

This guide is for you as much as it is for your child. If you are not familiar with Palestinian history, that is completely normal. This history has been largely absent from mainstream news and school curricula in the US and Canada. The notes below are a brief, plain-language introduction so you can feel grounded before the conversation starts. You do not need to be an expert. You just need to have read this page.

The short version of what you need to know: For centuries, a people called Palestinians lived on a piece of land in the Middle East known as Palestine. They had towns, farms, olive groves, family traditions, and a rich culture. In 1947 and 1948, as the new state of Israel was being established, more than 750,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes in a military campaign.¹ Over 400 of their villages were destroyed.¹ The United Nations passed a resolution saying the refugees had the right to return home.³ More than 75 years later, most never have. Their descendants, now in their fourth and fifth generations, still live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank. Palestinians call what happened to them the **Nakba**, the Arabic word for "catastrophe."

This is an ongoing situation, not just a historical one. Palestinian families are still being displaced today, through the demolition of homes and the expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.⁶ In 2022, Amnesty International, one of the world's most respected human rights organizations, published a major report concluding that Israel maintains a system of apartheid, meaning a system where people are given different rights based on their identity.⁴ Roughly 5.9 million Palestinians are registered as refugees with UNRWA, the UN agency that runs their schools and health clinics.² Understanding this context will help you guide your child's questions after the film with confidence.

A note on feelings: Some of this history is painful and some of it is contested in public debate. You do not need to have a final answer ready. It is fine to say "I'm still learning about this too." That is, in fact, one of the most honest and useful things you can model for a child.

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Key words to know before you watch

Nakba

Arabic for "catastrophe." The name Palestinians use for the 1948 expulsion from their homes. Palestinians mark May 15 each year as Nakba Day.

Refugee

Someone forced to leave their home who has not been allowed to return. Palestinian refugee status passes to children and grandchildren under UN rules.

Right of return

The right, recognized in international law, for refugees to go back to their original homes. UN Resolution 194 (1948) granted this right to Palestinian refugees.³ It has never been honored.

Apartheid

When a government treats different groups of people with different rules based on their identity. Amnesty International used this word in a landmark 2022 report about Palestinians.⁴

Settlement

Israeli neighborhoods built on Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank. International law considers these illegal. About 750,000 Israeli settlers currently live in them.⁶

UNRWA

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Runs schools, clinics, and aid programs for Palestinian refugees in five areas. Currently serves about 5.9 million people.²

As you watch the film, look for...

- 1 The moment Gary tells Judy: *"I have to prove it. Please, this is our only chance to set things right. And when I do, my family will finally be able to come home."* Notice how long his family has been waiting.
- 2 The newspaper headlines Judy finds in the attic: *"Reptiles and Mammals, Too Different for One City?"* and *"Tundratown Expanded"* appearing again and again across decades. Notice the pattern.
- 3 How the crowd and the news react the instant Gary appears, before he does anything. Notice what they assume about him.
- 4 What Agnes De'Snake's house looks like when they finally find it, after 100 years buried under snow. Notice the objects left behind, and what they say about who she was.
- 5 The moment Hoggbottom raises her weapon, then lowers it. Notice what changes in her face, and what she chooses to do with the power she has.

The Hidden History Inside the Story

COLOUR KEY: ■ In the film ■ In real life □ Questions to ask

1 A people who had a home, and a whole life in it

Before any conversation about what was lost, it helps to picture what was there. Palestinians were not a displaced people looking for somewhere to settle. They were already settled, with centuries of history, food traditions, crafts, and family customs rooted in a specific land.

IN THE FILM

When Judy, Nick, and Gary descend into buried Reptile Ravine, they find a neighborhood frozen in time: a clocktower, streetlamps, homes full of family objects, a sock still on the clothesline. Gary's great-grandmother Agnes De'Snake didn't just live there; she *invented* the weather walls that made Zootopia possible. The reptiles had culture, industry, and deep roots in the city.

IN REAL LIFE

Before 1948, Palestinians had been living on the land for centuries, farming olive and citrus groves, running soap factories in Nablus that exported across the world, hosting weddings that lasted three days with entire villages attending. Families passed recipes across three generations of women cooking together. *Palestinians owned roughly 90% of privately held land.*⁴ They were not a people waiting to exist; they already had a full, rich life.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"What did you notice about Reptile Ravine when they found it? What kinds of things were left behind?"

Ages 9–12

"Why does it matter that Agnes invented the walls, not just that reptiles lived there?"

2 A lie so big it buried an entire neighborhood

*The Nakba did not happen by accident. A military plan called Plan Dalet, adopted in March 1948, directed forces to destroy specific Palestinian towns and villages to make sure their residents could not return.*⁵ *The history was then actively hidden, with new construction, renamed places, and planted forests covering what had been there before.*

IN THE FILM

Ebenezer Lynxley stole Agnes's journal and patent, committed murder and blamed it on her, then turned off the power to Reptile Ravine and buried it in snow, erasing it from maps and memory. His portrait lined the manor hallways. Every generation of Lynxleys inherited both the wealth *and* the secret.

IN REAL LIFE

In 1948, a military plan called Plan Dalet called for the destruction of Palestinian villages to prevent people from returning.⁵ Over 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes.¹ More than 400 villages were demolished or buried.¹ Non-native trees were planted over the ruins. Place names were changed. This event is called the **Nakba**, meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic. A United Nations resolution said Palestinians had the right to return home.³ They never have.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"Why did Ebenezer bury Reptile Ravine instead of just asking Agnes to leave?"

Ages 9–12

"The Lynxleys kept expanding Tundratown each time they needed to cover something up. Why might someone keep taking more land?"

The Hidden History Inside the Story

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3 Fear as a tool, and who it serves

Treating a group of people as dangerous makes it much easier to justify taking things from them. This pattern shows up throughout history: when you can make others afraid of a group, you can do things to that group that would otherwise seem clearly wrong. The Lynxleys did not accidentally create a city afraid of snakes. It served them to keep that fear alive.

IN THE FILM

The moment Gary appears at the Gala, the entire room panics: "SNAKE! SNAKE! SNAKE!" Even though Gary never hurt anyone, the news runs "Terror in Tundratown." The Lynxleys immediately use the panic to frame Gary, Nick, and Judy. "No snake has been in Zootopia for 100 years," because the Lynxleys made sure of it. The Lynxleys made sure reptiles stayed feared.

IN REAL LIFE

For decades, Palestinians have been consistently shown in Western media as dangerous or threatening, while stories about their daily lives, families, and losses are largely absent. Amnesty International has documented how treating a group as less than human makes it easier to pass policies that would otherwise face more pushback: home demolitions, movement checkpoints, the blockade of Gaza.⁴ When a group is made frightening, it becomes easier to take what they have.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"Was Gary actually dangerous? Why did everyone still run away from him?"

Ages 9–12

"Who benefits most when people are afraid of reptiles? How does fear help the Lynxleys keep their secret?"

4 The city that calls itself progressive

One of the harder ideas in this film is that a place can be genuinely good in some ways and built on serious injustice at the same time. Most Zootopians are kind, diverse, and well-meaning. That doesn't make the foundation of their city any less stolen. This tension is one the film takes seriously, and it reflects a real debate happening in many countries today.

IN THE FILM

Zootopia markets itself as a place where "anyone can be anything." It has a diverse, progressive-sounding mayor. But the city's very foundation, the weather walls that make it livable, was built on stolen credit and an erased people. Most residents of Zootopia have no idea. The city's goodness and its founding crime exist at the same time.

IN REAL LIFE

Israel has long described itself as "the only democracy in the Middle East." In 2022, Amnesty International published a major report concluding that Israel maintains a system of apartheid, meaning a society where people are given different rights based on their identity.⁴ Most Israeli citizens are unaware of the full scope of the Nakba. In many countries, including Israel, teaching the Nakba in schools has been restricted or banned.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"Can a city be a good place and also have done something wrong? How?"

Ages 9–12

"Does it matter that most Zootopians didn't know about Reptile Ravine? Does not knowing make you responsible?"

What Do You Do When You Find Out?

COLOUR KEY: ■ In the film ■ In real life □ Questions to ask

5 Ordinary people and what they inherit

Most people do not choose the history they are born into. But once they find out the truth, they do have a choice about what to do with it. Pawbert is the film's most complicated example of this: he knows, and he still has to decide. This theme is especially relevant for children growing up in countries whose own histories include difficult chapters.

IN THE FILM

Average Zootopians (the party guests, the ZPD officers, the news anchors) have no idea Reptile Ravine exists. They're not evil; they just live inside a story that was built for them. Pawbert is different: he knows the truth and still has to choose. He can burn the patent and "earn" his place in the Lynxley family, or he can help repair what his family broke. The film is honest that he first chooses wrong.

IN REAL LIFE

Many people in Israel, and in countries that support Israeli policy, grow up without learning the full history of 1948. In some places, laws restrict how the Nakba can be taught. But today, more young Israelis and Jewish people worldwide are choosing to learn this history and speak about it publicly. Learning a difficult truth about your own community is uncomfortable. Doing it anyway is a form of courage.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"Pawbert knew the truth. Why did it take him a while to do the right thing?"

Ages 9–12

"If your family did something wrong before you were born, do you have any responsibility for it? What kind?"

6 Judy and the question of what power is for

Judy is not a villain, but she is part of a system that serves the Lynxleys. Her story raises a question that is very much alive today: can someone who works inside an unfair system still use their position to help make things right? The film's answer is yes, but it is also honest that Judy has to make a specific choice to get there.

IN THE FILM

The ZPD takes its orders from the Lynxley family; Mayor Winddancer does what they say, and Hoggbottom follows orders she knows feel wrong. Judy is part of this system. She initially enforces it without questioning where it came from. But her badge is also what lets her pursue the truth, protect Gary, and eventually expose the Lynxleys. She uses the same power for justice that could have been used to keep the secret buried.

IN REAL LIFE

Soldiers, police, lawyers, journalists, and politicians all work inside systems that sometimes enforce unfair rules. But history shows that people inside those systems can still make different choices: the soldier who refuses an unlawful order, the journalist who covers a story others won't, the politician who tells a truth that's hard to say. Hoggbottom's moment, when she lowers her weapon and then knocks out Pawbert, is the film's clearest example of this. Having power and using it well are two different things.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"Why did Hoggbottom stop? What changed for her?"

Ages 9–12

"Can someone do good things and also be part of an unfair system? What does Judy's story say about that?"

What Do You Do When You Find Out?

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7 The key in the door, and why families hold onto it

When Palestinian families fled in 1948, many believed they would be back in days or weeks. They took their house keys. Those keys have become one of the most recognized symbols of Palestinian identity, passed from grandparents to children to grandchildren. This is not a detail from the distant past. Palestinian children growing up today in refugee camps have never seen their family's original home.

IN THE FILM

Gary spent seven days in a crate to get to Zootopia. He carried his great-grandmother's story across generations. His whole mission was to find the original patent, proof of where he came from and what his family was owed. When they find Agnes's home, there's a music box still on her desk, playing. It had been waiting. Gary's family finally comes home at the end.

IN REAL LIFE

In 1948, Palestinian families fled their homes believing they would return in days or weeks. Many took their house keys. Today, those keys, passed down through four and five generations, are one of the most powerful symbols of Palestinian identity. *About 5.9 million Palestinians are registered as refugees with UNRWA,*² the UN agency that runs their schools and clinics. They live in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank. A UN resolution passed in 1948 said they have the right to go home.³ Most have never been allowed to return.

ASK YOUR CHILD

Ages 6–8

"Gary never lived in Reptile Ravine. Why did it still matter so much to him?"

Ages 9–12

"If a family has been waiting to go home for 75 years, do they still have that right? What would it take to make things right?"

The Nakba, in numbers

750,000+ Palestinians expelled (1947–49)¹ · 400+ villages destroyed¹ · 5.9 million refugees registered today² · 4th and 5th generation still in camps · UN Resolution 194 (right of return) passed in 1948, never implemented³

Going Deeper: What to Do Next

To learn the history yourself

The Institute for Middle East Understanding has free, sourced fact sheets on everything from pre-1948 Palestinian life to the refugee crisis today. Start with the Nakba overview and click from there.

imeu.org/resources/palestine-101

UNRWA's site explains the refugee situation in clear terms, with stories and statistics:

unrwa.org/palestine-refugees

Books for children

Sitti's Secrets by Naomi Shihab Nye (ages 5–9): a girl visits her Palestinian grandmother and they connect across language and distance.

P is for Palestine by Golbarg Bashi (ages 4–8): an alphabet book celebrating Palestinian culture and identity.

The Olive Tree by Elsa Marston (ages 8–12): two children, one Israeli, one Palestinian, and one olive tree they both claim.

If your child is upset

That feeling is appropriate and worth honoring. You can say: "It's okay to feel sad or angry about unfair things. Feeling it is the first step. The next step is learning more, and then deciding what kind of person you want to be about it."

Older children may want to take some kind of action. Looking up organizations that provide direct aid to Palestinian children (like UNRWA or UNICEF) is a concrete place to start.

The film's last word

Nick says: "If we just tried to understand one another, we'd see that our differences don't really make any difference at all." It's a beautiful sentiment, and also an incomplete one. Understanding is the beginning, not the end; it has to be followed by repair. Reptile Ravine had to actually reopen. The conversation you have after this film is a small version of that same work.

Sources & Notes

- 1 IMEU, "Quick Facts: The Palestinian Nakba (Catastrophe)." Figures for 750,000+ expelled and 400+ villages destroyed. imeu.org/resources/the-nakba/quick-facts-the-palestinian-nakba-catastrophe/142
- 2 UNRWA, "Palestine Refugees." Source for 5.9 million registered refugees figure and UNRWA's mandate and operations. unrwa.org/palestine-refugees
- 3 UN General Assembly Resolution 194, 11 December 1948. Paragraph 11 states refugees "wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date." unrwa.org/content/resolution-194
- 4 Amnesty International, "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians," February 2022. Source for the apartheid conclusion, 90% privately held land figure, and documented policies of dispossession. Full report at [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/)
- 5 IMEU, "Explainer: Plan Dalet & The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine." Details the adoption of Plan Dalet on 10 March 1948, its objectives, and its implementation. imeu.org/resources/the-nakba/explainer-plan-dalet
- 6 IMEU, "Quick Facts: Israel's Settlement Enterprise (West Bank & East Jerusalem)." Source for the approximately 750,000 settler figure and illegality under international law. imeu.org/resources/key-issues/quick-facts-israels-settlement-enterprise

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Sources: UNRWA (unrwa.org) · Amnesty International, *Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians*, 2022 ([amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org)) · Institute for Middle East Understanding (imeu.org) · *Zootopia 2* screenplay, Jared Bush, final draft 9-29-25.