TAKING CHILDREN SERIOUSLY ON ISRAEL

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Dr. Sivan Zakai. Dr. Zakai is the Sarah S. Lee Associate Professor of Jewish Education at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, Jack H's Gerbo Campus in Los Angeles. The director of the Children's Learning about Israel Project and Co-director of project Research and Leadership in Israel Education. She serves as a senior editor of the Journal of Jewish Education, and her books include, My Second-Favorite Country. How American Jewish Children Think about Israel. The topic of today's conversation and winner of the 2022 National Jewish Book Award in Education and Jewish Identity and the forthcoming teaching Israel studies of Pedagogy from the Field. Sivan, thank you for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

JH: Thanks so much for having me here today.

JH: Begin, if you would, by introducing us briefly to, My Second-Favorite Country.

JH: At the heart of this book is a very simple question. How do Jewish children in the United States think, learn and feel about Israel? And the book is based on a multiple year longitudinal study where I tracked a group of children from the time they were five or six years old in kindergarten all the way through the end of middle school. This book really focuses on their elementary school years and it considers a whole bunch of questions about children's thinking. How do children understand questions of home and homeland? How do children think about Israeli history? How do children think about the Israeli, Arab, Palestinian conflict and how do they think about questions of civics and politics in an increasingly polarized world?

JH: Before we dive into the substance of my second favorite country, tell us why you felt that this research was needed back when you undertook it.

Sivan Zakai: I started this project in 2010 eons ago when thinking about what's happening in Israel, but I was working with a group of day school teachers from a bunch of different kinds of

institutions who worked with children of different ages, and I was doing professional development work with them and I thought at the time that I had some expertise in Israel education until a very troubling conversation emerged from three teachers. One in elementary school, one middle school teacher and one high school teacher. And the elementary school teacher turned to the other teachers in their group and said, "Hey, we don't talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in elementary school. That's definitely not age appropriate for children, so I don't need to participate in this conversation." And the middle school teacher said, "Yeah, I really don't teach about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in middle school. That's definitely not appropriate for middle schools."

SZ: And the high school teacher turned to his colleagues and said, "Wait a second. I assume that by the time they get to me, they'll have already learned about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." We have a dilemma here, we have a problem. And they came to me as a supposed expert and they said, "What is the developmentally appropriate moment to introduce Jewish children to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" And I thought, I don't know the answer to that question. And nobody knows the answer to that question because actually there is no research in Jewish education and there's no research in social studies education that might help us answer that question, but I know how to answer that question. And that would involve asking children themselves to weigh in on how they think, how they feel and how they grow over time. And that really was the seed of the idea for this longitudinal study that sits at the heart of the book.

JH: Your book really offers many lessons, but at the heart of your book is a really keen and important argument, namely that we have to take children's thinking seriously. What do you mean by that? And why is a longitudinal study central to that argument?

SZ: Schools are places where children spend a lot of time, and yet there are many schools where children's ideas are not actually central to the work of schooling. Luckily, there are many schools, including many Jewish schools where children's ideas really are taken seriously. And by that children's questions are seen as legitimate children get a chance to weigh in on what they wanna learn and how they wanna learn. And also that we not infantilize children. I know it seems a little bit strange to say that because we usually in vernacular use the word elementary to talk about things that are not sophisticated. But actually, if you talk to elementary age children, their thoughts, their ideas, their beliefs are actually quite sophisticated. But why do this as a longitudinal study? There are certainly other kinds of educational research that will go into schools and ask children questions, and we'll ask kindergartners questions and high schoolers questions and get a sense of how they're different from one another.

SZ: But only longitudinal research is well suited to think about how people grow, develop and change over the course of their lifetime. And there's an idea that's really common in talking about Israel and Israel education and Jewish institutions, which is the idea that Israel education ought to, in this approach, help a student develop a connection to Israel. And I'm really skeptical of that language in part because after watching children grow over so many years, it's clear to me that no child and probably no human has a singular relationship to Israel. That actually a

child's relationships to Israel evolve, grow are different in different moments, in different contexts. And longitudinal research helps us see all of that.

JH: Appreciating the complexity which you just described and the capacity for change. You point out in the book that that change is central to the reality in which you are embarking on this research that we live in a world amongst children and adults are like, where our feelings about Israel are shifting, they change. There's a lot going on in that complexity. Is there something about children's ideas that cuts through all that complexity or in opposite fashion, do children's ideas merely reflect it? I ask this question because sometimes we romanticize children's wisdom out of the mouths of babes and all that. And I wonder how you feel about children's perspective on complexity.

SZ: The first thing I want to say is, the goal of this work is not to romanticize children, not to set them at a higher level than adults but to set them on equal footing with adults in terms of taking their ideas seriously. And there is a very rich tradition in Jewish studies scholarship of asking Jews, what does it mean to you to be Jewish? What is your own relationship with Israel? And kind of understanding adult Jewish life in response to human beings answers to those questions. And there hasn't been anything about children. And I would like to have children included in the conversation. And there's something about children that is also different from adults. So many times you'll hear kind of in a sloppy discourse, "Oh, that child doesn't really believe that thing. It's just their parents talking. They're just parenting what their parents say."

SZ: And one of the really amazing things that I was able to learn from interviewing the same kids year after year is that, up until about fourth grade, the developmental is more powerful than the home political environment. And children who grow up in really different kinds of political spaces sound almost identical to one another as they talk about things like the Netanya government. And that is because there's certain ideas and beliefs that children are ready to think about at different ages and only children above fourth grade start to sound more like their parents than like one another. That's just one example of a kind of developmental shift that we haven't known to think about kids younger than fourth grade, differently than kids, older than fourth grade, as they learn about, think about and develop ideas and beliefs about Israeli politics because we had never thought to ask them or include them in research before.

JH: Along the lines of this complexity and developmental evolution, you point out how difficult it can sometimes be to suss out linear or factual stories from children's perspectives and memories. I wonder if you would share some insight into that and also weigh in perhaps on whether or not there's a moral in that reality that maybe our own adult perspectives also don't correlate to fact and history as closely as perhaps we think.

SZ: Well, that is for sure true, Josh. And that is the difference between retrospective reporting and longitudinal research. In retrospective reporting. We might ask a person perhaps when they're in high school or perhaps when they're an adult, what did you think about when you were growing up? How did you think about your Jewish life? How did you think about Israel? And there's a ton of research literature and education to show that what people think their own childhoods were like is more a reflection of what they now believe than what their actual own

childhoods were like. And that if we ask children themselves in the moment, they'll give us really different answers. And some of those answers correspond with what we adults now think of as factual true information. Some of those are fantastical, imaginary stories. So I'll give you an example of that. I was working with a child, we'll call him David.

SZ: He was in first grade and he told me all about his best friend Uri who lived in Israel. And I said, "Hey, David, how do you have this best friend from Israel as far as I know, you've never been to Israel?" And he said, "Oh, well, I just haven't met him yet." It actually tells us quite a lot about how David was thinking about Israel. He understood that it was a real place. It was a place he hoped to visit and it was a place that he thought he might someday have friends. Sometimes children also tell stories to rewrite what they know to be false, to make it more palatable. And to help you get a sense of what that sounds like, I wanna introduce you to a child who we will call Carly. In 2014, there was a war between Israel and Gaza called Operation Protective Edge or Tzuk Eitan in Hebrew.

SZ: And it was a really dark time for Israelis and for the Jewish people around the world and for people who care about their loved ones in both Israel and in Gaza. And the impetus for this war was the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers. And as Carly was telling me the story, she clearly knew about this series of events, which included the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers. And I know that she knew about their deaths. Because she started telling me about them by saying, "I'm very sad and I'm very happy. I'm very sad because I know these boys died, and I'm very happy because in my community, there are now new babies being born, being named after these boys." But then when I asked her to tell me the story of what happened, she told me a story that started out real.

SZ: These boys were kidnapped and then took a fantastical turn because at the end she said, "And in the end, they escaped and they ran home and they hugged their mothers." And she knew that that was not true. She had told me earlier that that was not true. And yet she was using a move that many children use when they have trauma related war stories. It typically happens actually in children who themselves have experienced war, but Carly lived in the United States, was far away from this war, and yet she was still doing this move that children sometimes do, which is to tell the story that they want to have happened rather than the story that they know to have happened. And so children do all these things. They tell true stories, they tell imaginary stories and they rewrite true stories to be better or more palatable. And all of that is a normal part of childhood development.

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JH: You have a chapter titled, Why Didn't You Tell Me? Civics, Politics, and Children's Righteous Anger. Share with us if you would, some examples of things that got the Children's good, and how explicitly or not did they blame their education for failing to prepare them for those things?

SZ: So, I'll tell you three stories. One is of a child who in second grade was trying to tell me something about the Israel Gaza border and about Palestinian national identity, but he had never been taught the word Palestinian before. And so he started literally in an interview, tugging on his hair in frustration, saying, why won't anyone ever tell me what they're called?

SZ: A second story, is from a girl named Gia who visited the Kotel with her parents when she was in the middle of elementary school. She was so excited about this trip. She had never been to Israel before. She was so excited, especially to go to the Western wall. And then she got there and had a panic attack because first of all, it was the first time she realized that there is a gender divider in the wall. She never knew that before she went. And she has two fathers and only brothers. And she started to realize very quickly standing in the plaza at the entrance to the Western wall, if I wanna touch these stones that I've heard about my entire life, am I gonna have to do it all by myself? My dads and my brothers are gonna go to one side of that wall.

SZ: Am I gonna have to go to the other side by myself? And a third story is from a child named Samantha, who kept saying, "I really care about what's happening in Israel, but if I don't know Hebrew, how can I ever understand what's happening in Israel?" And one of the things that unifies all of these children is that they were really upset about their own Jewish education, even in the moment, right? They were saying, "I care about learning certain things. I think it is the responsibility of my parents and my teachers to teach me these things. And yet, I think, my own education is inadequate and I'm really upset."

JH: That's quite an admonition to all of us.

SZ: Yes, it's very, very troubling. And one of the most interesting thing about this phenomenon is that I heard from child after child, starting in about third grade language that nearly identically mirrors the young adult progressive movement called, IfNotNow. And IfNotNow, which is entirely made up of teenage and young adult, politically progressive Jews who are really upset about their own Jewish education, especially as it relates to teaching about occupation.

SZ: And they have a campaign called, You Never Told Me. And the language of these third graders who have never heard of, IfNotNow, who have never heard of the, You Never Told Me Campaign, were using almost identical language to say, "Why didn't you tell me parents? Why didn't you tell me, teachers, this essential bit of information?" But with the children, I heard it from kids whose parents were politically progressive and from kids whose parents were politically conservative. And I heard it about a whole broad range of issues, not just about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not just about occupation but about a range of issues that children thought, this seems like an essential piece of Jewish education, and I'm missing it, and I know I'm missing it, and I'm really upset about that.

JH: It's an object lesson, if ever there was one on how it is that elementary schoolers are not in fact thinking elementary, but sophisticatedly as you pointed out earlier in our conversation. And in terms of complexity and nuance, the stakes have risen exponentially. Reflect if you would on

how the need for your research has shifted between the time when you actually began it, executed it and published it. And today, in the wake of October 7th.

SZ: Badly. This research is more important than ever to help educators and parents understand just how big and profound the questions of young Jewish children are as they look to Israel from afar. One of the many things that I found in this book was, and I was surprised by this year, after year after year as I interviewed children, was just how young they were when they learned profound and profoundly violent details about the conflict. Children in second and third grade knew a lot of graphic information and they knew this information in large part because once they learned to read, which is something that happens for many children in those second, third grade years, if they asked their parents, tell me about this thing that I saw on the news, heard about on the playground, many children reported this. Their parents said, "You don't have to worry about that.

SZ: You're safe here. You're fine. You're far away from that conflict." The children did not, in fact feel fine or safe. They felt infantilized. And they went and they opened their computer sometimes without the knowledge of their parents. And they typed random things in Google that they had overheard snippets of. One child told me that he was in a restaurant with his family. There was a newscast in the background and he turned to his parents. He had some questions about it. They said, "Don't worry." He said, "Oh, if my parents are telling me not to worry, that means of course I should worry." And he waited until they went to bed and he opened his computer and he got on Google, and he typed in what he thought he saw on that television screen, war in Israel, bombs, explosions. And then he watched YouTube videos of really graphic, really violent, not appropriate for children things.

SZ: Children have been doing this for a long, long time. And now the violence and the graphic nature of this particular moment in the conflict is everywhere. It's in the kidnapping signs on your neighborhood street corner, and it's on every kind of media and social media. And children see, and children know, and they seem to know it in this moment at an even younger age. I was giving a talk several weeks ago for a group of Jewish educators who had gathered around the country to learn about the questions that children have about October 7th and its aftermath. And I was sharing some questions, and I said, in that context, "I think, by the time you have a second or third grader, you better be really tuned into the fact that your kid can access the entire internet." And one of the educators in the room raised her hand and said, "I have a three-year-old who just said, Hey, Alexa, tell me about the war in Israel."

SZ: So now, even younger children, even those who can't even read yet, are hearing conversations among adults and turning to all sorts of devices at their disposal and finding out information that is not at all kid appropriate, in part because it's not at all appropriate for any human being. This level of violence. And parents and educators are left to hold children and support children who have really profound questions about very, very difficult things. And this research, it can't help us in every moment, but it offers us at least some guide about the kinds of questions that kids have and the kinds of ideas and beliefs they have and the kinds of concepts that they are and are not yet ready to think about.

JH: Well, Dr. Sivan Zakai, thank you for sharing those stories with us and interpreting them for our benefit and really the delight of your conversation. Thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

SZ: Thanks so much for having me.

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