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DEFINING THE UNIQUENESS OF HOLOCAUST TEACHING IN THE JEWISH SCHOOL

Recent years have seen a welcome surge of interest in teaching about the Holocaust in public school systems across the North American continent. Courses are being introduced, curricula are being developed, and teachers are being trained to teach about the Holocaust.[1] As one who has given a fair amount of study to the Holocaust, and who has taught a course dealing with the Holocaust in a Jewish day school over the past several years, I have frequently asked myself a question which I believe all who deal with the Holocaust in Jewish schools must consider as they plan their courses of study: Should a Holocaust course taught in a Jewish school be different in some way from a Holocaust course taught in a public school setting? My answer to this question is a strongly affirmative one, and in what follows it is my intention to outline some of the ways in which I believe a Holocaust course in a Jewish school must differ.

It is appropriate to begin with consideration of goals and objectives. Although numerous objectives of Holocaust education can be formulated, in both the cognitive and affective realms,[2] it will be convenient for the sake of this discussion to consider only four:

1. to communicate historical information and understanding about the Nazi period
2. to teach — or at least to stimulate thinking about — values, specifically about the bases of moral decision making
3. to strengthen Jewish identity
4. to clarify what it means to be a Jew in the post-Holocaust world.

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Clearly the first of two of these objectives are in place in a public school setting, while the latter two are not; in a Jewish school setting, by contrast, all four are in place. Indeed, it is my own feeling that the latter two are more than "in place" in a Jewish school: they are critical and indispensable, since they form the very crux of the responsibility of the Jewish educator who attempts to deal with the enormous tragedy of the Holocaust, for this tragedy is, in its very essence, a Jewish tragedy and must be responded to as such by Jewish educators.

Let us turn now to the implications of the foregoing for curriculum. First of all, if one aims at strengthening Jewish identity, one must, in my view, address the matter of Jewish resistance (or lack thereof) during the Holocaust years. A student who is not disabused of the widespread notion that Holocaust victims went to their deaths "*ka-tzon la-tevchah*" ("like sheep to the slaughter") will inevitably feel a certain sense of shame and discomfort as he considers these Jews and their behavior; hence a formidable barrier will be erected in the way of his achieving a sense of identification with them and a feeling of pride in their reactions to their terrible fate.

How should the matter of Jewish resistance be taught? It should be taught with knowledge and proper emphasis, and without apologetics. The apologetic position is one which stresses that there was resistance on the part of Jews all over Europe, in all the ghettos and in all the camps, and which presents the Warsaw Ghetto fighter and the partisan in the forest as the *typical* Jews of the Holocaust period. There are two serious problems with this approach to Jewish resistance: first, it is a distortion of historical truth, and second, students are not convinced by it.[3]

The preferred approach, to my mind, is a two-pronged one. To begin with, stress should be laid upon the Jewish situation of powerlessness, on the absence of all requisites for effective armed resistance, e.g., weapons, support of local populations, intelligence-gathering mechanisms, opportunities to organize, etc.; proper presentation of this situation must inevitably lead to the conclusion that *any* act of armed resistance on the part of the Jews was remarkable.

Beyond this, however, it is crucial to consider, and to emphasize, that form of Jewish resistance which was, in fact, widespread: unarmed resistance. Here I refer, for example, to ghetto Jews who resisted Nazi attempts to humiliate, degrade, and dehumanize them by engaging avidly in cultural and educational pursuits. I refer, too, to Jews in the camps who stubbornly refused to allow themselves to be dehumanized, who resisted by affirming human values in a totally inhuman world — they shared food scraps with one another, they helped one another in times of particular distress, they encouraged one another to hold on. And I refer, as well, to those Jews in the ghettos and camps who risked their very lives to continue the practice of the *mitzvot*, affirming their commitment to external truths in a world temporarily gone mad.

With regard to the curricular implications of the fourth objective mentioned above, i.e., the clarification of what it means to be a Jew in the post-Holocaust world, I believe that Jewish schools must deal with two matters of central importance. The first of these is the problematic of Jewish faith after the Holocaust, that is to say, the question of whether it is possible, and how it is possible, to be a believing Jew after the Holocaust. In regard to this, it must be emphasized that the teacher need not feel that he must have "the answer" (or "the answers") to questions like "Where was God during the Holocaust?" or "How could a just God allow a million sinless children to die?" The teacher can and should suggest possible approaches to these extremely difficult questions, be they fully satisfying, partially satisfying, or even totally unsatisfying, for the very struggling with the questions raised by the Holocaust is of great educational value.[4] Nevertheless, the teacher should beware of presenting facile, glib answers to profoundly difficult questions.

The second matter of central importance is the question of the implications of the Holocaust for Jewish life and existence in the post-Holocaust world. Although a number of others can surely be suggested, among the major conclusions which I believe must be drawn by Jews from study of the Holocaust period are the importance of maintaining a sense of Jewish unity rooted in an awareness of the common destiny shared by all Jews, the priority which should be placed on assuring continuing Jewish survival and vitality, and the centrality of the continuing existence and vitality of the Jewish State. In connection with this last point, it is critical to deal with the whole issue of rescue[5] and, in so doing, emphasize that had the State of Israel come into existence in 1938 instead of 1948, many millions of Jews might still be with us, and the great Jewish cultural and spiritual wealth of Polish Jewry might still be ours to derive benefit from.

Mention of the cultural and spiritual wealth of Polish Jewry brings me to the consideration of a further question. I have argued to this point that there are significant ways in which Holocaust curriculum and teaching must differ in a Jewish school from Holocaust curriculum and teaching in a public school. But what about a yeshiva, a school philosophically committed to Orthodox Judaism? Are there ways in which Holocaust courses of study in such schools should differ from their counterparts in other Jewish schools without this orientation?

I believe that there are, but before presenting them, I would like to return to the question of objectives and goals. To my mind, the fundamental objectives of Holocaust education in yeshivot should not differ substantially from those of Holocaust education in any Jewish school. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that yeshiva educators should go beyond these fundamental objectives held in common and set for themselves additional objectives which relate to the spe-

cific impact which the Holocaust had on Orthodox Jewry and to the specific implications which the Holocaust has for Orthodox Jews — not because Orthodox Jews suffered any more, nor because their piety makes their suffering somehow more significant in qualitative terms, but rather because it is important for the Orthodox educator to do this as part of the ideological component of his responsibilities as a professional exponent of Orthodox Judaism.

The specific impact of the Holocaust upon Orthodox Jewry was enormous. Because Poland, which became the focus of the Nazis' murderous intentions regarding the Jews, constituted the center of a flourishing and productive Jewish society built around the two primary values of Orthodox Judaism, scrupulous *shmirat mitzvot* and intense involvement in *limmud Torah*, the losses suffered by Orthodox Jewry as a "movement" were particularly severe and catastrophic; hence Orthodox Jews studying the tragedy of the Holocaust and responding to it are compelled to concern themselves with the issues of survival and reconstruction in the wake of the great catastrophe. Consequently, in terms of his educational objectives, the Orthodox educator teaching about the Holocaust must seek to nurture among his students a commitment to the survival and reconstruction of Orthodoxy. While the remarkable post-Holocaust growth of yeshivot, particularly in Israel and the United States, has contributed much to the process of restoring Orthodox Jewry, the restoration is by no means complete or assured, and for it to continue the commitment to rebuild and restore must be transmitted to the young.

Holocaust education and teaching in a yeshiva must aim as well at creating a sense of identification with Orthodox victims, an appreciation for their particular tribulations, and a sense of admiration for them. Although a "crisis of identification" similar to the one discussed above may well ensue, students should be encouraged and aided in dealing with it through class discussion and other pedagogic means.

In view of these objectives, Holocaust curriculum in a yeshiva should highlight the responsa and behavior of Orthodox Jews in the ghettos and the camps and the significance which these have.[6] As well, the particular losses incurred by Orthodox Jewry should be dealt with, perhaps by focussing on the great yeshivot, Hasidic courts, etc., when looking at Polish Jewry between the World Wars.

Further, the curriculum should provide opportunity for students to consider and suggest what appropriate responses of an Orthodox Jew qua Orthodox Jew might be to the Holocaust, e.g., reaching out to the non-Orthodox, supporting yeshivot financially, intensifying one's own Torah knowledge and practice, etc.

To sum up, then, it is my contention that Holocaust education should not be viewed by Jewish educators as a monolith. I have argued that the aims and objectives of Holocaust education in the Jewish school are not identical with those of Holocaust education in the public school, and consequently the curricular content of the former must differ from the latter. I have argued further that even within the rubric of Jewish education, with specific reference to yeshiva education, aims and objectives differ and consequently curricular content must also differ. In addition to the enormous emotional demands which it makes upon the teacher, Holocaust teaching makes serious intellectual demands, not the least of which involves choosing which aspects to teach and where to place emphasis. Many factors influence these choices, as they do any curricular decision, but a clear awareness of one's objectives in Holocaust education can go a long way toward both making the process easier and assuring that the choices made are educationally responsible.

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REFERENCES

1. One particularly strong indication of the upsurge in interest in teaching the Holocaust is the extremely rapid growth in popularity of social studies curriculum called "Facing History and Ourselves," developed by a nonprofit educational foundation of the same name in Brookline, Massachusetts. Although this curriculum gives much attention to the so-called "Armenian genocide," its primary focus is on the Holocaust and the issues it raises, e.g., prejudice, stereotyping, racism, etc.
2. See, for example, the goals of the JESNA Holocaust Curriculum Project, *Pedagogic Reporter* 33:2 (March, 1982): 2.
3. It is interesting to note that until relatively recently this approach, which I have termed apologetic, typified the approach utilized in Israel, in schools and in other settings where the Holocaust was taught there. Perhaps this is because the potential "crisis of identification" which I have described was perceived to represent a more serious danger, since Israel represents the Jewish people's control over its own destiny, the very antithesis of Jewish powerlessness during the Holocaust period. Interestingly, the trend now is to eschew apologetics and deal with Jewish resistance along the lines of the approach which I describe below.
4. A useful reference for teachers (and perhaps advanced senior students as well) in this regard is S. Katz, "Jewish Faith After the Holocaust: Four Approaches," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1975-6 Yearbook, pp. 92-105. My students, who are senior students, have responded particularly favorably to selections which I have given them to read from Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, New York, 1973.
5. A recent and useful contribution to the literature on the subject of rescue is David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, New York, 1984. It should be read in conjunction with B. Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe: 1939-1945*, New York, 1979.
6. Useful material bearing on this subject includes I. Rosenbaum, *Holocaust and Halakhah*, New York, 1976; E. Berkovits, *With God in Hell*, New York, 1979; Y. Eliach, ed., *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, New York, 1982; as well as the works of M. Prager (Mark), e.g., *Sparks of Glory* (transl. of *Nizozei Gevurah*), New York, 1974.