

Teaching the Shoah in Jewish Education

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Why do we have to teach the Shoah to a Jewish audience? The answer is obvious: Jewish youngsters are lacking in knowledge especially in that field. Being involved for the last 10 years in Holocaust education both in Belgium and France, I can assure you that the average Jewish student is uneducated about important aspects pertaining to this most dramatic event of the 20th century.

The real problem is that he doesn't acknowledge it. The average Jewish student believes that he knows the issue; but the reality is quite the reverse.

Each year I give a test in the first class of my Shoah seminar at the Free University of Brussels where I lecture.

Among many others, here are some of the questions:

- Is there a difference between a “concentration camp” & “extermination centers”? Can you name the extermination centers?
- How many Jews were living in Germany before 1933? What was their percentage compared to the global population?

In the course of ten years, no one has ever passed this little test, especially none of the few Jewish students who attended the seminar.

In my opinion, the one phrase that characterizes the average situation of my Jewish students is unacknowledged **ignorance**. This **unacknowledged ignorance** is not without consequences:

1) A lack of personal investment

It is much more difficult to attract Jewish students than non-Jewish students to seminars on the Holocaust because Jewish students believe they have sufficient knowledge of this issue. Very often (and strangely enough) my Arab students are much more involved. The reason is simple: from the beginning, they acknowledge their complete ignorance.

What is true for students is also true for schoolteachers. At the annual summer university program that I organize in Paris, almost no Jewish professor attends. And the few teachers who do attend, very often come from Jewish schools, and are also characterized by this very strange phenomenon that I called “unacknowledged ignorance,” which puts them in a unique situation.

Like my Jewish students, these teachers who tend to regard the subject as sacred, show anxiety and emotion during debates and discussions when they are confronted with so called “controversial” or inflammatory issues like: Israel and the Shoah, Jewish collaboration and resistance, denial, other genocides, etc. In many cases, they respond with their emotions. This is normal because of their ignorance of the subject.

2) A lack of positive & rational responses

This **unacknowledged ignorance** is also problematic because nowadays we need more and more Jewish students and teachers who are able to give correct and rational answers.

If the Jewish tendency is to regard the Shoah as sacred, the non-Jewish tendency is, to make the Holocaust banal, commonplace, and ultimately to trivialize it. Even worse, the Shoah is, more and more, being used against the Jewish people as the ultimate weapon against Israel. The terms Shoah, Holocaust, and genocide have been corrupted. There is a tendency in the media to describe all atrocities as a 'holocaust'. This misappropriation of the word "holocaust" not only threatens to devalue the term through overuse but also misrepresents the very nature of the Nazi program. It is a somewhat lazy way to describe modern day tragedies that –being horrific enough- need no hyperbole.

As Dina Porat stressed in a conference held recently at Yad Vashem:

The meaning and status of the Holocaust have changed in the last decade not so much for the Jewish people [and Israel], but for other countries and peoples. Today, the Holocaust serves mainly as a cultural code of education, democracy against fascism, protection of human rights, and an ultimate symbol of suffering.

And the truth is that less and less, the memory of the Shoah is used to aid and protect the State of Israel as well as Jews worldwide. Today, the centrality of the Shoah as part of the greater world culture creates a reality in which anyone can use the Holocaust for his own interests — be they educational or political, democratic goals, or unfortunately, anti-Israeli propaganda. The new antisemites use Holocaust terminology against Israel.

3) A lack of a humanistic approach

There is one last fundamental reason to promote Shoah education with our Jewish students. Studying the Holocaust, for Jewish students, is still the best way to make them more sensitive as Jews and as human beings. An emotional connection with the Shoah could be dangerous if it leads to an isolation of the Jewish people from the outside world. The goyim hate us and always will. That's why we have to be strong.

If this statement is more or less true: is it enough? Should we be insensitive towards other suffering? Does "never again" only mean "never again" to the Jewish people? Is this behavior acceptable? Isn't it very dangerous?

One goal in teaching and learning about the Holocaust is to understand how and why it happened. Another goal should be to create responsible citizens.

Maybe, we can be sceptical and/or dubious about the idea of lessons of the Holocaust. *The Holocaust's very extremity makes it an unlikely source of "lessons for dealing with the sorts of issues that confront us in ordinary life".* As Peter Novick points out "If Holocaust study might sensitize people against "oppression and atrocity", emphasis on the Holocaust could also work in precisely the opposite direction: trivializing crimes of lesser magnitude

Still, I believe we cannot learn from the Holocaust by evading important moral responsibilities. The study of history should also be a moral and political enterprise. The objective is not only to learn about, but also from the Shoah in a way that encourages ethical reflection, more respect for human life, and a greater determination to mend the world. Even for Jewish & Israeli kids, the study of the Shoah could facilitate this by helping students:

- to explore concepts such as prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, racism, antisemitism, obedience to authority, the role of the bystander,, loyalty, conflict, decision making, and justice.
- to become more sensitive to ethnic and religious hatred (cf. Lipstadt)
- to realize that the questions raised by the Shoah are universal even though the Shoah itself, was and still is, unique.

Joseph Brodsky, a Nobel-prize winner from the former Soviet Union, argued that evil is not an aberration that stands apart from who we are but is a mirror, a reflection of the other self, of human negative potential.

By studying the historical development and the legacies of the Holocaust and other instances of collective violence, our students should learn how to struggle against:

- **prejudice** with compassion
- **indifference** with ethical participation
- **myth and misinformation** with knowledge.

The Holocaust was not an accident in history. It occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices that not only legalized discrimination, but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately, mass murder to occur. A critical study of the Holocaust helps students to think about the use and abuse of power, and the role and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and nations when confronted with civil rights violations and/or policies of genocide. Education should highlight the values of a tolerant and diverse society, based upon the fundamental position of equal rights for everyone, universal dignity, and the responsibility of society, to support rather than ignore these objectives.

If we are to win the struggle for our people's conscience and future, we must counter lessons of hate with lessons that promote understanding and caring. By doing so, we can all make a difference, most notably for a better Israel.

Conclusion

The Shoah is unique and without precedent. It didn't occur outside of history but within the context of: European racialism, World War I, and colonialism. These issues should not be ignored.

Since the Holocaust, some lessons have been learned. Yet tragedies involving genocide and mass murder have continued to occur. One of the core objectives of teaching about the Shoah is to ensure that those who follow us learn how and why these events as well as those of other genocides have happened. Of course the suffering of all the victims of other genocides

(namely Herero and Rwanda) needs to be addressed without relativizing the Shoah; even if there can be no hierarchy of suffering. That's why we need to accept the comparison of the Shoah with other genocides and, if I may so, to control those comparisons. The experience of the other genocides should not be relegated to a single "add on" lesson, with each of these distinct groups treated as if all were the same.

Last year Holocaust Memorial Day coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda Genocide. In many ways, the genocide in Rwanda was different from the Shoah, taking place in a different historical and geographical context, underpinned by a different ideology, and carried out differently.

The most striking similarity, however, was in the intent of the perpetrators. The Nazis had intended to wipe out everyone of Jewish descent within their territory and even beyond. The perpetrators of the genocide in Rwanda intended to murder everyone identifiable as Tutsi within the territory under their control. It is estimated that this resulted in the deaths of up to a million people. The CDJC / Memorial de la Shoah of Paris organized an exhibition on the Tutsi genocide. I am proud to say that CDJC was the only institution that prepared an exhibition in Paris. But in Kigali during the official & national commemorations, there were no representatives of any major Jewish or Israeli organizations, even though half of the speakers were of Jewish descent. Why?

Next year Holocaust Memorial Day will coincide with the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Our agenda for the 2005 commemoration should include this tragedy. Are we credible if we ignore the sufferings of the Armenians?