



From the Mouths of Children: Widening the Scope and Shifting the Focus of Understanding the Relationships Between American Jews and Israel

Sivan Zakai¹ 

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Abstract

Scholars have spent considerable effort to uncover and explain the unique ways that contemporary American Jews think and feel about Israel, yet the voices of American Jewish children have been conspicuously absent from most research. American Jewish children—like the adults in their lives—have beliefs, opinions, and thoughts about Israel and its role in American Jewish life. This article makes two distinct yet interrelated arguments about the role of children in research on contemporary American Jews. The first is that children ought to be included in research about American Judaism. Second, the inclusion of children in research both widens the scope and shifts the focus of understanding American Jewish relationships to Israel. Children’s participation in research demonstrates how American Jews develop relationships with Israel over the course of a lifetime. In addition, the methodological approaches that allow for the inclusion of children in research shift the focus of understanding away from a “deficit model” that measures participants’ knowledge and connection against an existing ledger, and towards an “inventory model” that takes stock of participants’ cognitive and emotional warehouses. This shift is essential for understanding what Israel means in the lives of American Jews of all ages.

Keywords Israel · Children · Research methods

Approaches to Understanding the Relationships Between American Jews and Israel

Scholars have spent considerable effort to uncover and explain the unique ways that contemporary American Jews think and feel about Israel, and the ways that American Jewish attitudes toward Israel have shifted over time (e.g., Cohen and Kelman

✉ Sivan Zakai
szakai@huc.edu

¹ Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles, CA, USA

2007, 2010; Sasson et al. 2008, 2010; Sasson 2014; Waxman 2016). As Israel education has developed as a distinct subfield increasingly integral to the education of young American Jews (Grant and Kopelowitz 2012; Horowitz 2012), scholars have also focused on the contexts in which contemporary American Jews learn about Israel. On trips to Israel (e.g., Saxe and Chazan 2008; Kelner 2010; Ezrachi 2011) and on college campuses in the United States (e.g., Sales and Saxe 2006; Kopelowitz and Chesir-Teran 2012), teenagers and young adults engage with Israel. Children and teens learn about Israel in Jewish day and supplementary school classrooms (e.g., Grant 2007; Pomson et al. 2009; Pomson et al. 2011; Zakai 2011; Pomson et al. 2014) and in Jewish summer camps (e.g., Sinclair 2009; Kopelowitz and Wess 2014).

These studies of American Jews' relationships to Israel and Israel education have been rich in data and methodologically varied. Scholars have conducted quantitative (e.g., Schnall 1993; Cohen 1996), qualitative (e.g., Cohen and Eisen 2000), and mixed-methods research (e.g., Horowitz 2003; Sasson 2014), probing the myriad ways that Jews in the United States think, feel, and learn about Israel. Some of these studies have focused on participants' relationships to Israel at discrete moments in time (e.g., Kelman et al. 2017; Hassenfeld 2018), and others have traced participants' relationships to Israel over the course of many years (e.g., Ari et al. 2003; Saxe et al. 2017).

Yet despite this growing body of knowledge, the voices of American Jewish young children have been notably absent from most research. Though there have been studies about the practices of teaching about Israel in Jewish day and supplementary schools (e.g., Grant 2007; Pomson et al. 2009; Pomson et al. 2014) and about the ways that Jewish preteens and teens perceive of Israel (e.g., Pomson 2012; Pomson et al. 2014; Hassenfeld 2016, 2018), American Jewish children's experiences of Israel and Israel education have been generally overlooked (cf. Zakai 2015). Children, defined throughout this article not under a legal framework as minors under age 18, but with a socio-cultural frame as those who have not yet reached adolescence, are rarely included as research participants.

This article will make two distinct yet interrelated arguments about the role of children in research on contemporary American Jews. The first is that children ought to be included in research about American Judaism. The second is that the inclusion of children in research both widens the scope and shifts the focus of understanding American Jews' relationships to Israel. Children's participation demonstrates how American Jews develop relationships to Israel over the course of a lifetime. In addition, the methodological approaches that allow for the inclusion of children in research shift the focus of understanding away from a "deficit model" that measures participants' knowledge and connection against an existing ledger, and toward an "inventory model" that takes stock of participants' cognitive and emotional warehouses. This shift is essential for understanding what Israel means in the lives of American Jews of all ages.

Children and Research on American Jews

There are approximately 1.8 million young people under the age of 18 residing in American Jewish households (Lugo et al. 2013), and they—like the adults in their lives—have thoughts and opinions about American Jewish life and the role that Israel plays in it. Yet while the beliefs and attitudes of Jewish adolescents have long been recognized as important (Keysar and Kosmin 1999; Pomson 2012, 2018; Woocher 2015), the voices of young Jewish children have been missing from most research on contemporary American Jews, and they have been conspicuously absent from attempts to gauge American Jews' relationships to Israel.

There are legal and ethical reasons why researchers have tended to steer away from children. Legally, research involving children is subject to stricter regulatory requirements than research conducted with adult participants. As minors, children are unable to give legal consent to participate in research, and studies involving children require not only parental consent and the assent of the minor but also that a clear case be made to an Institutional Review Board that the research involves minimal risks to children and can develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Ethically, research involving children raises profound questions about power dynamics between researcher and child (Holland et al. 2010) and informed consent (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). Children are “widely viewed as more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than adults” (Gallagher 2008, 14), in large part because they are consistently subordinated to adults in their daily lives (Morrow 2005). By excluding children as research participants, scholars of contemporary American Judaism are, whether intentionally or not, adhering to a research tradition that attempts to shield children from adult researchers who might take advantage of them.

Yet there is another set of ethical considerations, often acknowledged in other disciplines but generally ignored in Jewish Studies: the belief that children, like adults, have the right to be heard (Einarsdóttir 2007). As sociologist Roberts (2008) explains, “listening to children is central to recognizing and respecting their worth as human beings” (264). This approach is a deliberate departure from the view of children as vulnerable (Mahon et al. 1996). Therefore, including children in research relies on an ethical stance that recognizes and respects children as experts of their own lives (Clark and Statham 2005) who are capable of offering worthwhile, believable accounts of their experiences and beliefs (Alderson and Morrow 2011). Children, in this view, are both “beings and becomings” (Uprichard 2008), worthy of consideration not only for who they might someday be but also for the people they already are. For researchers who hold this conception of childhood, the potential pitfalls of research that involves children are less ethically problematic than the alternative: research that systematically excludes children's voices or relies only on adult proxies to speak for them (Mahon et al. 1996).

The Children's Learning About Israel Project, a longitudinal study tracking American Jewish children's thoughts and feelings about Israel, is one example of

research that attempts to address the absence of children's voices in the research literature. In the 2012–2013 school year, a group of 35 children were recruited from the kindergarten classes of three Jewish day schools (one Reform, one Conservative, and one non-denominational community school). The project has continued to track these children throughout their elementary school years, so that at present, during the 2018–2019 school year, the children are in 6th grade.

This project is rooted in an ethical and methodological stance that views children as partners in research. Children are invited to share their own thoughts and beliefs about Israel and its role in American Jewish life. As one child in the study explained when she was in 5th grade, “Any time that we have a conversation or an interview, it makes me feel more in touch with Israel and how our kids’ minds can share what they believe about Israel. It makes me think that kids’ thoughts matter.”

Methodological Approaches to Research with Children

The work of partnering with children in the service of research, and helping both the child participants and the adult research community understand that “kids’ thoughts matter,” is a delicate task. Methodologically, research involving children must be tailored to the ways that children themselves make sense of the world. Many of the questions and prompts that researchers use with adults are assumed to be too abstract for children, although, as renowned education reformer Meier (1995/2002) explains, “little kids, lo and behold, are capable of some very fancy abstractions” (47). To capture the complex thinking of children, questions and prompts must strike a careful balance, neither overshooting children’s linguistic abilities nor underestimating the range of their cognitive and affective responses.

The Children’s Learning About Israel Project offers one example of how researchers can partner with children to shed light on children’s “fancy abstractions” (Meier 1995/2002, 47). The project employs three primary methods that are deliberately crafted to shed light on children’s unique ways of understanding Israel and its impact on American Jewish childhood: interviews, elicitation exercises, and storytelling exercises. Each of these methods—necessary for including children in research (cf. VanSledright and Brophy 1992; Barton and Levstik 1996; Cappello 2005) yet also used with teenagers and adults (Harper 2002; Barton and McCully 2012; Leonard and McKnight 2015)—are open-ended and aimed at offering participants maximum flexibility in crafting their responses.

Interviews

The interviews we conduct with the children are semi-structured, based on a pre-written script but allowing for fluid conversation between interviewer and child (Miles and Michael Huberman 1994; Gillham 2005). The semi-structured nature of these interviews allows both focus and flexibility, each of which is useful when interviewing children (Drever 1995).

Like interviews about Israel with adult participants, semi-structured interview questions for children are open-ended, diverging from the fixed-answer questions typically asked in surveys. Yet questions crafted for adults assume a rich linguistic and conceptual repertoire, such as “Can Israel be both a democratic state of ‘all of its citizens’ and at the same time a ‘Jewish state’?” (Sasson 2014) or “Define your personal understanding of Zionism” (Grant and Kopelowitz 2012). Questions crafted for children, by contrast, assume that the children—not the researchers—must be the ones to identify the salient concepts and ideas in their conceptions of Israel. Therefore, the questions we ask of children are deliberately broad. While these questions vary from formal (e.g., “What is Israel?”) to playful (e.g., “If you were visited by someone from another planet, someone who spoke English and understood everything you were saying but really didn’t know anything about life on Earth, how would you explain to them what it means to be Israeli?”), they always allow children to identify for adults the concepts salient to their conceptions of Israel (e.g., the tensions between Israel as a safe haven for Jews and a place often engaged in violent conflict) and exclude those that are not (e.g., the tensions between Israel as a Jewish state and Israel as a democratic state) (Zakai 2015).

Elicitation Exercises

While asking children direct questions about how they see the world can be useful, it can also be limiting since children may not be able to call up all that they know and feel just because they are asked about it. Therefore, we always pair interviews with a “game,” for game play is a “language of children” (Hromek 2004, 5). Yet there is a much more serious purpose behind the play, for the game is a series of image and music elicitation exercises (Harper 2002; Cappello 2005; Allett 2010) in which the children see and hear a variety of visual and audio prompts that serve as springboards for further discussions about Israel. For example, we show the children a map of the Middle East, Israeli and Palestinian flags, paintings of people praying at the Kotel and eating at a Tel Aviv cafe, audio clips of the Israeli national anthem and Israeli popular music (past and present), and dozens of other visual and auditory stimuli.

Visual and audio prompts elicit not only what participants see or hear but also what they think about and feel when they interact with the prompt (Banks 2001). Thus, these exercises offer glimpses not only into what children see and hear when they consider sounds and images symbolizing different aspects of Israeli culture and society but also how they interpret what they see and hear.

Storytelling Exercises

Storytelling is a “fundamental structure of human experience” (Connelly and Jean Clandinin 1990, 2), one familiar to adults and children alike. For children in particular, telling stories can be a way of making sense of the world, serving as “a child’s way of exploring, inquiring, probing, and... playing her way into deeper understanding” (Lindfors 2004, 149). Stories allow children to process the world as they

understand it to be or to imagine the world as they would like it to be. Whether they tell stories that are factual or fictional, children's narratives reveal how they interpret and view the world around them.

In our work with the children, we use two primary storytelling prompts aimed at uncovering how the children view Israel, past and present. The first prompt invites the children to tell a story about the history of Israel, asking them to craft a narrative about "who made Israel, when, and why?" The second prompt asks the children to tell a story "about what's happening in Israel now," focusing on their accounts of current events. Drawing upon the work of VanSledright and Brophy (1992), who found that children can construct coherent narratives of events even when they mix up or imagine some details, storytelling exercises assume children to be intelligible narrators, including at times when they provide counterfactual accounts. We examine children's stories not simply to ascertain their accuracy but more so to illuminate their ways of thinking and feeling about past and current events.

Child-friendly methods like these allow the youngest members of the community to participate in the research process. Yet these methods do so much more: they broaden the scope of understanding, bringing into focus the fact that American Jews develop relationships to and beliefs about the Jewish state over the course of a lifetime.

Widening the Scope: Conceptions of Israel Over a Lifetime

Childhood is the first step of a larger life trajectory, and methods that allow for children's participation in research cast light on the ways that people develop over time. In the case of American Jews' relationships to Israel, children simultaneously situate themselves as part of the American Jewish community and express notions of Israel that are distinct from those of American Jewish teens and adults.

Jewish children in the United States, like the American Jewish community writ large, look to Israel from afar. Similar to Jewish adults who participate in "life both 'here' and 'there' at the same time" (Sasson 2014, 3), Jewish children, who are digitally savvy and remotely connected, pay careful attention to life in Israel (Zakai 2018). Like their teenage counterparts (Rosov Consulting 2013), they understand that Israeli society is imperfect and yet they nonetheless view themselves as personally responsible for participating in its repair (Zakai 2018). However, while American Jewish teenagers often believe that there is little room in the organized Jewish community to grapple with complex or conflicted emotions about Israel (Zakai 2011; Pomson 2012), American Jewish children readily express both feelings of pride or joy and feelings of anxiety or frustration with contemporary Israel and its role in American Jewish life (Zakai and Cohen 2016).

American Jewish children, no less than their adult counterparts, are also acutely aware of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Even as five-year-olds, they understand that Israel is embroiled in ongoing, often violent conflict, and by the age of eight most children are able to offer multiple explanations for the root causes of that conflict. Yet while adults often frame the conflict in terms of competing nationalisms (Peters and Newman 2013), American Jewish children are more likely to

frame it as a clash between religious groups (Zakai 2018). And unlike American Jewish teenagers and adults, who tend to see little cause for optimism in the face of intractable conflict (Hassenfeld 2015), American Jewish children tend to be hopeful in imagining a future peaceful resolution (Zakai 2019).

American Jews do not suddenly develop beliefs, ideas, and opinions about Israel as teens or adults; they develop over the course of a lifetime that begins with childhood. The inclusion of children's voices in the research literature makes it possible to see how people change over time.

Shifting the Focus: From a Deficit Model to an Inventory Model

The inclusion of children in research doesn't only broaden the scope of understanding; it also shifts the focus since the methodological approaches that are essential for the inclusion of children as research participants—open-ended, qualitative methods—entail a shift in the theoretical models for understanding all American Jews' relationships to Israel, including those of adults. These methodologies offer a chance to shift from a "deficit model" that measures participants' knowledge or connection against an existing ledger to an "inventory model" that takes stock of participants' cognitive and emotional warehouses. Such a shift is essential for understanding what Israel means in the lives of American Jews of all ages.

Much of the existing research that attempts to understand contemporary American Jews' relationships to Israel focuses on the affective connections that young adults and adults have to the Jewish state (e.g., Grant 2008; Sasson et al. 2010; Saxe and Boxer 2012). More recently, scholars have begun to turn their attention to cognitive understanding, arguing that "documenting what people know (and do not know) about Israel, the conflict, and the history of the region, is necessary for establishing the state of the field and building strong educational programs" (Koren et al. 2015, 2).

Studies that focus on American Jews' knowledge and understanding of Israel tend to operate on a "deficit model" grounded in a theory of cultural literacy. This model, rooted the tradition of education reformers like Hirsch (1988), assumes that there is a body of knowledge that literate Jews must know about Israel (e.g., Troen and Fish 2017). Experts in Israel Studies determine what constitutes that body of knowledge, and today's American Jewish youth manifest a severe "information deficit" when measured against that body of knowledge (Koren et al. 2015, 20). For example, the Brandeis University Israel Literacy Measurement Project asks participants a list of over 90 multiple choice questions about Israeli history, society, and politics. When participants fail to correctly answer a certain percentage of these questions, it is assumed that they have a "less than acceptable level of knowledge about Israel" (Koren et al. 2015, 20). This finding is clear and well-documented, yet it is also unsurprising given Sam Wineburg's (2001) assertion that multiple choice assessments in any subject area almost always find a deficit or deficiency in understanding; this is, after all, what the measures were designed to find.

Focusing on young Jews' deficits in knowledge about Israel mirrors a long-standing trend of discussing the deficits of young Jews' affective connections to Israel.

Studies about why young Jews appear to be less emotionally attached to Israel than their older counterparts (e.g., Cohen and Kelman 2007; Sasson et al. 2008, 2010) operate on a deficit model. Whether scholars argue that these differences are due to generational (e.g., Cohen and Kelman 2007; DellaPergola 2010; Sheskin 2010; Waxman 2010, 2017) or lifecycle factors (e.g., Sasson et al. 2010, 2012), the very nature of the debate itself rests on measuring young Jews against older Jews. While in studies about their Israel knowledge young Jews appear to be deficient because they are compared to a standard set by Israel Studies experts, in studies about their affective connections to Israel they tend to fall short because they are measured against the experiences and attitudes of prior generations.

Yet a deficit model is not the only way to assess young American Jews' knowledge and connection to Israel. As philosopher of Jewish education Jon Levisohn (2016) asks, "Rather than devising an instrument that tells us the facts that [people] do not know, how might the landscape look different once we understood what [people] do know?" (13). Here, Levisohn proposes the possibility of a second model for understanding participants' Israel knowledge and connection, a model I call an inventory approach. Like the language of deficit, inventory uses the metaphor of economics as a way of thinking about participants' knowledge and attitudes. However, while a deficit model measures participants' knowledge against an existing ledger, an inventory approach takes stock of whatever is in participants' cognitive and emotional warehouses.

The shift in focus is both methodological and ideological. The primary tool of the deficit model is the fixed-answer question (e.g., "Who was the first Prime Minister of Israel? Do you identify as pro-Israel?"), whereas the inventory model employs open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you know about Israel and its government? How would you describe your relationship to Israel?"). The former assumes that facts are the building blocks of meaning; the latter presumes that meaning is made only through larger schemata that allow learners to organize and contextualize information into a narrative or conceptual framework (Levisohn 2016). The deficit model is aimed at capturing the knowledge and attitudes of young adults and adults. The inventory model arises out of the unique circumstances of attempting to understand the thoughts and feelings of children, though it is also important for understanding the cognition and emotion of adults as they make sense of their own lives.

In her work on American Jewish identity, Horowitz (2002, 14) argues that in order to better understand American Jews, researchers ought to shift from questions that assess "how Jewish are American Jews?" to those that uncover "how are American Jews Jewish?" An inventory model attempts to make a similar shift in the study of American Jews' relationships to Israel, asking not "how knowledgeable about or connected to Israel are American Jews?" but rather "how do American Jews know and connect to Israel?"

Such a shift requires open-ended, qualitative methods aimed at uncovering both affective beliefs and cognitive understanding. It views knowledge and connection as fluid over time and as continually constructed by individuals and communities. And it honors both adults and "children's ways of knowing" (Wilson 1998; Robertson and Gerber 2001), recognizing that even when children do not use the language or concepts that adults do when speaking about Israel, they nonetheless are American

Jews whose knowledge and feelings about Israel merit inclusion in the broader discussions of American Jewish life.

Conclusion

American Jewish children, like American Jews of other age demographics, have ideas, beliefs, and opinions about Israel and its role in American Jewish life. This article has argued that including children's voices allows for two important shifts in the discourse about contemporary American Jews' relationships to Israel.

First, focusing on children makes it possible to see how people develop over the course of a lifetime. As Saxe and Boxer (2012) explain, "American Jews are not born with feelings of closeness and attachment [to Israel]" (95–96); nor are they born with an existing knowledge base. Yet many American Jews begin the process of learning about and connecting to Israel when they are children, and thus childhood offers an important window into understanding how American Jews develop a relationship to Israel over time.

Second, the research methods that allow for the inclusion of children necessarily operate on an inventory approach that attempts to uncover what children do understand and believe about Israel. This a departure from a more normative deficit approach that catalogues the insufficiencies in what Jews know and feel about Israel. Such a shift is important for honoring the lived experiences of contemporary American Jews—children and adults alike—and for capturing the ways that they understand and make sense of Israel.

Jewish children—like Jewish teens, young adults, and adults—are members of the Jewish community, engaged in an ongoing process of making sense of their own Jewish lives. For this reason alone they are worthy of inclusion in discussions about and research on contemporary American Judaism and American Jews' relationships to Israel.

Yet there may be another important reason to focus research and policy efforts on Jewish children. While it has long been understood that a person's sense of Jewishness often shifts well into adulthood (Cohen and Eisen 2000; Horowitz 2003; Pomson and Schnoor 2008, 2018), new research suggests that young Jews' attitudes towards Israel may in fact shift very little between the teenage years and young adulthood (Pomson 2018). As Pomson (2018) explains, "their views, even though significantly more nuanced, are largely the same" (15). If this is widely true, then understanding the beliefs and attitudes of Jewish children becomes even more important, as childhood may be the time of greatest growth and transformation in a young Jew's life. Only with future research that employs developmentally sensitive research methods and a commitment to the inclusion of Jewish children will it be possible to understand the full impact of Jewish childhood on American Jewish life and American Jews' relationships to Israel.

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Sivan Zakai is the Sara S. Lee Assistant Professor of Jewish Education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. She is also an affiliated scholar at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, where she directs the Children’s Learning About Israel Project. She also co-directs Project ORLI: Research and Leadership in Israel Education.