THURSDAY OCTOBER 14, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION B, 16:30-18:00

What Does the Holocaust Have to do With Me?

by

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This paper deals with a unique collaboration between two museums and their twin projects: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC – “Bringing the Lessons Home” and The Center for Humanistic Education at the Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum.

In 1994 the USHMM launched a unique and broad-reaching educational pilot program called Bringing the Lessons Home: Holocaust Education for the Community. In 1996 the Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum started the Center for Humanistic Education. The center now functions in cooperation with the Bringing the Lessons Home project at the USHMM.

While dealing with humanistic education in a Holocaust museum, the main thing that concerns us is the connection between the Holocaust and humanistic education. Our team is trying to address this fundamentally important issue within five different contexts, all of which examine the relevance and the significance of the Holocaust for contemporary society.

1. The Universal Context

The subject of the Holocaust raises several universal human dilemmas. The Holocaust revealed the full range of human characteristics in their most extreme form – from the pure evil of the murderers and their assistants to the fear, the struggle for survival and the despair of the victims; from the heights of courage, sacrifice and compassion of persecuted people for their fellows and of righteous Gentiles for survivors, to the indifference of those who stood by and did nothing, not to mention the cruelty of the collaborators. It is no wonder that these issues have engaged sociologists and psychologists such as Erich Fromm, who investigated modern man’s mechanism for the escape from freedom, or the psychologist Milgram, who examined the mental mechanism of obedience and the causing of suffering to others.

For those participating in a humanistic educational framework, facing questions on human nature and addressing basic moral human dilemmas together can bring people closer and emphasize the common humanity of people who have a different culture, nationality and background. This is particularly important when working with teenagers, who are constantly concerned with questions of identity, relationships and the development of their own moral philosophy.
2. The Modernistic Context
The Holocaust as a modern historical event represents a warning of the dangers modern society itself can raise: the exploitation of democratic institutions which allowed an anti-democratic regime to come to power. The use of the media for purposes of propaganda; mass conscription by totalitarian regimes; invasion of the privacy of people’s lives; state terror aimed at individuals or at what they considered undesirable groups; racism and discrimination on the part of the ruling elite; systematic extermination by industrialized methods, all were exploited by the Nazis in their most extreme form.

Modern methods have, of course, also been exploited in other historical cases of genocide, both in the past (the Armenians) and in the present (in Yugoslavia). Discussing these issues in educational programs serves to sharpen one’s awareness of social and political processes that have the potential to deteriorate. It also underlines the lurking threat to contemporary society from the educated elite who have scientific and technological knowledge (the atom bomb, genetic engineering, etc.)

3. The Jewish Context
The traumatic memories of the Holocaust comprise one of the main factors, if not the main factor, which identify and unify the Jews, as well as differentiating them from others, in their own eyes and in the eyes of those around them. The systematic attempt to exterminate a people by destroying their humanity and murdering every last one of them not only singles the Jews out as a group with a particular common fate, but also imposes on them a moral obligation towards themselves and others to continue to exist as human beings and as Jews.

The memory of the Holocaust is an identifying and unifying factor, because it includes all earlier history and affects all aspects of the life of the Jewish people, its art, morality and goals.

The Holocaust is seen by Israeli teenagers and by Jewish teenagers in the Diaspora alike as the most central and significant event in modern Jewish history. Listening to the testimony of survivors at our seminars, discussing the issues of religious faith that are raised by the Holocaust and facing dilemmas of Jewish endurance and resistance during the Holocaust – all reveal the human image of Jews in the Holocaust and forge links between the present and the past. The sense of historical empathy towards the victims of the Holocaust as lost members of one family creates common ground for discussion and the development of humanistic Jewish identity for both religious and secular teenagers in Israel and for Reform, Conservative and Orthodox young people overseas.

4. The Israeli Context
The memory of the Holocaust plays an important part in Israeli identity. Many young Israelis used to see the Holocaust as the epitome of the exile. They tended to show little understanding of the behavior of Jews who were victims in the Holocaust. Today, however, the Holocaust is widely seen as an event that had significant influence on their lives and fate and as a source of common identity.
Fifty years on, the Holocaust plays an increasingly central role in Israeli society, finding expression in many different fields – cultural, educational, political and so on. This constant reference to the Holocaust at times runs the risk of banality, and is sometimes exploited for national, even nationalistic purposes. This only strengthens the need to promote the humanistic message as the most important lesson to come out of the Holocaust. Young Israelis, who have difficulty identifying with the religious, and even the social aspects of Jewish life in Europe, can more readily accept and identify with the human side of the Jews in the Holocaust. A humanistic approach can foster sufficient empathy to bridge the historical chasm that opened up at Auschwitz.

5. The Arab Context
Stressing the human aspect of the Holocaust opens up the possibility of a renewed dialogue with the Arab sector in Israeli society. By studying the subject of the Holocaust educated Arabs come closer to seeing the human image of the Jew. They learn to see Jews not only as the majority in this country, but also as a minority during exile. They see the Jews not only as strong and as conquerors, but also as weak and as victims. Learning about Jewish suffering allows them to see their neighbors as human beings, and at the same time to raise the question of their own suffering, not for the sake of comparison, but as part of a common humanistic struggle against discrimination, racism and all kinds of oppression. In this way the discussion on the subject of the Holocaust contributes to increased Arab-Jewish understanding, realizing one of the prime aims of humanistic education.

For all these aspects the point of departure of the Center for Humanistic Studies when dealing with the Holocaust is our here and now. The Holocaust has become a principal component in the formation of the identity of every Israeli, but the split and divided Israeli society, which is in a belief and value crisis, can no longer treat the Holocaust only as a terrible and traumatic historical event in the Jewish people’s past.

We contend, that if we see the Holocaust as a general human cultural breakdown, as a breakdown in the belief in mankind, in its wisdom and in human progress, we can learn about the importance of defending human values, rights and dignity from it. We will then be able to educate for democratic values and good citizenship.

We see the study of the Holocaust and its meaning as a bridge towards an inter-cultural encounter. An encounter that will produce a common base for communication and understanding between all sectors of Israeli society, including the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, which has recently also shown the desire to learn about the events of the Holocaust and its human lessons.

This project was launched in the multi-cultural environment of Washington DC and was then replicated and adapted to the complicated multi-cultural multi-national milieu in Israel. We believe it can be replicated successfully in other multi-cultural environments.

The following suggested model that is implemented in the Center for Humanistic
Education was inspired by *Bringing the Lessons Home* of the USHMM.

**The Framework of a Workshop:**
An exposure day for an entire age group.
5-6 meetings of 6 hours each, for students who decide to participate in the workshop.
A joint summer seminar for Arab and Jewish youth who participated in the workshops in the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum (4-5 days at the beginning of the summer vacation).

**The exposure day:**
This day is meant to introduce the students to the subject in a different way than how they usually learn historical subjects. On this day we deal with the principal events that led to the Holocaust, by means of a tour of the exhibitions, a workshop on the subject of dilemmas, a short film and a testimony. We touch more on the emotional and human aspect and less on the historical aspect.

Following is the program of meetings for the students who choose to participate in the workshop:

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**The Nazi Regime – the Danger Inherent in Totalitarian Regimes**
By using all means – lectures, workshops, films and exhibitions we discuss the rise of Hitler to power and the Nazification of Germany. How did it happen in an enlightened, tolerant, cultured country? We try to understand the process that made the occurrences of the Holocaust possible. We add a workshop titled – A totalitarian regime in Israel – is this an imaginary situation? Or, what connection is there between negation of human rights and a totalitarian regime? We use actual examples from the whole world.

**Subject: The Underlying Appeal of Fascist and Racist Ideologies.** Work on texts – The Nazi ideology – what was the source of its appeal? Then we deal with Nazi propaganda and the different ways to control culture, education and thought. The film “The Swing Kids” helps us to deal with the delegitimization of the different in Nazi Germany. Next we deal with the attitude to others and xenophobia today, discussing stereotypes and prejudice by exercises in social psychology and actual cases of xenophobia in Europe and Israel and responses to the above.

**Subject: The Image of Man in its Extreme Manifestations during the Holocaust.** Through workshops in the museum exhibitions, we deal with the image of the Nazi murderer as opposed to the image of the victim, *The Righteous among the Nations* and loyalty to family and society versus loyalty to humanistic values. In a workshop on the subject of dilemmas, we discuss subjects like parents and children making fatal decisions, retaining humanity in the concentration camps, the responsibility of the underground to the Ghetto etc. To this session we add actual dilemmas like those of Jewish students who are going to join the IDF in a year or two - for example, the behavior of Israeli soldiers in the territories.

**Subject: The Power of Education and “Togetherness” in Preserving the Human Spirit and the Power of Resistance.** In this session we deal with the legacy of Janusz Korczak – the figure of an educator and humanist under Holocaust conditions, the children’s group
in the Theresienstadt Ghetto, a testimony telling about the youth movement in the Warsaw Ghetto – a substitute for school and for leadership. We end with a workshop discussing the issue – What examples from the period of the Holocaust concerning humanistic values can we adopt?.

Subject: *Manifestations of Resistance during the Holocaust*. Through exhibitions, films, texts and testimonies the students learn about different types of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, dilemmas of the underground fighters and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. We end with the workshop – reasons for and ways of resistance to a regime in peaceful situations.

Subject: *The Memory of the Holocaust in Israeli Society* - the attitude of Israeli society to the Holocaust survivors in the 1950’s and the 1960’s, the importance and meaning of the Holocaust today and the essence of the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony, the second and third generations and their attitude to the Holocaust survivors, the Arabs and the Holocaust – discussions in light of texts and film clips, lecture and workshop.

**Summary**

Both projects, *Bringing the Lessons Home* and the Center for Humanistic Education, reach out to local communities. In Washington DC the public school community is 80 percent African-American and the Ghetto Fighters’ House has focused, very successfully, on Arab and Druze communities near to it.

The basic principles behind both projects are:

- The implications of the Holocaust are applicable universally. By learning about the Holocaust the student comes to understand the protective nature of democratic values, the necessity of speaking out against the abuse of power and the danger of remaining indifferent to human suffering. The program attempts to teach the exercise of moral judgment and an acceptance of civic responsibility. Studying the Holocaust can bring people together, bridge cultural differences and clarify our common heritage as human beings.
- Students serve as partners to educators and their opinions and suggestions are taken seriously.
- Collaborations between the Museum, schools and the community help shape the discussion.

Both projects offer the following:

- Special visits to the Museum
  - USHMM – before-hours guided tours led by staff and student guides.

- At GFH guides are students from their school or community who conduct tours in Arabic for Arab students.
- Extended classes and workshops for teachers and students
- Both projects offer 24 hours of classes for students.
- Summer seminars which host 1-5 students from Israel in Washington DC.
- The students of both projects provide a tour for their parents and family on graduation.
- At USHMM we offer one to three-day workshops for teachers and a 10-day seminar in Israel for about 5 core teachers each year.
- At GFH we provide 120 hours of in-service training for Jewish and Arab educators with Ministry of Education credits.
- Ongoing 120 hours of in-service training for Jewish and Arab educators on humanistic subjects, 120 hours.

Classroom resources
- Opportunities for students to serve as museum guides for their parents and peers.
- Summer opportunities for teachers to share strategies.
- Summer opportunities for students to discover the implications of the Holocaust for their own lives.
- Support for classroom activities in partnership schools.