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"Israel Is Meant for Me": Kindergarteners' Conceptions of Israel

SIVAN ZAKAI

What is Israel in the minds and hearts of young American Jewish children? Through interviews and photo and music elicitation exercises, this research uncovers how day school kindergarten students conceive of Israel. This study, part of an ongoing longitudinal project, shows how 5- and 6-year-old children are able to form a multilayered conception of Israel, viewing it as both a Jewish state and a place for those who live there, a dangerous place and a safe haven for Jews, and a place at once special and ordinary. Yet these children also have several misconceptions, conflating time, space, and languages in their reflections on Israel. By illuminating children's understandings and misunderstandings about Israel, this research demonstrates how young Jewish children are building a multifaceted understanding of Israel even when they mix up particular facts and details.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Israel education has risen in prominence as a priority on the Jewish communal agenda. Responding to fears that "the socialization of young American Jews into a deep and meaningful connection with present-day Israel is not as self-evident or as 'natural' as it was 40-60 years ago" (Horowitz, 2012, p. 2), American Jews are investing unprecedented time and money into cultivating young Jews who feel connected to Israel. In Jewish education, as well as in other arenas such as advocacy, philanthropy, and tourism, the American Jewish community has "stepped up" engagement with Israel (Sasson, 2014, p. 2).

Sivan Zakai is Assistant Professor of Education at American Jewish University and an Affiliated Scholar at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. E-mail: szakai@aju.edu

In the world of educational practice, increased focus on Israel has led to the creation and expansion of a variety of programs and organizations geared toward engaging adult and young adult learners about Israel. The phenomenal growth of Taglit-Birthright has to date enabled over 350,000 Jewish young adults to travel to and learn about Israel (Saxe, Fishman, Shain, Wright, & Hecht, 2013). New adult education programs geared toward both Jewish professionals and lay leaders of the Jewish community, such as those by the Hartman Institute and the iCenter, have sparked renewed Jewish communal focus on American Jewish understanding of and connections to Israel. Also, organizations including AIPAC, JStreet, and the David Project have expanded programs for training young adults to advocate for Israel on college campuses and beyond.

In the academy, too, there is renewed focus on Israel education, with an increasingly substantive body of empirical research that sheds light on the roles that Israel and Israel education play in the lives of American Jewish teenagers and young adults. Some of this research has focused on "'figuring out what is going on' for [high school] students amidst all of the Israel engagement activity to which they are exposed" (Pomson, Deitcher, & Held, 2011, p. 3). In particular, these studies have shown how Jewish teenagers often struggle to make sense of the complicated, at times contradictory, messages they receive about Israel (e.g., Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Pomson, 2012; Zakai, 2011). Other research has focused on college-age students, showing how their experiences on campuses in the United States (e.g., Kopelowitz & Chesir-Teran, 2012; Sales & Saxe, 2006) and their trips to Israel (e.g., Kelner, 2010; Saxe & Chazan, 2008; Saxe, Sasson, & Hecht, 2006) have shaped their conceptions of Israel and their own Jewish lives. When viewed together, these studies indicate that there is an increasingly robust body of knowledge that sheds light on how American Jewish teenagers and young adults are taught about Israel, and how they attempt to make sense of what they have been taught.

Despite this growing body of knowledge, there is virtually no research about how younger Jewish children learn, think, or feel about Israel. Though data do exist on the practices of teaching about Israel in Jewish elementary schools (e.g., Pomson, Wertheimer, & Hacohen-Wolf, 2014; Pomson, Deitcher, & Rose, 2009), little is known about how young children themselves experience their Israel education, or how they conceive of what Israel is and what it means to them.

Scholars and educators often bemoan the "wide but shallow sympathy" that American Jews have for Israel (Reinharz, 2003, p. 2), and their laments are increasingly accompanied by a push for "complicating" Israel education (cf. Gottlieb, 2013; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Sinclair, 2014a). The goal, in this view, is to move American Jews away from a romantic, idealized notion of Israel (Alexander, 2011; Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012; Sinclair, 2013),

and toward an understanding of Israel as a "multi-vocal, multi-layered, textured weave that affords the possibility for intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social engagement" (Grant & Kopelowitz, 2012, p. 22). In both the academy and the world of practice, there appears to be a widespread—but unexamined—assumption that the real work of teaching American Jews about a multidimensional Israel should begin with teenagers. Yet, if as Lisa Grant and Ezra Kopelowitz (2012) suggest, Israel education should be about integrating Israel more fully into the tapestry of Jewish life in North America, that process cannot begin with Jewish teens; it must include the emotional and intellectual lives of Jewish children as well.

The current study works to incorporate the voices of children into the discourse on Israel education. In particular, it responds to calls for Israel education to become "more developmentally attuned" (Horowitz, 2012, p. 12). Scholars have voiced concern that Jewish schools often teach about Israel in a way that "communicat[es] developmentally inappropriate messages" (Pomson, Wertheimer, & Hacohen-Wolf, 2014, p. 48). As Alex Sinclair (2014b) explains, one of the most important next steps for the field is to "develop language that helps us talk about and teach about the complexities of Israel with children, including young children, in developmentally-appropriate" (para. 9) ways. Yet if Israel education is to better respond to the concerns, needs, and questions of children, it will require a better understanding of how children make sense of Israel.

What does Israel mean to young children? How do they conceive of what Israel is, and how do they voice their thoughts and feelings about it? The very concepts of nation-state and homeland, so central to adult American Jewish understandings of Israel, are not within the conceptual reach of young children (Piaget & Weil, 1951). Although children as young as 5 and 6 years old can often correctly name their religious (Elkind, 1964) and national (Jahoda, 1963) affiliations, they define these affiliations only in broad and diffuse terms, and frequently confuse religious, national, and racial designations (Elkind, 1964). Yet this is also the age at which children begin to develop sectarian attitudes (Connolly, Smith, & Kelly, 2002) and in-group favoritism (Barrett, 2007), viewing their home countries and communities in a more positive light than other places (Johnson, Middleton, & Tajfel, 1970). This developmental period is marked both by an emerging tendency to identify with national and religious groups, and an inability to conceptually grasp abstract religious, national, and political concepts.

How, then, do young American Jewish children conceive of Israel? What is Israel to 5- and 6-year-old American Jews? This empirical study investigates how kindergarteners who attend Jewish day schools think and feel about Israel. The research illuminates how children conceive of Israel as a Jewish place and a home for those who live there, a dangerous place and a safe haven for Jews, and a place at once special and ordinary.

METHODS

Data used in this inquiry come from The Children's Learning About Israel Project,[1] a longitudinal study of American Jewish students that is tracking a group of 33 children over the course of their elementary school years. The project aims to understand how these children think and feel about Israel, and how their thoughts and feelings about Israel develop or change over time.

This article focuses on data from the first year of the study, which occurred during the 2012–2013 school year. At that time, all participants in the study were enrolled in Jewish day school kindergarten classes.

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited from the kindergarten classes of three Jewish day schools in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. These schools have different Jewish affiliations: one is Reform, one Conservative, and one a nondenominational community school.[2] The ethnic background of the school's typical families also varies; one has a large Persian-Jewish population, one has predominantly Ashkenazi children, and one serves a large number of Israeli expatriate families. The project enrolled 33 participants from the three partner schools.[3] The participants included 17 girls and 16 boys from a variety of Jewish backgrounds (Table 1).

These children all attend Jewish day schools with mission statements that explicitly discuss the schools' goals of connecting students to Israel. All of the schools display Israeli flags on their campuses, celebrate Israeli Independence Day, employ several Israeli teachers, and teach about Israel. The particulars of the schools' approaches to Israel education—including the curricula and resources they use, the grade levels at which they teach different aspects of Israel, the amount of time they devote to teaching about Israel, and how they frame the reasons for teaching about Israel—vary. Thus while all of the children in this study attend schools that view Israel as an important part of their educational mission, only some had formally learned about particular aspects of Israeli society and culture in kindergarten.

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[1]The Children's Learning About Israel Project, conducted at American Jewish University, is a project of the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. The kindergarten data from this project were collected with support from the Dorot Foundation.

[2]Because previous research about Israel education has consistently shown that Orthodox children understand and relate to Israel in markedly different ways than their non-Orthodox peers, and previous research studies have had to disaggregate data collected on Orthodox students (e.g., Pomson, Deitcher, & Held, 2011), no Orthodox schools were included in this study. The three participant schools, when taken together, cater to a range of mostly non-Orthodox families with differing Jewish affiliations and beliefs.

[3]All members of the 2012–2013 kindergarten classes from the three cooperating schools were invited to participate in the study. Recruitment letters were sent home to all parents by way of the kindergarten teachers, and all children whose parents gave permission to participate in the study were enrolled as part of the Children's Learning About Israel Project.

TABLE 1. Participant Demographic Information

	Participant	School	Gender	Denominational affiliation	Parents' birthplace(s)	Primary language(s) spoken in the home	Visited Israel
1	Avigail	A	F	Chabad	Israel	Hebrew, English	Y
2	Ari	A	M	Reform	United States, Israel	Hebrew, English	Y
3	Bella	A	F	Reform	Iran	English, Farsi	N
4	Brent	A	M	Reform	United States, Iran	English, Farsi	N
5	Carly	A	F	Conservative	United States, Iran	English, Hebrew, Spanish	Y
6	Caleb	A	M	Reform	United States, Iran	English, Farsi	Y
7	David	A	M	Reform	United States	English, French	N
8	Dina	A	F	Chabad	Israel, Swaziland	English, Hebrew	Y
9	Esther	A	F	Reform	Iran	English, Farsi	N
10	Eli	A	M	Reform	Iran	English, Farsi	Y
11	Gali	A	F	Reform	United States	English, Farsi	N
12	Gabe	A	M	Reform	United States, Iran	Farsi, Hebrew, English	Y
13	Hayim	A	M	Reform	Iran	English, Hebrew, Farsi	Y
14	Hannah	A	F	Reform	United States	English	N
15	Isaac	A	M	Reform	Iran	English, Farsi	Y
16	Isabelle	B	F	Unaffiliated	Israel	English, Hebrew	Y
17	Jacob	B	M	Conservative	Israel	English, Hebrew, French	Y
18	Julia	B	F	Conservative	Unknown	English	Y
19	Keren	B	F	Conservative	Israel, Canada	English, Hebrew	N
20	Kevin	C	M	Unknown	Unknown	English	N
21	Lior	C	M	Unknown	Israel	English, Hebrew, French	Y
22	Lailah	C	F	Unaffiliated	Israel	Hebrew, English	N
23	Micah	C	M	Unknown	United States, Israel	English, Hebrew	Y
24	Maya	C	F	Unaffiliated	Israel, Czech Republic	English, Hebrew, Czech	Y
25	Noah	C	M	Unknown	Unknown	English	N
26	Nava	C	F	Conservative	Unites States	English, Spanish	N
27	Oren	C	M	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Y
28	Oleander	C	F	Conservative	Israel, Peru	English, Hebrew	N
29	Peretz	C	M	Unknown	United States, Israel	Unknown	Y
30	Pearl	C	F	Chabad	United States, Israel	English, Hebrew, Farsi	N
31	Rina	C	F	Conservative	United States	English	N
32	Ryan	C	M	Conservative	United States	English	N
33	Samantha	C	F	Reform	United States	English	N

Semi-Structured Interviews

The children were interviewed in 2013 during the spring semester of their kindergarten year. All interviews, conducted one-on-one, took place during the school day at a time and place set by the child's kindergarten teachers.

The interviews were semi-structured, based on a prewritten script but allowing for fluid conversation with the children. These semi-structured interviews had three purposes: to gather basic demographic information about participants, to provide children an opportunity to answer questions about Israel, and to build rapport in preparation for the photo and music elicitation exercises (see below).

Because part of the purpose of the interviews was to build rapport with children, the first several minutes of each interview involved an informal conversation with the child about his or her favorite school subject, friends, and/or experiences over the prior weekend. After this informal "getting to know you chat," children were asked a series of questions related to Israel. Some of these questions were intended to solicit basic background information (e.g., Have you ever been to Israel?), while others offered participants a chance to discuss their thoughts and feelings about Israel (e.g., When I say "Israel," what does it make you think about? When you think about Israel, what does it make you feel?). All interview questions were piloted with a group of day school kindergarteners not enrolled in this study, and were deliberately ordered to allow children to answer questions requiring only one- or two-word answers (e.g., What is Israel?) before being asked questions that necessitated longer responses (e.g., Do you ever talk about Israel with your family? If so, can you give an example of one time you talked about Israel with your family?). Some questions were reworded in several different ways if the children had difficulty answering with the initial wording (e.g., Do you ever talk about Israel with your family? Do you ever talk about Israel at home?) For the complete interview protocol, see Appendix A.

Photo and Music Elicitation

After the semi-structured interview was completed, children were invited to play a "game," a photo and music elicitation exercise (cf. Harper, 2002; Allett, 2010) in which the children were introduced to a variety of visual and audio prompts that served as springboards for further discussions about Israel. Visual and audio prompts elicit not only what participants see or hear, but also what is brought up for them internally when they interact with the prompt (Banks, 2001).

Elicitation exercises have distinct advantages when the research participants are children. Pairing photos with interviews can elicit longer and more comprehensive responses from participants (Collier, 1987). Such exercises also have the benefit of helping children distinguish the questions of the researcher from the kind of teacher questioning that regularly occurs in

schools (Cappello, 2005). In addition, verbal interviews rely heavily on linguistic communication, which can be challenging for some young children, and thus including visual prompts can mitigate some of the challenges of extensive back and forth questioning between researcher and child (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2008).

Thirteen visual and audio prompts were selected for the kindergarten photo and music elicitation exercise.[4] The visual images contained a variety of media including photographs, paintings, maps, and graphic images, and all audio prompts were accompanied by written lyrics. The prompts included:

- Symbol of the State of Israel
  This graphic image displays the state symbol of Israel, a menorah framed by olive branches.
- Map of the Middle East Including Israel
  This tri-colored map labels Israel and its major cities in one color, the surrounding countries of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in a second color, and the West Bank and Gaza strip in a third color. It also displays bodies of water including the Mediterranean Sea, the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, and the Gulf of Aqaba.
- Hatikvah/Israeli National Anthem
  In this audio clip, Barbara Streisand sings Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem. The music was accompanied by written lyrics in both Hebrew and English translation.
- IDF soldiers
  This photograph displays four male Israeli soldiers wearing fatigues and carrying packs and guns. An Israeli flag waves in the background.
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
  This photograph, a headshot of Benjamin Netanyahu, displays the Prime Minister next to an Israeli flag.
- Israeli Flag
  The Israeli flag waves over a blue sky in this photograph.
- United States Flag
  The United States flag waves over a blue sky in this photograph.[5]

[4]I selected a group of 30 visual and audio prompts, which captured distinct aspects of religious, political, and cultural life in Israel. I shared these prompts with a team of Jewish educators with different religious and political affiliations. Based on their input, a smaller group of images was then pilot tested on day school kindergarten children not enrolled in the study. The final group of images and sound clips for this exercise was selected based on the input from the team of educators and pilot test participants. All, with the exception of the Palestinian flag, were intended to be easily recognizable to a day school kindergarten audience.

[5]The United States flag was included in this study for the purposes of comparison, as a way of seeing similarities and differences in the ways that children talked about the two different countries and their relationships to them.

- Palestinian Flag
  The Palestinian flag waves over a blue sky in this photograph.[6]
- Street Sign
  This graphic image displays an Israeli street sign. The sign, in Hebrew, Arabic, and English, points to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.
- *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*/Jerusalem of Gold
  In this audio clip, the Israeli group Dor L'Dor perform Naomi Shemer's Yerushalayim Shel Zahav/*Jerusalem of Gold. The music was accompanied by written lyrics in both Hebrew and English translation.*
- Kotel/Western Wall
  This painting, "Davening at the Kotel" by Moshe Haffner, depicts the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Visible in the painting are the dome of the rock, both the men and women's prayer sections, and dozens of worshipers in both traditional and modern dress.
- Kibbutz
  This vintage poster from 1960, titled "BaKibutz/In the Kibbutz," was issued by the Jewish National Fund and painted by Barak Nachsholi. It depicts a kibbutz with groups of youth fishing, working the land, tending animals, and playing music.
- Tel Aviv Cafe
  This painting, by Art Levin, is titled "Breakfast in Tel Aviv's Café." It depicts diners and a waitress in an outdoor cafe with a Hebrew menu-board.

After encountering each prompt, the children were asked three questions:

1. What do you think this is?
2. What does it make you think about when you see/hear this?
3. What does it make you feel when you see/hear this?

This exercise was intended to help children have a more concrete entrée into talking about Israel than semi-structured interviews alone could provide. The prompts also highlighted distinct aspects of Israel—political, religious, and cultural—to provide children an opportunity to discuss multiple facets of Israel, many of which they did not address in the more child-driven semi-structured interviews. All semi-structured interviews and photo and music elicitation exercises were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

[6]The vast majority of participants (both in the pilot study and in the Children's Learning About Israel Project) could not identify this image. I included it so that, with longitudinal research over time, it may be possible to see if and when the children begin to recognize it and/or speak about Palestinian claims to the land.

Data Analysis

Three methods were used to generate an initial code list. One set of codes was generated following what Robert Weiss (1994) calls *issue-focused analysis*. In this approach, the researcher searches for patterns "to describe what has been learned from all [interview] respondents about [how] people in their situation" (p. 153) understand a particular issue. In this case, I searched for patterns in the way that kindergarteners conceived of what Israel is. Children spoke about Israel in many different ways—for example, as a Jewish country, as a place far away, and as a home away from home. Each of these different ways of conceiving of Israel received its own code, and I searched for patterns in the codes that consistently repeated across the majority of participants.

Other codes were generated using *selective open coding* to search for emergent themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In the tradition of grounded theory, these codes emerged from the thoughts and reflections of the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, children in this study often conflated time, space, languages, and symbols, and so codes were generated for each of these kinds of conflating "moves" that the children made. In addition, many of the children spoke about Hebrew when they were asked about Israel, and so discussions about Hebrew language also received their own code.

A third set of codes was generated based on *theoretically significant categories from existing research*. For example, scholars have shown that young children talk about geopolitical concepts using language that reflects the social interactions in their own lives (Targ, 1970) and often conflate nationality and religion (Elkind, 1964). Codes were generated to search for whether and how each of these known phenomena were exhibited by participants in this study.

Once I generated a preliminary list of codes, my process of analysis followed the "constant-comparative" method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), moving from generating conceptual categories to comparing categories to generating theory. Throughout the process, the goal of analysis was to create conceptual categories to describe and explain how the children in this study conceive of Israel, and the thoughts and feelings that Israel elicits from them.

KINDERGARTENERS' CONCEPTIONS OF ISRAEL

As these 5- and 6-year-old children talked about Israel, they surfaced three sets of conflicting ideas about it. They discussed Israel as both a Jewish state and a state for its citizens, a safe haven for Jews and a dangerous place, and a country at once special and like any other.

TABLE 2. Children's Conceptions of Israel

	Participant	Jewish place	Place for those who live there	Safe place	Dangerous place	Special place	Ordinary place
1	Avigail	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Ari	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Bella	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
4	Brent	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Carly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Caleb	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x
7	David	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
8	Dina	✓	Unsure	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Esther	x	x	x	x	✓	✓
10	Eli	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Gali	✓	x	✓	x	x	✓
12	Gabe	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓
13	Hayim	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Hannah	✓	Unsure	✓	x	✓	✓
15	Isaac	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓
16	Isabelle	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
17	Jacob	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Julia	✓	x	x	x	✓	x
19	Keren	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
20	Kevin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Lior	✓	Unsure	x	✓	x	✓
22	Lailah	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓
23	Micah	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Maya	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Noah	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x
26	Nava	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
27	Oren	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Oleander	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Peretz	x	x	x	✓	✓	x
30	Pearl	✓	Unsure	x	✓	✓	✓
31	Rina	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x
32	Ryan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Samantha	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x
	TOTAL	27	17	20	28	30	25

Each of these ways of talking about Israel surfaced repeatedly in both the interviews and the elicitation exercises, and each was mentioned by more than half of the children in this study. More important, however, was that *all* of the children described Israel in more than one way, discussing Israel as a Jewish place *and* an ordinary place, for example, or a dangerous place *and* a special place. Even more noteworthy is that 27 of the 33 children spoke of Israel using at least one dichotomous set of ideas, talking about *both* special *and* ordinary aspects of Israel, or discussing ways that it is *both* a dangerous *and* a safe place (Table 2).

What, for this group of children, did it mean for Israel to be a Jewish place and a place for those who lived there? How did they view Israel as a place at once safe and dangerous, both special and ordinary? Their words provide a window into their conceptions of Israel.

Israel as a Jewish State and a State for Its Citizens

Children in the study repeatedly referred to Israel as "a Jewish state," "a Jewish place," or "a Jewish home." Twenty-seven of the 33 participants in this study referred to Israel as a uniquely Jewish place at some point during their interviews, and this kind of language was clearly prevalent in the discourse about Israel in their schools. But what did it mean to kindergarteners that Israel is a Jewish state?

The children generally identified Israel as a Jewish place for one of three reasons. For six of the children, Israel is a Jewish place because it carries a special connection to God. Jacob defined Israel as "God's favorite state," and Isabelle referred to it as a place "made by God." Others viewed Israel as receiving special protection from God. In the words of Nava, "God is surrounding [Israel] with a big bubble." For several children, like Hannah, thinking about Israel made them think about "pray[ing] to God." Or, in the words of Isabelle, Israel is a place "you ask God something, nicely." All of these children viewed Israel as linked to God, and God to Judaism, viewing Israel, Judaism, and God as interconnected.

For seven of the children, Israel is a Jewish place not because of any unique divine connection, but because of its link to Jewish rituals, customs, and holidays. For some kindergarteners, like Nava, Israel is the place "in the Torah" and its Jewish character stems from its Biblical roots. Some, like Gabe, view Israel as a place where people observe Jewish holidays. Others, like Samantha, see Israel as a place with "a lot of rabbis" and "a lot of temples." Still others believe that Israel is a Jewish place because people there observe Jewish rituals. In the words of Hayim, "there's no shrimp" in Israel because it is a Jewish place. For these children, the Jewish character of Israel derives from what they believe to be a special connection to Jewish rituals and traditions. They equate Israel with a place where Jewish rituals, customs, and holidays are more prevalent or more rigorously observed than in their home communities in the United States.

Yet for 17 of the children—more than half of those in this study—what makes Israel a Jewish place is not primarily spiritual or religious, but demographic. That is, Israel is a Jewish place because, in the words of Samantha, "a lot of Jewish people live there." Children repeatedly made claims that "there's lots of Jewish people there" (Brent) or "so many people there are Jewish" (Eli) or "Jewish people are there" (Ari). That so many Jewish people live in Israel was, for most children, the defining characteristic of the Jewish state.

Although Israel's special status as a Jewish place was clear for the overwhelming majority of children in this study, many of them also were beginning to understand that Israel is also a place for those who live there. Although the children themselves did not use the language "a state for its citizens," at least 17 of them were conceptually aware that inhabitants of the

Jewish State include non-Jews. For example, Eli described Israel as Jewish because "people there are Jewish," but when asked if all people there are Jewish he clearly responded that not all people in Israel are Jews. For Bella, Israel is "a place where Jewish people live . . . but you can live in Israel if you're not a Jewish person." Hayim summed up the most common conception of this group of kindergarteners, explaining that most but not all of the Jews in the world live in Israel and most but not all people in Israel are Jewish. These children were aware of both Israel's character as a Jewish state and of the existence of non-Jews in Israel.

For several of the children, this awareness was tied to an emerging ability to distinguish between what Samantha called "the Jewish and Israeli people." For her, being Israeli meant that you lived in Israel and spoke Hebrew, and she believed that most but not all people who fit that bill were Jewish. Being Jewish, on the other hand, meant that one could live in Israel or outside it, and that one could speak Hebrew or another language like English. Ryan made a similar distinction between Israelis—who in his mind were people who lived in Israel and spoke Hebrew—and Jews—who could live anywhere and speak English too. For these students, being Israeli was much more tied to language and residence than it was to being Jewish.

There were certainly children who expressed confusion about the role of non-Jews in the state. Three of the 33 mistakenly stated that only Jewish people live in Israel. David defined Israel as "a land for Jews" and when asked what that meant, he explained, "It means only Jews can be there." Similarly, Ari defined Israel as a "special country . . . because it's only allowed for Jews." Lior insisted that Israel is a place "only for the Jewish people." Another four children were simply unsure about whether all people who live in Israel are Jews. For example, Hannah spoke confidently about how not all Jews lived in Israel—after all, she herself did not—but when asked if all the people in Israel are Jewish she replied, "mm, maybe?" Dina expressed similar uncertainty, saying, "I know that Israel is a place that's full of Jewish people. And all of the people in Israel are—wait. All of the people in Israel are Jewish, right? Are they? I don't know." For the children in this group, which represented nearly a quarter of participants in this study, it was abundantly clear that Jews can live outside of Israel, but a lot less clear whether non-Jews can live in Israel.

Yet for over half of the children, Israel's Jewish character did not eclipse its reality as a state for many people. As one child explained, "not only Jews love Israel . . . and Israel care[s] for people that's not even Jewish." Although a few children mistakenly believed that Israel is a place "only for the Jewish people," all of them understood that although Israel is a Jewish place, not all Jews live in Israel, and most also understood that not all people who live in Israel are Jews.

Israel as a Safe Haven and a Dangerous Place

In building their conceptions of Israel, kindergarteners also talked about Israel both as a dangerous place and as a safe haven for Jews. Their reflections on Israel were marked by repeated discussions of guns, wars, and death, which often mixed with their feelings of being protected and secure.

For the vast majority of children in the study, talking about Israel meant talking about its dangers.[7] Twenty-eight of the 33 children in this study spoke about Israel as a dangerous place at some point during the interview and/or photo and music elicitation exercise.[8] Of those children, 15 mentioned war or violence in response to the initial open-ended interview questions, especially in response to: *What is Israel? When I say Israel, what does it make you think about? When you think about Israel, what does it make you feel?* In other words, even before children were shown images—including an image of Israeli soldiers—that might prompt them to reflect upon Israel's dangers, nearly half of the children in this study spoke about Israel as a place where "Jews died" or "Jews were killed."

For these children, an invitation to talk about their thoughts and feelings about Israel elicited responses linked to war and death. For example, in response to the very first interview question, *What is Israel?*, Hayim said, "It's a Jewish state, and, that's where the war happened." Carly responded to the same question by explaining, "It's this place and they fight. . . . They fighted against other countries." The question *When I say Israel, what does it make you think about?* elicited similar responses. Rina explained, "[When I think about Israel,] I think about all the people that died in Israel and the wars with other people that died." Noah said it made him think about "the soldiers. . . . They died. . . . They were in a war." Jordan responded to this question, "It makes me think about the Jewish people who died." The pattern repeated in response to the interview question *When you think about Israel, what does it make you feel?* Maya, for example, spoke of "sad feelings . . . because the Jewish people, the soldiers, died." These children thought about Israel as a place with soldiers, wars, and Jews who had died.

If images of danger and death surfaced in many of the children's responses to the initial interview questions, they were even more prevalent—both for these 15 children and for 13 others—as they talked about the images and songs in the study. In responding to the photograph of the Israeli flag, one girl thought she saw a bullet in the photograph. Another girl spoke

[7]The kindergarten interviews were conducted during a period of relative calm during the spring of the 2012–2013 school year, approximately six months after the 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense and more than a year before the 2014 Operation Protective Edge.

[8]The remaining five children, all girls from either the Reform or Conservative day school, did not discuss issues of violence or danger at any point in their interviews, even in response to the image of Israeli soldiers. Although 100% of the boys and 70% of the girls in this study did talk about Israel as a dangerous place, it is noteworthy that all of the children who did *not* discuss violence were girls.

of war when looking at the symbol of the State of Israel, and a third girl talked about "the soldiers that died" in response to both the Israeli flag and the map. Several children mentioned soldiers, wars, guns, and/or Jews who died in response to the symbol of the State of Israel, the Israeli flag, and Hatikvah. Less surprising, most of these children also talked about war or death in response to the photograph of Israeli soldiers.

In their discussions about the dangers facing Israel, many children mentioned that Israel was fighting "enemies," "bad guys," or "bad people." So who were the "bad guys" that Israel faced? A few of the children had a specific idea about who constituted Israel's enemies. One boy spoke about how Israel "had to attack Iran." One girl defined the "bad guys" as "the Arabs and the Muslims." Another girl named Japan as Israel's greatest enemy. Yet most of the children had a much vaguer sense of some external threat facing Israel. One girl defined the "bad guys" as "strangers." More typical were explanations like that of Oren, who said, "There's other states, but I don't remember all of them . . . but they're not nice to Israel. They are trying to bomb Israel . . . and are trying to make Israel and *Yerushalayim* [Jerusalem] not beautiful at all." Similarly, Maya said "I don't know [who] the bad guys [are but they're trying to] kill the Jewish people." For these children, it was clear that Israel was under threat, although a lot less clear where the threat came from.

Given their often vague sense of "the enemy," how did these children conceive of the conflict in which they believed Israel was engaged? Children in this study repeatedly mentioned "the war in Israel," but rarely were they able to give any details of that war.[9] One girl believed the war was because the enemies of Israel were "stealing stuff." Another said it was because the enemies were "taking guns . . . [and] stealing money, stealing kids, stealing babies." A third talked about "the dark side [that] has swords and guns, and they were shooting people and swording people, like cutting them to half." In a troubling twist on the notion that American Jews often create an image of Israel that reflects their own sentiments more than the realities in Israel (Sarna 1994, 1996), these children appeared to be grafting their own worst fears on Israel's enemies, imagining them as thieves, kidnappers, and murderers.

Yet despite the violent images that arose in many of the kindergarteners' discussions of Israel, for many children Israel also elicited thoughts and feelings about safety. One boy called Israel "the first safe place on earth" and another spoke of Israel as a "safe place." Several of the children explicitly talked about Israel as a place that offers special protection for Jews. In response to the question *What is Israel?,* one kindergartener described it

[9]The one exception was their ability to talk about "the Hannukah war," which will be discussed below.

as "safe places for Jewish people" and another defined it as "there's a lot of Jewish people, and it's a very safe home." These same children also spoke about Israel as a violent place, but its dangers did not overshadow for them that Israel also offered protections, especially (but not exclusively) for Jews.

Just as the photos and images triggered comments about danger, so too did they elicit reflections on the safe and comforting aspects of Israel. When looking at the Israeli flag, Caleb explained, "God made Israel, and, and then He made it safe," and after hearing Hatikvah he talked about how "Israel is a safe place for everybody to go to." When Bella talked about the map of Israel, she said, "It makes me feel safe inside." For several of the children, songs and images of Israel also elicited other comforting thoughts. One boy repeatedly said that different images of Israel made him think of "love and care." Hearing Israel's national anthem made one girl think of "peace and . . . the dove of peace [because] God is surrounding it with a big bubble." Another kindergartener heard the song *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* (Jerusalem of Gold) and thought about "kind and nice people [who] have good deeds." Several children also talked about feeling "peaceful" when looking at the painting of the Western Wall.

Although the photo and music elicitation exercise elicited responses about both the safety and danger of Israel, it was not because some particular images elicited feelings of danger while others evoked feelings of safety. In response to the very same images, some children talked about safety while others reflected on danger. For example, some children saw the photograph of Netanyahu and said that he made them feel safe and protected, while others saw the photograph and commented on how he lived in a dangerous place. In looking at the street sign, one child said it made him feel safe to know that in Israel there were street signs that would direct him where he needed to go, while another child talked about how in Israel even driving in a car is more dangerous than it is in the United States. In response to the Dead Sea shown on the map of Israel, one child discussed how he felt buoyant, safely supported by the water. Another said it made her worry that babies would drown in its salty water. The painting of the Western Wall in Jerusalem was for one girl a particularly peaceful place, and for another girl it was a place to "remember all the people who died in the war."

Even though particular children responded differently to individual audio and visual prompts, it was clear that most were able to *simultaneously* hold in their heads an image of Israel as a safe *and* a dangerous place. This was most apparent as the children responded to the image of Israeli soldiers. For many children, this photograph elicited reflections about a country that was dangerous for soldiers who were fighting to keep it safe for others. In Maya's words, "the soldiers died instead of the people that lived in Israel." Or, as Bella explained, the soldiers "fight . . . to keep [the rest of] Israel safe." Oren most clearly summed up how many of the children talked about the soldiers. "The Israeli soldiers died," he explained, "but they gave their lives

to us. . . . They fight and they die for us to have a safe land in Israel." These kindergartners viewed the soldiers as those in Israel who fight and die to keep it safe for others, particularly the children in Israel. Their existence demonstrates that the world in which Israel exists is a dangerous one, yet, as Brent explained, the soldiers "protect Israel and if bad guys come to Israel they save Israel."

At times, the children distinguished between *thoughts* of danger and *feelings* of safety. For example, Bella said the photograph made her *think about* the soldiers fighting, and that made her *feel* "that I'm going to be safe." Similarly, it made Ari *think about* the soldiers who were fighting difficult battles, and it made him *feel* "good . . . because they're protecting Israel." Carly *thought about* "the fighting" and *felt* "happy . . . because the army stopped the fighting and [the bad guys] stopped doing bad stuff." Other children viewed this photograph and expressed negative emotions. Keren felt "worried . . . because [the soldiers] might die," and Eli felt "sad . . . because God created everybody and some of them are going to get killed." Yet whether the children explicitly named their feelings as safe, sad, or worried, all of them talked about both the dangers facing the soldiers, and the protections that they believed the soldiers offered for the people or land of Israel.

Israel as a Special Place and a Place Like Any Other

Along with viewing Israel as a Jewish place and a place for all its inhabitants, and as a safe and dangerous place, kindergarteners' conceptions of Israel also included a third set of seemingly contradictory ideas. They talked about Israel at once as a special place and as a place like any other.

Thirty of the children in this study repeatedly discussed how "Israel is a special country" or a "special place for Jewish people." One child even said, "When I think about Israel, it makes *me* feel special." Children also used words like "cool," "fun," and "a happy place" to describe Israel, and this kind of language was common both for the children who had been to Israel and for those who had never before visited. In the words of Samantha, "It's special because this is the one and only country of Israel."

When reflecting upon the attributes of Israel that make it special, many children envisioned Israel as an exceptionally caring place. Brent believed that "Israel people are so nice," and Avigail explained that "Israel cares about every country." One child, David, who had never visited Israel and had no friends there, kept talking about the friends he imagined he could have if he visited Israel because he envisioned it as an extraordinarily friendly place. Several children believed that in Israel people were especially kind to animals, never trapping or killing them. In Hayim's words, it's a place where "they're taking care of the animals and not killing the chickens." For these children, Israel exemplified caring relationships among people and between people and animals.

Some children viewed Israel's specialness as being related to its Jewish character. Oren called Israel special "because the Jews needed a place, needed their own country, but they didn't have one, so they had to fight for their own country." Samantha explained, "There are a lot of rabbis there, and the rabbis are really special." Gabe explained that Israel is special because "there's lots of Jewish holidays." According to Brent, "there's lots of Jewish people there and, that's why it's special." These children talked repeatedly about Israel's special status as a Jewish place.

For others, Israel was special because of its connection to the Hebrew language. As Avigail explained, "Hebrew is really important to Israel. Israel owns Hebrew. Israel is made of Hebrew, [so] Israel is a special country." Or, as Hannah put it, "People in Israel talk in Hebrew . . . [and] Hebrew's exciting and special to learn." For children like Avigail and Hannah, it was Hebrew language, not any explicit connection to Jews or Judaism, which makes Israel a special place.

Many of the children talked about how Israel is special because of its food. Several children talked about banana milk, chocolate milk ("a Jewish drink"), and how in Israel kids drink milk from bags. Three children, all from the community day school, talked about how Israel has "the very best lemonade in the world." One boy talked about the "special Israel food hamantaschens." Some also talked about Israel as a special place because of the food that *isn't* eaten there. Consider, for example, Hayim's list of the food not prepared in Israel: "There's no shrimp, they don't catch shark, they don't catch squid, they don't catch crab, no lobster, no pig."

Some children also talked about the special landmarks and landscapes of Israel. In her interview, Keren repeatedly called Israel a "beautiful state." David, who had never been to Israel, talked about a special "ocean different than all the other oceans"; and Micah, who had visited, insisted "it has the best ocean in the whole wide world." Oren explained, "I love Israel because, it's so beautiful. I've been in Yam Hamelach [the Dead Sea], and it's so cool and special." Other children, in response to particular visual stimuli, talked about the Western Wall, the golden Dome of the Rock, and the kibbutz as special places only in Israel.

Yet perhaps most interesting of all, many children had a sense that Israel was special not only because of any particular characteristics of the land or country itself, but because of their own personal feelings of connection to it. Rina explained that Israel is "my first favorite country that I love." Pearl echoed this in the plural, saying, "It's our country and we love our country." For Eli, the United States may be "where I live," but Israel is "our second country." Several children used this kind of language, talking about Israel as either a "first" or "second" favorite country or home. For example, in response to the question, *When you think about Israel, what does it make you feel?*, Esther, who had never been to Israel answered, "like I'm home." And for Samantha, Israel was a place to which she had felt connected from

the time "I was in my mom's tummy." It made her feel "special because when I was born, I straight [away] knew about Israel." For these children, Israel evoked feelings of home, family, and country, and for those reasons it was a very special place.

Despite repeatedly talking about Israel's special qualities, most children—and especially those who had themselves visited Israel—also viewed it as a place like any other. In their interviews, 25 of the children talked about the quotidian, reflecting on how in Israel—just like elsewhere in the world—children live in houses, eat food, sleep, and play. The children listed scores of things that could be done in Israel that they viewed as activities that could also be done by children anywhere else: go to school, play at the beach, visit toy stores, play on a playground, swim, ski, hike, boogie board, sleep in hotels, eat at restaurants, play with animals, and plant gardens. In a response that exemplified how many of the children viewed Israel as a place like any other, Isaac responded to the question *What is Israel?* by explaining, "It's a place. You can do things [like] swim, sleep, [and] jump."

Several of the children viewed Israel as one line on a list of places they'd like to see, and not always a particularly exciting one. For example, Avigail explained, "I really want to go to every single country . . . like Egypt and Israel and China and Brooklyn." Eli viewed Israel as "kind of boring" in comparison to Washington, DC, Boston, and other places he'd visited. Micah talked about his recent trip to Israel, and when I asked him why he went there, he answered, "Because we didn't have any other ideas." Some students who had not yet been to Israel said they wanted to visit to see Israel's special attractions: the Dead Sea, for example, or the golden dome on the Temple Mount. But for others, like Ryan, they wanted to visit just "Cause, then I get to eat some new foods [and], I get to try new things." Israel was, for these children, like any other vacation destination. In Isabelle's words, it's "a nice country to relax [in]."

Many of the children shifted back and forth between talking about the special and mundane qualities of Israel. For Maya, Israel was "a special place" because her grandparents lived there, but also "regular" because people in Israel eat chocolate cupcakes. In Isabelle's response to the question *What is Israel?,* she listed over a dozen attributes of the country, some particular to Israel like the Hermon Mountain and the Dead Sea, and others more universal like having horses, stores, and cities. These children were aware of both the unique attributes of the State of Israel and of the ways that children's lives there were very much like their own lives in the United States. For them, Israel was at once a special place and a place like any other.

Summary

Kindergarteners' conceptions of Israel were multilayered. All of these children, aged 5 and 6, were able to simultaneously hold in their heads multiple

ideas about Israel, and the vast majority were able to hold multiple conflicting ideas at once. These children viewed Israel as a Jewish state and a place for those who live there, a dangerous place and a safe haven for Jews, and a place at once special and ordinary. And yet, as is true for all children of 5 and 6, robust understanding often accompanies deep misunderstanding (Gardner, 2011). Despite their ability to conceive of Israel in such multifaceted ways, the boys and girls in the Children's Learning About Israel Project also had repeated misconceptions that surfaced in their reflections about Israel. These misunderstandings also illuminate how it is that young American Jewish children think about and relate to Israel.

KINDERGARTENERS' MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ISRAEL

Children in this study often mixed up particular factual information, conflating time, space, and languages. Yet even their missteps reveal that for these children, Israel is a special place, both distant from their daily lives and unmistakably connected to the children's understanding of their Jewish selves. Even as the details of time, space, and language were confusing, the children clearly saw Israel as a place connected to the Jewish people and, therefore, to themselves. They distinguished between foreign and familiar, viewing Israel as a place that is "ours."

Conflating Time

Throughout the interviews, children conflated time, often blurring the distant past, the recent past, and the present. Research on children's understanding of time has shown that children as young as 5 years can conceive of time as a quantitative entity (Levin & Wilkening, 1989), yet they do not fully understand dates at this early age. It is not until third grade that children generally begin to understand dates, and only by fifth grade can they usually connect particular dates with specific historical background knowledge (Barton & Levstik, 1996). Thus it is not surprising that the 5- and 6-year-old kindergarteners in this study had difficulty keeping distinct iterations of time in their heads as they spoke of Israel's past. What is noteworthy, however, is that even as they conflated particular instances of time, they were able to keep in mind certain meta-narratives about Israel; all of the instances in which they conflated time were linked to stories from the Jewish past, and children were able to locate those stories as connected to the land of Israel even as they mislabeled when the stories occurred.

The most noteworthy instances of children's misconceptions of time were iterations of children collapsing the distinction between contemporary Israel and the Israel featured in Jewish holidays. Nearly half of the children in this study conflated contemporary Israel with the Israel of the Hasmonean

Rebellion of 167 B.C.E., which the children know as the Hannukah story. Consider, for example, Dina's discussion in response to the photograph of IDF soldiers. She identified the soldiers as the Maccabees "because I see the Israeli flag behind them . . . so I think that's the State of Israel, and I think the Maccabees live in Israel." She then continued to say that the photograph made her think about "Judah, because Judah's fighted the army and he lives in Israel. . . . They fighted King Antiochus." Hayim also thought the photograph depicted "the Hannukah war." So did Lior, who identified the photograph as "the armies for Israel," and said it made him think about "the Hannukah war." Earlier, after hearing Hatikvah, Lior said the song reminded him of how "the Israeli people won the Greeks." Other children talked about the Maccabees and the story of Hannukah in response to the map of the contemporary Middle East, the Israeli flag, and—less surprisingly—the symbol of the State of Israel that contains a menorah, which for many children was a reminder of the holiday of Hannukah. These children had quite a lot of knowledge about the Hannukah story; they knew of the Maccabees fighting King Anticochus and the Assyrian Greeks, and they understood that the story occurred in the land of Israel. They misjudged only the timing of the story, collapsing the temporal distance between the time of the Maccabees and the modern nation state.

Children also conflated the contemporary countries of Israel and Egypt with the lands of the Passover story. Carly believed that the painting of contemporary people praying at the Western Wall was depicting the freed Israelites "praying about God and . . . having rest and not being a slave anymore." Lior thought the song *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav,* about the city of Jerusalem, was about "Moshe [Moses] the baby" and how "when he grown up he was a hero." Pearl talked about how Israelis mourn the loss of their "firstborn babies," conflating contemporary Israeli parents with the parents of Book of Exodus. Several children recounted stories of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt in response to the map of the contemporary Middle East. For example, Avigail pointed to Egypt and said, "King Pharaoh is in Egypt." Eli said that the map:

> makes me think about Passover . . . because the Jews went from here [Egypt] to here [the Negev] and then they went across it [the Gulf of Aqaba], and then they went to Mt. Sinai, and that's right here, and then they came back, and then they went all the way to Israel.

What is noteworthy here is that although the children were often confusing details of time (and space, as will be discussed more below) they did have a basic understanding of how the stories from Jewish holidays mapped onto places that still exist in contemporary Israel.

Throughout the interviews, children collapsed distinctions between time. One child placed Moses in the time of the Maccabees. Another put

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the time of King David, and a third saw Netanyahu as a contemporary of David Ben Gurion. Another child placed Noah in the Passover story, talking about how he had crossed the Red Sea. In each of these instances, children demonstrated misconceptions about time, collapsing centuries into a single time period, either contemporary or recently past.

Yet as the children conflated particular instances of time, they were also recounting narratives that clearly linked Israel with the Jewish past. Even as the chronological details were blurry, one thing remained clear: these children knew that the Jewish stories with which they were familiar occurred in the land of Israel. Israel was, for them, clearly a place connected to Jewish holidays and Jewish history.

Conflating Space

Just as the children in this study conflated time, so too did they conflate space. Prior research has shown that children begin to map the environment around them even as newborns (Matthews, 1992), and by the time they are 3 years old they can begin conceptualize the relationship between a map or model and the space it represents (DeLoache, 1989). Despite this early development of spacial understanding, children in elementary school often find it challenging to conceive of larger geographical concepts related to space, and have particular difficulty with the nomenclature used to discuss geography (Platten, 1995). Thus it is unsurprising that the children in this study often struggled to talk about geographic space, and repeatedly conflated distinct places and the cultures associated with them. However, even as the children melded stories about Israel, the United States, and Iran in particular, they did so in consistent ways, always distinguishing between foreign lands and homelands.

Several of the children in the study, all from Persian Jewish families, confused Iran and Israel. The clearest example of this trend comes from Caleb, who told the following story after looking at the photograph of Prime Minister Netanyahu:

> That president [Netanyahu] is nice. Do you know what? My dad used to be in Israel, and there used to be a mean president, and my dad had to leave. He used to have trophies, but his [mom said he had to leave and pack a suitcase.] His clothes were in it, and he couldn't put his trophies in, so he just left—left his trophies in there and he couldn't bring it.

Caleb's story about his dad's previous life "in Israel" was, in fact, a story about his father's departure from Iran, yet he named it as a story about Israel, and it was triggered for him by talking about the "president" of Israel. At the time of this interview, Caleb had never visited Iran and had been to Israel only as a baby, and yet his family's lore was intimately tied with both

places. The same was true for Eli, who mislabeled the Palestinian flag as the Iranian flag, explaining that the three flags in the elicitation exercise were the flags of the countries in which his family had lived. Several other children confused the words "Israeli and Iranian" or "Israeli and Persian." Yet even as the children mixed up the particular names and details of the faraway places, they remained clear about the fact that their families had ties to lands in which they did not actually reside.

Other children had difficulty articulating where Israel was, often viewing it as a part of the United States—though far away from their homes in Los Angeles. For example, Lailah talked about "all of the lands" of America like New York and Israel. When asked where Israel is, Ari explained, "In America, but I don't know where it is. In America [but] far." Dina said that Israel was "in a part of California, and you have to take a plane there." None of the children mislabeled Israel as somewhere in Europe, South America, or elsewhere in North America, including the students who spoke at length about having visited these places. For these children, both Israel and the United States were what Eli called "our country," and thus even when the children were able to explain that the physical distance of Israel was much greater from their homes than the physical distance of New York, they did not conceptually differentiate between the "ours" of New York and the "ours" of Israel.

As was true with the kindergarteners' conflation of time, their misconceptions of geography are illustrative not only because of what they reveal about what the children misunderstand, but because of what they reveal about what children *do* understand. In every instance in which children inaccurately labeled or spoke about places, they clearly delineated between "our" and "foreign" spaces. They mixed up one homeland with other homelands—confusing Israel with Iran or the United States—but they never confused these places for other places in the world. And though they often confused other places with one another—for example, calling Japan Israel's greatest enemy, or confusing China and Australia—the children never talked about those places as "ours" or confused them with Israel. In other words, even as the children blurred distinctions between Israel, the United States, and Iran, they clearly differentiated between those places in the world with which their family had particular connections, and those places where they might have visited but never could have called home.

Conflating Languages

Just as the kindergarteners conflated geographic locations but distinguished between foreign lands and homelands, so too did they conflate languages while maintaining clear distinctions between foreign languages and "our" languages. The children in this study frequently misidentified particular languages, but as they did so, they distinguished between languages to which their families and communities had ties, and those to which they did not.

All of the girls and boys in the Children's Learning About Israel Project were familiar with multiple languages, either because multiple languages were spoken within their homes (see Table 1), or because they were learning a second (or third) language at school. Hebrew instruction was part of the kindergarten curriculum at all of the schools in this project, and although the time given to Hebrew instruction and the nature of that instruction differed across schools, children from all of the schools spoke about Hebrew in their interviews.

Most of the children in this study were accurately able to identify Hebrew characters in print. This is unsurprising given their Hebrew instruction in school and the fact that voweled Hebrew has a "transparent" orthography, and thus is relatively easy for elementary school students to decode in comparison to English and other languages with "deep" orthographies (Geva & Seigel, 2000). As an example of children's identifying Hebrew characters, nine of the children in this study identified the Hebrew writing depicted in the painting of the Israeli restaurant, and used this knowledge as a way of determining that the restaurant was in Israel. Several others clearly distinguished between the Hebrew and English writing that appeared on the screen as they listened to Hatikvah or *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*. Others still commented on how the songs themselves were playing only in Hebrew, but the script on the screen was both in Hebrew and in English. When presented only with Hebrew and English characters, most of the children in this study could correctly distinguish between the two languages.

However, when a third language came into play—either because the children brought it up, or because it was triggered by the elicitation exercises—the children began to conflate languages. The clearest example of this phenomenon occurred as children discussed the languages displayed on the Israeli street sign. The children were never explicitly asked to reflect upon the languages printed in the graphic, but 17 of the 33 children in the study did so as part of their response to the image. Of those 17, 13 specifically commented on the middle line of the graphic—the line in Arabic—and all 13 of them incorrectly identified its language. Ten of those children identified the top two lines of the sign as Hebrew, and the bottom line as English or "not Hebrew." Avigail even called the top two lines "familiar letters," which she later defined as Hebrew letters. Two other children, both of whom identified as Persian, mistook the Arabic for the similar yet not identical Farsi alphabet. As Gali, who learned to read Farsi at home and Hebrew at school, explained, the sign contained "Hebrew letters and Farsi letters and English letters." One boy, with a Chinese-speaking grandparent, identified it as "a sign that says Israeli words, Chinese words, and American words." When the children looked at the Israeli street sign, they presumed it to have only languages with which they were already familiar. None of the children assumed the sign contained Japanese, French, or Arabic. They all believed it to be some other language with which their own family had a connection.

In Israel, they seemed to say, signs are not in foreign languages; they are in our languages.

Yet the children did know of the existence of other languages. One girl believed that Israel's neighboring countries spoke Chinese. Another thought that Israel's enemies spoke Japanese, and another presumed that people in Canada spoke Spanish. They often conflated foreign languages with other foreign languages, but they presumed that languages associated with Israel were languages spoken by "our family"—whether Hebrew, Farsi, English, or Chinese.

Israel, and the languages the children presumed were spoken there, were for these children intimately tied to a concept of self and family. Even as the children mislabeled print languages, or misattributed spoken languages to people who did not actually speak them, they continued to identify Israel as a place tied to the languages that they and their families spoke. As one student explained, "Israel is made of Hebrew [and] I'm made of Hebrew and Israel." Or, in the words of another student, "Israel is meant for me. And Israel is meant for Hebrew, and I'm meant for Hebrew."

Summary

As the kindergarteners spoke about Israel, they conflated time, space, and languages, often mixing up particular details. Yet in each of these instances, their reflections revealed an underlying set of beliefs and stories about Israel. These children framed Israel as a place inextricably linked with the Jewish past and with contemporary Jewish holidays. Their words suggest that they saw Israel as a homeland but not a home. And their stories reveal that they viewed Israel as a distant place, but not a foreign one. These children, as young as 5 and 6, had already begun to recount some of the meta-narratives that American Jews tell themselves about themselves. Even when the facts were wrong, and children confused particular details, their overall framing of Israel reflected larger stories about American Jewish ties to a distant land central to Jewish meaning.

CONCLUSION

Jewish educators have long been concerned with how to teach about Israel in nuanced ways (cf. Zakai, 2014), and as contemporary discourse about Israel education has put renewed focus on complexity (Sinclair, 2014a, 2014b), scholars have begun to raise questions about the age or stage of learning at which American Jewish students are capable of engaging with a complex, nonmythical Israel (e.g., Grant, 2011; Sinclair, 2013). This study of kindergarteners demonstrates that American Jewish children as young as 5 and 6 years old are already engaging in a particular kind of complex

thinking: voicing, in their own words, multiple and at times competing narratives about Israel.

The kindergarteners of the Children's Learning About Israel Project view Israel as a multifaceted place with multiple roles and meanings in Jewish life. Israel is, in the minds of these children, a place at once safe and dangerous, both special and ordinary. It is a Jewish place intimately tied to Jewish holidays and Jewish history, and yet a place that is not only for Jews. Israel is a homeland but not a home, a place distant and yet not foreign. For these children, Israel is a place of "both and," not "either or." They seamlessly shift between two sides of a dichotomy, revealing an ability to see multiple facets of Israel.

Theirs is a relationship to Israel marked by multiple meanings and multiple possibilities, but not marred by tension or struggle. Unlike kindergarteners who transition from one culture to another (e.g., Ebbeck, Yim, & Lee, 2010) or Jewish teenagers in the United States who learn about Israel (Pomson, 2012; Zakai, 2011), these kindergarteners appear to hold contradictory beliefs in their head without experiencing cognitive or emotional discomfort. Their relationships with Israel are neither fraught nor unstable, even as they indicate awareness that Israel is multiple things to multiple people. It is possible that, over time, these children may begin to express discomfort with competing claims, or may start to erase or edit out contradictions in the ways that they talk about Israel. But, at least for now, these children are adept at—and entirely comfortable with—expressing multiple, at times conflicting, ideas and beliefs about Israel.

Much of the contemporary literature on Israel education, based on studies of teenagers and young adults, suggests the importance of *reframing* how American Jews view Israel. In the words of Alex Sinclair (2013), what is needed is a:

> move from a one-dimensional understanding of Israel towards a multidimensional one, so that Israel is no longer seen as a perfect and miraculous entity that must be supported and loved blindly, but as a complex, real place, alternatively beautiful and frustrating, groundbreaking and backward. (p. 84)

Yet the kindergarteners in this study *already* view Israel in much this way. Five- and 6-year-olds can, without emotional discomfort, discuss a multifaceted Israel that is, in the words of one child, a place of both "darkness and lightness." Given this capacity, any robust program of Israel education can and must involve teaching about a multifaceted Israel not only to teenagers and adults, but also to young children.

Many Jewish educational institutions operate under the assumption that the goals of Israel education are first to inculcate students into a love of Israel and then, only after their commitment has been assured, to introduce them to its more messy realities and invite them to grapple with some of the fundamental tensions embodied by the state. But young children do not

need to be inoculated against the existence of an ever-evolving, imperfect Israel. They are perfectly capable of understanding that Israel can *both* offer safe haven to Jews *and* be a place fraught with danger. Jerusalem can be *both* a holy place for Jews *and* a special city for other peoples and religions as well. Israel can be *both* a place cherished by the Jewish people *and* an ordinary place where children live and learn and play.

If Jewish educators are to develop Israel education programs that are attuned to the needs and capacities of young children, they must understand that the tensions embodied by the contemporary Jewish State are not unpalatable to children, but rather form the very palette of color that makes Israel a vibrant place that can attract children's interest. Curricula geared at young children need not avoid teaching about Israel as a home to many peoples and religion even as it teaches about the special role that it has played in the past and present of the Jewish people. Teachers of young children need not steer clear of talking about the challenges—mundane and extraordinary—facing Israel's residents even as they teach about Israel's special landscapes and customs. Rather, educators and educational institutions must be willing to engage young children in learning that frames Israel as a multifaceted, vibrant, and ever-evolving project (of both the Jewish people and the citizens of the state).

Additional research is needed to in order to continue building a knowledge base of how American Jewish children conceive of Israel. Knowing more about what American Jewish children understand, think, and feel about Israel—and what they misunderstand, gloss over, or ignore—is essential for developing the field of Israel education. So, too, is understanding how particular pedagogies influence or interact with the ways that children construct their beliefs about and relationships to Israel. Future studies must focus both on children's developing thoughts and feelings about Israel and on the ways that the primary teachers in their lives—parents, professional educators, rabbis, and others—cultivate (or inadvertently hinder) their understanding.

In addition, the field needs to continue to develop a clearer articulation of what constitutes pedagogical content knowledge for Israel educators. Recent calls for more robust pedagogical content knowledge have highlighted the importance of teacher subject matter knowledge and comfort with multiple facets of Israel (e.g., Backenroth & Sinclair, 2014; Sinclair, Solmsen, & Goldwater, 2013). Yet in order to fully develop pedagogical content knowledge in Israel education, teachers must also develop knowledge of their students' understandings and misunderstandings about their subject matter. For, as Lee Shulman (1986) explains, "pedagogical content knowledge also includes an understanding of . . . the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them" (p. 9). For Israel education, this means building a more textured understanding of children's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about Israel.

It remains to be seen how the boys and girls of the Children's Learning About Israel Project will change over time, and what their development will mean for their understandings of and relationships to Israel. But, at this

snapshot in time, the 5- and 6-year-olds are already emerging as American Jews willing and capable of thinking about, wondering about, and relating to multiple facets of Israel. And, at least for the time being, they are curious, engaged, and eager learners. In the words of one kindergartener, Hannah, "I'm ready to learn more about Israel!"

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APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

1. Background and rapport building:

Hi _____. My name is Sivan, and I'm excited to talk to you today. Thank you so much for hanging out with me for a little bit.

What's the rest of your class doing now? Do you like _____? What's your favorite part of school? (Find some piece of connection and discuss.)
I'll take you back to your classroom in a little bit, but first I want to talk to you a little bit about kindergarten, and a little bit about Israel. Are you willing to talk to me today about kindergarten and about Israel?

Great! I'm going to ask you a few questions, and I'm also going to show you some pictures and let you listen to some music and ask you questions about those. We're also going to use these cool voice recorders to make a recording of what you tell me. This is because I think what you have to say is very, very important, and I want to be able to remember it. [Show how voice recorders work, let child play with it, and let child turn it on and "introduce" him/herself into the recording.]

I want you to know that when I ask you questions, any answer you can think of is fine. Do you have any questions for me, or are you ready to start?

2. The first question is: What is Israel?

    Probe to get a richer answer of the conception of what Israel is/is not.

3. Have you ever been to Israel?

    a. If so

        i. When did you go to Israel?
        ii. Why did you go to Israel?

    b. If not

        i. Do you want to ever go to Israel?
        ii. Why/why not?

4. Do you know where Israel is?

    Probe: Where do you think it is?

5. When I say "Israel," what does it make you think about?
6. When you think about Israel, what does it make you feel?
7. Do you ever talk/learn about Israel at school?
    a. If so
        i. Can you give me an example of one thing you learned about Israel in school?
        ii. Why do you think you talk about Israel in school?
    b. If not
        i. Do you ever learn about Israel in your classroom or in your Hebrew class?
        ii. Do you ever learn or talk about Israel at school but not in your classroom, like maybe in an assembly or when your class goes to the Temple/synagogue?
8. Do you ever sing songs about Israel at school?
    a. If so
        i. Can you give me an example of one Israeli song you learned about in school?
        ii. Why do you think you sing songs about Israel in school?
9. Do you ever talk about Israel with your family?
    a. If not, do you ever talk about Israel at home?
    b. If so
        i. Can you give me an example of one time you talked about Israel with your family/at home?
        ii. Why do you think you talk about Israel with your family/at home?
10. Do you ever sing songs about Israel with your family/at home?
    a. If so
        i. Can you give me an example of one Israeli song you sing with your family/at home?
        ii. Why do you think you sing songs about Israel with your family/at home?