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A Rationale for Teaching the Holocaust

Until recently, it had become a widely accepted fact that until the Eichmann trial in 1961, there was silence in Jewish communities about the Holocaust. We lacked the language and vocabulary to express the ineffable, the argument goes. Yet in her most recent book, American Jewish social historian, Hasia Diner, marshals evidence to demonstrate that the story of silence is a myth, and that Jewish communities were talking about the Holocaust from the beginning.¹ However, even if we have been talking about the Holocaust since 1945, perhaps the most challenging task has been the struggle with how to teach about it. To address this dilemma, we need to turn from social historians to pedagogues.

The Holocaust is a complicated, difficult, tragic event to make sense of not only for the Jewish community, but also for the world at large. It is loaded with moral issues, historical facts, unanswerable questions and challenging ideas that threaten our basic sense of humanity. These complexities may be partially why some feel that there is no real representative way to teach the Holocaust well and therefore, no reason to present one perspective over another. Perhaps to uncover the dilemmas and tensions ridden in the Holocaust overwhelms educators, compelling them either to make some sense of the events, or at least to cover the vast amount of historical information. To be sure, the Holocaust was not an easy time in Jewish history and does not come with any built-in *nechemta*, or *consolation*. Indeed, if there were anything comforting about the Holocaust, surely we would not be left with so many more questions than understandings about the brutality and the suffering. Furthermore, if the Holocaust were simple,

¹ Hasia Diner, We Remember with Reverence and Love, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 9.

we would not struggle with how to teach it. Since Holocaust survivors, sadly, will not be with us in the near future, the responsibility to teach the Holocaust effectively becomes even more important.

There are traps in the teaching of the Holocaust that are easy to fall into. I will discuss two of these traps: the use of Holocaust artifacts as a textbook for teaching the Holocaust and being reductionist in the presentation of the event. For example, a common assumption is that Holocaust artifacts or exhibits require no introduction; that the students will somehow magically grasp ‘the lessons’ of the Holocaust, and the exhibit or artifact will speak for itself. Schweber recounts an incident at Castlemont High School in 1994 that demonstrates the fallacy of this approach.² A well-meaning teacher from Castlemont encouraged a group of his students from Oakland, California to see *Schindler’s List*, in honor of Martin Luther King Day. The movie was the students’ first exposure to the Holocaust. After viewing the movie for an hour, the following happened, as described by Christine Spolar of the *Washington Post*:

A boy shouted as a young Jewish woman was slaughtered on screen. “Oh,” he said, “that was cold.” Laughter followed. A couple dozen other moviegoers – some whose family members had died in the Holocaust – besieged the theater manager to complain.³

The movie was stopped and the group of 73 students was told to leave the theater. This teacher fell into the trap of believing that the students would be able to enter into the complexity of the Holocaust just by watching the movie.

The assumption that a movie such as *Schindler’s List* could adequately teach the Holocaust, with no preparation or context given ahead of time; and that the storyline would speak for itself, could be mis-educative. Without providing sufficient and appropriate context,

² Simone Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Practice*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 3.

³ Ibid.

teachers risk mis-educating about the Holocaust, and do more harm than good. After the incident with the Castlemont students, questions were posed among those who read the article in the *Washington Post* about whether these students were anti-Semitic, overexposed to violence, or simply unmoved by the graphic nature of the movie. In actuality, the students had no historical context for the event they were about to encounter and were unprepared to deal with what the movie would present to them. They had no prior knowledge about the movie and did not know if they going to watch something fictional or historical. They had no tools to interpret the role of the Jews, the Nazis, or the heroes in the movie. Without this introduction, they did not know how they were supposed to feel while they watched the movie.

Another example of a trap for teaching the Holocaust is in being reductionist and in over-collectivizing the event. In her article, “Reading Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel: Voice and Gender in Stories of the Holocaust,” in the journal *Contemporary Judaism*, sociologist Mary Lagerwey asserts that Elie Wiesel and Anne Frank are iconic figures of the Holocaust who each have come to represent the survivor and the victim.⁴ Their stories have shaped the way the American society collectively envisions the Holocaust. Since these stories are taught as a regular part of Holocaust curriculum, she claims that they have been adopted into our psyche when we think about the Holocaust. Generally speaking, this adoption is not problematic. To be sure, as Lagerwey argues, individual stories can be more accessible than reports of mass suffering. However, when the collective memory is reduced to only two stories, the Holocaust is oversimplified. There is a danger to using any one of these personal accounts, movies, or artifacts to tell the entire story of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is not that simple.

⁴ Mary Lagerwey, “Reading Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel: Voice and Gender in Stories of the Holocaust,” in *Contemporary Judaism* 17:1, (January 1996):48-65.

To investigate these issues, in *Making Sense of the Holocaust*, Schweber observes that in high school classes, the Holocaust tends to be taught through one of two lenses: history or morality. She contends that using only one of these lenses to teach the Holocaust is mis-educative. The Holocaust must be taught through both of these lenses simultaneously if the scope and impact of the Holocaust is to be comprehended. On this point, Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt acknowledges that the history of the Holocaust is laden with moral lessons.⁵ However, Lipstadt warns against extracting the moral lessons laden in the historical content explicitly. Instead, she suggests an implicit approach that uses the historical content to shape the students' moral insights of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is unquestionably full of moral issues. But when the moral issues are removed from their context, the questions unique to the Holocaust become universal. The life and death decisions that survivors and victims made were a result of unimaginable circumstances. They need to be read and understood within their historical context. Based on her own teaching experience, Lipstadt reassures the reader when she concludes that students will most assuredly apply these lessons to their own universe as they see appropriate.

Perhaps this method of teaching the Holocaust seems obvious. In theory, it makes perfect sense to teach through both a historical and moral lens. Yet, this has not been the practice.⁶ Schweber asserts that teaching the Holocaust in a meaningful way requires a balancing act of the tensions and complexities embedded in the Holocaust narrative. She describes these tensions as, “the pulls between tragic and redemptive, unique and universal, and insular or expanded emplotments; the pulls between individualized and collectivized, normalized and exoticized,

⁵ Simone Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Practice*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

personalized and depersonalized representations of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers; and the pulls between chronological and thematic, broadly explained and specifically illustrated, climactic and quotidian, inevitable and contingent images of history.”⁷ These tensions can create cognitive dissonance for the learner; which may force an intellectual “wedge” between what the learner previously believed and the “new” information being presented.⁸ In turn, this dissonance may lead to two types of responses: a more nuanced, effective learning or a total rejection of the new ideas. While the latter response is possible, in the best of circumstances the learner will open himself up to new information and become transformed by his learning about the Holocaust. Schweber argues that in certain cases, it may be worthwhile to emphasize one tension over another. Nevertheless, the very process of navigating these tensions will deepen the learning and help unpack the complexities of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust changed the reality of the Jewish community, and that affected who we are today. The scope of the calamity compares to the fall of the Temple and the exile from Spain. These events in our history completely transformed Jews and Judaism. The Holocaust transformed the Jewish community, too. There is no satisfying explanation of why this event had to happen. We should not feel compelled to make sense of it. But lacking neatly packaged explanations is no excuse to avoid teaching something, much less the Holocaust. We must have the courage to teach about it well, as it is so significant to our modern Jewish collective memory. In Yosef Yerushalmi’s book, *Zakhor*, he reflects upon his charge as a historian. He wonders, “Can it be that the journalists have stumbled across something more important than they perhaps realized? Is it possible that the antonym of ‘forgetting’ is not ‘remembering,’ but *justice*?” The

⁷ Simone Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Practice*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 163.

⁸ ATHERTON J S (2009) *Learning and Teaching; Cognitive Dissonance and learning* [On-line] UK: Available: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/dissonance.htm> Accessed: 16 December 2009

charge of a teacher is similar the historian. Teachers must have greater goals than memorializing the Holocaust; teachers seek justice every day when they inspire their students learn from the atrocities of the Holocaust. A teacher's charge should not be to make sense of the event, but to teach about it in an honest, complicated, and tension-filled way. This model of teaching the Holocaust not only honors the multiplicity of experiences that create the collective, but also pays tribute to those who will no longer be around to tell us of their personal experiences. Through adopting the wide array of stories into our collective memory, we strengthen our Jewish identity for the future.