Hebrew-speaking senior staff and MESSH support available for Israelis will help them be better prepared for camp and ease their adjustment into the new environment. Access to professionals who they can speak to in their first language may also make them more comfortable talking about personal and professional challenges. This would go a long way in helping Israeli staff feel more comfortable and lead to better integration which would help them feel greater confidence in sharing their stories and experience.
- 3. Lead Israel 101 sessions for staff, especially at day camps.** Staff members arrive with varying levels of knowledge about Israel, its history, culture, and politics. This is especially true at day camps with its high percentage of non-Jewish staff. An introduction to Israel, why it matters to the camp, and what is expected of staff will help them best be able to participate in Israel programming.

- 4. Ensure Israel programming is age appropriate.** Though there are programs that are attractive to campers of all ages, it is important to offer programming that is designed for specific developmental stages. This ensures that the content being offered is relevant and best suited for the campers attending the program.
- 5. Engage Israelis in implementing Israel-related programming.** Israeli staff and campers want to be leaders in sharing about their home country and North American campers and staff want the opportunity to learn from Israelis. These programs resonate strongly with campers and increase the overall impact of the educational program. Camps should continue to find ways to increase Israelis' opportunities to exercise active involvement in this way because it fulfills Israelis' and North Americans' interests in expanding the role of Israelis at camp.
- 6. Continue to emphasize interactions and friendships between Israelis and North Americans.** Interactions between Israelis and North Americans remain a central feature of how both groups experience summer camp. Camps need to continue to find ways to create opportunities where Israelis and North Americans can engage in a variety of activities together and get to know each other as people. Camp leadership should constructively manage opportunities for Israeli and North American staff to bond at the start of camp and consistently throughout camp so that there are more opportunities for individuals to form meaningful relationships.
- 7. Help Israeli campers and staff to better understand the North American Jewish experience.** Camp directors should set Israeli campers' expectations about what types of Israel-related content to expect at camp. Many Israeli campers and staff see their time at camp as an opportunity to learn about North American Jewish life and practice, both within camp and to also hear about life outside of camp. This can be accompanied with age-appropriate explanations about how and why October 7th, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and antisemitism will (or will not) be present during the summer.
- 8. Gauge and meet staff where they are.** The relationships between Israeli and North American staff at camp can present challenges each summer. However, summer 2024 brought unique dynamics, with some Israeli staff returning shortly after serving in Gaza. This deeply affected them and left North American staff uncertain about how to approach or ask about their experiences. Meanwhile, the Israelis, eager to share, were confused by the lack of engagement. While this situation was unique, cultural misunderstandings can be mitigated when addressed intentionally, with space created for understanding and respecting diverse perspectives.
- 9. Carve out space for addressing the conflict.** Counted amongst parent and staff surveys were requests that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, October 7th, and anti-Israel activism be more directly addressed. Jewish camps are uniquely positioned as both safe spaces to be proudly Jewish and Zionist but also supportive communities that prioritize belonging and welcome diverse perspectives and productive conversation. When done effectively, these opportunities can help campers better understand Israel, what they see being said about it online and at protests, and help prepare campers with tools for sharing their own stories or engaging in brave conversations about Israel. This also includes affording space to Israelis who are interested in sharing their October 7th stories. Creating the right environment is important and

these types of programs are not for everyone, nor do they need to be mandatory for everyone. But at camps where they occurred, Israeli and North American staff spoke about how they led to new cross-cultural understandings and relationships.

**10. Adjust professional feedback and staff management for Israeli staff.** While both North American and Israeli staff received feedback during summer 2024, Israelis often felt they did not. Camp leaders can bridge this gap by clearly explaining the camp’s feedback process before the summer. Additionally, engaging Israeli senior staff can help identify cultural differences in how feedback is perceived, allowing camps to adjust their approach and ensure Israeli staff feel supported professionally.

**11. Enact direct connectivity to Israel.** The opportunity for camp communities to contribute to Israel—tying tzitzit, making gift packages and sending letters to Israelis, volunteering in Israel—can provide diaspora Jews connection with a place that matters a great deal to them. To be most effective, relationships need to first be established between camps and Israeli organizations to determine what can be done in North America that would be most beneficial to Israelis. Where possible, camps should explore ways to work with and alongside Israelis.



“Counselors talking with kids about Israel and what October 7th meant to them. There’s no bigger impact than seeing someone you respect and care about share what it means to be Israeli and what happened on that day. My 15-year-old was very impacted by this (in a good way). We are far removed in the US and it’s the best thing that they can spend time with Israelis and make that bond.”

– NORTH AMERICAN CAMPER PARENT



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

These recommendations aim to address gaps identified in the field following the summer of 2024. In response to these findings, the funding community has united to provide grants to support many of these efforts. As part of this initiative, FJC is launching a program called Teaching Israel at Camp, which will begin to implement recommendations on this list.

- 1. Establish cross-camp Israel education learning communities.** Opportunities for interaction before and during the summer for Israel educators at different camps would be beneficial. At these meetings, resources can be shared, strategies can be discussed, and common challenges can be worked through together. The ideas and content generated at these meetings can then be shared within the wider FJC camp network. These learning communities are being started through Foundation for Jewish Camp's Teaching Israel at Camp grants. Through this new initiative, Heads of Israel Education will be hired and will learn with each other prior to summer 2025.
- 2. Build a dedicated camp repository of programming resources.** A digital repository should be built where camp professionals can post materials that they used successfully at camp. It is unrealistic to think that camp educators would post materials during the summer but if camps agreed to post materials after the summer, there would be resources available for future summers.



- 3. Continue to deepen our understanding of how staff and families experience Israel at camp.** FJC will be revising its Staff Satisfaction Insights Survey (SSI) and Camper Satisfaction Insights Survey (CSI) for summer 2025. In its current format, overnight camp staff are asked whether camp helped them maintain or strengthen their connection to Israel and whether camp helped their ability to have nuanced conversations about Israel. More questions that are designed to understand the impacts of Israel encounters and experiences, especially for day camp staff, will be added. Additional questions will be asked to gauge whether staff understand their camp's Israel identity and the value of Israeli-North American interactions.
- 4. Continue to bring Israeli campers to camp.** The experiences of Israeli campers testify to the transformative power of camp. Not only did they gain tremendously from being at camp, but their presence also had a positive impact on the experiences of North American staff and campers. However, the costs associated with sending Israeli children to North American camps are prohibitive for many Israeli families. Camps should continue to partner with North American and Israeli organizations that are positioned to facilitate these cross-cultural exchange programs.
- 5. Increase opportunities for camp staff to visit Israel.** Travel to Israel prior to camp had a profound impact on how professionals and staff felt prepared for summer 2024. Educational trips can afford camps an opportunity to reimagine what Israel looks like at camp, based on the realities of contemporary life in Israel. Finding ways to bring additional staff to Israel, to see first-hand the devastation of October 7th and the ways that Israeli society has demonstrated resilience, will help ensure more staff are better equipped to talk and teach about Israel in summer 2025 and beyond.