Ask an American Jewish adult what’s been happening in Israel recently, and you’re likely to hear a litany of woes. The arrest of Israeli Conservative Rabbi Dov Halyyun for performing wedding ceremonies outside of the Orthodox-controlled Israeli rabbinate and the detainment of prominent leftist American Jews at Ben Gurion Airport have many liberal American Jews concerned. A bill passed in the Knesset that expands surrogacy eligibility while excluding gay couples, and the new controversial nation-state law that proclaims “developing Jewish settlement as a national interest” trouble those who are committed to supporting Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Fires raging along the Gaza border due to incendiary devices launched by kite and balloon, followed by renewed rocket attacks on Israeli border cities, portend both human suffering and ecological disaster.

Ask an American Jewish child about what’s been happening in Israel recently, and you’re likely to hear a very different story. For while the children’s version of the story would probably include reflections on the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza, it would likely omit any discussion of the other conflict: ongoing tensions among Israeli Jews or between Israeli and American Jewish communities. That other conflict often eludes children, yet it ought to be a rich and meaningful source for Jewish education.

From a very early age, children are capable of understanding conflict, contention, and contested issues. I know this because for the past six years, I have been following a group of American Jewish children to learn from them what they know and how they feel about Israel. From the time they were in kindergarten until today, when they are rising sixth graders, the children have shared their evolving thoughts and feelings about Israel as part of the Children’s Learning About Israel Project. From these children, I have learned that they know a lot about the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict, yet little about the conflicts that take place within the borders of the Israeli and Jewish worlds.

All of the children I have been following knew about the conflict between Israel and its neighbors even as 5-year-olds. In early elementary school, they framed this conflict as an ongoing war between “Israel and the other team,” and they placed themselves squarely on Israel’s team. By second grade, many of the children were able to offer detailed explanations of specific moments of heightened tension, and all were able to reflect on multiple root causes for the ongoing conflict. By fourth grade, the children began to distinguish between different neighbors with whom Israel fights, including Hamas and Iran, reflecting on the particular ways that the conflict plays out with each. By the end of elementary school, most children have begun to experiment with voicing aloud Arab, and especially Palestinian, views of the conflict, attempting to understand it from multiple perspectives even as they continue to side with Israel.
With increasing sophistication each year, the children have reflected on many of the key issues in the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict.

By contrast, the children have little practice thinking about the key wedge issues in Israeli society, or the ongoing tensions between American and Israeli Jewish communities. Perhaps because Israel is often framed for children as the place that unites Jews around the world, the children are surprised—and often feel hurt by or angry at the adults in their lives—when they first encounter the internal conflicts of the Jewish world. For most children, this realization begins in third or fourth grade, and the children express frustration that, in the words of one girl, "no one told me before." Echoing the concerns of many of their older peers, who have organized a "You Never Told Me" campaign to protest what they perceive to be an organized attempt to withhold information about the occupation from young American Jews, these children are saying "you never told me" about the other conflicts with which Israel grapples.

Questions about the character of the Israeli state, its evolving relationship with Jewish communities outside of its borders, and its ongoing struggle to enact its dual commitments to Jewish and democratic principles are among the most pressing issues of the contemporary Jewish world. Children ought to be inducted into these conversations, and the questions that they raise about the kind of Jewish societies we are and ought to be constructing. These questions are, to be sure, complex and contested. Yet children can handle, with increasing sophistication over time, thinking about unresolved and contentious matters.

Today's children are current members and future leaders of the global Jewish community. As such, they must learn to take responsibility for the issues that matter most to the collective Jewish people. As the adults who are poised to have a positive impact on their lives— their educators, rabbis, parents, and grandparents—the responsibility to frame these conversations is ours.

---

RIKMA at the Taube Family Campus, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem

Michal Muszkat-Barkan, Ph.D., Director, Department of Education and Professional Development, Taube Family Campus, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem

Rikama (tapestry) is a specialized program focusing on educational leadership with an emphasis on pluralism and community that is offered in partnership with the Melton Center at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The Hebrew word rikma connotes an embroidered fabric that brings together threads of different shades and texture to form a new whole. The word also includes an abbreviation of the central pillars of the program—Rav-kolist (pluralism), Kehilah (community), and Makhnigat (leadership).

We hope that this program will empower young leaders to take responsibility for the renaissance of Jewish culture, the anchoring of education in communities, and the strengthening of ties between different sectors of Israeli society and within the Jewish people. At the heart of this program is the building of bridges between education and society, between Israel and the wider Jewish world, and between individual Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood.

The two-year program, requiring one day of study on campus each week, increases students' capacities in four areas:

- Teaching and learning aspects of Jewish and Israeli culture in innovative and diverse ways;
- Enhancing the continuity of formal and informal Jewish education, forging links between educational institutions and the wider community;
- Discovering the diversity to be found within Israeli society, in Jewish and non-Jewish settings, while enriching education towards tolerance and coexistence; and
- Deepening acquaintance with and ties to the Jewish people across its geographical and denomination boundaries, while increasing a sense of identity and belonging.

RIKMA is supported by the Department of Jewish and Israeli Culture in the Israeli Ministry of Education and Jewish Agency for Israel. Students receive an M.A. in Education from the Hebrew University upon successful completion of the program. To learn more, please contact Dr. Muszkat-Barkan at mmbarkan@huc.edu.