

# This Yom Ha'Atzmaut, I'm Talking to My First-Grader About Palestinians

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By Shira Klein



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ORANGE, California — “Come on, they’re just Arabs,” laughed my friend Yogev. We were 19 years old, both soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces, enjoying a weekend leave on the colorful streets of Tel Aviv. Yogev had been showing me a couple of IDs he had taken from Palestinians, “for fun,” he said. I was serving in the then-occupied Gaza Strip, he in Samaria, and we both knew that Israeli soldiers regularly went into civilians’ homes as a matter of policy.

At my feeble protests (“Why’d you go and take their stuff though? That’s mean”), he rolled his eyes. “Everybody does it, that’s how it is. And don’t forget they blow up our buses.” I fell silent, because that year, 2001, had indeed seen 40 Palestinian suicide bombings. We went to get coffee instead.

Twenty years later, now a tenured historian in California, I teach the reality of the occupation to my students, as well as the conflict’s past. Above all we study the 1948 war, the watershed moment at which the state of Israel was born and 720,000 Palestinians were displaced. Most students are astonished to learn that the U.N. Partition Plan, over which Arab states waged the war, [allotted](#) 38 percent of the land area to Palestinians, even though they made up almost 70 percent of the population. Students also express surprise at the fact that Jewish forces carried out calculated expulsions of Palestinians. My teaching leans on peer-reviewed scholarship, as this war is one of the [most researched conflicts](#) in history.

What I struggle with now, however, is talking about Israel with my first-grader. At six years old, my child already knows a lot about Israel, but nothing about Palestinians. Her Jewish day school, like [most Jewish educational programs](#) in the U.S., offers a sanitized image of Israel: a country of hi-tech and science, spirituality and music, beaches and good food, and military prowess. This approach to Israel echoes in Sunday schools, youth groups, and summer camps. Such [ahavat Israel](#), love of Israel, leaves little room for nuance. Our temple’s commemoration of Israel’s independence, in typical fashion, features a krav maga workshop, folk dancing, hummus tasting, and

visiting a shuk, but not a word about the conflict. The same goes for PJ Library books, such as “Engineer Arielle and the Israel Independence Day Surprise,” which takes readers on a shiny light-rail train through Jerusalem, the occasional Arab character smiling in the background. Granted, elementary school children can’t analyze statistics, maps, or concepts like nationalism, and the violence used by both sides is hardly something they should hear about. But teachers are experts at communicating complex topics to children, as evidenced by my first-grader’s savviness on Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

To be sure, any mention of Palestinian plight, especially on Independence Day, is political, something Jewish schools and congregations generally try to avoid. A Pew Research Center survey found that Israel is a wedge issue rabbis [tiptoe around](#) for fear of alienating congregants and donors. On the face of it, avoidance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict steers clear of politics, but in reality it is just as political. Sweeping the conflict under the rug erases Palestinians, and their right to self-determination, from the record.

Therefore it falls to us parents to provide our children with a more honest discussion of Israel. If we don’t tell our young children about the price of independence, nobody else will. We can use age-appropriate books, an effective medium for telling complex stories in child-appropriate ways. Although there are scarcely more than a [dozen juvenile books](#) about Palestinians, and most are held by only a handful of libraries across the U.S., Amazon offers helpful titles like *Baba, What Does My Name Mean?* and *Sitti’s Secrets*. These open conversations for children and adults to explore the often buried subject and allow for the creation of empathy and understanding.

This year, try talking to your children about what else Yom Ha’Atzmaut means beyond Israel’s birthday. It could be as simple as “This is a happy day for many Jews, but a sad one for Palestinians, who still don’t have a country of their own.” Your kid may respond with difficult questions – mine certainly does – and it’s all right if you don’t have all the answers. Talking with our young ones about Israel’s injustices, past and present, can feel uncomfortable, anathema to our very identity as Jews. But if we want our children to be honest, empathetic individuals who think critically, let’s start to talk honestly about Israel.

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