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Point:

Emily Amie Witty

The Obligation to Teach the Light:

A Response to Joshua Levy's "The Necessity of Darkness: The Pedagogic Imperative to Teach About the Death Camps"

I recall vividly my 11th-grade Holocaust education experience when I was a student in an all-girls yeshiva high school. As my classmates and I entered the ballroom where all large gatherings and assemblies were held, each of us— young, unsuspecting, and unprepared—found a seat facing a giant movie screen. The lights dimmed, and then before my eyes came images that seared and burned my soul and numbed my thoughts. The story of the Holocaust unfolded shockingly through images of haunted and wandering skeletal figures staring with empty eyes into the narrating camera. I felt no sympathy for them or anyone in the film; I could make no sense of what I was seeing or why I had to see it. Corpses were stacked in rigid piles; bodies, naked and unburied, lay sprawled in the pits where they had been tossed. As the photographs filled the screen, I felt no connection to the ghastly scenes; I instinctively shut my eyes to block them, and I kept my eyes closed tightly and hid my face for the remainder of the film. I countered the grim factual narration by whispering to myself, "What is this evil that has been thrust upon me? Why are my teachers subjecting me to this?"

Today, an educator myself, I reflect on the motivation of my teachers then, and I confess that there is a part of me that understands. I, too, have the urge to show all the evils that were done to us, the Jews. There is a part of me that feels so victimized and yes, angry, that I also want to scream the suffering of my people to the entire universe. I want to thrust before the eyes of the world the images that I was forced to view as a teenager and have my story, the story of the Holocaust, seen, heard, felt, and understood. I want others to not only witness but also somehow to experience viscerally the horror and trauma of those ghastly and tragic figures whose eyes met mine on that screen. I understand the Holocaust educator who says about his complacent 10th-graders, "I simply want the words to burn their comfortable souls and leave them scarred for life" (Thorton, 1990).

I understand the feeling, but I reject it. Precisely because I *am* a teacher, and one who teaches the story of the Holo-

caust, I am committed to ensuring that no students of mine will ever be turned away from learning about this history the way I was. Thus I have spent the last number of years in Jerusalem and in New York learning both the history and the pedagogy of the Holocaust and have been privileged to learn from giants in both fields. I have come to understand that trying to teach about the Holocaust by using media and methods that serve to transfer to our unsuspecting students our own adult outrage and anger about what happened cannot and does not help new learners embrace this study and seek to learn more. It did not work for me when I was a teenager because I was shocked and appalled and repelled; it does not work today. Psychologically, it cannot work, because learners do not seek out pain; they turn away. If they are burned and scarred by the fire, they will not return to touch it again. Teaching the darkness from beginning to end is a model doomed to fail.

I feel compelled, therefore, to respond to several points in Joshua Levy's (2009) pedagogic editorial in this issue, in which he makes the case for "the necessity" to teach the darkness. Levy begins with his concern that teachers, unable or unwilling to confront the realities of the concentration and death camps, will instead distort the history and focus too heavily on a few moments of goodness. He warns, correctly:

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. (p. 70)

He continues, "The horrors of the... gas chambers and crematoria need not be overemphasized, but they should be addressed, as should the inhumane conditions in the camps, including a starvation diet, forced labor, humiliations, tortures, random beatings and murders" (p. 71). He suggests that the lessons commence with a historical overview, beginning with Hitler's rise to power. "You might start in the early 1930s with Hitler's rise and the establishment and maintenance of the camps as prisons," he writes (p. 71).

I agree that one must teach the historical events of the Holocaust; in the absence of this information, there can be no meaningful conversation with students. However, I disagree with Levy's suggested starting point and propose instead the centrality of teaching about Jewish life before Hitler: the vibrant Jewish communities of Eastern and Western Europe, the yeshivot and centers of Torah learning, the contribution of Jews to the arts, music, and science of the time. Levy suggests that the focus of teaching should be on

Hitler and his collaborators, and by so doing, he brings the darkness quickly and decisively into the classroom. I believe that we should teach first about the Jews—an element of "light"—and only then about their oppressors. I submit that it is only the elements of light in the blinding darkness of the Holocaust that enables one to be able to see and confront the suffering, despair, and anguish of this historical event. As Holocaust historian and museum curator Yitzchak Mais teaches, we must tell the story through the Jewish narrative and not the Nazi narrative.

Levy seems to suggest as well that if we do not talk about the horrors of the gas chambers, then our students won't be able to grasp fully or appreciate the suffering of the Jews. Yet there can be little doubt about the suffering endured by the Jews long before Auschwitz and Treblinka. There is the suffering of the German Jew whose business was boycotted by those who were his neighbors and friends, who had his long-standing German citizenship revoked, who watched as his children were first humiliated in, and then expelled from, their schools. There is the anguish of the German and Austrian Jews who endured Kristallnacht, who were interned in camps, who had to make the "choicelless choice" of the Kindertransport. There is the mortification of the Polish Jews whose beards were torn from their flesh on public streets by laughing, taunting Poles and the fear and despair of the Jews forced into ghettos. There is the terror of the Jews throughout Europe who were rounded up and deported or forced to seek hiding places. Levy seems to say that our students will comprehend the evil of Nazism only if we expose them to the Nazi terror of the years 1941–1945. Is the terror against the Jews during the years of 1933–1941 somehow insufficiently evil for students to get the point?

When I reflect on my educational philosophy, I remember that I teach children first and foremost; only secondarily do I teach the subject of the Holocaust. In the same vein, the Holocaust, first and foremost, is a story of individual men, women, and children; only secondarily is it history, a collection of facts and figures. It is with this principle in mind that I approach my classroom, and this principle informs my choice to tell the history through the voices and stories of the Jews rather than the perpetrators.

This widespread depiction of Jews as innocent but passive victims presents a fundamentally skewed picture of what was a far more complex and nuanced situation, and prevents people from viewing the behavior of Jews during the Holocaust in a positive light. (Mais, 2007, p. 18)

If we do not present Jews as active participants in their own history, and if we do not allow our students the time, space, and security to explore the extent of the evil according to their cognitive and emotional capacity and tolerance

at their own pace and in their own way, *then* we risk skewing the history. We owe it to our students to teach the “more complete perspective [that] will reveal that Jews were not passive victims, but active agents who responded with a surprisingly wide range of resourceful actions” (Mais, p. 18). This teaching does not in any way negate the Nazi net that ensnared European Jewry—quite the opposite. Through learning about the responses and actions of the Jews, students begin to understand for themselves the challenges and hardships that confronted the Jews under Nazi occupation.

Levy appropriately suggests the inclusion of narratives, and he recommends Elie Wiesel's “Yom Kippur: The Day Without Forgiveness,” for example, as “the quintessence of the kind of narrative most appropriate to be taught” (p. 77). While one might argue that the story does show Jews “responding”—in this case, refusing to fast for Yom Kippur—the overriding depiction here is of suffering, martyred, despairing Jews, victims of the Nazis rather than active agents. Here and all too often, our default position is to choose narratives that depict Jews as passive recipients of Nazi cruelty.

In addition, as educators we must always consider our audience and the background knowledge and experience they bring into our classroom. Any child familiar with the holidays on the Jewish calendar knows that the Jewish people have been the target of persecution and repeated attempts at annihilation. Students are keenly aware of the strength and voice of the perpetrator in history. What the student has yet to be exposed to is *the strength and the voice of the Jew* in history. Thus it is critical to teach Jewish agency, particularly for Jewish students. As Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer (1973) suggested:

A Jew seeking to understand what his Jewishness means must take into account his people's greatest catastrophe. He must ask himself, for example: How did the values and attitudes to which I am heir stand up under the most terrible test in history? (pp. 55–56)

With the rise of the Nazi Party, “Jews *responded* [emphasis mine] to what they perceived to be a brutal—but temporary—situation” (Mais, 2007, p. 19). As the anti-Jewish legislation isolated the Jews from their German neighbors and Jews were no longer permitted to go to German schools or play on German sports teams, Jews created their own schools and teams. They did not simply accept the status quo; they made choices and were active agents in their history. A glimpse into Jewish life during the period of their imprisonment in ghettos reveals a vibrant and flourishing network of communal activities. Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1976) writes:

Despite the attempts of the Germans to impose a state of barbarism upon them, the Jews persisted in maintain-

ing or in re-creating their organized society and their culture. ...In nearly all the ghettos, the Jews conspired against the Germans to provide themselves with arts, letters, and society—above all, with the protection of the community against man's solitariness and brutishness. Never was human life suspended. (p. 327)

Too often the only voice brought into the history classroom in general and the Holocaust classroom in particular, is that of the perpetrator. We hear the voices of Adolf Hitler and Adolf Eichmann but not the voices of Yocheved Farber, a four-year-old from Vilna; or Moshe Flinker, a teenager from the Netherlands. Neither Yocheved nor Moshe survived the Holocaust; we owe it to them and the millions of others who did not survive to bring the Jewish voice to our students. We owe it to the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, husbands, and wives that the Nazis murdered to let *their* voices be heard and remembered. To do anything less is to condemn them to a second death.

As Holocaust educators—as educators of children—we must practice responsibly. We must resist the urge to show violent images in an attempt to take a shortcut to elicit a quick visceral response from our students and to provoke them to feel our pain and rage. Instead, we need to develop the resources, skills, and emotional resilience to present this history in an age-appropriate way with the goal of cultivating within our students the desire to learn more about this chapter in human history. ■

EMILY AMIE WITTY is Director of Instructional Improvement for the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York (BJENY). She is the author of the Holocaust curriculum *It Is My Business: Selected History from 1933–1945* (BJENY, 2005). She is a doctoral student at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University and research assistant for *PRISM*. To contact the author e-mail ewitty@yu.edu

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Counterpoint:

Joshua Levy

Finding the Right Proportion:

A Response to Emily Amie Witty's Response

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Emily Amie Witty's comments about my editorial. I'll begin with her personal anecdote—an admittedly powerful and important example of the potential dangers of teaching the darkness. The progression of her article implies that were the Holocaust to be taught in the way I suggest, it would mirror the experience she had in her adolescence.

Witty, however, has interpreted my statements as an either/or scenario. I insist that the horror be taught, ergo I insist that *only* the horror be taught. She takes issue with my examples in a potential lesson of the historical context of the death camps, implying that my entire Holocaust curriculum is contained therein. Yet I mention explicitly that the good must be taught as well: "There is much positive behavior to note throughout lessons on the Holocaust" (p. 70).

My suggesting the death camps as crucial components of a unit of study was certainly not to say that they should be taught to the exclusion of everything else; rather, I maintain that everything else should not and cannot be taught to the exclusion of the camps. My article is titled "The Necessity of Darkness," not "The Necessity of *Only* the Darkness." I urge readers to rebalance the classrooms that have skewed the Holocaust too far toward the redeemable. I would surely not do so only to have the scales unevenly tip in the other direction. Yet Witty asserts that not only would I have a teacher present the bad to the exclusion of the good, but I would also insist on teaching the camps to the exclusion of the rest of the bad. "Yet there can be little doubt about the suffering endured by the Jews long before Auschwitz and Treblinka" (p. 74), she writes, as if I would deny it.

Witty agrees that the Holocaust should be taught through the lenses of individual people and acknowledges my emphasis on narrative and the personal stories contained therein, but she rejects the specific narrative I chose in spite of my stated reason: Wiesel "offer[s] us truth with a sensitivity that makes its inherent trauma bearable" (p. 72). When she implies that my methods would "not allow our students the time, space, and security to explore" the Holocaust "at their own pace and in their own way" (pp. 74–75), she does not

recognize that I do qualify lessons based on age-appropriateness and other such markers of emotional maturity, directly addressing such concerns through my suggestion that Holocaust educators involve their students in discussions of Holocaust pedagogy in the classroom itself.

Witty suggests that I speak in absolutes, and in doing so, engage in a disservice to the very goals I wish to accomplish. I wonder if Witty does the very same when she writes that it is her "choice to tell the history through the voices and stories of the Jews rather than the perpetrators" (p. 74). Her outlook on Holocaust education is an either/or statement—Jews or Nazis—and she has chosen. I wonder if Witty would respond to this by asserting that she, too, did not mean to say the above to the exclusion of everything else; that, of course, we must endeavor to explore every aspect of the Holocaust without improperly skewing the nature of the era; and that, as educators, we seek to avoid absolutes. In that case, perhaps, there is little fundamental difference between us after all. ■