If you ask a Reform Jewish leader about the Kotel, you’re likely to hear about the politics of one of the most contested Jewish sites in the world. If you ask a Reform Jewish child about the Kotel, you’re likely to hear about a place where wishes and dreams come true. For while the leadership of the Reform Movement is spending a great deal of time and political capital agitating for change at the Kotel, the message is not (yet) getting through to Reform Jewish youth.

As a scholar of Jewish education, I have been tracking a group of American Jewish children – many of whom attend Reform synagogues and/or schools – throughout their childhood to understand what they know, think, and feel about Israel. Though the children know quite a lot about the Kotel’s religious and historical significance, they understand very little about its political significance.

If the Reform Jewish community hopes to create meaningful and lasting change at the Kotel – not just this year, but for decades to come – then Reform Jewish children need to learn that, yes, the Kotel is a sacred religious space, but it is also a contested political one. In addition to the political work that Reform Jews are doing as part of the #LetMyKotelGo campaign, there must be educational work to #LetMyChildrenKnow about the Kotel as a symbol not only of Jewish continuity, but also of the struggles that Reform Jews have long faced to gain equal access and recognition in the Jewish State.

**What Children Know**

By age 6, many children understand that the Kotel is a place of religious and historical significance to the Jewish people. As Eli, one child I interviewed, explained, it is “a really holy place.” Children know the Kotel is, in the words of Tzvi, a “remaining wall of the Second Temple,” and they are proud that such an ancient place can still be accessed. As Gali explains, “It makes me feel happy that at least one part of the Temple is there for me to see, and when I grow up, for my children to see.”

That the children understand and care about the Kotel’s religious and historical significance is a good sign. It indicates that in Jewish educational settings – their homes, schools, and synagogues – they are learning to take pride in the narratives of the Jewish people. Yet these children are missing an important part of the Kotel’s story that they should be learning as Reform Jews,

**What Children Should Know**

Missing from most children’s understanding of the Kotel is any sense that it has become a place where Jews battle – sometimes physically – over holy space, and where the full participation of women and liberal Jews is highly contested. All those who educate Reform youth – parents, grandparents, rabbis, and teachers – should be teaching about this political Kotel, not just the religious and historical Kotel.

Some adults may be skeptical of this idea, believing that children need to be protected, and that when they’re older, they can learn about the restriction of egalitarian prayer and the exclusion of Reform rabbis from the Israeli rabbinate. Other adults may believe children are just too young to
understand the complexity of a space that both welcomes Reform Jews as part of the Jewish people and restricts many liberal Jewish practices.

Both assumptions misunderstand how children learn and think about Israel.

By the time children are 8 or 9, they begin to notice the darker realities of the Kotel and the inequities built into the space. Even if they have seen it only in photographs, eight- and nine-year-old girls and boys notice how, in Gali’s words, “the women’s side is smaller than the men’s side, and I don’t think that’s fair.” Especially at the age when fairness matters tremendously to children, they need a space to process the fact that, while the Kotel can be beautiful and powerful, for many liberal Jews it can also feel unfair and unequal.

It is a misconception that children can’t grasp that the Kotel, as it stands today, has both profound and profoundly troubling attributes. By age 6, children are able to hold competing conceptions of Israel in their heads. They know, for instance, that Israel is both a safe haven for Jews and a dangerous place, both a Jewish state and a state for all its citizens, not all of whom are Jewish. Surely by age 8 and 9, when they begin to wonder why the Kotel’s space is constructed the way it is, they are capable of understanding that for much of the Reform Jewish community, the Kotel is both a beautiful religious space and a fraught political one.

Those who agitate for change at the Kotel should also change the ways children learn about it. In classrooms, synagogues, and homes, children should be included in conversations about the politics of the Kotel. Teaching this facet of the Kotel will not harm children or their relationships with Israel; it will only make them – and the Reform Movement – stronger.

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