

“Here There Is No Why”: Holocaust Education at a Lubavitch Girls’ Yeshivah

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ABSTRACT

Based on research conducted within a Lubavitch girls’ yeshivah in the United States, this article describes in detail how the Holocaust was taught and learned about in an eighth grade, secular studies classroom. The article describes the yeshivah, its site and students, and the teacher and the unit she taught. Special attention is given to the meaning the students made of their learning. The article concludes by arguing that the Shoah was rendered mysterious in this classroom, that the teaching of history was compromised, and that both the students’ historical understandings and religious growth opportunities were shortchanged in the process.

Key words: Lubavitch, yeshivah, Holocaust, education

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi narrates this vignette: “Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle, but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. ‘*Warum?*’ I asked in my poor German. ‘*Hier ist kein warum*’ [Here there is no why], he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.”¹ Claude Lanzmann, in a brief manifesto on the representability of the Holocaust, adopted the language of that SS guard: “There is indeed an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding [the Holocaust],”² Lanzmann elaborated, writing that the Nazi’s motto was, in a sense, his own:

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“There is no why”: this law is also valid for whoever assumes the charge of such a transmission. Because the act of transmitting alone is important and no intelligibility, that is, no true knowledge, preexists the transmission. It is the transmission that is knowledge itself. . . . [There can be] no why, but also no response to the refusal of why under the penalty of instantly reinscribing oneself in the aforementioned obscenity.³

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Whether the attempt to understand the act itself or the presumption of doing so are equally “obscene” to Lanzmann is unclear. Regardless, for him, the “project of understanding” is futile vis-à-vis the Holocaust. The Holocaust is ineluctably unintelligible, simultaneously a hideous inversion and an example of romantic notions of the sublime.

Commenting on this rhetoric, Dominick LaCapra has explained that Lanzmann is enforcing “a displaced secular religiosity,” whereby he is “sacraliz[ing] the Holocaust” and “surround[ing] it with taboos.”⁴ The fact that Lanzmann trades in “absolutes” as quasi-commandments alone points to what LaCapra considers his “prophetic mode.” Not only does Lanzmann “affirm a *Bilderverbot*, or prohibition on images, . . . [but] he also insists on what might be called a *Warumverbot*, or a prohibition on the question of why.”⁵ It is as though Lanzmann’s over-identification with Holocaust victims keeps him from claiming or understanding the event even *ex post facto*. As LaCapra explicates, “in the case of perpetrators, understanding might mitigate condemnation”—a possibility that Lanzmann rejects outright.

Like Lanzmann, numerous authors have elaborated the discourse of the Holocaust’s unintelligibility, expounding on the Shoah’s unspeakability, unimaginability, and fundamental unknowability.⁷ As Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes have written, a “trope of unrepresentability . . . has dominated Holocaust studies since Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.”⁸ Few, however, have considered the disciplinary limitations of such a theoretical position. The stance of unintelligibility may work for literary theorists and cultural critics, but it hardly aids educators. What might it mean, for example, to teach *toward* unintelligibility? Can one teach despite, through, or with a *Warumverbot*? What would that look like in practice? And, most important, perhaps, what moral outcomes might such teaching enact?

When I set out to study the teaching of the Holocaust at a Lubavitch girls’ yeshivah in the Midwestern United States, I was not aware, naïvely perhaps, that a *Warumverbot* could serve as a pedagogical platform. I knew that any yeshivah would value religious education over secular education. Indeed, as Yoel Finkelman has written about ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) boys’ education, “The yeshivah . . . grants students competence in the vast and highly complex world of Talmud and Rab-



binic literature, while depriving them of systematic general or vocational education that might help them succeed outside of a rabbinical profession.⁹ I knew, too, that yeshivah educations prepare boys and girls differently, given the different roles expected of each in the future.¹⁰ And I was aware that the Holocaust has become increasingly important as a curricular topic in haredi schools in the last few years. As Menachem Freidman has written, haredi interest in the Holocaust has become “almost obsessive” in the past few decades.¹¹ In 2001, as a mark of that interest, Torah Umesorah, the largest Orthodox Jewish school network, published a large compendium outlining goals, resources, and reasons, as the title states, for “teaching *Churban* Europa to our children.”¹² Mistakenly, I had assumed that, precisely because the Holocaust has become important to ultra-Orthodox Jews generally, it would be taught about in human terms. After all, the Jews, Germans, Sinti, Roma, people with disabilities, Communists, and other groups involved in this history were all human beings. But, as LaCapra insinuates, at a Lubavitch yeshivah “religiosity” is not “displaced” since sacralization is a primary goal of education. To offset such institutional biases, I specifically sought a yeshivah where the Holocaust was taught about in the context of secular studies rather than within religious studies. I also specifically sought out a teacher who had been state-certified to teach history. These conditions, I hoped, would enable the teacher, at least potentially, to challenge the students’ religiously driven understandings of the world.¹³

Completed in 2004, the study was part of a larger comparison of how different fundamentalist schools “emplot” the Holocaust¹⁴ to serve sociological ends such as communal boundary maintenance. Much research has documented modern Hasidism, its sociological innovativeness, the nature of its communities, individuals’ pathways within them, haredi usages of Yiddish, the contours of sex roles and gender identities, and even early socialization rituals.¹⁵ To date, however, very little research investigates the secular curriculum within ultra-Orthodox schools, specifically ultra-Orthodox uses of history and historiography.¹⁶ By examining the teaching of the Holocaust at a Habad girls’ yeshivah, my study begins to address that gap.

I became interested in Holocaust education at religious schools after studying Holocaust education in public schools. My prior work had revealed that, in American public high schools, as in other public arenas, the Holocaust is in some ways “Americanized”—that is, when actually taught, Holocaust content is molded to fit particularly American master narratives, even at the expense of its historical integrity.¹⁷ The representation of the Holocaust in the enacted curriculum, in

other words, may bear only slight resemblance to its historical referents. In one case, for example, a teacher taught the Holocaust as a story primarily about (rugged) individuals facing obstacles and overcoming adversity—the American mythos of individual agency—rather than as a story about people constrained in their choices by the constellations of historical circumstance.¹⁸ This teacher’s “American” cultural mold channeled the Holocaust into a pathway that not only emphasized individualism but also lauded heroism as individual accomplishment and that required redemption, constructing the Holocaust and post-Holocaust worlds as universally accessible, equivalently insufferable, and teleologically driven toward moral triumph. Some of the devout students in that public school study piqued my interest in the religious master narratives that framed their learning.

In the present study, I was interested in how religious and “American” master narratives interacted, if at all. How might students who believed in divinely driven history, for example, understand human perpetrators? When would contingency trump eschatology and vice versa? Despite an expanding literature on the nature of collective memory—its multiplicity, dynamism, and eclecticism, and its crystallization in particular monuments and moments¹⁹—the role of religious narratives in orchestrating individual teachers’ and students’ historical understanding is still underdeveloped.²⁰ As Sam Wineburg has pointed out, studies of collective memory tend to be oriented toward its production rather than its reception.²¹

Methodologically, I generated data for the case study by observing and tape-recording the entirety of a three-month Holocaust unit. I interviewed the teacher before and after the unit and followed the students’ reactions throughout. The students were selected for their adherence to the school’s faith orientation—in (the famous educational ethnographer) Alan Peshkin’s terminology, they were “believers” rather than “scorners.”²² Each participating student was interviewed individually. The data sources thus included transcribed class sessions, interviews, collected curricular materials, written field notes, and copies of all student work. Using techniques from grounded theory,²³ the transcriptions were coded for emergent categories of meaning. From them, I rendered a portrait of the religious master narratives at play and an interpretation of how they contributed to students’ understandings of the Holocaust.²⁴

In this article, I first describe the Lubavitch girls’ yeshivah, its site, and students. I then describe the teacher and the Holocaust unit she taught. Interspersed throughout are quotations from interviews with the girls that highlight their interpretations of the material and their

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experience of the curriculum. To close, I discuss the case in terms of its moral trade-offs. Specifically, I examine how the Warumverbot functioned and with what results.

Lubavitch Girls' Yeshivah

Lubavitch Girls' Yeshivah²⁵ has a single entrance: a side door to a low-slung building, angled inauspiciously and mostly obscured by bushes. A video camera is perched conspicuously over the door so that visitors can be screened and allowed (or disallowed) entry. Habad pays rent to a conservative Jewish congregation with a dwindling membership in order to house their school in the building, but the paucity of the owners' resources is betrayed by its decrepitude. Holes pockmark the hallway walls. The desks are old. The classrooms are cramped. Signs in the bathroom stalls warn the girls not to flush too frequently lest they jam the plumbing. And, though the congregation is thankful for the school's support, the strained relations between the organizations show up symbolically. In the single room that houses the library, the congregation's books are neatly arranged along one wall, peering out of locked, glass-fronted cabinets. The other three walls contain the Lubavitch girls' books, in disarray on mismatched shelves, some with covers barely attached, others practically hanging off the ledges.

The girls attend the school from eight o'clock in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon. Their days are packed, predictably so. In a typical day, as one of the girls described it:

I come to school, and there's a uniform. Right away, we do, like we learn, we read different inspiring things before we *doven* [pray], like a story, and we say different things, . . . *Tanya* [wisdom offerings]. And then we daven and then we learn *Humash* [Bible], and afterwards we learn different *halakhos* [religious laws], like different laws and the explanation of it and where it comes from, and different leniencies [loose or flexible legal interpretations] and specifications about it. . . . And in between we have recess and then lunch. Then we have English, and afterwards we learn *Nivayim*, the Prophets, and go through the kings of Jewish history, and then we learn some Hebrew. Actually, first we daven *minhah* [recite the afternoon prayers].

The girls in the class I am observing can be roughly divided into two groups, following Stephanie Wellen Levine's (2003) classification. The more observant girls, the ones Levine identified as "chassidishe," always kissed the mezuzah on the doorjamb, plainly, modestly, in earnest.

These girls, in accordance with the strictest dictates of Hasidism, did not “call undue attention to [their] bodie[ies]”²⁶ and would never compromise the integrity of ritual commandments. These were the girls whose skirts were at or exceeded regulation length, who never wore long socks instead of tights, and who tended not to have pierced ears or flashy glasses. Many of these girls were the daughters of *hozrim bitshuvah*, parents who had adopted Hasidic lifestyles rather than being raised with them. By contrast, the “normal” girls—a self-designation—made up the majority of the class and were prone to “lively, impish”²⁷ behavior. To these girls, “the thrill of social popularity [was] more immediate and tangible than the subtle rewards of spiritual refinement.”²⁸ These girls tended to kiss the mezuzah with a sweep of the arm, their hands just grazing their lips with stiff fingers as though they were featured in a Virginia Slims advertisement.

Whether “chassidische” or “normal,” however, the Lubavitch girls seemed to me to have mainly three operative modes during class time: giggling, arguing, and concentrating—with concentration being the least well represented. The girls constantly interrupted both the teacher and each other; they were full of energy and were completely at ease there, the result of a comfort bred through intimacy. Most of the girls in this class had attended the same school since kindergarten, and there was only one class of girls per grade. In addition, a third of the students roomed near the school because their families did not live locally, so this school functioned not only symbolically but actually as a home for them. Although there were some religious divisions in the school, because not all the girls were Lubavitch (and, of those who were, not all were *Meshikhist*)²⁹ the girls themselves did not experience these divisions as important. For the most part, they felt satisfied with the school and glad to be in a basically like-minded environment. As Rochel³⁰ explained during my interview with her:

Simone: Do you like this school?

Rochel: I like it. I think it’s a good school.

Simone: What do you like about it?

Rochel: The atmosphere, um, I don’t know, the point of views people have.

Simone: Do you feel like people have very different points of view?

Rochel: Not very different, I don’t think. Maybe some of them do, but they’re pretty much all the same sided.

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The Teacher and the Students

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Mrs. Glickman had been teaching at Lubavitch Girls' Yeshivah for "a long time—longer than you've been alive," as she told me. She originally began teaching there because she was seeking part-time work, and the schedule suited her. She could teach two hours at the girls' school, two at the boys' school, and both were near her home. She identified as a conservative Jew but felt completely at home in the school given that she had taught there almost long enough to be teaching the children of her first students. Because she was a strict disciplinarian, the girls recognized that they "behaved better" for Mrs. Glickman than for their other teachers. Mrs. Glickman was also the eighth grade secular studies teacher, which meant that, in addition to history, she taught math, English, and science, all within a two-hour daily block.³¹

Mrs. Glickman taught about the Holocaust not because she considered it a receptacle of moral lessons, as was often the attitude among public school teachers, but because the Shoah was a central feature of her own and her students' Jewish identities. Many of the students were related to Holocaust survivors and victims. In addition, the man responsible for making Lubavitch Hasidism into a mass movement was himself smuggled out of Hitler's Europe.³² Thus, the girls had multiple connections to the Holocaust. As one of her students explained when asked why she thought Mrs. Glickman taught about the Holocaust:

Because we're part of it, and it's important in history. It's a big effect on us, and I think, you should know about it, it's something, I think, I mean, I probably don't know a lot of things that affect somebody else's history, but also, it affects the whole world.

Most of the girls already knew about the Holocaust by the time they entered Mrs. Glickman's classroom at the beginning of the year, but the unit marked their first formal exposure to its informational terrain. "Have you learned about [the Holocaust] before Mrs. Glickman's class?" I asked each girl during our first interview. Shaina's answer was typical: "Not in like a class or anything, but yeah, I knew about it all my life, whatever. I heard about it." "Did you hear it from your family?" I asked to follow up. "I don't remember exactly, like it wasn't a surprise. I just always knew about it; it was something known." What the girls knew from their families' stories, their rebbe's history, and school rumors, however, tended to be abstract and vague rather than concrete or specific. Moreover, none of Mrs. Glickman's students had seen visual images of this atrocity or of any other. Most of the

girls did not watch television, and even those who did watch it had not been exposed to the amount of violence typically viewed by American teens.³³ Mrs. Glickman was thus careful in her teaching. While she delved into specifics, she made it a point to do so gingerly. She purposefully waited until the end of the year to begin her Holocaust unit, and she began it with a focus on rescue.

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The Beginning of the Unit

On the first day of the unit, Mrs. Glickman asked if any of the girls knew what *Schindler's List* was. "I don't really know much about it; I've just heard the name," one girl responded. The others were quiet, a mark of the success of their insulation from popular culture and other untoward influences. They began their unit by discussing Oscar Schindler and reading about Raoul Wallenberg. The focus on rescuers allowed the girls a gentle entry into the horrors of the Holocaust. Over the next few days, they read descriptions of other rescuers and narratives about those they hid, including Aristides de Sousa Mendes and the Huguenots of Le Chambon Sur Mer.³⁴

The girls were tremendously interested in these readings. They hung on every word of the short pieces, and they argued passionately about what they read. In a short description of hiding, for instance, Mrs. Glickman emphasized that Jewish children hidden with Catholic families in Vichy, France, often had to recite Catholic prayers. "Is that okay?" she asked her students. "No," Henya replied. "No, it's not," other girls declared. "They were saving their lives!" Brachi countered, yelling at Henya, flabbergasted that she could disagree. "That caused so many problems, though," another student chimed in. "It's *pikuah nefesh*," Brachi nearly exploded, citing the dictum that allows Jews to break commandments in service of saving human life. "You have to do what you have to do to stay alive!" Brachi elaborated. Later, when they read a passage about how "teenagers didn't want to leave their parents, thinking it cowardly to escape the fate of their families," the girls argued over whether Jewish teenagers in pre-war Europe resembled Jewish teenagers now. "That's so weird that they wouldn't want to leave their parents," Faige blurted out, clearly disdainful of the foreign teens. Henya countered, "You can't compare! You can't compare! They didn't have a childhood! They were more mature then." As these brief excerpts imply, in this classroom culture, argument flourished. The girls squabbled forcefully and without worry about rupturing their communal fabric. Unlike their peers in mixed-sex classrooms,

the girls at this school spoke with confidence and conviction, unafraid of controversy.³⁵

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On the second day of the unit, the girls gathered in the library to hear a survivor. Marion Lazan, author of the book *Four Perfect Pebbles* (1996), had been invited to speak. Lazan was traveling the country to address school and community groups. That day alone, she spoke in three schools, and she had worn a suit with a jacket and matching mini-skirt. Because of her nylon-coated, skin-revealing legs, Lazan was carefully stationed behind a desk before the girls were allowed to enter the room. Once introduced, Lazan spoke immaculately, as though she had memorized the script of her story. Every sentence was complete, every image, poetic. (“There were no trees, no flowers, nor did we ever see a blade of grass.”) The girls listened as Lazan described her pre-war life, Kristallnacht, her experiences at Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen, her recuperation after the war, and her immigration to the United States. Afterward, the girls peppered her with questions. In one answer, Lazan characterized her brother’s relationship to God as vexed, a revelation that startled some of the girls I interviewed later. Lazan mentioned that her brother “has a very hard time with Hashem.” This, she explained, “makes her very sad, but I do not fault him,” she added. She explained that her brother had been in the men’s section of the camps and that he “saw things and experienced things” that she had not. The girls I later spoke to understood that people may lose faith, but they lamented it all the same.

The Holocaust unit was nested within a study of German history, beginning with the formation of the Weimar Republic. Following their textbook, Mrs. Glickman or one of the girls would read aloud a paragraph or two, the teacher would check for understanding, and then the girls would answer textbook-provided questions in writing. Very little marked this section of the unit as specifically Jewish in character. Aside from the girls’ Yiddish-inflected English and their uninhibited argumentativeness, the classroom discourse seemed decidedly generic: traditionally teacher-dominated and textbook-driven. Only Mrs. Glickman’s reliance on Israel as a touchstone in discussion betrayed the site’s Jewishness. Frequently, Mrs. Glickman used Israel as a kind of illustrative commonplace, a known entity that could explain the history they were reading about. For example, when Mrs. Glickman had read about the demilitarization of the Rhineland, she asked the girls why the Versailles Treaty would include that provision. When they could not answer immediately, she explained, “It’s a security area, like Israel wants a security area.” Her assumption was that, if referenced to contemporary Israeli events, the girls would un-

derstand the historical concepts they were reading about. In this way, Mrs. Glickman encouraged the girls to elide the differences between then and there and here and now.

As the girls read the textbook passages, Mrs. Glickman's recourse to unanswerability emerged. In the following exchange, Miri read a textbook passage, prompting an inquiry from Brachi, which Mrs. Glickman's breezy retort did not answer:

Miri: "Jews comprised less than one percent of Germany's total population. They included many distinguished people who had contributed to Germany's international renown. Among them were such leading scientists as Albert Einstein. Yet Hitler and the Nazis blamed the Jews for most of Germany's problems since World War I. Like the Roman leaders who blamed Christians for their problems, Hitler used the Jews as convenient scapegoats for Germany's troubles."

Brachi: Why Jews?

Mrs. Glickman: Why not?

In this fast-paced exchange, as in many others that followed, Mrs. Glickman refused to "explain." In accord with her fundamental belief that the Holocaust is inexplicable, Mrs. Glickman did not answer Brachi. The girls, however, were not satisfied with this reply, and in a pattern that kept recurring, one or two students struggled to fill the void left by their teacher's non-answer. In this instance, Mussi fumbled to answer Brachi's question, saying:

I read a book about him [Hitler]. Because he was in Vienna or something, I don't know, and he saw Jews on the street for the first time and he grew a hatred towards them. That's why he decided to turn against them.

As was often the case in this classroom, Mussi's wording substituted Hitler for Nazis and encapsulated the institutional within the personal.³⁶ Mrs. Glickman immediately discredited Mussi's answer. "Just because he saw them on the street? Unless you can tell us something more specific than that," she said, the explanation would remain unconvincing. By this point in the year, though, the girls had learned not to push Mrs. Glickman too far, and the burble of questions subsided.

An oddly clinical discussion of Jewish disenfranchisement followed, a listing of the many rights deprived to Jews in the early years of the Nazi regime. The girls dutifully listed examples on their homework sheets, copying phrases from their textbook such as "not allowed to fly the German flag." Because the textbook was the source of their historical information, it was as if there was only room for mechani-

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cal learning in the room—at least temporarily, as long as they understood what they were being taught. As soon as they had questions, these girls never failed to ask them.

As the girls read the textbook account of Kristallnacht a few days later, Shaina asked “How could none of the Jews not have found out?” Once she knew that the assaults of that night had not been “spontaneous,” she assumed that Jews would know the Nazis’ plans and act on the information. Earlier in the week, Mrs. Glickman had explained Hitler’s being voted into office, how the German people “could have voted him down . . . could have said no to him, but . . . didn’t.” “And so,” Mrs. Glickman concluded, “as they say, the rest is history.” Brachi asked at that point, “What about the Jews?” She wanted to know how *they* voted, assuming they were part of the “German people.” Brachi clarified, “You said they didn’t go against him, what does that mean? Don’t they vote? They just voted for what he was saying even though they didn’t want him? Or, they just didn’t vote?” In Mrs. Glickman’s narrative and in the textbook account, the Jews were truly victimized. That is, they were at the mercy of German voters, German actors; they were not assumed to have participated in the Weimar Republic. “They were one percent of the population,” Mrs. Glickman replied to Brachi. “They were not enough alone to do something.” The girls, however, resisted this characterization. Just as Shaina had assumed that Jews would have found out about Kristallnacht, so Brachi assumed that Jews had participated in electing Hitler to office. To these girls, German Jews in the 1930s, like the Jews in their contemporary world, had agency, knowledge, and at least a modicum of power. By contrast, later in the unit, when they read about Japanese-Americans being interned in camps, a student asked, “What did they do to deserve that?” The girls in Mrs. Glickman’s classroom automatically identified with the Jews about whom they were reading, a connection they did not assume in regard to Japanese-Americans.

A few distinct themes became salient during the early part of Mrs. Glickman’s Holocaust unit. First, as a result of the culture of argumentation,³⁷ the students’ presentist orientations toward history surfaced. Because they thought of their religious dictates as being ahistorical or transhistorical, they could argue over whether it was “okay” for Jews in hiding to recite Catholic prayers; their investment in prayer and religious obligations trumped historical circumstances in their understandings of the Holocaust. Second, because some of the girls thought of Jewish teenagers as being basically the same across time and space, they could argue over why European Jewish teens would return to their homes. The girls’ assumptions about Jews, in other words, were person-

ally based (and similarly presentist). In most public or Christian school contexts where the Holocaust is taught, Jews are easily exoticized, but for these Hasidic girls, Jews were noticeably normalized.³⁸

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The Unit's Middle

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During the second month of the Holocaust unit, Mrs. Glickman took the girls on a field trip to their local Holocaust Center. The center was small and consisted mainly of three rooms of exhibits. The girls entered quietly and sat on the floor of the first room. There, a father and daughter team spoke about their experiences during the Holocaust. The daughter had been hidden during the war and raised, temporarily, as Catholic. The father spent the bulk of the war passing as Aryan. The girls listened with rapt attention to their stories. Then, they toured the center's exhibit. I noticed that they were staring, wide-eyed, at the most gruesome pictures, never before having seen such photographs. As we returned to the bus to head back to school, I asked the girls how they felt about the trip. "It was nice," Mirele said. Overhearing Mirele, Mrs. Glickman interrupted to correct her imperiously: "I will not let you use that word." To Mrs. Glickman, describing the trip as "nice" was sacrilege.

The bulk of Mrs. Glickman's Holocaust unit centered on the reading of a survivor's memoir, which the girls began the following week. Entitled *There Is Always Time to Die*,³⁹ the memoir chronicles the exploits of a young Polish Jew, Adam Starkopf, as he leaves home to fight in the Polish army, as he returns and takes his wife and newborn child on a daring escape from the Warsaw Ghetto, and then as they pass as "Aryans" over the next two years. The narration of the book is clipped; its plot is event-driven. Starkopf does not dwell in emotion. The girls read chapters of the memoir aloud, taking turns by paragraph. They adored this reading; when it was time to move to the next subject in their two-hour secular studies block, they would plead relentlessly with Mrs. Glickman to allow them to read "just a little more."

It is important to note that the girls did not read from the text of the book itself but from photocopies of each chapter. Mrs. Glickman did not believe in marking up books by hand, and, because there were occasional words, phrases, or entire sentences and paragraphs that needed to be censored to shield the girls from ideas deemed inappropriate, Mrs. Glickman relied on the photocopies.⁴⁰ In the first chapter of the memoir, for instance, Starkopf recounts entrapping a German officer posing as a Polish lieutenant. In the girls' photocopies, the word

“damned” in reference to Germans was blackened, with the word “stupid” handwritten above it. In later chapters, all references to desire, to God, or to the intermingling of the sexes were similarly cut out, such that some pages and a few whole chapters were missing.

The photocopied handouts from which the girls read erased any references to the wrong types of Jews—to behaviors the Lubavitch consider irreligious. The censorship, in other words, allowed the girls to imagine that Starkopf was their type of Hasidic Jew, even as they recognized that the need for censorship alone indicated he was not. Generally speaking, the girls did not seem to mind the blackened lines. In fact, when on page 55 they came upon a word they recognized should have been censored, they happily volunteered to do it themselves. “I’ve always wanted to cross something out,” remarked Miri contentedly. “What should we put in instead?” Brachi asked (to replace the offending word, “hell”). “Trouble,” Mrs. Glickman replied, modifying the suggestion with “a lot of trouble.” “A lot is better,” the girls agreed. For the most part, the girls understood and accepted the purpose of the excisions. They were engaged by the storyline and simply wanted to know what happened to Starkopf, his wife, and their baby.

As the girls read the book aloud, Mrs. Glickman would pause to explain words they were unfamiliar with or concepts she wanted them to attend to. In the very first chapters of the book, for example, Starkopf describes the invasion of Poland in 1939 and the havoc in the streets. He describes being hit in the foot by shrapnel, realizing he was wounded, and his friends’ leaving him to try to find help. “Luckily,” he wrote, his compatriots “had come upon the ambulance and the medic had helped them find me.” Mrs. Glickman paused their reading. Starkopf “uses the word ‘luck,’” she said. “We don’t necessarily think of it as luck, though; we think of it as what?” she asked the girls. “Hashem,” a few girls answered in unison. “Yes, Hashem,” Mrs. Glickman affirmed.

As they continued to read, Starkopf’s narrative grew more graphic as the machinery of persecution intensified, and the girls’ lack of prior Holocaust knowledge repeatedly revealed itself. In one passage, Starkopf depicts the process of Gestapo men murdering “Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto who had been wealthy or socially prominent” before the war. In detail that was shocking to the girls, he describes “brains” being “blown out” of heads as the victims stood in their nightclothes in front of their apartments.⁴¹ “Were they killed because there was no room?” asked one girl in the class, wondering if the overpopulation of the ghetto spurred the murderous rampage. A flurry of discussion erupted in response: “Because they were German!” Brachi yelled. “Be-

cause they were Jews!” Shaina added, exasperated. “Don’t say ‘because.’ *There was no because,*” Mrs. Glickman intoned heavily, ending the discussion. In so doing, she avowed her sense that discussion of “because”—the supplying of reasons—would be more than unnecessary, indeed almost offensive. The girls’ essentialized notions of Jews and Germans could stand. Though not exactly illustrative of a *Warumverbot*, a prohibition on asking “why,” Mrs. Glickman’s pedagogy can certainly be considered as prohibiting answers to such questions. Because God is a central actor in these students’ worldviews, asking “why” about events in history was communicated as superfluous.

As much as Mrs. Glickman attempted to deny explanation, however, the girls’ curiosity occasionally propelled her to modify the strictness of her position. In the following excerpt from classroom discussion, for example, a student asked why Hitler “hated the Jews so much,” repeating the question and thereby prompting Mrs. Glickman to circle around an answer before asserting unanswerability:

Mrs. Glickman: You’re asking why did he, giving him a reason. We talked about a scapegoat, what is a scapegoat? He needed someone to say to these people in Germany, “You’re having a hard time because of.” He needed something after the word “of.”

Shaina: If someone just came up to me and said, “all of your problems are because of blah blah.” And they don’t give me a reason, then, like I’m not gonna believe them . . .

Mrs. Glickman: Well, you’re a thinking person. Let’s hope you continue that way, and let’s hope that you don’t become prejudiced for no reason at all. When you have a whole group of people listen[ing] to a spellbinding orator, when he told you in no uncertain terms and worked himself [up] into [giving you] a good reason why you’re going to be better off [without Jews], . . . and you listen, . . . is it right? Heavens no. Did it cause terrible things to happen? Absolutely.

Shaina: There are so many people who just listened to him with no reason? How could he give no reason?

Mrs. Glickman: Do we have an answer to that? No.

Shaina’s wording in this exchange subtly echoed Mrs. Glickman’s earlier in the week. Mrs. Glickman had asked the students to compare two textbook narratives about the Holocaust, one that was extensive, the other much briefer. She had summarized the persecution they read about by saying, “The Jews who died in the Holocaust, not as victims, not as numbers, but as human beings who tried valiantly to live their lives . . . were killed for no reason at all.” Although Mrs. Glickman had been emphasizing the unjustifiability of mass murder, her remarks were

interpreted as indicating a lack of explanation for it. The consistency of her wording—“for no reason at all”—made the important distinction disappear, allowing the secular question to pass as a theological one.

In Mrs. Glickman’s classroom, in short, many different types of historical questions wound up against the wall of unanswerability, among them: why the German people followed Hitler, how religious antisemitism evolved, why racial antisemitism developed, and, ultimately, why Jews were murdered en masse. Lacking classroom-, teacher-, or document-based explanations, the girls stretched their own background knowledge to traverse the gaps.

Student Understandings

In trying to answer my interview questions, the girls struggled, reiterating the half-baked, non-explanations floated during class but knowing they had few, if any, answers. In the following interview excerpt, asked why she thought Jews were persecuted during the Holocaust, Rochel repeats what she heard from Mussi a few weeks earlier:

Rochel: I don’t know. I really don’t. I don’t think about it a lot, why especially them. I don’t know. Maybe Hitler had a personal something, he was affected by it, and wanted to target them? Maybe he had an experience that wasn’t good and he, all of sudden, didn’t like all the Jews? Maybe all the Germans did? Maybe, like they said, like they just have to blame somebody and they’re all so mad, and they [Jews] were the only ones who were just standing there? . . . I don’t really know. I don’t really have an opinion.

Simone: Why do you think it happened at all, then?

Rochel: I think something had to happen because God made it happen.

Simone: Why would God make it happen?

Rochel: That would be for His own reasons. I wouldn’t know. Nobody could ever understand that for sure.

At the end of our last interview, I asked Rochel if she had questions, if there were things she wished she understood but did not. Although I meant about my research, she answered in terms of Holocaust history. Plaintively, Rochel said, “Why it happened.” She quickly corrected herself, adding, “But it’s not like it’s going to be answered or anything. Still, I wouldn’t mind knowing why.”

Of the girls I interviewed, only Mushka supplied a tentative answer as to why Hashem may have allowed the Holocaust to occur. She began cautiously, stipulating God’s unknowability by saying, “I don’t know, He has

His reasons for doing it.” She continued, though, by offering a possible explanation: “I think the Jews went through so much more than other religions and cultures, and they’re still existing and they’re still—No matter how much you try to do that [murder them], the Jews are always going to be existing.” For Mushka, Hashem used the Holocaust as testament to both the endurance and enduring nature of the Jewish people.

Like Rochel and Mushka, the other girls I interviewed were convinced of God’s power to direct history and of the Holocaust’s inevitability. “If it had to happen, it had to happen,” Miri remarked during her interview. Unlike Rochel, however, all of the other girls supplied Jewish chosenness as the explanation that undergirded Jewish persecution. Rather than blaming assimilation, secular Jews, the advent of Reform Judaism, Zionism, Zionists, or the lack of or dedication to a Jewish homeland—all of which are common refrains in Israeli haredi materials⁴²—these girls located the root of persecution in envy. In response to the interview question “Why were Jews persecuted?,” each of the other four focus students supplied an answer that involved jealousy or difference:

They’re jealous of us, and they always know that we’re true, and they’re testing God.

That’s the one question that I ask . . . I think that people are jealous of us. We’re really lucky to be Jews, and when jealousy enters the picture I think that it’s really where the blame goes, toward the people they’re jealous of.

They thought we were different from them. That’s probably why they chose us. Everyone knows that we always . . . well, since *they’re* different, that’s why they have all these problems.

Because we’re the chosen nation and everyone’s always jealous of us, [and] the Germans weren’t normal. There’s no normal reason anybody would do that.

Mrs. Glickman did not “teach” the students that jealousy caused persecution during the Holocaust; the girls entered her class holding that belief. But the notion that the Germans were not “normal” and thus that their actions could not be “understood” had been communicated. Because Mrs. Glickman frequently espoused the idea that no explanation or combination of explanations could bolster understanding of Nazi behavior, the girls considered it beyond reason, beyond explanation, and fundamentally abnormal. As Henya explained,

I mean, this comes up all the time. Everything you hear that the Nazis did, you can just say “How” to. How could they do these things that a

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normal human being couldn't bring themselves to do? I will never understand how they did what they did.

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For the girls, this statement of incomprehension was typical and, moreover, comfortable for them. Not only did this kind of incomprehension insulate them from any commonality with the Nazis and their all-too-human behavior, but also, more generally, the discourse of incomprehensibility was one the girls often employed. They were used to thinking about God as being inscrutable, unknowable, and beyond the human capacity for reasoning. As Ayala Fader's research suggests, these girls were likely taught from a young age to accept their own lack of understanding about a whole range of topics as part of their gender socialization.⁴³ "Nobody could ever know that for sure," Rochel had said about Hashem's reasons for allowing the Holocaust to occur. In the quotation from Henya above, though, the language of incomprehensibility was being applied not to God's greatness but to Nazi brutality. The girls never conflated these topics, but an odd commensurability was implied in the equation. Though diametrically disparate and ostensible opposites—God's greatness and the Nazis' inhumanity—both were rendered unthinkable in this context, ironically comparable in their unfathomability.

Because chosenness bounded the girls' historical meaning-making, other victim groups fell out of their Holocaust narratives. When asked at the conclusion of the unit what groups were involved in Holocaust history, all of the girls supplied the answer of Jews and Nazis, Jews as victims and Nazis as perpetrators, but none could summon other groups involved. Mushka, a chassidische girl who read voraciously about the Holocaust outside of class (but, it is important to note, only Habad-sanctioned tracts about it), provided the most expansive answer of the group. Asked, "Do you know what other groups were persecuted during the Holocaust?" she answered, "Poles, I guess? Um, I don't know. Non-Aryans." In response to the same prompt, Henya told me, "I think some Blacks were, and um, people who were found hiding Jews." Although the girls had heard Mrs. Glickman mention Communists and Trade Unionists, and although they had read about "Gypsies" and the "handicapped" in their (outdated) textbook, these groups simply did not stick in their Holocaust narratives. As an explanatory rubric, chosenness provided not only the rationale for persecution but also a boundary on memory.

Because chosenness was so important to the girls, I specifically probed their understandings of Hashem. I made sure to ask each of the girls how they thought of God in relation to the Holocaust, and each

struggled to articulate the dynamics between free choice and divine determination. Feyge's reflections were representative of her peers' views:

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Feyge: I mean we know that Hashem controls everything and there are a lot of things we don't understand. So we can't question Hashem because that's just the way it is. But just to have that faith, even though I don't understand why such a bad thing could have happened and why Hashem didn't stop it, I still have a lot of questions, this is one of my questions, I just have to believe that this is what happened and I can't give up hope and my faith in Hashem.

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Simone: So it's not like Hashem—

Feyge: It's hard to say. When we believe in Hashem, it's hard to say that He made all these Jews murdered. . . . We know that even though everything is caused by Hashem, people still have free choice to do right and wrong.

Simone: So some people would say the Holocaust isn't about Hashem, it's about people doing this to other people, and not Hashem doing this; it's an example of that free choice rather than God's will.

Feyge: Right, like you could say, why did I do something bad? Well, everything is from Hashem, so I did something bad, so it's not my fault, it's Hashem's fault. But we know that we do have, we call it *be-hira* [choice, free will]. Hashem knows what we're going to choose, but He still gives us the choice to choose between right and wrong and what we're going to do. . . . He's on top of it.

Mushka's wording echoed Feyge's almost exactly: "He has the big picture. You just have to believe that. . . . You have to believe that He knows what He's doing. I mean, He does."

On the one hand, then, Hashem is "on top of it," according to these girls. Hashem is omnipotent and omniscient and has granted humans free will, *behira*. On the other hand, these girls have been taught that one simply cannot understand those who choose to perpetrate crimes; they are beyond human fathomability, like God's intentions. Thus, two tensions operate simultaneously within the classroom discourse: the first between divine determination and human agency; the second between the knowable and the unquestionable, the already known and the forever unknowable.

The End of the Unit

The end of the Holocaust unit marked the end of the school year as well as the end of the girls' stay at the school. They celebrated their graduation from Lubavitch Girls' Yeshivah with a trip to New York City, where,



among other sights, they visited 770 Eastern Parkway, the main headquarters of the Lubavitch movement, and the gravesite of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. When they returned from their trip just after Shavuot, the girls stopped reading Starkopf's book aloud. So many of them had raced ahead in their reading that Mrs. Glickman allowed them to finish the memoir by reading the photocopied installments silently at their desks. They dutifully obliged, sitting quietly as the classroom grew warmer and the air conditioner failed.

In the final weeks of the school year, the girls finished reading their textbook's coverage of World War II. They answered the accompanying questions, and each of the girls presented an oral report on an assigned topic (such as "The Battle of the Bulge"). The girls were excitable despite the seriousness of their reports; the end of the year and the impending summer vacation were too tangible to ignore. In an effort to harness the girls' attention the day after they took their final history examination, Mrs. Glickman asked the girls to go around the room and share a single reflection on their unit. "Something you like, something you didn't like, an opinion about the book: You can share anything," Mrs. Glickman prompted. Amid flashing camera bulbs and occasional bursts into song, the girls shared their reflections on both Starkopf's book and their Holocaust learning. Even Mushka, who rarely spoke in class, shared an opinion; "I liked how he [the narrator] said every time he was in trouble, he remembered that God was on our side. I liked that," she remarked shyly. "It's so amazing that they could be so unselfish, the Jews, at such a time, that they all helped each other," Brachi commented—clearly imagining that Starkopf's attempts to save the lives of his family members while in hiding extended to Jews' behaviors to all other Jews throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. "I always looked forward to eighth grade 'cause I knew that I'd learn about the Holocaust," Feyge shared. The girls continued taking turns around the circle, arguing only occasionally:

I learned just how hard it was, always in general, always worrying about each other, always trying to help each other.

I thought it was very nice that they [Starkopf and his wife] were always willing to do what they had to to teach their child about Judaism.

I thought it was good that they wanted to keep her [the child's] Judaism alive.

They didn't want her to stay alive because she was Jewish! It's because she was their daughter! They weren't even religious—I mean, they were, but they didn't go to *shul* [synagogue].

Obviously they wanted her to be Jewish, but they made sure she didn't know. If she did, it would put her at risk.

When they told her she was Jewish, and she cried about it, I thought that was interesting.

She was crying when she found out she was Jewish and she didn't want to be. Also, I agree, that before I came into this class, I didn't know as much.

You know when you hear Holocaust stories? It's always like this. This is what you imagined it to be, but sort of, you can't believe it's real. I know it's almost a cliché to say so, but like the horror upon horror of trying to stay alive when your whole family gets killed. It's hard to make it feel real.

I never heard a complete story from start to end like this one.

Yeah, you hear bits of stories and bits of stories.

Like Chayele said, you can read about it and read about it, but you can't ever imagine how it must have been. I learn more about it every year, and still I don't really understand it.

Although the girls had slipped into a serious mode, the end of their last class snapped them out of it. With only six minutes left to the secular studies block, the girls sang heartily, accompanying themselves with rhythmic clapping and cheering. They sang in appreciation of Mrs. Glickman; they sang to me; they sang for themselves. They had learned about the Holocaust, but their general optimism and the sheer joy of that last afternoon eclipsed its horrors. Their enthusiasm could not be quelled.

Reflections

Although Mrs. Glickman taught about the Holocaust during her secular studies block, she taught about it as a religious event. She did not include miraculous stories that so frequently populate Hasidic sources,⁴⁴ but her course relied on the miraculous as explanation; for much of her Holocaust curriculum, rational explanations for events were not proffered. For Mrs. Glickman, the Holocaust transcends human understanding and, as such, defies explanation—regardless of whether human action or theological issues beg explanation. “Don't say because; *there was no because,*” she had admonished the girls, encapsulating her educational philosophy in the process. In Mrs. Glickman's classroom, study of the Holocaust demanded a *Warumverbot* because the Holocaust deserves special ontological status.

That special status, however, did not position the Holocaust as the penultimate in a series of Jewish persecutions—a frequent orientation toward the Holocaust espoused in other Jewish school contexts.

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In part because the Holocaust unit sat within the secular studies rather than the Jewish Studies curriculum, the Shoah was not taught about as a modern-day magnification of Purim or Hanukkah, nor as the culmination of eternal antisemitism. Although the Lubavitch have focused much attention on the Holocaust in recent years, this teaching approach stripped the Shoah of iconic status, moving it to the margins of Jewish consciousness. In that way, too, the Shoah did not beg new philosophical questions or challenge the girls' preexisting beliefs. The girls understood the Shoah as they understood all events, through the social frameworks provided by Lubavitch Hasidism: social solidarity, mutual help and zealous piety. Their sense of security—as American haredi girls—was rooted in their dedication to divine *bitahon* [which, in a traditional Judaic conception, translates roughly as security, faith, and trust]. The Shoah, in short, sat at a strange nexus in this classroom: infused with religious mystery but also out of place amid ritualized history.⁴⁵

Although the lack of attention paid to Jewish persecution enabled these girls' positive conceptions of Jewish civilization to thrive, the special status of the Holocaust in their classroom deprived them of basic historical understandings. None of the girls at the end of their unit knew about the history of antisemitism,⁴⁶ the reasons Germans voted for Hitler, or the ways perpetrators were socialized. None could answer even basic historical questions like why the Holocaust occurred without resorting to all-encompassing theological rationales. Lubavitch eschatology filled the vacuum left by non-explanation such that the girls considered European Jews to have been persecuted because their non-Jewish neighbors envied their status as God's chosen, a religious orientation that obviated Nazi racial hierarchies.⁴⁷ Although the girls tried to understand the Holocaust—asking Mrs. Glickman many questions and pressing her for detailed answers—they left their unit sharing Mrs. Glickman's convictions. They believed that, like God's intentions, this history was and would remain incomprehensible. To these girls, the Holocaust would be rendered only in "bits of stories" without the connective tissue that might allow it, if not to "feel real," then at least to make sense.

I cannot but object to this form of teaching history. As I see it, Mrs. Glickman taught toward fundamentally narcissistic ends: she did not expand the girls' notions of others, of otherness, or even of Jewishness itself, but, following the dictates of the yeshivah, she censored the text to create the Jewish survivor in the girls' own haredi image. Moreover, in considering Nazi behavior to be abnormal, unknowable, and unable to be investigated, Mrs. Glickman fed the girls' moral ar-

rogance and religious triumphalism. Not only did the girls believe themselves to be incapable of compromising behavior, but they could not deign to discuss it even in others. The starkness of the moral divide that Mrs. Glickman etched through her deployment of the *Warumverbot* thus reified the girls' righteousness and supported their narrow-mindedness. In the process, the contingencies, complexities, and even overly simplistic explanations that sometimes masquerade as history were occluded, rendered invisible to these girls.

The advantages of this kind of teaching and this kind of belief system are obvious. Mrs. Glickman's teaching was dedicated to propagating clean lines of sympathy and knowledge: lines that bound what is known and what can be understood, who can be known and cared about. In radical opposition to what Susan David Bernstein has termed "promiscuous identification,"⁴⁸ whereby almost anyone who reads about Anne Frank identifies with her, the identification being fostered here might be called chaste, funneled, or amputated. This kind of identification provides the backbone for teaching toward fundamentalism as it renders meaningless those human acts "blackened out" or censored from the religious worldview. Mrs. Glickman's pedagogy fostered identificatory crispness, identification within strictly demarcated boundaries. The girls' predisposition to identify with European Jews and with current-day Israelis was reified and strengthened. Their predisposition to scorn the indistinguishable category of Germans/Nazis was similarly reified and strengthened. Certainly it went unquestioned.

In thinking about this relationship to the perpetrators, I was reminded of what Slavoj Žižek has termed "canned hatred." As opposed to "canned laughter," Žižek describes "canned hatred" as follows:

The Nazi executioner acting as a cold bureaucrat indifferent to the plight of his victims [is] not unlike the subject who can maintain a tired indifference towards the comedy he is watching, while the TV-set, through its soundtrack, performs the laughter for him, on his behalf.⁴⁹

Mrs. Glickman's students were taught a kind of "canned hatred," an automatic distancing, distaste, and disdain through an epistemological disposition imposed on them by the constancy of the *Warumverbot*. Mrs. Glickman's Holocaust education thus did not serve to complicate the girls' worldviews but rather to narrow their world's vistas and support its moral simplicity, religious clarity, and, ultimately, social insularity. Rather than opening up moral questions, Mrs. Glickman's pedagogy closed them down.⁵⁰

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As much as I object to this orientation toward history in general and the Holocaust in particular, it was an orientation that fit perfectly within the larger Lubavitch frame of reference. As Reb Schneerson is quoted as saying: “We cannot *explain* the Holocaust, for we are limited by the earthbound perspective of mortal understanding. As G-d says, in a prophecy of Isaiah, ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts.’”⁵¹ It seems to me especially egregious for the utter inscrutability of Hashem to be likened to the supposed incomprehensibility of the Nazis, and that is symbolically what the Warumverbot effected in Mrs. Glickman’s classroom, yet no one at Lubavitch Girls’ Yeshivah seemed concerned about the parallel. This, despite the fact that the parallelism itself obscured the line between understandable and hence condemnable human choices—behira in all its glory—and the incomprehensible and thus unknowable divine dictates. This position, it might be noted, inverts LaCapra’s stance that “understanding [the perpetrators] might mitigate condemnation” of them. Though intuitively this position makes sense, based on the girls in Mrs. Glickman’s unit, I must argue for its reversal: that rejection of historical understanding eviscerates the power of moral condemnation. After all, Mrs. Glickman’s students hardly understood the behavior they condemned. It is in precisely this sense that their “hatred” was “canned” rather than nuanced, processed for them rather than arrived at independently or, more important, intellectually.

It is unlikely that my protestations will change the way in which Holocaust curricula are delivered in Lubavitch schools, or even within this Lubavitch school.⁵² The enlightenment ideals on which my biases as a researcher (and history as a discipline) are based run counter to both ultra-Orthodox beliefs about schooling and ultra-Orthodox schooling for belief.⁵³ It hardly matters to these Lubavitch Hasidim that their daughters’ potentials for Jewish pluralism are being compromised or that their multicultural awareness is being curtailed. Moreover, it does not seem important that the Holocaust’s (albeit historiographically contested) ontological specialness does not derive from the inscrutability of its actors’ choices. Hasidim, despite their political and religious divisions, are not dedicated to the learning of history as a discipline but rather to the inculcation of Judaism as a “total world.” Indeed, given the lower status of secular studies at all ultra-Orthodox schools, it is not clear that the content taught within the secular studies curriculum really matters in the first place. Finally, it is worth restating that the expectations of Hasidic girls’ futures and the very gendered nature of their curriculum make it especially unlikely that their secular education will be made intel-

lectually more challenging. The concerns of one “outsider” advocate will not convince “insider” educators to consider these issues differently. For a constellation of reasons, then, it seems likely that the Holocaust, certainly in this haredi school, will continue to be taught about within the context of inscribing social boundaries rather than in pursuit of moral inquiry.

What I hope might convince some Lubavitch school administrators to reconsider the practices they condone, however, is exceedingly basic: the knowledge that the girls in Mrs. Glickman’s class do not inhabit the same world as that of Primo Levi. At Auschwitz, “there [was] no why”; in the post-Holocaust world, we cannot desist from asking why and providing answers, no matter how compromised or partial, indeed no matter how theologically driven. That is precisely our duty *as educators*. Claude Lanzmann may reject understanding of the Holocaust as an obscenity, but one can assume that the pretense of understanding must be all the more obscene and that condemnation without understanding lacks integrity. “Canned” condemnation, it seems to me, is doubly egregious and ultimately hollow. Therefore, I argue that the secular studies provided at ultra-Orthodox yeshivahs ought to encourage authentic historical inquiry to take place, teaching that truly reflects the accomplishments of historians and the discipline of history, if not for the sake of classically liberal educational goals then to support ultra-Orthodox religious ones: to help in illuminating behira, the range of human choices, to help in preserving *Klal yisrael*, the totality and range of the Jewish people, and to aid in gaining compassion for all human beings.

For those of us who work in the academy rather than in Lubavitch schools, this case serves as a challenge to the discourse of Holocaust exceptionalism overall, the perpetuation of which buttresses offensive hierarchies of suffering. In Mrs. Glickman’s classroom, the language of Holocaust incomprehensibility bred a kind of religio-moral superiority among the girls, reifying their separateness. In the academy, a secular variant of the same language—in the form of Holocaust uniqueness—functions similarly. In the academy, however, educators must reject insularity, for it is the enemy of inquiry. In academia, in short, there must be “why’s,” no matter how partial, contested, illusory or temporary.

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- 1 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York, 1995), 28.
- 2 Claude Lanzmann, "Hier ist kein Warum," in *Au sujet de Shoah*, ed. B. Cuau (Paris, 1990), 279. As translated by Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), 100.
- 3 LaCapra, *History and Memory*, 100.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 128.
- 7 See, e.g., Almuth Hammer, "'Vergessen oder Gerechtigkeit?' Sakralitätskonzepte im Umgang mit der Schoah," in *Verbot der Bilder—Gebot der Erinnerung: Mediale Repräsentationen der Shoah*, ed. Bettina Bannasch and Almuth Hammer (Frankfurt, 2004), 397–409.
- 8 Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes, "Afterword," in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, ed. M. Hirsch and I. Kacandes (New York, 2004), 492.
- 9 Yoel Finkelman, "Haredi Isolation in Changing Environments: A Case Study in Yeshiva Immigration," *Modern Judaism* 22 (2002): 62.
- 10 Sarah Bunin Benor, "Talmid Chachams and Tseyekeses: Language, Learnedness and Masculinity Among Orthodox Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 11, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 147–70, opens with an anecdotal encapsulization of this difference. Benor asked haredi boys what the differences were between girls' and boys' education, and they told her, "Boys need to learn how to be . . . the *talmid chachams* [masters of Jewish texts]; girls should learn how to be *tseyekeses* [righteous women]" (147). For more, see Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (Boulder, Colo., 1994); Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (Berkeley, 2000); and William Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry* (New Haven, Conn., 1986).
- 11 Menachem Friedman, "The *Haredim* and the Holocaust," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 53 (1990): 86.
- 12 *Churban* is the Yiddish term for the Holocaust, preferred by the ultra-Orthodox. Rabbi Joseph Elias, *Teaching Churban Europa to Our Children* (New York, 2003).
- 13 Unfortunately for the generalizability of this study, these conditions also made the school unique, not only as compared to other haredi schools but even as compared to other Lubavitch yeshivot. As the astute reviewer of this article pointed out, in most such schools "anything related to Jewish history" is typically viewed as "the exclusive domain of religious teachers" and hence taught only by them. This school allowed a secular studies teacher to teach about the Holocaust largely because she was considered the most knowledgeable teacher on the topic, she herself was highly dedicated to its teaching, and she had taught at the school for long enough to have earned the right to some, albeit limited, curricular freedom.
- 14 For more on "emplotment" and its limitations, see Hayden White, "His-

- torical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. S. Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).
- 15 For studies of modern Hasidim, see J. S. Belcove-Shalin, ed., *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany, N.Y., 1995); Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York, 1992); and Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). For studies of haredi women, particularly their navigations of Hasidic norms, see El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*, and Stephanie Wellen Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls* (New York, 2003). For debates over the innovativeness and modernity of Hasidic society, see Gerson Hundert, *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York, 1991). For a study of the uses of Yiddish, see Miriam Isaacs, “Yiddish in Orthodox Communities in Jerusalem,” in *Politics of Yiddish*, ed. D. B. Kerler (New York, 1998), 85–96. See also Ayala Fader, “Literacy, Bilingualism and Gender in a Hasidic Community,” *Linguistics and Education* 12 (2001): 261–83. For an excellent piece on Israeli education, see Michael Rosenak, “Jewish Fundamentalism in Israeli education,” in *Fundamentalism and Society*, ed. M. Marty and R. S. Appleby (Chicago, 1993), 374–413.
- 16 Kimmy Caplan’s work is a notable exception to this generalization, though his corpus tends to focus on this historiography rather than its reception and interpretations. See, e.g., Kimmy Caplan, “The Holocaust in Contemporary Israeli Haredi Popular Religion,” *Modern Judaism* 22, no. 2 (2002): 142–68. For a famous work on ultra-Orthodox historiography of the Holocaust, see Dina Porat, “‘Amalek’s Accomplices,’ Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel During the 1980s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 4 (1992): 695–735. For a fine piece depicting the relationship between ultra-Orthodoxy and the Holocaust, see Ruth Ebenstein, “Remembered Through Rejection: *Yom HaShoah* in the Ashkenazi Haredi Daily Press, 1950–2000,” *Israel Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 141–67.
- 17 Many authors have discussed the so-called “Americanization” of the Holocaust, among them Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Essays in Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Engl., 1990); H. Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore, Md., 1999); Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” *Commentary* 99, no. 6 (1995): 35–40; Cynthia Ozick, “Who Owns Anne Frank?,” *New Yorker*, Oct. 6, 1996, pp. 76–86; and Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2000).
- 18 Robert Bellah et al., eds., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, 1985).
- 19 A vast and growing literature analyzes such crystallizations of memorial culture, so much so that it hardly seems worth noting a few examples among the legions. That said, some exceptional works include James

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- Young's books on Holocaust memorials, such as *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, Conn., 2000); Edward Linenthal's books on American memorial culture, such as *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford, 2001); and Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, 1997).
- 20 Although researchers have examined historical thinking and religious schooling, few focus on the nature of historical thinking as a religiously mediated activity. Notable exceptions include Alan Peshkin, *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School* (Chicago, 1986); Susan Mosborg, "Speaking of History: How Adolescents Use Their Knowledge of History in Reading the Daily News," *Cognition and Instruction* 20, no. 3 (2002): 323–58; Simone Schweber and Rebekah Irwin, "Especially Special: Learning about Jews in a Fundamentalist Christian School," *Teachers College Record* 105, no. 9 (2003): 1693–1719; Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, and Dan Porat, "What Can *Forrest Gump* Tell Us about Students' Historical Understanding?" *Social Education* 65, no. 1 (2001): 55–58; and Susan Rose, *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan: Evangelical Schooling in America* (New York, 1988).
- 21 This idea is articulated in Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2001). He writes, "To date, . . . there have been few if any attempts to track how the processes of historical memory play out in the lives of ordinary people: how it is that the proverbial person-on-the-street embodies (or doesn't) the broad social processes posited by the theorists of collective memory" (249).
- 22 Peshkin, *God's Choice*.
- 23 Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park, Calif., 1988).
- 24 Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and Andrea Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco, Calif., 1997).
- 25 Lubavitch Girls' Yeshivah, like all proper names in this article, is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the institution and study participants.
- 26 Wellen Levine, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers*, 50.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Meshikhist* refers to those Lubavitch Jews who considered their last rabbi, Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, to have been the messiah.
- 30 Most of the girls chose their own pseudonyms for this study. I took the liberty of changing only those names that I felt would be distracting in the narrative. The girl I call Rochel throughout, for example, chose as her pseudonym "Lunchy Munchy."
- 31 What was called math, English, and science, I would term accounting, spelling, and home economics. In the entire time that I observed this two-hour block, the girls participated in a single "science" activity,

- which consisted of their pickling cucumbers and tasting them at regular intervals.
- 32 Bryan Mark Rigg, *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (New Haven, Conn., 2004).
- 33 Some of the girls did watch television shows. When asked "If you were the principal of this school and you wanted to change it to make it better, what would you do?," one of the "chassidische" girls answered that she would make the school environment stricter. "No movies, no TV," she elaborated, because, as she put it, "I think it ruins their lives."
- 34 These were excerpted chapters from Milton Meltzer, *Rescue: The Story of How Gentiles Saved Jews in the Holocaust* (New York, 1988), 103–15.
- 35 Research on girls' participation patterns in mixed-sex, public schools shows unequivocally that they tend to be quieter than boys and less likely to argue passionately or articulate their views fully. See, e.g., Myra Sadker and David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (New York, 1995). For an investigation of girls in middle schools, see Judy Cohen and Sukey Blanc, *Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School* (Washington, D.C., 1996).
- 36 Mary Juzwick's work recounts students making similar discourse moves. See Mary Juzwick, "Performing Curriculum: Building Ethos Through Narrative in Pedagogical Discourse," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 4 (2006): 489–538.
- 37 Perhaps the girls' culture or questioning can be explained in part through reference to the boys' learning culture, a culture of pilpul, or give-and-take argument in the hope of sifting, winnowing, and deepening Jewish textual understanding.
- 38 For elaboration and other examples of the ways in which Jews may be normalized and exoticized in the context of enacted Holocaust units, see Simone Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Practice* (New York, 2004).
- 39 Adam Starkopf, *There Is Always Time to Die* (New York, 1981).
- 40 The censorship was a school policy that is common among ultra-Orthodox schools. William Shaffir refers to it as "an intentionally organized mechanism of social control . . . to maintain the boundaries separating [Hasidim] from the surrounding culture." William Shaffir, "Boundaries and Self-Presentation among the *Hasidim*: A Study in Identity Maintenance," in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim*, 49.
- 41 Starkopf, *Time to Die*, 93.
- 42 See, e.g., Ruth Ebenstein, "Remembered Through Rejection: *Yom HaShoah* in the Ashkenazi *Haredi* Daily Press, 1950–2000," *Israel Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 141–67.
- 43 Ayala Fader, "Learning Faith," *Language in Society* 35, no. 2 (2006).
- 44 See Caplan, "The Holocaust in Contemporary Israeli *Haredi* Popular Religion," 142–68.
- 45 My thanks to Derek Penslar for these insights. Although it is not at all clear how frequently the more liberal Jewish schools position the Holo-

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caust as the culmination of centuries-old antisemitism, it is certainly a prevalent perception among American Jews that probably does find its way into the teaching of the Shoah.

- 46 Most of the girls in the class did know that a history of antisemitism and Jewish persecution existed. They did not know, however, what it looked like historically—that is, what it consisted of outside the stories of Passover, Purim, Hanukkah, and broad generalizations. Thus, as Mushka put it during her interview, “throughout history, they keep on trying to persecute us,” but, beyond that basic orientation, she could supply no examples or rendering of the history of the Christian Church vis-à-vis Jews or the racialization of Christian antisemitism.
- 47 I do not mean here to discount this theological strand as a historically important element. I suggest only that it is one among many others and that it, too, deserves historical contextualization.
- 48 Susan David Bernstein, “Promiscuous Reading: The Problem of Identification and Anne Frank’s Diary,” in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. M. Bernard-Donals (Madison, Wis., 2002), 141–62.
- 49 Slavoj Žižek, “From *Urvater* to Holocaust . . . and Back,” *Parallax* 6, no. 2 (2000): 29.
- 50 For a beautifully written study of how moral questions are handled in public and parochial schools, see Katherine Simon, *Moral Questions in the Classroom* (New Haven, Conn., 2001).
- 51 In its entirety, this quotation was actually a repudiation of the former Lubavitch rebbe’s statements to the effect that the Holocaust served as divine punishment for Jewish sins. The section I quote above followed this sentence: “To say that those very people were deserving of what transpired, that it was a punishment for their sins, heaven forbid, is unthinkable. We cannot *explain* the Holocaust . . .” For the source, see Rigg, *Rescued from the Reich*, 183. In this quotation, Reb Schneerson was clearly addressing theological questions of intent in the interpretation of the Holocaust rather than secular questions of human agency or behavior during those years, and this distinction is important. However, my point is simply that the discourse of the former may have allowed for the obfuscation of the latter. It is possible that Mrs. Glickman guarded herself so vigilantly from engaging theological questions—the answers to which might have “undermined concepts of divine omnipotence or mercy”—that she avoided secular questions which would not have borne the same possibilities.
- 52 My claim assumes that Mrs. Glickman’s teaching is generalizable in some way to secular studies teachers in other Lubavitch schools. I think there are strong arguments to be made about this possibility, to be sure, but more fine-grained, qualitative research in such classrooms ought to be done. Fortunately, Moshe Krakowski, to whom I am indebted for early feedback on this article, is doing just such work at Northwestern University.

53 Even within other kinds of haredi schools, where, much more problematically, the Holocaust is explained as punishment for Jewish sinning of one sort or another, insularity remains a primary social goal of schooling. Thus, even if we consider Lubavitch Girls' Yeshivah to be highly atypical of haredi schools, the generalizations I draw from it probably hold. In other words, though the teaching of the Holocaust may look very different in terms of materials and content at other haredi schools (and even at other Lubavitch schools), it still seems likely that perpetrators would not be humanized and that the range of victims would not be included. It is clear that further and more nuanced research on the topic is in order, especially because the theological orientations espoused by the various haredi movements' leaders do not necessarily translate directly into their own schools' classroom practice. For more on such Holocaust-era leaders' theological positions, however, see Gershon Greenberg, "Consoling Truth: Eliezer Schweid's *Ben Hurban Le'yeshua*: A Review Essay," *Modern Judaism* 17, no. 3 (1997): 297–311.

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