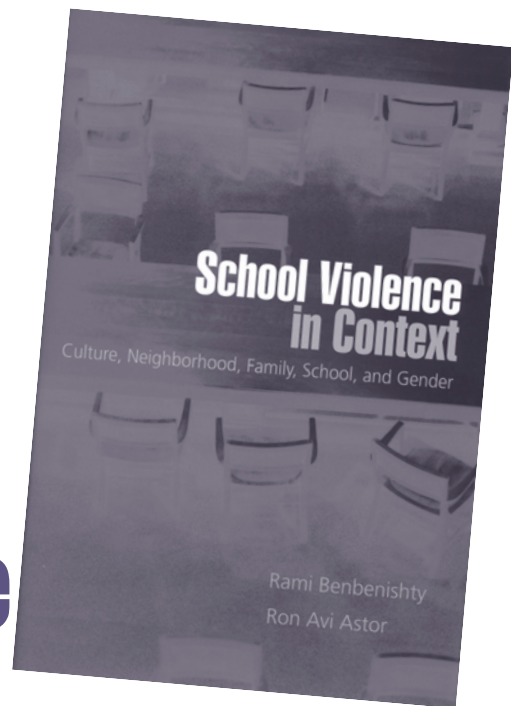


Dr. Ron Avi Astor: Jewish Communal Service Alumnus Combating School Violence Worldwide

Ruth Friedman and Jean Bloch Rosensaft



Groundbreaking research on school violence by Dr. Ron Avi Astor (MAJCS/MSW, '85) has helped transform Israeli educational policy and influenced educational policies throughout the world. The only comprehensive study of Jewish and Arab children and school violence and the largest study on school violence in the world, his findings and recommendations can be found in his recently published book, *School Violence in Context: Culture, Neighborhood, Family, School and Gender* (with Professor Rami Benbenishty of Hebrew University, Oxford University Press, 2005).

School Violence in Context shares the findings of their studies on school violence and how family, community, and culture affect this violence. Astor and Benbenishty analyze the results of their studies in Israel and California and offer solutions for combating school violence in Israel and worldwide. In interviews with *The Chronicle*, Dr. Astor, Professor in the Schools of Social Work and Education at the University of Southern California, reflected on his Jewish communal service studies at HUC-JIR and their influence on his career path, highlighted his recent landmark research, and shared his hopes for expanding the relationship between HUC-JIR and USC.

HUC-JIR Beginnings

As a double master's graduate student at HUC-JIR's School of Jewish Communal Service in the mid-1980s, Ron Astor focused on the treatment of children and families in organizational and clinical settings and, as part of the Social Work Program at USC, studied children and family. He credits his studies at HUC-JIR for having taught him about the organizational, historical, and cultural aspects of Jewish issues. For example, he learned how issues of victimization and violence have a distinct cultural perspective in both the Jewish community in Israel and the United States. The historical roots of Jewish thought about violence and Jewish experiences with victimization influence how violence might be interpreted. His learning at HUC-JIR serves as a foundational basis for the research that has animated his professional career.

"Dr. David Ellenson, my advisor and professor in numerous courses, influenced my decision to pursue a Ph.D.," recalls Astor. "He encouraged me to pursue my studies and to look further at the social and empirical questions I had about violence and society. During my year in Israel as a Fulbright Scholar, we frequently talked about ways violence has been discussed throughout Jewish history and in modern times." Furthermore, at HUC-JIR, Rabbi Michael Signer's text classes also highlighted the critical roles of

conflict, violence, and moral perspectives surrounding interpersonal issues of violence. Professor Gerald Bubi's many classes encouraged him to think about the Jewish community on an institutional, organizational, and global level. Dr. Abe Zygierbaum's course on the Holocaust made a profound influence on Astor's thinking on the role of bystanders in violence. Dr. Bruce Phillips's classes stressed the importance of forming policy through demographic study of modern Jewish populations. Astor's placements at Jewish Family Service and Vista Del Mar focused exclusively on issues of family, school, and interpersonal violence. Finally, "the close emotional and intellectual relationships I developed with many of my peers during those years remain among the most important influences from my HUC-JIR days. I met my wife, Sheva Locke (MAJE/MAJCS, '85), who is my closest intellectual and spiritual partner, and Rabbi Ellenson married us. Many of our close friends are people we learned with at HUC-JIR."

Astor received his Ph.D. in 1991 from the University of California, Berkeley, where he focused on human development and school psychology. Astor joined the faculty of USC after teaching at the University of Michigan for nine years. At USC, he teaches courses to social work students, doctoral students, education students, and others on globalization of education, cultural and religious influences on different forms of violence throughout the world, and school violence. Much of what he teaches is based on his work in Israel.

Cutting-Edge Research

His current research began when he was a Senior Fulbright Scholar studying school violence at Hebrew University in 1997-1998. During that year, the Israeli media was reporting cases of school violence and national politicians became interested in the topic. Astor was invited to testify about school violence to the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) Subcommittee on Education. He suggested to the Subcommittee that Israel's school safety policy be based on accurate data rather than on media reports or public views. This led to the Ministry of Education's call for very large-scale studies on issues of school violence.

The Ministry of Education's movement to tackle the problem systematically and swiftly was a source of inspiration for Astor and his colleagues. Even with the intense geopolitical situation, involving terrorism, recession, regional wars, and internal religious and ethnic tensions, the Israeli government saw the safety of schools as a national priority and it made radical changes to its educational policies and training. "The national studies we've conducted are the basis for most of Israel's educational policy around school safety. The studies had a quite large contemporary impact almost immediately, which is rare in the kind of work that we do," notes Astor.

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While he has conducted many of his studies in the U.S., his largest studies have taken place in Israel. *School Violence in Context* is based on three of his large Israel studies. To date, there have been four separate large-scale studies that have looked at between 16,000 and 30,000 students. With funding from the Israeli Ministry of Education, he, Professor Benbenishty, and other colleagues have surveyed Jewish and Arab students, teachers, and principals on topics such as violence by students and staff, weapon possession in schools, risky behaviors in schools, and school climate and feelings of safety.

Although Astor and others had studied youth violence in the U.S., most had not analyzed

Jewish groups. "Very little or no research had been done up until this point on Jewish kids, which was very interesting to me," he notes. "I had conversations with David Ellenson over the years about why there has been so much written about Jews as victims, but not as victims within our own relationships, families, schools, or communities."

Astor believes that his newly published book is the only representative study of Jewish children anywhere regarding school safety or youth violence. Like the historical debate within Judaism, he believes his research normalizes Jewish children's life experiences because "we, like every other people, have issues of school violence and interpersonal issues and family violence." Conversely, he believes that this research on Jewish and Arab children is "a light" for other cultures to replicate. "The research and study we do in Israel is the most advanced and largest school violence study done anywhere," Astor explains. "We're really leading the international community in showing that our research in Israel on Jewish kids and Arab kids in the Middle East is establishing a model for how countries might look at the problem."

His research, conducted with Professor Benbenishty, has studied Arab as well as Jewish children in Israel, including ultra-Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, Bedouins, and Druze. Their studies also have looked at teacher/student violence in Israel, which they have found to be high. According to Astor, Israel is one of the few countries in the world collecting national data on teacher/child violence.

Overall, the study found that "when all forms of victimization: verbal-social, threats, and physical violence are rank-ordered, patterns are extremely similar across gender, ethnicity/culture, age, and within and between the U.S. and Israel," which supports their belief in common global victimization patterns that exist within schools. They found that the social climate within schools – school policy, teachers' relationships with students, and peer group support – more than community or family, influences the violence. Nevertheless, their research also supports the fact that in every country and

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community there are some schools that account for large amounts of victimization and there are some schools that have very low levels of violence. An exploration of these types of schools could help countries develop more effective antiviolence strategies.

Astor and Benbenishty recommend a “whole school” approach to school violence, where the school community, including school leaders, students, and parents, addresses the problems of violence and creates solutions to solve them. Everyone in the school community is held responsible to make the school a better and safer environment.

One study in Herzelia, Israel, provided schools there with a system by which they could compare themselves to other schools within the school district and nationally on issues of violence. This way, the school could tailor its responses to particular situations after reviewing how other schools handled similar problems. Schools could track their problems over time and see if their “grass-roots” approaches or adopted programs actually reduced violence. It also enabled democratic discussion since students, teachers, principals, parents, and community members could all see the local victimization rates and work together to solve the problem. They found the program to be very successful with “significant reductions in interpersonal violence as a result of allowing each school to develop its own kind of method,” which is then followed up with monitoring and collecting data on a regular basis. The Israeli Government Accounting Office recommended this kind of process as a model school violence program. They would like to bring this program to the U.S. and expand it more systematically in Israel.

Another study conducted by Astor and Benbenishty in Israel, funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, looked at nine “atypical” schools that have high levels of community or political violence surrounding the schools, but where the schools have created a

safe place for their students. The study looks at how “different school practices in different cultures are protecting children from some of these outside influences, such as crime, family violence, and political violence. We spent three years in these schools and have learned from the principals in these safe haven schools. The strategies and patterns in Muslim, Christian Arab, Orthodox, Secular, and Mixed Ethnic group schools appear to be very similar even though each culture

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uses its own history and culture to create safe havens.” This qualitative case study will be the basis of their second book exploring how these islands of safety were created and maintained.

In the U.S., Astor has looked at the impact of schools’ and neighborhoods’ physical conditions on violence. This has led to having students and teachers map out dangerous locations around their schools and create interventions to prevent violence in these places. The article based on this study was honored as the article of the year (in 2000)

by the American Educational Research Association. Since then, the mapping procedure has been used in countries across the globe and in the U.S.

Due to the large size of his studies, Astor feels “very confident in our data to show which groups are being victimized most and what teachers and principals could do to stem the violence in certain schools and areas.” Consequently, the Israeli Ministry of Education and Blue Ribbon Knesset Subcommittee on School Safety have adopted the majority of the suggestions from their studies for teacher education codes and for education programs that train teachers and principals, such as mandatory school safety plans and teacher in-service training on issues of school violence. School psychologists and counselors in Israel have also participated in this effort to create a school level process around the national and local data. These combined efforts contributed to a reduction in school violence since the first two studies. Based on their third study of 24,000 students in Israel, they found approximately a 25 percent reduction in school violence that they believe is partially resulting from the awareness and intense media coverage that their studies generated on the issue.

Astor emphasizes the universality of their findings, noting that “We have very strong empirical data showing that what happens in Israel is similar to what’s happening in the rest of the world in terms of schools, and that their interventions and way of seeing it and our understanding of how community and culture interacts with interpersonal violence have a lot of lessons to be taught.”

Based on their work in Israel and the U.S., they have come up with suggestions on how teachers should be trained and how policy should be set on local, district, and national levels in the U.S. Their findings were cited on the U.S. Senate Floor and entered into the Congressional Record. Astor has used methods they developed as a result of their work in Israel in the U.S. and hopes to continue to expand the impact of their findings.

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Strengthening HUC-JIR and USC Relations

HUC-JIR's links with USC include the double master's program in Jewish Communal Service and Social Work, Public Administration, Business Administration, or Communications Management as well as the Louchheim School of Judaic Studies, offering Jewish studies courses to more than 600 USC undergraduates each year. These partnered programs are offered within the context of the Los Angeles School's rabbinical, communal service, and education programs. Astor stated that USC's School of Social Work wants to build on these programs and, particularly, to strengthen the counseling skills training for rabbinical students. In many ways, clergy function as social workers and he feels that additional social work training would benefit them for lifecycle events. Conversely, having clergy in courses with social workers will help integrate cultural and religious perspectives with sociology and psychology paradigms. He hopes faculty will work to strengthen the connection between HUC-JIR and USC in pastoral counseling, family mediation, and family violence work.

Jacqueline Mondros, Vice Dean of USC's School of Social Work, is working with HUC-JIR to offer more possibilities for connections between the schools. As USC's School of Social Work revises its curriculum, it plans to open up classes so that rabbinical

students, cantorial students, lay people, Jewish communal professionals, as well as other clergy can attend. Emphasizing the importance of rabbis receiving more social work training, Astor says, "I think we could both learn from each other. Combining education for clergy and social workers moves the whole realm of social work and clinical intervention, not just to communal and Federation work, but to more interpersonal relations and the role of spirituality or religion." HUC-JIR has already moved in this direction but further collaborations would benefit both USC and HUC-JIR. This training could also enable rabbis to use the tools of the social sciences to collect analytical data so that they better understand and care for the needs of their congregations or regions. Astor suggests that HUC-JIR and USC give students more electives with the hope of offering more joint programs, which could award certificates in areas such as family violence, school interventions, and spirituality.

He believes that USC is open to further collaboration with HUC-JIR and other institutions. "In general there's tremendous support for the joint collaboration with HUC-JIR as well as with the Jewish community at large. I haven't felt this strong support for working with Israel and Jewish issues at a research university setting in a long time. There's a very positive feeling towards working with the Jewish community and Jewish institutions." USC's recruitment of Jewish students and faculty, the creation of The Center for Religion and Civic Culture and The Casden Institute for the Study of Jews in American Life, as well as joint programs with HUC-JIR, such as one with Dr. Reuven Firestone on religious text and its implications for violence in society, help foster this collegiality.

Reflecting on his work, Astor is grateful for the "tremendous support from academic colleagues and students" for his work in Israel, reinforced by the Los Angeles Jewish community's support for Israel. He believes it is important for Jewish institutions and organizations "to bring in a different vision of what's happening in Israel than what we see in the media. There are so many positive and wonderful things going on there. People are

actually working hard to solve society's problems at the social, interpersonal, and political levels in Israel. The quality of research on social issues is excellent both at USC and with Israeli academic institutions, including HUC-JIR." He plans to become more involved with the Jewish Federation in Los Angeles to help form joint partnership programs with schools in Israel and schools in Los Angeles. His wife, Sheva Locke, is Head of School at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino. She has already started a joint school/family partnership with the Bloch School in Tel Aviv. These kinds of collaborations have political, social, educational, but also strong personal implications. An exchange of people, ideas, and programs can create the links needed for a meaningful Jewish identity in modern times.

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Astor sees his current work as a culmination of bringing his research on community violence and school violence to the Jewish communities in the U.S. and Israel. "Since I realized I could actually study my own people in the context of the world community, I get a lot of personal, professional, and spiritual *naches* out of this work." ■