

How much knowledge about the Holocaust is too much for students? How early is too early to begin to teach about the event? How do we find the correct balance between teaching about the atrocities and teaching about Jewish agency? Two graduate students from the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration debate these and other pedagogical questions in the following pages. We welcome your responses to the points of view they put forward.

Point/Counterpoint

Joshua Levy

The Necessity of Darkness: The Pedagogic Imperative to Teach About the Death Camps

The Holocaust, as a historical event, is most extreme. The opposing phenomena of cruelty and kindness have never before been so clearly documented in such shocking ways. Good and evil assume their purest meanings when we examine the story of the European Jews living and dying in the years leading up to, and including, the era of World War II. Indeed, the Holocaust embodies extremes, and often, for teachers, it is difficult to find the balance in presenting the nuances of every aspect of life during this time. It is a struggle, teachers find, to insert uplifting moments, because such minimal goodness is vastly overshadowed by the horror. Yet struggle they do, for the sake of their students' sensibilities and perhaps also for the sake of their own emotional well-being.

"The vexing challenge that confronts us," Lawrence L. Langer (1978) noted, is "to be in touch with the intolerable, and to remain psychologically whole" (p. xiii). "I suppose," he writes 20 years later, "given the history of our indecent century, the impulse to defend the human species must surface periodically as ballast against the darker view" (Langer, 1998, p. 5).

Today's teachers confirm this need to push back against the darkness. "In the years that I have been teaching about the Holocaust," Daniel Meyer (2008) writes in his teacher's guide to Bernard Gotfryd's "A Chicken for the Holidays":

I have come to believe that students must come away from such study with a sense that the Holocaust was not merely a horrible display of man's inhumanity, a litany of atrocities to be examined with morbid fascination and used to inform future generations of the need to be vigilant against evil's insidious and relentless search for will-

ing recruits. It was also the canvas upon which ordinary people painted the story of their tenacious wish to live, love, and celebrate their family and their faith, to preserve all that they held dear. (p. 168)

Surely, this is true. There is much positive behavior to note throughout lessons on the Holocaust: the small kindnesses Jews showed one another despite their own desperate privations; friendships forged among the condemned; acts of resistance and sacrifice documented in ghettos and camps throughout Eastern Europe, including strenuous attempts to adhere to Jewish law; and, of course, the remarkable and notable, if limited, actions of the Righteous Gentiles, who risked their and their families' lives to save Jews.

However, at its core, the Holocaust was a wholly negative and dark period in history. One cannot gloss over the essence of the evil perpetrated in our need to establish the fact that good also existed. This perspective, if too heavily emphasized, risks falsely skewing students' understanding of the Holocaust and its essential bleakness. Allowing a student to think that the Holocaust contained good and bad in equal measure is both ahistorical and a gross injustice to those who were its victims. Responsibility is the key here: responsibility to memory, to the survivors, to the students, and to ourselves. As difficult as it may be to teach about the violent and anguished extremes of the Jewish experience in the ghettos, the forests, and in hiding; and in the transit, concentration, and death camps, a treatment of the Holocaust without their discussion is disingenuous. "To ignore the intolerable, as if death by atrocity were an aberration and not a crucial fact of our mental life, is to pretend an innocence that history discredits and statistics defame" (Langer, 1978, p. xiii).

Of course, of importance to this discussion are the qualifications of age-appropriateness: what, when, and how much; and if certain things should be taught at all to anyone but the Holocaust scholar. However, such considerations play themselves out in all aspects of Holocaust pedagogy and should not be taken as insurmountable obstacles here, where we are addressing teachers of students in grades 11, 12, and beyond. It is obvious that young adults of such ages are already exposed to vicarious violence, atrocity, and gore through the media and other cultural phenomena and, tragically, through our very real life experiences. To quote Langer (1978) again, "The facts of recent history have destroyed much of the sustenance that once fed our conceptions of human dignity" (p. xii). To teach high school juniors and seniors and university students about the realities of the conditions and actions in concentration and death camps may not desensitize them, as some may purport, or force them away from further study, but may rather, in fact, attune them to what they may have hitherto mistaken as mere exaggeration.

CLASSROOM OBJECTIVES

In an effort to narrow the scope of the lessons possible in a unit on this subject, I suggest four specific areas of focus for four separate lessons, taught perhaps over the course of a four-period unit but further condensed or expanded as necessary. Certainly, no two classroom conditions are identical, and some basic assumptions, such as the grade level, must always be made in teaching guides such as this. The areas are:

1. Historical context
2. Literary analysis
3. Comparisons
4. Thought-provoking questioning; Conclusions

Historical Context

In placing this section first, I recognize that I am taking a side in the debate over which to teach first: the narrative or historical context. I believe that I am acknowledging the sensitivity of the subject with the assertion that the history *should* be taught first. Concerns that the "excitement" or "suspense" of the story may be sacrificed when the students "know too much" beforehand fall by the wayside when dealing with the concentration and death camps. A proper framework *must* be established when discussing and teaching this darkest of times. It is incumbent upon the teacher to be knowledgeable about the history of the camps, with time spent on research and much thought on pedagogy before ever broaching this topic. The teacher must *always* know considerably more than the students: *always*.

That said, what must be conveyed to the students is decidedly not everything, and no one high school teacher would have the time or the knowledge base to do so. You

might start in the early 1930s with Hitler's rise and the establishment and maintenance of the camps as prisons for political dissidents such as outspoken journalists or Communists. Increasingly, then, the camps became places to hold certain social "undesirables," such as homosexuals, trade unionists, Gypsies, mentally handicapped, and others who did not follow or support the Nazi party platform. The genocidal extermination of the Jews as the central purpose of the camps did not arise until later. With the beginning of the Second World War, as more and more "undesirables" came under the rule of Hitler's Germany (namely, Jews in Poland after its takeover), more and more camps were established to hold them.

By mid-1941, though, the SS had begun a small, soon-to-be-expanded program of selected mass killings in the camps themselves by means of gassing. By November of that year, camps specifically designed for that purpose began to be set up (the first was Chelmno; others were Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau). Using different methods of execution, the Einsatzgruppen A, B, C, and D had already murdered 300,000 Jews by December 12, 1941; in January of 1942, at the Wannsee Conference, the planned genocide of the Jews as the Final Solution was established as official Nazi policy, and the mass murder of the Jews began in earnest. The horrors of the Einsatzgruppen, gas vans, gas chambers, and crematoria need not be overemphasized, but they should be addressed, as should the inhumane conditions in the camps, including starvation diets, forced labor, humiliations, tortures, random beatings and murders, and the various forms of occasionally extreme Jewish compliance.

Good teachers are aware of the sensitivities of their students; certainly, one should not push students to face this history in *all* its horrific detail. A general discussion, though, is essential. Clearly, more or less detail depends on several factors, not the least of which is the time allotted for this unit of study as well as the context—that is, if this is a history class or a literature, humanities, religion, or psychology class. For those who choose the more detailed approach, there are hundreds of reputable resources, easily found and explored online. A few are:

<http://remember.org/camps>—A poignant database of pictures of some of the camps.

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cc.html>—A wealth of organized and outlined information about the camps.

<http://fcit.usf.edu/HOLOCAUST/resource/resource.html>—A site dedicated to pedagogic materials including maps, video clips, primary source materials, and relevant links.

<http://www.pbs.org/auschwitz/40-45/index.html>—A unique site and resource analyzing the specifics of the Auschwitz death camp.

Literary Analysis

From my experience, the straightforward history of the time must be illustrated by literary narrative, which, with its intimate and personal portrayals of specific occurrences and encounters, gives students the ability to relate in more profound ways to the grim circumstances and realities of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel's (1968) "Yom Kippur: The Day Without Forgiveness" for example, is the quintessence of the kind of narrative most appropriate to be taught. It conveys the atmosphere and conflicts intrinsic in the dire situation of its protagonists in very real ways, yet the situation it depicts, while dreadful, does not contain the potentially objectionable, vividly graphic content of other such accounts. Wiesel has mastered the difficult form that is Holocaust literature, offering us truth with a sensitivity that makes its inherent trauma bearable.

As the class begins analysis of the assigned story, the teacher would have decided on appropriate goals, rationale, assessment opportunities, including writing assignments; and methodology, including vocabulary guides, reading prompts, and discussion questions that elicit both affective and cognitive responses, such as:

1. Based on what we have learned in history texts, in what ways do you think this story accurately portrayed the lives of those in the camps?
2. What emotions does this story evoke from you, the reader?
3. What do you think were the intentions of the author in writing this story?

You might also ask students to choose and explain the two or three passages that represent to them the heart of the story.

Comparisons

Students will compare several stories on the same subject to analyze what and how they learned most effectively from each. (A wealth of such stories is available; additional choices might include Cynthia Ozick's [1980, 1993] "The Shawl" as well as "The Verdict" and "Friendly Meetings," both by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk [1985].) They may also reflect on the different understandings they gained from literary narrative and history texts.

Thought-Provoking Questioning; Conclusions

Increasingly, classroom methodology has been focusing more and more on the benefits of involving the students in classroom decisions (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Hardin, 2007). As such, this final section, though ipso facto, revolves around student debate over the validity of teaching this material. Just as teachers may debate if and how to teach about the death camps, so, too, can involving the students in such discussions be healthy and productive. Such conversa-

tion allows each learner to share and elicit validation for his or her feelings and also offers possibilities for expression of individual coping and learning styles.

Some follow-up questions:

1. Do you think the workings of the concentration and death camps should be taught in high schools? Is there anyone to whom this should *not* be taught?
2. What value is to be gained by learning the details of the death camps? Is there such a thing as too much when it comes to teaching such material?
3. Is memory enough of a motive to learn something? Are there also lessons to take away?
4. What responsibilities do we, as teachers and students, have to the victims/survivors?
5. What are alternative ways to learn this material?

CONCLUSION

There are few subjects as sensitive as the Holocaust, and no portion of that time in history is more delicate and difficult to teach than that of the concentration and death camps. As educators who endeavor to teach this material, we need not deny the difficulty of our task. Indeed, we should share our apprehension with the students and involve them in the discussion and debate over the value and the depth of the teaching of this aspect of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is vivid on our historical map. To not teach it would be a grave injustice. To teach its full horror would be a nightmarish experience not appropriate or possible to be shared in the average classroom. Yet as we strive to honor and memorialize those who suffered at the bloodied hands of the perpetrators, we must find a way—a sensitive way—to confront and to teach at least some of its grimmest truths, savage as they might be.

"Auschwitz must and will forever remain a question mark only," Wiesel (1997) wrote. The death camps are unending question marks, but questions about them should be rightfully asked nonetheless. What happened in them? Why did it happen? How could it have happened? What does it all mean? These are questions that the teacher of a class on the Holocaust will undoubtedly face. If, through the foregoing teaching, the student has walked away with nothing but an appreciation for those questions—a sense of the heartbreaking impossibility that was the Holocaust—then we will have done our duty. ■

JOSHUA LEVY is a recent graduate of Yeshiva College with a BA in history. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Jewish education from Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration and a rabbinical degree from Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. To contact the author please e-mail josh5621@aol.com