

U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS  
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL:  
JEWISH ENGAGEMENT AND  
SOCIAL TENSION ON CAMPUS

**A SURVEY PORTRAIT  
OF JEWISH LIFE  
ON CAMPUS IN  
THE MIDST OF THE  
ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR**  
7 Key Findings

# INTRODUCTION

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The October 7th attack in Israel and its aftermath created an intense atmosphere for Jewish communities worldwide, including on university campuses. But how, exactly, did the war affect Jewish students on these campuses? And what can the Jewish community learn from the unexpected changes in Jewish students' lives during this tumultuous time?

In this essay -- part two of a series -- I discuss seven ways that American Jewish college students have been impacted by the war. This portrait emerges from a survey of approximately 1,000 Jewish students conducted in November and December of 2023 and a companion survey of about 1,500 non-Jewish students.

As discussed in the first essay in the series, this data comes from a project funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation and implemented by the survey firm, College Pulse. I helped to organize the project and I conducted the analyses. More details about the methodology can be found in the earlier essay, as well as in [a related report](#) on Jewish and non-Jewish college students that I published two years ago and build upon here.

In case you haven't read the first essay in this series, there are a few important points to know about the methodology. First, in some of the analyses below, I focus not on the full set of students surveyed in 2023, but specifically on the 155 Jewish students who took *both* the 2022 survey (when they were freshmen and sophomores) *and* the 2023 survey (when they were juniors and seniors). I refer to this group as the "panel." This group shows us changes in attitudes in the same students over time.

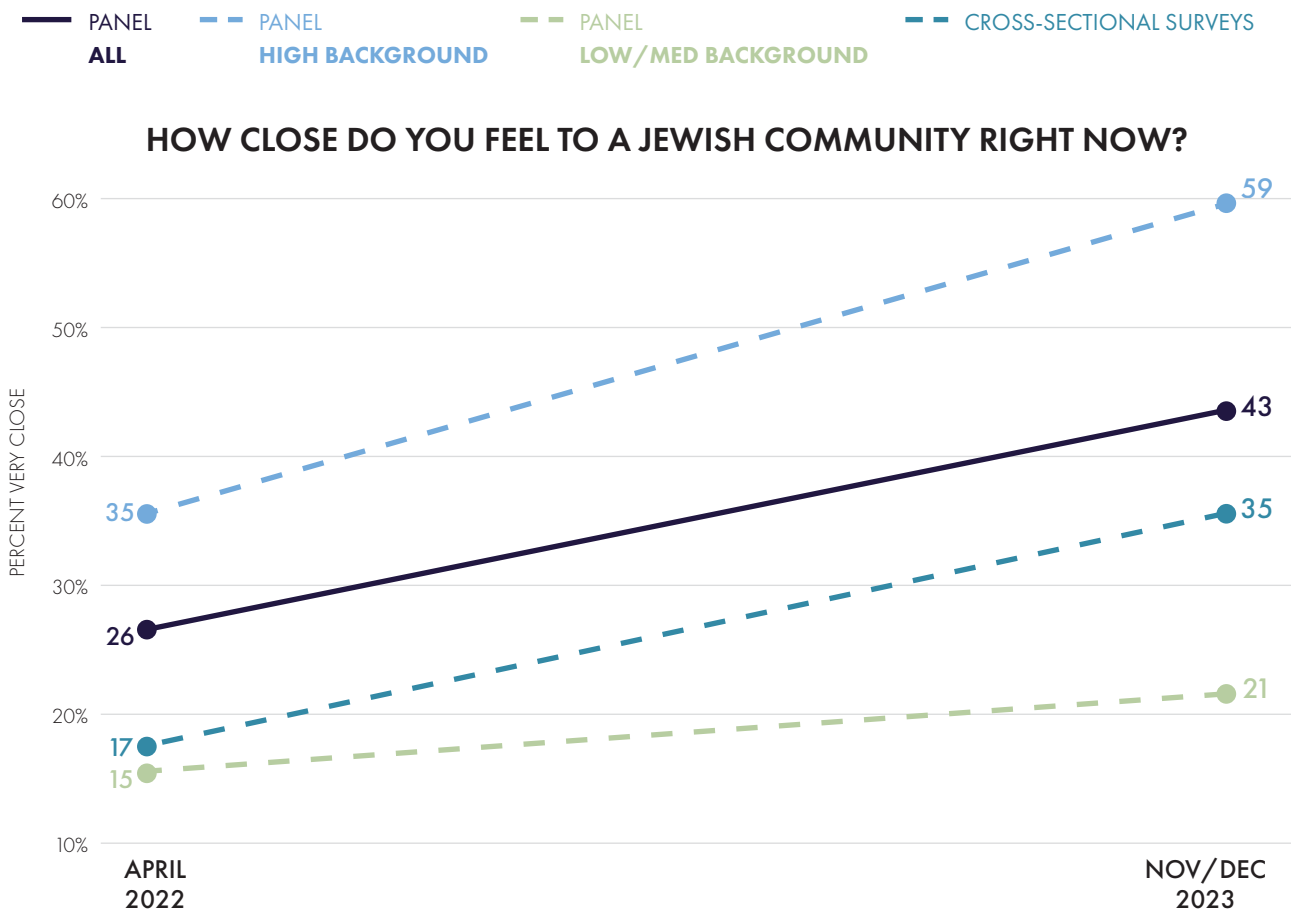
Second, the sample of non-Jewish students is not meant to be representative of all non-Jewish four-year college students. Rather, we sampled non-Jewish students who attend colleges and universities that have large Jewish populations. Also related to the non-Jewish sample, there are a few questions for which we analyze Muslim students, of whom 64 took the survey. The Muslim student sample is small but revealing because in some ways these students were affected similarly to Jewish students.

Third, I analyze how results vary by Jewish background. To do so, I created a statistical model that measures how much "Jewish stuff" these students did when they were growing up (e.g., a bar mitzvah, a shabbat practices, cultural activities). Some students did a lot of that, while others did none at all. This background score is a simple way to summarize their Jewish upbringing.

# REACTION #1: JEWISH STUDENTS FEEL A HEIGHTENED SENSE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

In April of 2022, we asked students, “How close do you feel to a Jewish community right now?” Only 17% said they felt very close. Two school-years later, in the midst of the war, we asked a new sample the same question. The percent saying they felt very close to a Jewish community doubled to 35%.

Just among the students in the panel (who we surveyed both in 2022 and 2023), we see a similar pattern. These students tended to already be more engaged in Jewish life back in 2022 compared to the typical student who took the survey – 26% of these 155 students said they felt very close to a Jewish community in 2022. But, by 2023, 43% of them answered that way. The increase in the panel suggests that the change in student attitudes is real, and not just some artifact of the kinds of students who took the survey in different years.



Is the heightened sense of Jewish community concentrated among students from more robust Jewish backgrounds? As the figure shows, students with high and low background scores both felt closer to a Jewish community in 2023. It isn't the case that Jewish students from less traditional backgrounds felt *less* close in the midst of the war. At the same time, the biggest change between 2022 and 2023 is concentrated among the students from more robust Jewish backgrounds.

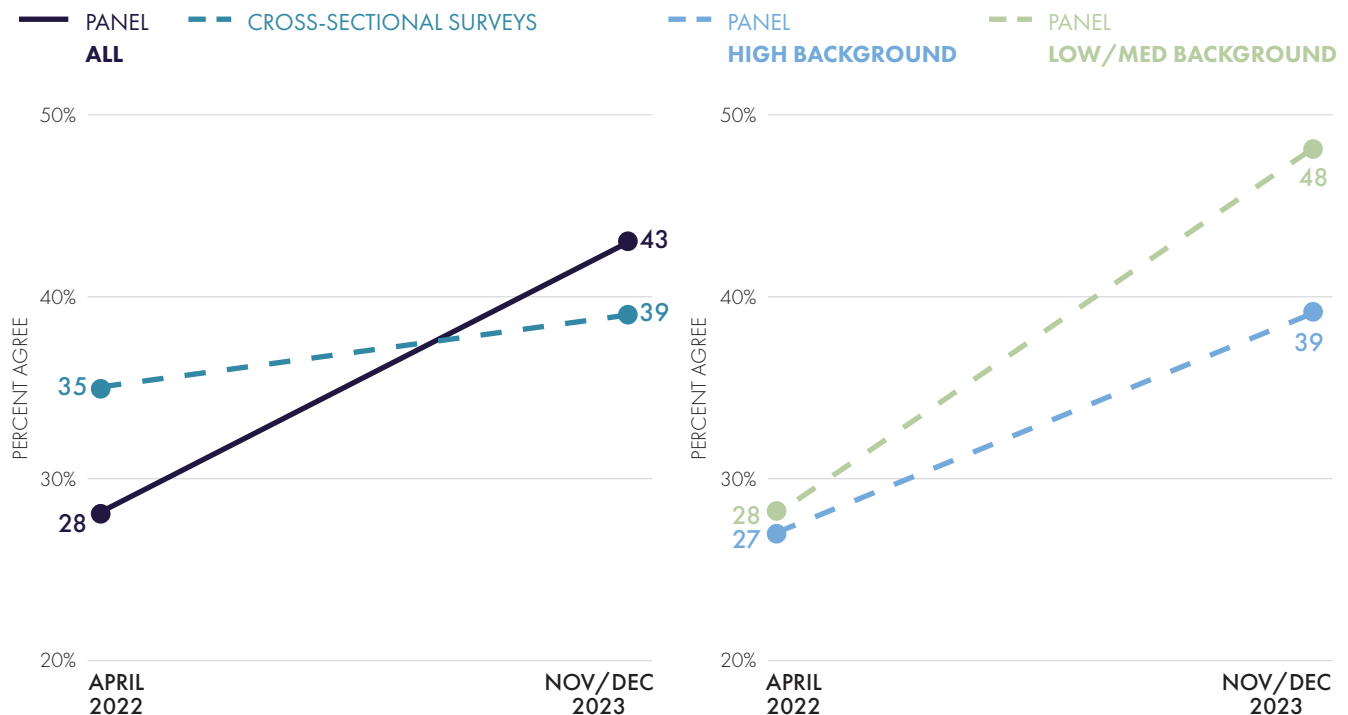
## REACTION #2: PARTICIPATION IN JEWISH LIFE IS HIGH BUT FRAUGHT

Did more students start attending Jewish activities and programs on campus since the war? When we asked students in 2022 how often they attend Jewish programs on campus, almost half of them (46%) said seldom or never. In 2023, a quarter answered that. In the aftermath of the Hamas attack on October 7, there appears to have been a substantial increase both in students who were occasional attendees and an increase in those who attend events weekly or more.

But the increase in participation does not mean that these spaces were always comfortable for all Jewish students. Consider this agree/disagree survey question:

*In order to fit in at Jewish activities on campus, I feel like I need to hide some of my opinions.*

As evidenced in the next figure, we see an increase from 2022 to 2023 in students agreeing that they need to hide some of their opinions during Jewish activities. The increase is especially notable among the students in the panel, who in 2022 expressed more comfort in Jewish spaces than the typical student who was surveyed. Crucially, this increase in needing to hide opinions in Jewish spaces is present among students from more robust Jewish backgrounds (who tend to feel more connected to Israel) as well as students from less robust Jewish backgrounds (who tend to feel less connected to Israel), as the right side of the figure shows.



Why do students feel they need to hide their opinions? One possibility is because of the tone set in Jewish activities by Jewish professionals or student leaders. But when we asked about the what organizations should be doing differently, students seemed generally satisfied with Jewish organizations, which suggests this top-down explanation does not explain the change.

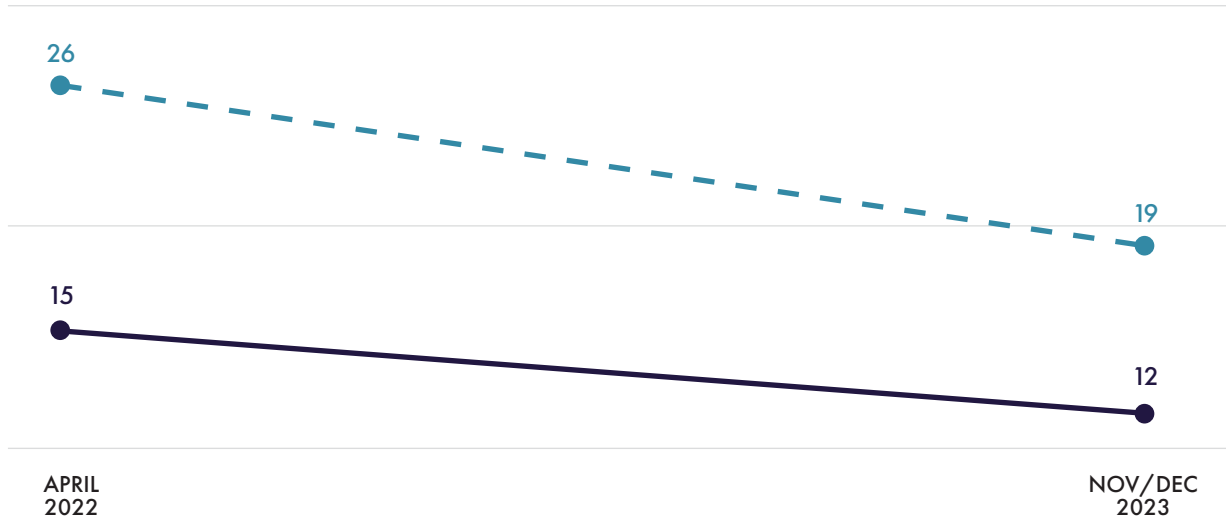
The more likely explanation is a bottom-up story of the inherent tensions arising from students with diverse political views sharing a space. Jewish spaces can be a refuge for students, but they can also be a source of anxiety as a social environment where the war in Israel is a constant topic of conversation and students find themselves disagreeing with one another.

## REACTION #3: STUDENTS ARE FORMING OPINIONS ABOUT ISRAEL AND HAVE INCREASED THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE STATE

A major change from when we surveyed students just two years ago is that more of these young people have formed opinions. For instance, when we asked Jewish students in 2022 if they thought there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine, over a third (36%) said they didn't know. That number of "don't knows" dropped to 15% in 2023.

— JEWISH PANEL  
- - - JEWISH CROSS SECTION

### I dont think there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine



Of those who gave an opinion, we see in the third figure that Jewish students have become more likely to think there should be a Jewish state (as they are more likely to disagree with the negative statement).

## REACTION #4: JEWISH STUDENTS ARE FOLLOWING THE NEWS AND DRAWING ON DIFFERENT SOURCES THAN NON-JEWISH STUDENTS

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Eighty percent of Jewish students reported following news about the Israel-Hamas conflict somewhat or very closely. Even among Jewish students who were raised with less robust Jewish backgrounds, 70% still say they were following the news. That compares to only 48% of non-Jewish students.

Jewish students were also much more likely than non-Jewish students to say they posted on social media about the conflict (37% versus 21%). Posting online, however, is more common among the students from engaged Jewish backgrounds: 50% of students with robust Jewish backgrounds posted online, versus 27% of those from less robust Jewish backgrounds.

One key difference between the way that Jewish students and non-Jewish students are learning about the conflict is in the sources they are turning to. We asked students this open-ended question:

*In your opinion, which news sources or social media influencers are currently providing the most informative, trustworthy, and unbiased news about the war between Israel and Hamas?*

Jewish students were more likely to name a news source: 68% of Jewish students versus 58% of non-Jewish students answered the question, which is expected given the Jewish students' higher attention to the news on the conflict. Among students who named a news source, Jewish students were more likely to name mainstream American news sources (e.g., *New York Times*, *Fox News*) than non-Jewish students (61% versus 52% named such a source). Non-Jewish students were more likely to report they followed the news on social media, compared to Jewish students.

A small number of students named specific influencers when answering this question. These students reveal an asymmetry between the influencers more aligned with Israel and the influencers more aligned with Palestinians. For instance, 40 students mentioned Bisan Owda, 32 mentioned Motaz Azaiza, and 13 mentioned Plestia Alaqad, all Palestinian journalists. No Jewish or Israeli influencer was mentioned at a similar rate. Five students mentioned conservative American pundit Ben Shapiro, the most of any "pro-Israel" influencer mentioned. Four students mentioned the Israeli Hen Mazzig. Three mentioned Israeli Noa Tishby.

## REACTION #5: JEWISH STUDENTS, AND ESSENTIALLY ONLY JEWISH STUDENTS, ARE ATTENDING PRO-ISRAEL EVENTS

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A third of Jewish students (32%) said they had attended an "event sponsored by a pro-Israel group" since the outbreak of the war. Among the students with high Jewish background scores, 52% attended such an event. Among the students with low Jewish background scores, only 15% attended such an event.

Even though the non-Jewish students who were surveyed are on campuses with sizeable Jewish communities where pro-Israel events have been organized, almost no non-Jewish students report that they attended a pro-Israel event. Across the sample, only 3% of non-Jewish students ever attended a pro-Israel event.

What about events sponsored by a pro-Palestine group? 10% of Jewish students attended a pro-Palestine event. Of the sample of Muslim students, 44% attended a pro-Palestine event. And 10% of students neither Muslim nor Jewish attended such an event.

## REACTION #6: JEWISH STUDENTS, AND MUSLIM STUDENTS, SAY THE WAR AFFECTED THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

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Borrowing language from Gallup, we asked: *How would you describe your own mental health or emotional well-being at this time?* We then asked a follow up: *How would you have rated your mental health before hostilities between Israel and Hamas broke out?*

Jewish and Muslim students answered this question similarly: 44% of Jewish students and 41% of Muslim students indicated a decline in their self-assessment of their mental health on account of the war. In contrast, only 15% of all other students indicated any decline.

Of those who felt affected, the most common repercussion was a decline in their ability to focus on schoolwork. Two-thirds (65%) of students who identified a specific way the war affected them focused on the ability to focus on schoolwork. Fifty percent mentioned a feeling of alienation on campus. Forty-four percent mentioned difficulty relating to friends. Twenty-two percent reported needing extra help from a mental health professional.

## REACTION #7: FOUR IN TEN JEWISH STUDENTS SAY THEY WERE PERSONALLY TARGETED WITH ANTISEMITIC MESSAGES

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The survey asked Jewish students: *Since the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas, have you personally been targeted by antisemitic comments, slurs, or threats?*

The students could select “No” (59%), “I don’t know” (8%), or one or more of the following options: on social media (17%), off-campus (12%), in a campus social environment (11%), or in a campus academic environment (6%).

We don’t have a measure like this in the 2022 study, so we cannot tell from this survey whether 41% of Jewish students saying they have been personally targeted is higher than before the war, but it seems quite high.

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

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This survey portrait gives us a unique window into a moment of historical significance to the Jewish people. The question is what happens next. Will feelings of Jewish connection and increased participation in Jewish activities inspire a generation of students to continue to develop their Jewish identity? Will attitudes and behaviors revert to their pre-October 7th levels? Does the spike in negative outcomes – in mental health, in antisemitic harassment – have long-term negative consequences? Does life return to normal?

On the one hand, these are empirical questions, and our research team will be able to answer some of them; we plan to continue surveying students and learning how things develop. But on the other hand, the answers depend on what leaders inside and outside the Jewish community do next to build on a heightened sense of identity and community while fighting antisemitism, social disharmony, and a drain on mental health.