

TEACHING ABOUT THE SHOAH:  
Introduction

In recent years, the Holocaust has come to occupy a position of tremendous power in the American imagination. It has become a moral reference point not only for American Jews, but for almost all Americans regardless of religion, ethnicity, or political persuasion. Indeed, as Peter Novick has written in his book, *The Holocaust in American Life*, the Holocaust has become such a dominant metaphor for Americans that references to it abound in political life regardless of context. In other words, you are as likely to hear people invoke the Holocaust at a pro-life rally, for example, as you are to hear people invoke it at a pro-choice demonstration, a pro-Israel or anti-Israel event, an anti-hunger campaign, etc. In the U.S., the Holocaust has become so powerful rhetorically that it serves as a rallying cry for almost any cause, even opposite sides of the same cause. And the U.S. is not unique in this regard. In many other countries across Europe and across the world, the Holocaust has become a focal point of attention, in one way or another.

Why has this happened? We'd argue that it's the moral power of the Holocaust which accounts for this magnetism; we'd suggest that the seeming moral clarity of the Holocaust has drawn the attention of the world. This is a history, after all, which people think of as having crucial moral lessons, maybe the most important moral lessons we stand to learn as human beings. Moreover, they are moral lessons that seem to garner agreement across the political spectrum. It is this clarity that draws people from decidedly different political positions to call on the Holocaust in support of their platforms. It is this moral clarity which entices people to use the emotional weight of the Holocaust as a metaphorical bullhorn, amplifying their arguments. As a side note, perhaps, we have often thought that when the immediacy of the losses of September 11 recede further into the past, an analogous kind of political utilization may occur with its events. As the Holocaust has been for most Jews, 9/11 is now for many Americans; though of course radically different in scale, timing and circumstance, both events are emotionally devastating and morally clear cut since the murder of innocents is always, utterly wrong. It is out of this same moral urge that we are drawn to teach about the Holocaust regardless of where we teach: public school, synagogue school, Jewish, Catholic or Christian day school.

In the wake of destructions, large and small, immediate and more distant, we are often moved to draw lessons, perhaps as a vehicle to soften the blows of loss. Learning from loss extends the possibility of hope; it provides the thread from which a silver lining can be sewed. Consider the slogan "Never Again!" While it may have served first as a rallying cry during the 1970s to drum up support for Jews trapped and discriminated against in the former USSR, its psychological staying power may be explained by its redemption of the Holocaust's tragedy. "Never again!" allows us to make some use of the Holocaust; it allows us some relief from its horrors, allows us at least the temporary conviction that things will be different in the future, that we can make a difference.

Other lessons that people have drawn from this history seem to extend the same analgesic. Such lessons include the imperatives to: defend the rights of minorities, speak out against injustice and oppression in all of its forms, safeguard the freedoms of democracy, question personal participation in bureaucratic systems, support the state of Israel, support an independent Palestine, and fundamentally preserve the dignity and

uphold the sacredness of all human life. The lessons—whichever ones are embraced—are easy to arrive at. We don't mean that the lessons are easy to enact in our lives or to teach to students, but they're usually easy for people to identify with and to connect to the events of the Holocaust.

The seeming moral clarity of the Holocaust stems not only from its over-arching wrongness, however, but also from the clarity of its actors' roles. In other words, we know that the Nazis and their collaborators were the bad guys; the rescuers and resisters were good; the bystanders allowed and perpetuated atrocity. And the victims were victimized; they were thus innocents to be remembered as martyrs, heroes and heroines.

As Americans and as Brits, Australians, and Canadians, we're usually positioned as rescuers. In fact, some have argued persuasively that one of the reasons the Holocaust has become so popular in the American imagination is that it is our last good war, the last moment in our collective memory as a nation that we were rescuers, heroes, unreservedly good. In contrast with our role in Vietnam and in a host of other, more recent events (some might add as a force of cultural imperialism), as regards the Holocaust, we were the ones who liberated the concentration camps, who fought and defeated fascism, who finally ended World War II. You need only imagine the entry points for visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to understand the power of this conception; as visitors travel to the main exhibit areas, the elevators show films taken during the liberation of the concentration camps. Visitors are therefore positioned as American liberators. They are, in effect, introduced to the Holocaust museum through the "eyes" of liberators. The role we played during the Holocaust epitomizes how we'd like to perceive ourselves as a country more generally; we like to see ourselves as defenders of democracy, a nation which is selfless and heroic, triumphant and good.

### The Myth of Moral Clarity

Unfortunately, this kind of thinking is a trap. While it may be alluring to think of Holocaust history as morally simple, it isn't. The large categories and the broad lessons may be simple, but when you really start to investigate their historical realities and more specifically, their implications, they become very, very complex, not only for American Jews, but for all Americans, for all Jews and for all thinking people. It may be tempting to think that as public school, Jewish or Christian educators, we serve our students best by simplifying history, by glossing over its considerable complexities, by clarifying its moral messages. The premise of this book is that the opposite is true. Following the arguments articulated in Katherine Simon's ground-breaking research, *Moral Questions in the Classroom*, we are fully convinced that, as she writes, "the moral, existential and intellectual are intertwined [in education]; exploration in one realm often augments the others"<sup>1</sup> In other words, delving deeply into the complicated moral terrain of the Holocaust not only serves our students intellectually, but morally and spiritually as well, and ultimately, religiously. If we want our students to be empowered to make hard decisions in the complicated world they will inherit, we would do best to help them illuminate the complexities of history. This means that we cannot teach stereotyped roles or simplified lessons.

An example of what we mean here may help to concretize our point. Consider the category of victims. Ask yourself what words come to mind when you hear the phrase,

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Simon, *Moral Questions in the Classroom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 13.

"Holocaust victim." (Think specifically about "Holocaust victim" as the word, "victim" alone may carry quite different associations.) Do you find in the list of associated words a notion of martyrdom, of *kiddush haShem* (sanctification of God's name), of innocence, of heroism? We would be surprised if somewhere in your associations these themes didn't appear.

And yet, the approach to Holocaust education that we are advocating in this book would have you bear in mind as you plan your Holocaust unit the ugly reality that not all victims behaved heroically (although those are the accounts we most like to read). There were, among the victims, parents who sacrificed children, sisters who stole from brothers, children who betrayed parents, people who within the concentration camp system occupied the liminal status of the [moral] "grey zone" in Primo Levi's magnificent wording. Of course it is vitally important to recall that the systems of Nazi terror forced people into roles they wouldn't otherwise occupy; nonetheless, the idea that Holocaust victimization yielded a huge range of human behavior among victims should make it into your curriculum.

Likewise, the idea that not all perpetrators were cruel should be represented in your teaching. The vast majority of perpetrators, in all probability, were not the animalistic killers portrayed by Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler's List* but people we would recognize, indeed people with traits we need to recognize in ourselves. The perpetrators of this atrocity were people, fully human; they had aspirations, families, careers and foibles. (In this line of argument, we are closer to adherents of Christopher Browning's claims in his book, *Ordinary Men*, than to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's position in his, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Ultimately, though, we consider both works useful in teaching about the Holocaust, which we discuss in greater depth below.) To teach about the perpetrators as a morally complicated group is exceedingly challenging, but utterly necessary. Were bystanders perpetrators? By doing nothing and allowing evil to flourish, were they culpable for the tragedies of the Holocaust? And, if so, to what degree, and how do you decide? Even the question of who constitutes the category of perpetrators, therefore, is morally complex.

Finally, not all rescuers were wholly altruistic or uncomplicatedly good. There were rescuers who exploited those they hid, extracting money, labor, in some cases even sexual favors. Regarding Americans, while we were rescuers, liberators, fighters against Nazism, White Americans were also simultaneously racists and bystanders (at least most of us) to home-front injustices. Our immigration quotas severely restricted those who could find refuge on our shores. Our Black soldiers were fighting on two fronts. And our Japanese American neighbors were sequestered in internment camps. So, even rescue, the most valorized role associated with Holocaust history, must be recognized, at least in some senses, as a morally complicated category.

While working as an educator on the March of the Living program, Debbie learned an important lesson about not viewing Holocaust survivors as one-dimensional figurines or heroic icons.

Debbie: Bella, a Holocaust survivor who was liberated from Auschwitz, traveled with the teenagers to Poland and Israel. Bella had moved to Berkeley, California after the war and was a former hippie who was active in Berkeley's liberal political scene. On the trip, I became increasingly frustrated with Bella because she would encourage the teenagers to sneak out of their rooms after their curfew to smoke cigarettes with her, publicly defying the rules of the trip. That experience helped me readjust my stereotypical image of Holocaust survivors. In short, because Bella was a survivor did not mean she was

necessarily a role model (even if the students on that trip will likely remember smoking with Bella fondly). Throughout your teaching, we encourage you to present survivors and perpetrators and bystanders in the fullness of their humanity, rather than as personifications of stereotypes.

It may sound from this introduction that we are advocating a kind of cynicism in teaching about the Holocaust, that we are recommending that all heroism be diminished, that only the bleakest truths be taught. That is not what we are suggesting at all. Instead, what we believe and what forms the basic premise for this book is that in teaching about historical actors in the fullness of their humanity, we are more likely to treat each other humanely, whether victims, perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators, resisters or rescuers. For aren't all of us at one time or another (indeed sometimes simultaneously) in all of these roles?

### The Challenges of Teaching: One Example Not to Follow

What does it mean to teach about historical actors in the fullness of their humanity? On the one hand, as mentioned above, it means that we avoid valorizing, ennobling and condemning so much that we forget that the Holocaust involved real people in truly complex situations. In other words, we need to do our utmost to understand the moral complexities of the situations in which people found themselves. We don't pretend for a minute that we can know how it might have felt to be Anne Frank hiding in the annex, Elie Wiesel traveling in a boxcar, or Primo Levi reciting poetry to himself in Auschwitz. But what we can understand is something of how complicated it was to live in that time, in those places, and specifically, how morally complicated. The real question at the heart of the endeavor, then, is: How do we do that? How do we teach our students to gain an appreciation for moral complexity rather than to diminish it, especially given the kinds of mythologies that shroud this history? We'll begin by giving an example from Simone's teaching of what not to do.

Simone: By the time you read this, I will have taught Holocaust history for almost 18 years, to students in grades four all the way through college. For the first 10 years, when I taught mostly middle and high school students, I did what a lot of good history teachers do. I taught the informational content: the names, dates, places, what happened where and why. I don't mean that my teaching wasn't interactive; it was. But I would purposely hold off engaging the tough moral questions until the close of the unit, when we would spend one or sometimes two class sessions on the implications of this history. "Now that you understand what happened during the Holocaust and have some sense of why," I'd ask my students, "What is it you think we're supposed to learn from the Holocaust?" The students and I would come up with a list of moral lessons, profound ones even, and then we'd move on to the next unit or the next course.

When I think back about why I structured my unit that way for so long, I do have justifications—good ones even. Foremost among them was my dedication to content coverage. I firmly believed then that in order to draw lessons and make moral judgments, you needed to have the historical information under your belt, so I structured the two sequentially: have the students learn the information first, then they'll be prepared to make sound judgments. Over time, this conviction changed. While I still believe that students need rich wells of information in order to draw up meaningful lessons, I came to think that the best way to teach about the Holocaust was to do both in tandem: to have students muddle through the thick mud of moral issues as a way to examine the historical information itself. The moral issues, when fully explored, help students understand the historical circumstances and vice versa; the

historical circumstances, when fully explored, necessitate discussion and exploration of the complex moral issues at play.

When I sat down to think about it, I came to realize that my own insecurities and inexperience as a teacher were preventing me from engaging kids in tough moral questions throughout studying the Holocaust. I think I was afraid of looking stupid. As teachers, we're trained to have answers. We serve as role models because of our knowledge, because of our competence, because of our abilities to guide students. Engaging students in discussions of tough moral questions in class, in some sense, is to compromise all three, at least it can feel like that. You don't know what will happen in a discussion of thorny moral problems, and engaging tough moral questions is to admit publicly to our students how little we understand, how little we know, how much we have yet to learn or figure out. I didn't know how to do that. I wasn't trained to lead conversations about morally complex events for which there can be no right answers. (As a side note, perhaps, I think it's fair to say that we have very few models for that kind of discussion in our public spheres. Think of a presidential debate, where in order to appear competent, you must condense the moral complexities of a question rather than explore them. In order to model leadership, you must appear utterly convinced of a particular side rather than appear to understand multiple angles on an issue.) To facilitate a discussion of a morally complex issue, by contrast, requires teachers to hold their own answers in check, to fully expose the values underlying students' opinions, and to weigh moral issues critically.

According to Katherine Simon's research, I was not alone in my proclivities for avoidance; it is common for both public and religious school teachers to avoid raising such issues and to close down such questions when they do surface in classrooms. Consider the brief exchange Simon observed in a Jewish day school where the students were studying Elie Wiesel's famous memoir, *Night*:

Gary [a student, asks]: How can Wiesel still believe? How is it possible for anyone to believe in God after the Holocaust?

Ms. Sherman [the teacher, replies]: That's an important question. You really should bring it up with the rabbi in your religion class.<sup>2</sup>

While I understand Ms. Sherman's unwillingness to engage Gary's question, the reasonableness of deflecting Gary's inquiry to a rabbi's expertise, I can also attest to the greater power of that kind of teaching which delves students into such questions fully and consistently, whether they bring up the questions or you do. I know from my own practice that once my philosophy shifted to structure those kinds of discussions throughout the curriculum, my impact on students increased tremendously. They learned more, more deeply, and more enduringly.

As learners, we all have a natural tendency to connect what is foreign to what is known to create understanding and make meaning. That is, we compare what we don't know to what we do. Consider for a moment a time when you traveled to a new city, state or country. Oftentimes, travelers will say things like, "This French cafe reminds me of the coffee house near my house." Or, the balmy weather in Florida is so different from the cold climate at home." The process of comparing what is not known to what is known enables us to make sense of new information. Debbie witnessed this natural tendency

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 86.

repeatedly over nearly a decade of traveling with teenagers to Poland and Israel on the March of the Living program.

Debbie: Depending on current world events at the time, students would naturally compare the Holocaust to other genocides. During the early 1990s, for example, students would say things like, “The Holocaust is being repeated again today in Bosnia.” In the late 1990s, I heard students compare the Holocaust to the genocide taking place in Kosovo. My initial inclination was to discount those comparisons for fear that comparing other genocides to the Holocaust would somehow diminish its severity or distinctiveness. I would respond emphatically with statements like, “Six million people aren’t being systematically murdered in Bosnia like they were in the Holocaust.” My reluctance for my students to make these comparisons is understandable, but ultimately was not beneficial to their learning. Rather than shut down students’ natural inclinations to compare events, I learned not only to encourage those comparisons, but also to help students contrast current events with the Holocaust to better inform their learning. As the events of the Holocaust recede deeper into history, this process becomes even more important. As educators, we need to find ways to help students grapple with and comprehend a history that most students will have an increasingly more distant relationship to as the years pass.

#### A Guide to this Guide: What it is and What it is Not

We have designed this book to help you avoid many of the mistakes that we and all teachers make in teaching about the Holocaust. Throughout this book we include lessons learned from our own teaching experience and disclose some of our own family histories in the hopes that doing so will engender deeper learning and will enable you to teach about the Holocaust with more integrity. We want you to be able to guide your students through its complicated moral terrain from the first day of your unit through the last one, and we want you to enter your classroom unafraid of engaging students’ queries. We’re not discouraging your students from bringing their questions up with their rabbis, grown-ups, priests or parents, too; we simply want to make sure that the questions don’t get shut down in your classroom. We hope that you will encourage inquiry and discussion and caution you not to confuse students’ questions or doubts with disrespect. Towards that end, each chapter in this book contains ethical dilemmas and pivotal, moral questions, issues and scenarios to encourage student questioning and to help focus the discussions you have with your students.

The chapters in this book are organized by theme, which creates a vaguely, but not wholly, chronological architecture. As a result, certain ideas, topics or events may appear in more than one chapter. For example, the Wannsee Conference appears in the chapters entitled, *Naming the Holocaust*, *The War Years: 1939-1945*, *Perpetrators*, and *Aftermath*. To ease your reading of the chapters, we decided not to reference these overlaps in the chapter text. In other words, we don’t include references like “See Chapter 12 for more information about...” Instead, we encourage you to use the index to aid you in your searches.

Each chapter begins with an introduction, followed by *big ideas* and *key terms*. The *big ideas* are the main, over-arching concepts that we hope your students will learn. The *key terms* are the words, phrases and names associated with those *big ideas*. Scientists ask “robust questions” as part of scientific inquiry; they look at the big picture while probing the details. We have designed the *big ideas* and *key terms* sections to mirror that approach; the *big ideas* relate to the big picture of the chapter and the *key terms* relate to the details. For example, one big idea related to resistance during the Holocaust is that

acts of resistance were heroic, regardless of their outcomes. A *key term* of this big idea is the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In deciding what to teach, we suggest you first read the *big ideas* section of each chapter. Depending on whether you are teaching a single class, a short unit, a semester or entire year on the topic of the Holocaust, the *big ideas* sections will help you determine what you want your students to learn and to focus your curriculum accordingly.

Please bear in mind as you use this text that we have specifically avoided writing a history of the Holocaust. In other words, this book does not cover everything that is now known about the Holocaust. Instead, each chapter provides an overview of the teaching issues pertinent to its theme, a significant overview of content in that area, teaching ideas, and resources for classroom use and for further study for you and your students. Almost regardless of the reasons you're teaching about the Holocaust, we think that the issues outlined in the following chapters are integral to a coherent, thorough and meaningful education on the topic. Whether, for example, you're teaching about the Holocaust because it is one of the major historic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because it continues to shape the world stage today, because it illuminates the tragic powers of antisemitism and racism, because it can aid in understanding the psychological processes by which victimizers oppress and the victimized respond, or whether because you know that study of the Holocaust can enrich your students' senses of what it means to be a Jew, a Christian or indeed a human being—the chapters in this guide can be used to form a unit of study.

As you'll see, with the exception of the first chapter, (*Introducing the Holocaust to Young Children*) all the teaching ideas and resources are designed for middle and high school students, not for students in lower grades. This reflects our conviction that the Holocaust should not be part of the formal school curriculum for young children, except in exceptional circumstances. To accommodate such circumstances (*Yom HaShoah* commemorations, communities with large populations of survivors and their families, etc.), we have included a number of single-session activities for teachers of young children. The bulk of this book, however, is dedicated to the teaching of much older students, students who we feel are mature enough to begin tackling this subject with the seriousness it deserves.

### Closing Thoughts

Teaching about the Holocaust is necessarily an act of shaping memory, of forging the consciousness our students have. In creating our students' links to this past, we are helping to define their understandings of the present, and we are helping orient them towards particular futures. Of course as teachers, we are not alone in influencing their memory of the Holocaust; they will learn from their families, their friends, from the movies, from television, books, magazines and websites. They will hear urban myths about the Holocaust ("Wasn't Hitler part Jewish?"), contested rumors, even deniers' insults, the detritus of an information age and an ever-expanding politic. In our classrooms, by contrast, we have the unique opportunity to shape our students' memory of the Holocaust in carefully thought-through ways, to structure their learning caringly, with serious regard for the nature of the subject matter, for the needs of our students individually and the demands of our religious communities as collectives. We thereby stand in a position of special responsibility: to aid in fashioning the collective memory of future generations. We hope that this book helps you in accomplishing that formidable job by helping you navigate the incredibly complex moral terrain of teaching about the Holocaust.

