

Shulamit Imber

Aharon Appelfeld, born in Chernovitz Bukovina in 1932, is a Holocaust survivor and an Israeli author whose literature has taught me a lot about the human story of the Holocaust. In an interview where he was asked about the memory of the Holocaust, he said the following:

By the end of the Shoah, a full third of the collective body of the Jewish people were no longer alive. It was a biological wound within the family.

I also believe that the concept of the collective body is a fundamental part of our identity. Today we ask ourselves who we are. Never before in history did the Jew ever entertain such a question. And the question only arises because the collective body is ill. Only a serious trauma could promote such a question. Of course during other periods, like at the close of the 19th century, this question was asked but never in so intense or profound a manner. Only towards the end of the 20th century did this question become acute. Appelfeld's comment suggests several things:

First of all, Aharon Appelfeld talks about a biological wound. In time you recover from a simple wound. But when we talk about the Holocaust as a biological and physical wound, we are saying that 60 years has not been enough for us as a people to heal. How long it will take us to recover from this biological wound we cannot say, but this suggests that this is a trauma and a biological wound that affects us all.

The second thing that I believe Aharon Appelfeld is talking about is the collective nature of this wound. The Holocaust doesn't only affect people whose parents

survived the Holocaust. It affects all of the Jewish people. Every Jew is affected. As he says, it is a biological wound in the family. So even when someone says, “ Our family doesn’t have a background in the Holocaust,” this doesn’t mean that it doesn’t affect them as a Jew.

The third and most important thing he talks about is loss and he says that we lost a collective spiritual consciousness. It is that connection to the past and to the Jews who lived in that time and in those places that shapes who we are today. It is this loss of spirituality that affects our Jewish identity. This for me is extremely significant. We need to look at what was lost and how that loss affects us.

So I want to stress the challenges of *how* we talk about the Holocaust in light of these points. When we talk about how they killed the Jews in the gas chambers, we have to rescue the individual from the pile of bodies. Who did we lose in the Holocaust? How are we coping with that loss? This is integral to our understanding of who these people were as well as whom we are.

There are many people in the Jewish world who in the last few years are dealing with what we call life before the Holocaust. But I don’t think that they are dealing with the depth of life before the Holocaust. Showing pictures of how Jews lived before the war is very emotional and touching, but I think sometimes it allows us to remain detached. We look at these people from a distance.

So how do we get closer to whom these Jews really were? How do we teach about life before the war? The Jews who were killed in the gas chambers were facing the

question of what it means to be a Jew in modern times. Many of their questions are the same ones that we have today when we talk about Jewish identity. For students today in Israel and around the Jewish world, I think we have to create a face for that modern Jew, a face that our students can connect to and through that connection feel that kind of loss – the loss of a family member.

How shall we put a face to this member of our collective family? As a teacher I concentrate specifically on Jewish youth. And when I talk to teachers, I suggest that they concentrate on young people and the dilemmas and issues they faced. What changes were they facing? What was their life like before the war? Who were these youngsters whose hopes and dreams and very future were killed by the Nazis?

Even in the ultra-orthodox world, there were questions of identity and the relevance of the culture for young people. There was a very interesting phenomenon in the ultra-orthodox Jewish world before the war. The boys got education. They went to Chedars or to Yeshivot. But the Jewish girls in ultra-orthodox families didn't receive an education because none of the rabbis would give their permission to open religious schools for Jewish girls.

Girls had to go to school because there was a law requiring it and so they went to Polish schools. So in these ultra-orthodox families before the war, you could see the boys following the very strict ultra-orthodox tradition and the girls coming back home with Polish identities and leaving Jewish customs.

At about this same time a very distinguished woman named Sarah Schenerer who had been a refugee in Vienna during World War I and was working as a seamstress in Krakow, was concerned that so many ultra -orthodox girls were losing their religious identity. She decided that it was very important to create schools for these girls so that they would receive a religious education and not have to go to Polish schools. Although it was not easy, Sarah Schenerer persevered in her determination to improve the educational system for girls and eventually persuaded the rabbis to give their permission for her to open Beit Yaacov schools. This was revolutionary.

In 1917, she opened a seminar in Krakow to teach young women how to open schools in other places in the Jewish world around Europe. It is interesting to look at the curriculum that they developed in these ultra-orthodox schools. Sarah Schenerer was a very clever lady. She saw for instance that the Jewish girls were very influenced by the fashion trends from Paris. So she designed a course in the Beit Yaacov ultra orthodox schools on how to dress fashionably yet modestly.

It is noteworthy that on the eve of the Holocaust there were several hundred Beit Yaacov schools and that the ones who opened these schools were girls who graduated from the seminar. They were 15, 16, and 17 years old. So this means that youth at 15, 16, and 17 years old can revolutionize the world.

Once again the challenge of talking about Jewish life before the war in order to understand the loss we have suffered is talking about people, talking about conflicts, talking about tradition. It is talking about a variety of things in the Jewish world in

such a way that today's Jewish school children can identify with these people and see them as part of their own identity. When we talk about *Jewish life before the war*.

we are also talking about the many issues that these Jews had to face. We are connecting our students to questions and choices that confronted young people.

The over-riding issue of the Holocaust for the Jews of that period is that they lived in the world of choice-less choices. They had to face disease, starvation, and death. The main concern for Jews in the Holocaust was survival. But I think that we also find examples of tremendous strength in the Holocaust because of their strong sense of Jewish identity before the war. The moment that you decide to organize your everyday life you have to face issues of your identity. And I want to give a second example that I share with teachers when we talk about Jewish identity *in* the Holocaust. I talked about the ultra-orthodox and now I want to talk about the Bund.

I read this recently in a new book about Marek Edelman published by Dani Blatman. The youth section of the Bund in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto organized a unique gathering and they wrote about it in the underground paper. It was a central congress in memory of Mendele Mocher Sforim. It would have been his 105th birthday and they celebrated the occasion. They called it a congress – of Mendele Mocher Sforim, one of the greatest Yiddish writers. Listen to what they wrote:

“A central congress in memory of Mendeli Mocher Sefarim [one of the greatest Yiddish writers] was held. Officially, it was said that the youth section organized the congress, but in fact, we organized it. The program included speeches, recitation, and a popular choir. Six hundred youngsters participated. The Mendeli Congress became

*a real youth festival of the **"Zukunft"***. It was the first time since the outbreak of the war that we encountered such a large number of participants. Again we were together (for at least two hours).*

I read this to my students when I take them to Poland and to Jewish students around the world when I teach them and I ask them to show me a cultural gathering today where six hundred youngsters participate. Now a very interesting thing happened. The Shomer Ha Tzair was very envious that the Bund got six hundred youngsters to take part in this gathering. So they applied to the Bund and asked if they could translate Mendele into Hebrew. And guess what. They didn't get permission for the copyright. So they didn't translate the writings of Mendele. This was an issue of identity. Yiddish is kept as Yiddish You do your thing and we'll do ours. We'll see who will get more youngsters.

We are talking about something incredible here. Chaim Kaplan talked about the gatherings in memory of Bialyk and Herzl in the Warsaw Ghetto and he said something very touching. {I am paraphrasing here} He said, look, we come and we don't look one another in the face. We are ashamed to look at one another because we are ashamed about how we look when we are starved. But he also said that the tradition had to continue. And this is very interesting. We come there although we are starved, although we don't have the energy but because it is a custom, because this is our tradition, we continue it in the ghetto.

Mark Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights*, Daniel Bettelman (Ed.). Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, 2001, p. 134.

* Future in Yiddish, also the name of the Bund's youth movement

Leo Baeck once told how the lectures in Judaism started in Theresienstadt. This is what he said: "I stood there when the Jews from Holland came on the lorry. A Gestapo agent read off their names as they came down. When I heard the names, I literally heard the history of the Jews in the Netherlands, history that dated back to the 17th century. I heard a list of Dutch aristocracy." And because of that experience, he decided to give lectures in Theresienstadt. He taught Plato and people asked questions and participated. Some people that were ordered to go to the trains didn't go because they wanted to stay until the end of Baeck's lecture.

This determination to persevere in their identity and culture is a very important point to stress when we talk about Jewish identity in the Holocaust. Another issue closely related to Jewish identity is the way the survivors chose to return to life after the Holocaust and the personal identity they chose for themselves. The survivors built; they didn't destroy. They gave deep meaning to Jewish identity after the Holocaust; this is an important issue. And here I want to stress two things.

We are talking a lot about the connection between the Holocaust and Jewish identity and Professor Yitz Greenberg also stressed it. We have to be very careful that in education in Israel, on trips to Poland, in the education of Jews around the world, the Holocaust must not become the main component of Jewish identity. Jewish identity existed before the Holocaust. Jewish identity stands for itself. The Holocaust gives it a new meaning. The Holocaust sometimes gives it a way, as Professor Greenberg said, to learn about life before the Holocaust. But we have to be very careful in the crisis of identity, for Jews in the 21st century in Israel and around the world that the Holocaust won't become the main component.

And I want to address the issue of the survivors. My dear friend, Batsheva, is sitting here as are many other survivors from whom I have learned so much over the years, and it pains me to say it but the survivors are aging. Five years ago, my friend Bill Shulman, organized a conference and said that we have to talk about how we will teach the Holocaust when there are no survivors. At that time, we all told Bill that it was not a big deal. We have oral testimonies. We will videotape everything and this will *replace* the survivors.

Today I understand that when we talk about losing the survivor, it is also about losing a moral authority. It is not only about losing what we call the eyewitness. The survivors shaped what we call Y'om Ha Zikaron. I know that every school today has ceremonies. Students come back from trips to Poland and organize the ceremonies and as Ephraim Kaye can tell you - three months before Y'om Ha Shoah there are no survivors left to invite. They all have engagements. Everyone wants a survivor as a moral authority. And when a survivor stands before us we have to look him in the face. There is an obligation that our students feel when a survivor talks to them.

I don't feel that we can postpone this anymore. I am talking about challenges. In Jewish education in the 21st century we have to shape our memory. Y'om HaShoah will not be able to stand by itself. It will have to be the peak of an educational experience. We will have to see how the teachers prepare the students before that and the ceremonies of Y'om Ha Shoah will be the culmination. I think this is going to influence many of the things we are talking about.

There is another very important issue in Jewish education and we were speaking about it before. Dr. Kotek and Professor Greenberg both addressed it. It is the moral aspects and the universal implications of the Holocaust. In Israel we teach more of the story of the victim and I think in the 21st century we need to develop a method using interdisciplinary learning to also address questions of why the Holocaust happened, the issue of the bystander, and that of the perpetrator. Sometimes I feel that we minimize those topics here.

Certainly there are also universal lessons that can be taught in Holocaust education and you have to grasp the universal aspects of the Holocaust as well as the unique meaning of the event and its repercussions. I think in our school and in Jewish schools everywhere we will have to make more of an effort to look at how we teach the Holocaust without trivializing it. In Israel it is mandated to teach the Holocaust only in the high schools. It is recommended that the holocaust be taught at the middle school level but it is only a recommendation. I know that some of you are surprised.

The first time some our students learn about the Holocaust is the 30 hours that are mandated. But the teachers that come here to Yad Vashem come primarily from middle schools. And they say that they feel that they are talking of this biological wound. They are talking about an event that has impacted our lives and the lives of our students. They want methods for educating primary and middle school children in Jewish schools.

I see people here who are nodding because we were talking about it in the seminar that recently took place here, and we were struggling with these issues. I am not

saying that we have all the answers. I always say that we are learning all the time. But we do have what we call a spiral method. You begin with the individual. You continue with the family. You move on to the community. And you end with the history. I think it has to be cognitive and emotional in age appropriate ways. Avner has often asked me about this issue of age – appropriateness. How young is too young? There is no easy answer.

I always tell the story of my son in Majdanek. Everyone knows it but I will repeat it anyway. By the time I took my oldest son on the trip to Poland with his class, I had taken 15 groups to Poland. When we entered the death camp Majdanek I felt something I had never felt when I went with other students.

I did not want my son to see Majdanek. And I was standing there and I said to myself, I am his mother. I have to teach him. I have to protect him. I have to bring him to the world. Why am I bringing him to Majdanek? It was the first time that I asked myself: what am I doing in Holocaust education?

And believe me I was ready to say: Ariel out – everyone else in. You are not going to see Majdanek. And I felt something physically like only a mother can feel there. And the group is standing there and I am not talking. But because of what happened to me there, I became a much better educator. I started looking more critically at the materials I was using. I started protecting my students. I understood the depth and the danger of what I do. There is power in Holocaust education. There is power and accountability in what we are doing.

Before that time if a parent had dared to suggest that maybe I didn't need to take them to three camps, maybe one camp was enough – I would have said no! They need to see all the structure. Auschwitz is this. Majdanek is that. Treblinka is something else again. Why? How are we using our materials and our other resources?

When I came back from that trip we went through a whole revolution here because we were discussing all of this. I think we have to question our methods and ourselves all the time. On one hand there is the impact of Holocaust education – this biological wound that we are dealing with – the questions of identity. But on the other hand, who are our students? Why are we taking them on this journey into the depths of this issue and what is going to become of them as Jews and as human beings? I think these are very crucial questions.

Another thing I want to address is the Holocaust and technology. We saw a very good example of it here. Someone in the Jewish Educators' Course told me that Jewish schools are becoming very *americanized*. What does that mean? It means that they have computers but they don't have rabbis. And I was shocked. There is enough money in Jewish education to bring all of this technological equipment but there are not enough people to teach the depth. When we teach Holocaust – we need a face.

Technology can help us. Technology will make us reach out into the 21st century but who will take care of the souls of our students when we teach them and when we take them on this journey into this biological wound that Aharon Appelfeld talks about? I think we have to question ourselves. When we are about to publish something new, I ask my team and myself if we are careful enough. What words are we using when we

put materials up over the Internet? With what language do we teach the Holocaust and technology? I think it's very important to address this.

My last point is the issue of contemporary antisemitism and Holocaust education. People in the Jewish world today and teachers in schools apply to Yad Vashem or contact us and say that they are teaching Holocaust education and facing issues of contemporary antisemitism. They want to know how they can use Holocaust education to discuss contemporary antisemitism.

I think we have to be very careful when we attempt to compare situations. What is happening today with antisemitism is not the Holocaust. So what can we teach? We can teach the language of antisemitism and the nature of antisemitism. You see through teaching antisemitism we find the essence of what it means to be an antisemite. That's a very different thing. It is not comparing things. It is looking into language. It is sensitizing our students to the importance of dialogue especially with students from other schools. It is important that the students in Jewish day schools meet with students from non-Jewish schools to discuss issues of language and meaning today concerning antisemitism.

What I have talked about here is four or five of the challenges that we face today in Holocaust education. I think we have about one hundred more to speak about. But we have to save that for another day.

Thank you very much.