



How Resilient Are Jewish Institutions?

A roundtable interview with

AMY SPITALNIK, DAVID CYGIELMAN
& AARON KATLER



BEFORE October 7, Jews in Israel and the United States had lived for decades in an exceptional period of safety, comfort, and assurance. While 2023 was marked by political upheaval, the long story of the Jewish state seemed to be one of thriving rebirth, with adversaries deterred, increasing regional acceptance, and security for its citizens. Jewish Americans lived in prosperity and freedom in a country that still seemed to be, as it had been for previous generations, *di goldene medina*.

In both countries, many of our institutions came to shape themselves to this reality, which lasted long enough to appear inviolable. For years, budding threats went unseen, ignored, or unanswered by institutions large and small, from NGOs to the government of Israel. October 7 shattered that reality.

On and after that day, the Jewish people proved resilient even when

their institutions had failed, with leadership springing from individuals and grassroots networks. In Israel, citizens coordinated rescue and relief efforts in the absence of government initiative; in the United States, we were faced with building new relationships and alliances as the places that had been our home for so long took heart from Hamas's barbarism, or looked on with little or nothing to say.

Since then, world Jewry has been tasked with applying our natural resilience to the institutions that represent and lead our community. In a roundtable interview with SAPIR Associate Editor Felicia Herman, three leaders—Amy Spitalnick of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, David Cygielman of Moishe House, and Aaron Katler of UpStart—discuss what resilience means to them and the organizations they lead.

This roundtable interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Felicia Herman: Thanks to the three of you for being with us for this conversation. Let's start by talking about how each of your organizations tries to build Jewish communal resilience in America and beyond.

Amy Spitalnick: The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) was founded in 1944 with the understanding that American Jewish safety and longevity depend on building not only political power but also deep relationships with many American communities. We build national action networks of Jewish and non-Jewish partners; and we help 125 local Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRCs) and others to mobilize for democracy, combat antisemitism and other interconnected forms of bigotry, and better tell the story about why Jewish safety is inherent to our democracy and to the safety of other communities.

David Cygielman: Moishe House helps young adults ages 22 to 32 to experience thriving Jewish lives, primarily by enabling them to live together and create events for themselves and their peers. When we started, we were building resilience in young Jews by empowering them to take charge of their own Judaism—to see themselves as leaders. Now it’s a different story. Stepping up to be a proud Jewish leader today has actual personal risk. People in our network have lost friends. I heard from someone in our network who was asked on a dating app whether they were a Zionist. And professionally, young people are being told that maybe it’s not such a good idea to have Jewish leadership experiences or study in Israel on their résumés. People are worried that their colleagues or their supervisors can call them out for being proudly Jewish or publicly pro-Israel on social media. And there’s physical risk: In Europe, some Moishe Houses have felt like they needed to take down their mezuzot. Others say they’re going to be *more* outwardly Jewish, despite the risk involved. Resilience means knowing that there are risks and still saying, in whatever way you can, “I am proudly Jewish. I am a Jewish leader. This is a part of my identity that I’m not going to hide.”

Aaron Katler: UpStart’s mission is to design a just, vibrant, and inclusive Jewish future by enabling Jewish communities to become hubs of innovation. We help social entrepreneurs develop new initiatives and organizations. Like Moishe House, we were built on hope and optimism—we didn’t lead with the word “resilience,” but it was inherent in our work of fostering Jewish leaders who embrace change, take risks, and step up in the face of challenges. They need to be like Nachshon ben Aminadav, the head of the tribe of Judah, who according to the midrash was the first to jump into the Sea of Reeds as the Israelites were running from Pharaoh and his army. They need to take risks, to leap into troubled water. And to constantly be in a

state of creation and renewal, like we say in our morning prayers about God: that with kindness, God continually renews the work of creation. This means embracing change—seeking it out and welcoming it.

The essence of resilience is that we need to keep an eye on what a brighter future looks like, and to keep building toward it and becoming stronger even in the face of challenges. It's like the psychology of training for a marathon, which is counterintuitive—it's all about getting ready for the starting line, not the finish line. You can't know what's going to happen once you start—what the weather will be, whether you'll fall and get hurt. Training is about building the fortitude to be prepared no matter what, to build the resilience to handle adversity and keep going.

Herman: The attacks of October 7 and the ongoing crises thereafter have offered a kind of revelation for many of us. The world looks different now, and we see things much more clearly. For some organizations, it's changed everything. For others, not so much. How have your organizations changed since October 7?

Katler: Being in Israel a couple of months ago was essential for my understanding of how UpStart should navigate our work right now. The civic and social entrepreneurialism playing out in Israel is remarkable: Nobody is waiting for the government to solve their problems. *Lehavdil*, our challenges are very different here. But the parallel is clear: Nobody in the UpStart network waits for the established institutions of Jewish life to solve their problems. They find new grassroots solutions. I think this is part of the Jewish people's DNA. Diaspora Jews and Israel are more connected than ever—we're all alone, together. And we don't simply have an opportunity to make a difference right now, we have a *responsibility* to do so.

Our mission and our strategic plan haven't changed. We've realized we need to move Israel closer to the center of our work. If UpStart is focused on developing new and unique solutions to the major issues affecting Jews around the world, Israel has to take up more of our thinking and work than it did before.

Before October 7, we thought we had only a handful of organizations in our network that dealt with Israel. It turned out that we had 35. Thirty-five responded to our offer of additional resources: grants, webinars, education. And that number is only growing. So we're developing new programs and resources for groups that want them.

In 2018, we developed a set of principles, including our position on Israel, to guide our decisions on whom we include in UpStart programs. These principles worked for us as recently as September. But immediately after October 7, we started reevaluating those principles. The reevaluation wasn't an "everyone gets a vote" process. It wasn't based on cultivating broad buy-in. It was a process that I led with board partnership. I said, "This is what I think we need to say and do, and why." I wanted feedback and input, which I took into account. But I owned the process.

Herman: Were there organizations in the network that hadn't paid attention to your Israel principles, or that didn't like what you were saying after October 7? What kind of pushback have you heard?

Katler: On October 8, we posted on social media, "We stand unequivocally with Israel." Some people were pretty upset by this. Not a lot of people, but a few people couldn't believe we used the word "unequivocally." I was very clear that we were not going to make a slew of statements, but that if you couldn't stand by that statement on October 8, then UpStart was not for you. A consultant we were supposed to work with on a program saw the post and told one of our staff

that he wasn't going to work with us anymore. So the staff member suggested to me that we take the post down. I said: No way. That's not how we operate. If he had posted something we didn't like, we would call and ask to talk to him — we'd engage in curious dialogue. We'd ask questions. But we don't bend over for other people if they don't like what we say.

Spitalnick: The role of trauma feels important to unpack here, because I think it's informing so much of how this is unfolding within and outside the Jewish community. Even before October 7, there was a lot of intergenerational trauma within the Jewish community, especially as it relates to the work we do at JCPA on countering antisemitism and hate. We are predisposed to feel alone, because we have been alone so often in our history. Jewish persecution has occurred for millennia. We need to understand the role this trauma plays in Israel and in the region, especially because no one there is post-trauma yet — the war is ongoing, hostages remain.

Not to compare our experiences as American Jews with what Israelis are going through, but the wave of hate and antisemitism that was unleashed in the aftermath of October 7 has reinforced many of our worst assumptions about our place in society and the world. It's never been clearer or more urgent that we understand the role intergenerational trauma plays in how we approach our relationships with other communities. That shapes my thinking a lot.

It's easy to say that the aftermath of October 7 was proof of the failure of community relations. There's definitely a need for changes in how we understand allyship, but not all the narratives that have gained traction in the Jewish community in the past few months are accurate. One narrative is that we're totally alone: that no one showed up for us after October 7. There are definitely many people who did not show up for us — or worse, who said and did awful

things. But there are also many people who did show up, whether it was the black civil rights leader who picked up the phone to check in with me on October 8, or someone like the Reverend William Barber, who wrote in *The Guardian* the following week about the importance of condemning Hamas and its terror attack, or the labor unions and other groups that published statements of solidarity.

We need to reset our expectations of what allyship looks like. It's not necessarily going to mean that every person puts up an Israeli flag on their social media, or says that they stand with Israel or that they support every action of the IDF or the Israeli government. But we can help our partners and our neighbors understand what it means to show up for the Jewish community right now: understanding the pain and the grief we went through and what our hopes and expectations are for our allies, condemning acts of terror, calling for the hostages to be released, and — perhaps most important — speaking out against antisemitism here at home.

Allyship or community relations or coalitions have so often been framed as tit for tat: I'm showing up for you, I'm putting up a Black Lives Matter sign on my lawn; therefore, you should show up for me. But that's not what allyship or community relations are. Those of us who care about Jewish safety need to be better at telling the story about how it directly connects to other communities' safety and the safety of our democracy. It's not just that showing up for Jews or for other groups is the right thing to do — it's doing it because ensuring inclusive, pluralistic societies in which all communities are safe, including Jews, is critical to everyone.

We need to help others understand what our expectations are, what we hope to hear from them in moments of crisis like October 7 and 8, and in response to the wave of antisemitism we've seen since. And we need to be able to differentiate between those who are malicious — the paraglider Left, as some people have called it in the past

few months — versus those who are either ignorant or unsure of how to engage on this.

Herman: You work with individual JCRCs around the country, and each of them works with multiple partners. What factors led some organizations and communities to stand with the Jews on October 8, versus the ones that didn't? Are there lessons we can learn about which strategies worked, and which fell flat?

Spitalnick: Relationships matter. When we think about resilience, we think of the places where there were established relationships — whether it's the JCRCs that organized interfaith missions to Israel over the past few years, or those that did deep work fighting alongside their local black churches or others on white Christian nationalism or white supremacy. These are places where it wasn't just dialogue for the sake of dialogue, but where we mobilized together and built coalitions toward shared priorities and goals. Beyond the relationships, partners also come to understand why Jewish safety is so crucial, and how you can separate your feelings about the IDF's actions in Gaza from the pain and the grief over the hostages and the events of October 7 and their impact on Jews in the United States.

Herman: We hear a lot about the communities that are letting us down. Do you see new communities emerging as allies for the Jews? Are there new groups coming to JCRCs saying, "Hey, this is the first time we really understand what you're going through" or, "Pay more attention to us, because we really care about the Jews"?

Spitalnick: I don't want my lack of an answer to be depressing, but I don't know that there are new groups emerging. I think

there are new leaders and voices within existing communities that have emerged as true partners, whether they are elected officials, certain university leaders, key labor or LGBTQ or black civil rights leaders—people who have stepped up and been able to understand the complexity and nuance of allyship with the Jewish community in this moment.

Katler: I've lived in the Bay Area for a long time, and I'd say our community has not felt sufficiently supported institutionally. I feel like the Jewish community has felt rather confident in its standing until recently, offering more support to others. For a long time the attitude was "We don't need that much as a community; we're here to help others, and we don't need anything in return." That was obviously not correct, which became clear on October 8.

Spitalnick: I've seen firsthand the vital work Bay Area Jewish organizations are doing in really difficult circumstances right now, from turning bad resolutions into something more thoughtful and constructive to behind-the-scenes engagement that prevents fires from breaking out in the first place. We should be clear: Building relationships and coalitions among diverse communities isn't only the right thing to do. It's also inherent to our own safety as Jews, whether it's relationships that have been crucial over the past few months or working toward the inclusive, pluralistic society that is necessary for Jews and all people to be safe.

Cygielman: After October 7, Moishe House needed first to address our immediate needs. We operate many programs in Israel, and we're in the young adult space, so many of our people were called up to the reserves and lost friends, family, loved ones. But none of us really even had the opportunity to mourn our losses, because we had to

pivot right away to responding to antisemitism. In the U.S., in many cases for the first time, we've had to increase the security at Moishe Houses—investing in things like floodlights, Ring cameras. A lot of our Houses in Europe had these already, but now we need them here, too. Only then could we start thinking about how to move forward. We've now done a few different things.

First, thankfully, we've been investing for years in building up a network of rabbis. They've been able to step in to do what rabbis do best: holding space for pain, caring for us all as part of the Jewish people.

We're also investing more in relationships with Israelis, opening new Israeli Moishe Houses all over the world, where the residents are Israeli and, like at all Moishe Houses, they create community and experiences for their peers. We want more people to know Israelis, have them as friends.

We've also increased the number of our immersive retreats. It can be exhausting and unnerving to be a young Jew in the world today, and people need the chance just to be together for a few days. The content is grounding in a difficult time—we host learning retreats around Jewish holidays, or about different kinds of Jewish practices. But these are also important because they give people a space to just breathe a little bit. They're spending their days worrying about stepping on land mines everywhere in conversations, wondering always if they need to speak up when faced with antisemitism or anti-Israel comments.

Demand for Jewish learning has also spiked. We run a program called the Jewish Learning Collaborative that facilitates one-on-one Jewish learning. We were happy in September 2023 with facilitating more than 250 hours of this kind of learning. In January 2024, we were at 525 hours. People want to talk to someone to feel less alone and to get grounded in Jewish history, wisdom, and thought. It also

helps them feel less alone in their views of the world as a Jew, and to feel connected to what it has meant to be Jewish for thousands of years. That also speaks to resilience: feeling connected to people who have gone through this before. If you have deep relationships with Israelis or European Jews, and connections to the Jewish past, then it's harder to get locked in on how hard things are today in America. The fact is, it's harder elsewhere, and it's been a lot harder in the past. This builds resilience—the strength to bounce back, to keep going.

Spitalnick: That reminds me of something that Nathan Diament from the Orthodox Union said on behalf of a group of Jewish community leaders when we were meeting with President Biden just after October 7. He said that as painful and traumatic as this moment is, there's a stark difference between today and the 1940s, when the White House refused to meet with a group of rabbis who wanted to talk about what was happening to the Jews of Europe. Today, Jewish leaders like us are invited to talk with the president and his senior leadership about our safety and a path forward. It's so easy to feel like we're living in the 1930s or '40s—we hold that trauma. I'm the granddaughter of survivors, and I think about my grandparents' story every single day. But we need to appreciate how different things are now, and how we are in positions—and have built resilience—to build toward something even better and protect our community in this moment.

Herman: Let's talk about your teams. How do you promote resilience among staff when there may be division, above or below the surface, about critical issues?

Katler: We have very few people who work together in the same office, but we felt it was important to bring everyone together in person, so

we held a full staff retreat in February. We included an “ask me anything” session with our senior leadership. A lot of the questions were about our Israel-related policies and programs. I talked about how we’re in the business of building thriving Jewish communities, and that UpStart itself is a community that we care about, one with people who have different opinions and values. This isn’t a club or a kindergarten: It’s a place of work. Of course, we want people to feel safe to work here. But if their personal values don’t align with the organization’s, that’s okay. We can create space for the conversation, but we’re not changing our policies because of it.

One last thing. My dear friends are the parents of one of the hostages. I grew up with Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, Hersh’s parents. When I was spending time with them in Israel, Rachel said that one of the hardest and most confusing things about this time is seeing how the worst behavior in humans can also bring out the best in humanity. People can be awful, and people can also be amazing. Which side do we want to illuminate? That has stuck with me. I constantly remind myself that whatever I’m dealing with right now, it’s nothing compared with what Jon and Rachel are dealing with.

Cygielman: We had already been using the Constructive Dialogue Institute’s trainings with all our residents and staff. This helps them understand where people’s differing opinions come from, and builds skills for having conversations despite difference, in which you’re not trying to convince someone of something, but rather trying to understand where they’re coming from. This, plus our rabbinic leadership, has helped us a lot.

Spitalnick: For us, building a resilient staff in this moment means recognizing that it’s both professionally and personally challenging to work in a Jewish organization. We’ve been in crisis mode, work-

ing constantly. We're asked to show up for the Jewish communities and others that we're serving in this moment, and bringing our personal experiences into that work gives it a lot more impact. But we're also experiencing life as Jews in America right now, raising Jewish children, navigating grief and all our challenges. So we've been trying to acknowledge that and create some space to grapple with it together, for the JCPA team, and with the local JCRC directors and so many others.

Last week I was in Milwaukee, where I spoke to a couple hundred people at a Federation event, about what a path forward can look like for Jews in America. People want that: They want something to do that feels like more than just sitting in their own trauma and pain. Then, the next day, I was telling a few hundred civil rights and labor leaders about the trauma that I have been feeling as a Jewish woman after October 7, and about how the aftermath of it has been, in some ways, even more painful for me than after the neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, because of the antisemitism that I've been experiencing personally in some of the spaces where we work.

We're trying to grapple with all of this in a way that recognizes that this isn't just a short-term crisis. It's a new normal.

Katler: I'm on all the local WhatsApp groups and email lists that started in Berkeley after October 7 to help us get organized. A lot of it is, "We need to be at this meeting, what are our talking points?" Or, "We need to talk to this person and build a relationship." It's important work. But just having action items means that you can miss the *neshamah* (the soul of the work). The other day, I texted one of the community groups, with hundreds of people in it, to ask whether anyone was interested in doing some Jewish learning together and talking about the Jewish wisdom and values that can help guide us in these moments. People responded and thanked me

for pointing this out, realizing that they've been sorely missing it for the past 175 days. We can't be so focused on the fight itself that we forget the reasons we're fighting it — it's to help make people better, make our community stronger, and make the world a better place to live. We need to stay rooted in all of that, beyond just focusing on winning the next battle.

Spitalnick: We're all feeling responsible for everything right now. But we need to triage, to figure out where we can best use our strength and our time in this moment — and to remember to also feel Jewish joy. Putting my toddler in a lion costume for Purim was one of the ways I dealt with this. Those few hours at the Purim party at our synagogue last weekend were really healing for me. They gave me strength to get on a plane that night to go to another city, do even more talks, have even more meetings. The balance is crucial.

Herman: We have the incredible blessing of working in service of the Jewish people at a really challenging time, and I'm grateful to all of you for doing that hard work every day. I love what you're all saying about leaning into Jewish learning — that learning about Jewish history and Judaism gives us perspective and reminds us why we're doing this work in the first place. That's what will give us the resilience we need, the strength to bounce back from adversity, just as we've always done. *