

## Finding inner strength on campus: How Jewish educators can help students – opinion

Jewish educators can model and cultivate a different kind of campus presence to help Jewish students thrive, not just survive.

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This fall, Jewish students will step back onto campuses in many countries where, too often, tension and division are part of the air they breathe. This reality has, unfortunately, become familiar since October 7, 2023.

To lead, guide, and inspire students through these challenging times over the past two years, many of us Jewish educators and campus leaders have had to turn inward and build our own reservoirs of strength – choosing to dance, sing, and stand tall in campuses where our presence was not always welcomed. That lived resilience can now become a gift we pass on, helping Jewish students take pride in their identity and gain the courage and inner grounding they need to live confidently and joyfully on campus.

### **Resilience begins by naming the forces that erode it**

Identity doesn't form in a vacuum. To help students strengthen their Jewish identity, we must first understand the forces shaping how they see themselves. Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley coined the term "looking-glass self" in 1902 to describe how people, especially young people, form their identity by imagining how others perceive them. Over time, external judgments directed at them – or at groups they identify with – can become internalized, quietly influencing how they think and feel about their own identity. I call this "living outside in."

The same phenomenon is why an uncle or grandparent might incessantly mention Jewish Nobel Prize winners – it's their attempt to provide the younger generation with pride rooted in external recognition. And it works. As a community and as a people, we feel that swell of pride, even if the repetition wears thin.

Yet this same mechanism becomes deeply destructive when turned against us. When a student's admired professor or once-friendly classmate declares that Israel is committing genocide – the same Israel bound to their identity with ropes of love – those words don't just challenge politics; they shatter identity and soul. The rubble of antisemitic fallout is real, and in some ways more destructive than a torched building.

Antisemitic attacks – verbal and physical, online or in the real world, small and large – over the past two years have left students shaken, eroding their inner identity, their joy, and the courage needed to navigate daily social interactions in classrooms, dining halls, and common rooms. The predictable response is to retreat: hiding outward signs of being Jewish, feeling uneasy or embarrassed about connections to Israel.

### **Tools for turning inward, together**

Eleanor Roosevelt famously said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." This statement, while containing truth, is incomplete. We can influence how others affect us, but it's not simply a matter of saying "no" and expecting immunity from Cooley's "looking-glass self" phenomenon. Undoing self-perception shaped by others' perceptions requires redirecting our focus and efforts inward – into our rich, complex, and fascinating inner world.

In hassidic tradition, we call this skill avoda pnimit – insourcing. It's the practice of deepening our understanding of who we are from within. In doing this often hard work, we can start to live from the inside out – shifting from being victims of others' opinions to architects of our own unshakable, authentic, and proud Jewish identity.

For educators and community leaders, avoda pnimit is not only personal work; it's a skill we can teach and model for our students. When they learn to engage with campus life from the inside out, grounded in a strong sense of self, they are far less likely to be swayed or diminished by the swirling chatter of hallways, classrooms, or social media. Instead, they become masters of their own thoughts and identity.

We know this works, because we've seen it play out across the Jewish world. A recent national survey by the Jewish Federations of North America found that amid the surge in Jewish engagement since October 7, the growth in participation has been especially remarkable among those connected to Chabad. Many respondents noted feeling especially welcome at Chabad houses – drawn in by a model of Jewish life that is open, joyful, and without preconditions. It's an approach that draws people in when they are searching for meaning, connection, and community.

On campus, all Jewish leaders or educators can offer students a similar experience: to see Jewish identity not as something to defend, but as a source of confidence and joy they can carry with them into every space. When we provide our students with tools to strengthen their inner life, they become more resilient in the face of outside pressures.

### **The power of presence**

We can guide students in developing different habits and changing their mindset. In practice, this manifests not as a curriculum change, but as a shift in presence. A curriculum change implies adding new courses, revising syllabi, or developing workshops on Jewish identity – external modifications that treat the challenge as a content problem requiring new information.

Yet herein lies the central challenge: Teaching someone to live from the inside out requires creating conditions that feel safe enough to turn inward – precisely when the external environment feels most hostile.

Watch an educator who has done this inner work: When a student approaches with anxiety about wearing a kippah to class, there's no rush to strategy or reassurance. Instead, space is held for the student to discover what feels true beneath the fear. The educator must simultaneously acknowledge the very real dangers students face while refusing to let those dangers become the defining principle of Jewish campus life.

This is not the familiar territory of either pure validation or stern encouragement, but something more complex: holding steady in the face of genuine threat while modeling that one's essential self remains untouched by external judgment.

The conversation moves from "How do I handle this?" to deeper questions: "What am I learning about myself in this moment?" and "What in me cannot be diminished?" The student leaves not with a technique, but with a slightly different relationship to their own inner authority – having touched something in themselves that external circumstances cannot reach.

At a time when many young people feel pressure to shrink or self-censor, Jewish educators can model and cultivate a different kind of campus presence – one that radiates joy, strength, and an unwavering sense of self. By doing so, we'll help Jewish students to thrive this semester, not just survive.