

**The Israel Learning Ladder:  
Developmentally Appropriate Tools for K–8**

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The kinds of educational experiences that children deserve . . . must be structured around children’s interests, questions, and concerns, and thus it must be undergirded by three pillars:

1. It must be developmentally sensitive, responsive to the particular ways that children think and feel. Given that how children think is often discipline-specific, developmentally sensitive education must be built upon an understanding of how children grapple with ideas and questions related to a specific kind of subject matter.
2. It must allow children to ask and investigate the kinds of questions that capture and hold their attention. Questions that sustain children’s interests over time are not the kinds of common questions asked in elementary classrooms, to which the teacher has predetermined an acceptable answer or set of answers. . . .
3. It must explicitly help children make sense of civic and political matters about which people disagree. In other words, contested questions and issues—not settled ones—ought to be centered in the conversations that adults have with children.

On the most basic level, a developmentally sensitive approach to Israel education would build upon an understanding of how children think about the particular subject matter of Israel. Yet common practices in Jewish education regularly both overshoot and underestimate children’s developmental readiness to engage with particular ideas and concepts.

The starkest example of overreaching children’s capacities occurs in the ways that Jewish educational resources commonly use the geography and terrain of Israel as a way of focusing children’s gaze. . . . Elementary school students often find it difficult to make sense of geographical concepts related to space and often have difficulty with the nomenclature used to discuss geography. Thus resources for children often focus on precisely the aspect of Israel that early elementary school students have to strive most to understand.

Yet even more common than overreaching children’s cognitive capacities is the tendency to underestimate the depth and sophistication of children’s thinking and questioning. Nowhere is this phenomenon clearer than in the ways that Jewish educators tend to shy away from education about the Israeli–Arab/Palestinian conflict and Palestinian claims to the land. . . .

Elementary-age Jewish children spend considerable mental and emotional effort attempting to sort through the contours of a conflict that they often investigate with minimal adult guidance. Elementary-age children ask pressing questions both about why the conflict persists and what it might take to shift the current reality.

## Summary of Findings: K–8 Developmental Stages

Kindergarten–1st grade	2nd–3rd grade	4th–5th grade	6th–8th grade
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners view Israel as a Jewish place, where lots of Jewish people live and Jewish things are found</li> <li>→ Learners view Israel as a place special to God</li> <li>→ Learners understand that Israel offers special protections for Jews who live there</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners view Israel as the place promised by God and lived in by our ancestors</li> <li>→ Learners view Israel as a place where they can/should/want to help</li> <li>→ Learners express anger at being taught about a sanitized version of Israel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners understand that Israel is holy for other religions</li> <li>→ Learners understand that Israel offers protections to Jews around the world</li> <li>→ Learners overlay their biblical/theological understandings of Israel with Jewish heritage/ Zionist lenses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners become aware of politics <i>in</i> Israel, <b>then</b> of American politics <i>about</i> Israel</li> <li>→ Learners recognise that Jewishness has a political component</li> <li>→ Learners are aware that the Israeli prime minister is a political (not merely symbolic) figure</li> <li>→ Learners are able to understand basic workings of Israel’s parliamentary system</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners conflate contemporary and historical details about Israel and its enemies</li> <li>→ Learners are aware of Israel’s involvement in an ongoing, violent conflict</li> <li>→ Learners believe that future peace is possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners view themselves as “witnesses” to the conflict</li> <li>→ Learners can recount specific details of violent current events</li> <li>→ Learners can offer multiple explanations of the root causes of the conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners can name specific other actors in the conflict</li> <li>→ Learners can imagine non-Jewish/non-Israeli views of the conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Learners increasingly seek out information about Israel from family and online news, though they remain skeptical about some news sources</li> </ul> <p><b>By 8th grade:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Some learners reflect on hostile political discourse online</li> <li>→ Some learners distance themselves from peers with different political beliefs</li> </ul>

Dr. Sivan Zakai, *My Second-Favorite Country: How American Jewish Children Think About Israel* (2022)

Dr. Sivan Zakai, “We’re Not Friends Anymore Because I Support Israel’: Evolving Beliefs about Israel Politics from Elementary to Middle School”, *Contemporary Jewry* (2024) 44:83–105