What We Can Learn about Learning from Holocaust Education

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For decades, Jewish education has included the study of the Holocaust in the curriculum of supplementary schools and day schools, as well as in the informal educational programming of synagogues and camps. In this chapter, Schweber asks about the significance of learning from and for extremes. She proposes that one of the goals may be the cultivation of “reasonable Jews,” i.e., Jews with the capacity and disposition to reason even about extreme ideas. Furthermore, Holocaust education ought to immerse students in the “messiness” of lives, to help them resist quick and easy moral judgments. Third, the teaching of the Holocaust highlights the importance of context, especially the context of learning about Jews. Finally, she observes that the teaching of the Holocaust brings to the fore the danger of essentialism and absolutism—not only in politics but in education.

The general argument of this book is that Jewish educators and the Jewish community need to think more deeply and more critically about learners and learning outcomes in Jewish educational settings and within Jewish subject areas. They need to ask, what have they been missing or overlooking, regarding learners or learning outcomes? One way to probe this question is to look at what we can learn from cases on the margins of Jewish education—such as instantiations of Holocaust education.

To be sure, the Holocaust is an especially vexed venue through which to come at the question of learning for a variety of reasons. For starters, the Holocaust is not just a marginal case of Jewish education but an extreme event. Regardless of your positioning along now-clichéd historiographical debates over its uniqueness, the Holocaust is nonetheless historically extreme. That is, whether or not you agree to its uniqueness in Jewish history or world history or

even only within the boundaries of the history of genocide, it is clearly an extreme case. It is an extreme case of “othering,” of genocidal intent, of persecution, mass murder, industrialized killing, the denial of humanity, and totalitarianism.

In some domains, it is important to prepare for extremes. First responders and crisis planners think about extreme scenarios. Legal scholars do too, when thinking through the implications of a particular law. But as educators and educational researchers, we do not tend to think about learning for extremes, but rather learning as oriented toward the typical. An imperfect analogy might be the following: It is strange to imagine teaching beginning drivers to navigate crashes. While it is certainly in the best interest of new drivers to consider how to avoid crashes, learning to drive is more frequently conceptualized as learning the rules of the road, how to maneuver the vehicle, how to attend to trucks and the weather. I do not mean to suggest that learning about the Holocaust is akin to driving, nor that the Holocaust is akin to a car crash, only that learning via extremes is inherently problematic. Extreme events evoke extreme reactions; they propel us to reactionary responses rather than nuanced reasoning or cultivated compassion. Other educational frameworks, likewise, prepare for the typical. Whether due to optimism or naïveté, or whether due to some structural constraint of formal schooling, we tend to think about education as preparing for life within a fairly narrow range of possible futures. In short, we tend to teach for the typical and in avoidance of the extremes.

And yet, what I want to cultivate through Jewish education are what I have come to think of as “reasonable Jews,” that is, Jews who are able to reason about their lives, about the lives of others, about their identities and interactions, about Jewish life and practice, and about how religious identities and national and historical landscapes interact. Reasonable Jews, I think, are Jews who are able to reason about Jews, Judaism, Jewish issues, and Jewish history, which necessarily includes non-Jews, non-Jewish issues, and non-Jewish history.

Is this the only way to think about the desired learning outcomes of Jewish education? Surely not. But to whatever extent the cultivation of reasonable Jews is a shared goal, then it seems to me that the content that we teach must be taught in ways that provide our students with opportunities to practice the kinds of reasoning that we want them to be able to do. We ought to be teaching our students to reason, not only about Jewish texts, but about Jewish life, and not only about Jewish life but about what life as Jews in the modern and ancient world means. We ought to be deliberating about Israeli policies, American policies, and controversial issues, all of which are confronting world Jewry. We ought to be cultivating Jews who reason, through opportunities to do so.

The idea of “reasonable Jews” does not presuppose a single, universal standard of reason with a capital R, the kind of Enlightenment conception of rationality that has been subject to much criticism over the last few decades. It does not mean that Jews ought to act in accord with Reason by suppressing emotion, or by following rules of logic. It does not assume that all rational or reasonable people hold the same (intellectually legitimate) beliefs or act in the same (morally legitimate) way. We can instead embrace what Nicholas Burbules calls a “more inclusive and flexible understanding of reason.”¹ The reasonable person is not the person who thinks and acts in accord with Reason. Rather, “a person who is reasonable wants to make sense, wants to be fair to alternative points of view, wants to be careful and prudent in the adoption of important positions in life, is willing to admit when he or she has made a mistake, and so on.”²

Put in less abstract terms and applied to teaching, the very episodes that most rile us with the blatancy of their immorality, I suspect, are the very acts that we ought to teach about with level-headedness, with openness to radically opposing ideas, with the possibility of learning from them compassion rather than superiority. Even in the extremity of its content, the Holocaust needs to be taught in ways that foster reasonableness, rather than moral supremacy or ethnic insularity. If we teach about the Holocaust so as to insulate ourselves from its protagonists—to claim that we are not like Nazis, for example, or could never be collaborators or bystanders or that we could never be morally compromised—we are, inadvertently or purposefully, teaching for hubris rather than humility. In those acts, we deny our own humanity out of fear. We cannot teach about the Holocaust fruitfully from a place of fear without perpetuating disdain, and we cannot learn moral courage by reifying moral outrage.

This is not to say that moral outrage is never appropriate in discussions of genocide. We can affirm that some acts are morally outrageous. We can respect people who demonstrate righteous indignation. But as educators, we must also admit that moral outrage is sometimes lazy and oftentimes shallow. The condition of moral outrage can be a mask for sanctimony and melodrama. “There are some emotions,” writes Eamonn Callan, “[that] we earn the right to feel with the consequence that they are truly our own—emotions we have paid for, so to speak, in thought and experience—and others that have in some way been illicitly appropriated or aroused so that they do not belong to us in all but the

1 Nicholas C. Burbules, “Reasonable Doubt: Toward a Postmodern Defense of Reason as an Educational Aim,” in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 85.

2 Ibid., 86.

shallowest sense.”³ Moral outrage can sometimes have that unearned quality, and hence is not a powerful place from which to learn reasonableness.

My first argument, then, is that Holocaust education demonstrates for us the importance of encountering the extreme in the cultivation of reasonableness.

Second, we ought to consider Sam Wineburg’s⁴ argument for the value of learning about history as do historians rather than shaping history as do politicians. To think like a historian is ultimately to make moral judgments about events, but not to make those pronouncements lightly. Instead, it is the job of the moral historian to make distinctions based on an evidentiary basis that sifts and weighs and winnows documents and data, that makes careful and reasoned claims warranted by that process, allowing for the humanity of people across time and place to emerge, even if—or perhaps *especially* if—their humanity is unlike our own. Citing Primo Levi’s inability to explain to a fifth-grade student why he couldn’t escape from Auschwitz concentration camp, Wineburg elaborates on the idea that “our ‘inability to perceive the experience of others,’ as [Levi] put it, applies to the present no less than the past”⁵ continuing:

This is why the study of history is so crucial to our present day and age, when issues of diversity dominate the national agenda. Coming to know others, whether they live on the other side of the tracks or the other side of the millennium, requires the education of our sensibilities. This is what history, when taught well, gives us practice in doing.⁶

Presentism is ahistorical precisely in its collapse of the sensibilities that change across time; and it is unavoidable precisely because it is in the present that we act as historians. By contrast, historical inquiry done well, as Wineburg explains, is ultimately redemptive by allowing for the revelation of profound difference and surprising sameness at one at the same time. In this way, it gets us closer to the deepest questions of what it means to be not only human, but also what it means to be a human collective. To deny the possibility that we, living in the aftermath of the Holocaust, share traits and likenesses and difficulties and sociality with perpetrators, is to deny the possibility of careful

3 Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.

4 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

5 *Ibid.*, 23.

6 *Ibid.*, 23–24.

learning from history—as it ultimately allows only self-serving moral lessons to emerge rather than profound moral questions to be addressed.

To state the obvious, perhaps, the most important moral quandaries come from precisely the humanity of all the protagonists who act in history. All of us—perpetrators and bystanders, collaborators and neighbors, victims and survivors, Jews and Roma, Sinti and POW's, in the present and the past—lead what Travis Wright⁷ has rightly called “messy lives.” Holocaust education, done well, pushes us to reckon with that messiness, and it is that reckoning, in turn, that can lead us to be better thinkers and more compassionate people, if not immediately or directly, then eventually and serendipitously.

What Wright discusses as “messy lives” are the ways in which our coping mechanisms, which are visible in social settings, always reflect the realities of the unseen, the backgrounds of abuse, trauma, fear, or neglect that children sometimes bring to school with them. To think that students should behave well in class is to forget that they live “messy lives” out of school. I agree with Wright on the deepest level that to make sense of the mess we live in is illusory but important. To reckon with the mess as a whole has the power to remind us of the ways that our stories and lives, our families and communities, our nations and states are always intertwined. Ironically, perhaps, it is the acknowledgment of our own messy lives in our ineluctable present that should allow us as researchers and educators to minimize the traps of presentism and to downplay the historical hubris that infuses academic work. This, then, is the second argument: Holocaust education immerses us in the challenges of real lives, messy lives, and their inevitable moral morasses.

Third, Holocaust education reminds us of the importance of learning about Jews. The domain of Jewish education is typically understood as the education of Jews, i.e., of Jewish learners, and more specifically, the education of Jews in the subject matter of Judaism to help them enact their Jewishness in various ways. Learning *about* Jews seems much more like the kind of thing that happens in Jewish museums, or in textbooks about the history of religions, sometimes authored by Jews, but often by non-Jews. And yet, I want to argue that learning about Jews, whether those learners are Jewish or not, is important in our current historical moment—a moment when anti-Semitism is on the rise worldwide, where violence is not necessarily more frequent but more

7 Travis Wright, “On Jorge Becoming a Boy: A Counselor’s Perspective,” *Harvard Educational Review* 77, no. 2 (2007), 164–86; Travis Wright, “Learning to Laugh: A Portrait of Risk and Resilience in Early Childhood,” *Harvard Educational Review* 80, no. 4 (2010), 444–63.

visible, and where anti-Jewish activity is only sometimes connected to Israeli state policies.

A few months ago, in Madison, Wisconsin, my hometown, there was a spree of racist, pornographic graffiti and minor property damage. It seems unlikely that the swastikas and message of “fuck Jews” spray-painted on garages and driveways was in any way a reflection of anti-Israel sentiments directly. Instead, it seems more likely that these symbols and expressions were symptomatic of a rise in the acceptability of white supremacist ideas generally. When asked if these messages constituted a hate crime, a spokesperson for the Madison Metropolitan Police initially said no, which further infuriated some local residents. They understood the answer of the police spokesperson to be an anti-Semitic extension of the initial acts, a willful ignoring of the real hurt inflicted by the spray-painted images. But to imagine his answer as a “microaggression” is to use the context of reception to trump the context of production; it is to confuse the impulse to defend against attacks by seeing them everywhere as intents to harm.

For the representative of the police was answering correctly, if not carefully; he was answering the question from a legal standpoint rather than a compassionate frame. The graffiti was of course hateful, but not technically a hate crime. The legal process for the acts to be designated a hate crime according to state statute require that a perpetrator be found and interrogated to prove intent before it could be labeled as such. I would like to think that, had this police representative taken into consideration his multiple audiences more fully before answering the query about the classification of the crime, he would have been better able to answer the question more compassionately and not strictly legally. I would like to think, too, that had the graffiti-writers known more about Jews and understood them better as fellow humans, they would have been less likely to perpetrate the harm in the first place.

But my point here is simpler: that in meaning-making, context is everything, and that to respond with compassion takes practice.

That, then, is the fourth lesson that I have learned from studying learners of the Shoah, that contexts always matter and never superficially: what people know about Jews reflects, powerfully, their social contexts. In other words, students’ ideas that come into play when they are learning about the Holocaust always reflects their prior knowledge about Jews. And what they know about Jews reflects the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which that knowledge was embedded.

In my various studies of Holocaust education, I have made it always a point to ask students why they think Jews were persecuted during the Holocaust. I ask the question before they have learned about the Holocaust in their formal or informal settings, and I ask the question afterwards. I ask not only as a way to assess what they learn or investigate their knowledge of history, but to see what they think about larger questions of historical meaning: how violence is justified or inexplicable, under what conditions, when it is deserved or fated or incomprehensible. One student answers the question of why Jews were and are persecuted with, "It's because we're the chosen people, and everyone is always jealous of us." Another student answers, "When I think about it, they killed Jesus, . . . it was all fated to happen." These two responses are dramatically different, and moreover, they provide windows into the ways these students see the world, not only the ways they see Jews. For the fundamentalist Catholic girl who said "they killed Jesus," the murder of Jews was justified, at some theological level, given the myth that "the Jews killed Jesus." For her, there was a kind of divine retribution involved in the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust. For the Lubavitcher girl who told me that "everyone's always jealous of us," the murder of Jews has to do with envy, not necessarily fate, but envy that is driven by a religious claim about the existential condition of the Jews as chosen. As these examples show, context is not only meaningful as a background or setting for their thinking; it shapes their meaning-making.

More like the scriptwriters than the scenery, contexts structure identity work. Thus the fact that eighth graders at a Charismatic, fundamentalist evangelical Christian school are learning about the Holocaust and that eighth graders at an ultra-orthodox girls' yeshiva are learning about the Holocaust does not mean that they are learning the same content. Indeed they did not even learn the same skills. The girls at the yeshiva learned to argue, in keeping with the pedagogical traditions inherited from rabbinic praxis; the students at the Christian school continued to provide short informational answers to the teacher when called upon, in keeping with the tradition of an authoritarian church dedicated to inculcating obedience. Interestingly, it turned out that both groups of students I studied in those contexts were learning toward similar dispositional ends. Students in both places were taught that they are potential victims in history, that perpetrators of violence can't be understood, and that their own eschatological chosenness or religious supremacy was unquestionable. Through the teaching of the Holocaust at both schools, the students were instructed in ways to solidify their in-group boundaries, and by default, to keep their out-groups out.

We sometimes imagine that “content” exists in a kind of Platonic ideal world, knowledge about the world or about history that we then have to figure out how to convey in the real world to real students in real contexts. Holocaust education reminds us that what it is and what it means depends fundamentally on the contexts in which the students find themselves and the meanings that they make.

Reflecting further on what I saw in the evangelical school and the ultra-orthodox school, we might say that it was a form of teaching toward absolutism—the creation of impermeable boundaries between groups—of the sort that many fundamentalisms perpetuate. That is, after all, one of the defining features of fundamentalisms, that fundamentals are absolute: whether of belief or practice or social groupings. To use the Holocaust to teach *toward absolutism* of any kind, it seems to me, is an abuse of education, as at least according to my frame of reference, absolutism is fundamentally unreasonable. Put differently, teaching toward absolutism can never produce reasonable Jews—as teaching for absolutism is antagonistic to reasoning.

I want to argue, then, that teaching toward reasonableness is not only opposed to teaching for absolutism, but may well act as an antidote to teaching for absolutism. Moreover, as ironic a position as it is logically, I also want to argue that teaching toward reasonableness is an absolute good, regardless of the particularities of our politics. For reasonableness is what allows democracies to function based on an informed citizenry, a citizenry that should be opposed to idiocy, as Walter Parker⁸ elucidates etymologically. If I want education to be geared toward reasonableness, that commitment is predicated on the notion that reasonableness fosters tolerance and that tolerance is a requirement, not only for democratic citizenship, but for most forms of living amidst difference, Jewish and otherwise.

Pedagogically, deliberation leads to greater reasonableness. That is, learning that puts people in the position of having to inhabit opposing viewpoints, that forces them to argue against their own beliefs and intolerances, that requires them to listen and be listened to, leads them to reasonableness and greater toleration for difference of opinion. And yet reasonableness, and its reflection in the ability to deliberate, it seems clear, is not enough to generate care or compassion for otherness. It is not enough to grow kindness or love. Deliberation can lead to honed abilities to reason only, not necessarily reasoning about others or caring for them regardless of the reasonableness of

8 Walter C. Parker, “Teaching Against Idiocy,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 5 (2005), 344–51.

doing so. Think of the *yeshiva bochers*, the young men in traditionalist houses of study, arguing over Talmudic texts and following a rabbi who argues for the murder of a Jewish leader; or think of the lawyers arguing reasonably for amoral ends given that law and justice are not synonymous. Nor is tolerance alone a worthy goal for education, having been described as the failure of multiculturalism. So even though I have been arguing that education about Jews ought to involve deliberation as a pedagogical approach for instilling reasonableness, reasonableness is not sufficient. Nor is tolerance. Instead, my contrary (and closing) conclusion from Holocaust education is that our educational efforts must transcend reasoning and foster caring and compassion.

It seems likely that we humans are neurally wired (not neutrally wired) to attend to difference and to be attuned to it, instinctually. Organisms that are different from us in form may also have different aims than we do; they are potential threats. This is the case when we meet a tiger, but it also may be the case when we meet another member of our species—and so a phenomenon that may be evolutionarily explicable may also contribute to anti-sociality. In other words, if by virtue of our evolution we have as a species learned to protect ourselves from possible threats, then the corollary is that education for compassion and care probably bumps up against those biological predispositions. It helps to explain why teaching to care for others is so difficult and so necessary; it probably cannot be accomplished easily. Compassion may well be hard to learn.

Orienting education toward care, as Nel Noddings theorized convincingly, is likely to be successful only through repeated attempts and continuous insistence. What Noddings claimed over thirty years ago⁹ is only bolstered by more recent understandings of the brain. We may be hard-wired for human connection and attachment, but it's likely that we are also predisposed to violence in the form of self-protection. It is why violence is easily conjured from only imagined threats, because our heightened sensibility to protect against threats is real. Here again, context is everything. Deliberation allows us to understand others' contexts, the contextual frames that make opposing beliefs tolerable; it teaches us to reframe our deeply held ideas toward reasonable, if utterly opposing, explanations. But how, pedagogically, do we instill care?

Richard Davidson, in his expansive research in neuroscience, has shown that within months, even novice meditators can rewire their neural pathways for a greater capacity for compassion, a heightened sense of joy, and a deeper

9 Nel Noddings, *Caring, A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

sense of calm, following the example of Buddhist monks. And it turns out that young kids when taught to meditate mindfully, report becoming kinder to each other in school, and that researchers observe the same behaviors in children. It is hard to know exactly what to conclude from this empirical evidence, but here's one possibility: if discussion formats like deliberation teach us to navigate differences reasonably and therefore to orient toward each other more productively, perhaps what meditation does is to teach us to orient toward ourselves in similarly healthy ways, lowering our sensitivity to the felt threats that otherness elicits. Though clichéd and in vogue, it may well be the case that mindful practices help us to learn from a place of compassion and, in so doing, enable us as teachers to help our students learn to be more caring with themselves and each other. It may, in other words, be a fruitful method for encouraging compassion when learning about the kinds of otherness that threaten us most deeply. For some of us, the idea that in other circumstances, I, too, could commit murder or "racial cleansing" is the most threatening learning; for others, it is simply the idea that I could end up in poverty or powerless.

Holocaust education, it seems to me, can easily be harnessed to buttress absolutist certainty rather than to inspire enlightenment ideals—as can all educational endeavors. I do not know if extreme events incite absolutist positions more consistently or more frequently than learning about other kinds of events, but I can imagine that that is the case. Extreme events propel us to reject them vociferously for their rejection of our humanity. This is why not all education about extremes encourages shared understandings of humanity—not even all forms of genocide education. Sometimes, inadvertently or not, Holocaust education distills and transmits essentialized notions of Jews, Nazis, perpetrators, victims, God, or violence. With the aim of drawing distinctions, of making sure our students are good, we demonize and dismiss. We reify categories, including even categories of human beings. And yet, education about Jews, like education about Muslims, about Christians, about African Americans, Latinos, Asians, transgender, intersex and gay people, all of us humans, ought to *de-essentialize* us. It ought to teach us to resist categories, to see nuance and complexity, to be suspicious of formulas, to avoid conclusions even about "what makes us all human." It is precisely the essentializing of people that makes genocide possible, that makes particular patterns of violence continue, that confines us to our narrowest frames of thinking. In *de-essentializing* us, Holocaust education pursued carefully and deliberately enables us to see complexity, and contributes to compassion without the elision of difference.

Absolutism is necessarily a stripping away of the context that makes difference understandable and that makes essentializing inevitable. Absolutism is the thorough rejection of difference, the rejection of reasonableness, even probably the rejection of compassion, for it makes a claim to omniscience that necessarily divides human groups rather than limiting those divides. Absolutism is unscientific, ahistorical, impolitic, immoral, and inhumane. It reflects the curse of thinking we are godlike rather than human, and as such, bypasses the humility that allows us to imagine a common humanity across important difference, sharing life on an uncommon planet.

I am not arguing in this chapter for greater attention to Holocaust education *per se*, neither within Jewish education nor within general education. I am not proposing that Holocaust education is the cure for what ails us, that Holocaust education will make students good or moral or democratic or reasonable in some miraculous fashion. But reflecting on two decades of investigating the ways that Holocaust education is pursued, I have come to believe that there is much that Holocaust education can teach us. I have seen the Holocaust taught well, with attention to nuance and complexity, in a manner that seems to foster reasonableness and compassion. And I have seen the Holocaust taught poorly, in a manner that seems to foster essentialism and absolutism. Precisely because of its extreme nature, the Holocaust is subject to extreme pedagogic diversity. But these lessons are not what I've learned about Holocaust education only; they are lessons that I've learned about learning.

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