

# Revisiting the Pedagogy and Purpose of Holocaust Education

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Sh'ma

## Koret Book Review

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Simone A. Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004. 185pp. \$19.95 paperback

THE STUDY OF EXEMPLARS opens varying kinds of windows through which one can make inferences about typical performance. Simone Schweber's book features an extensive look at three teachers' classes about the Holocaust, with the work of one additional teacher who uses what might be called a "traditional" approach treated in a more cursory manner. The three focal teachers have clearly worked with extreme diligence, persistence, and creativity to create Holocaust education experiences. Perhaps more critically, they have not only thought deeply about the Holocaust, but they have explored their own feelings about it. They have come to see that Holocaust education, whether standing alone or part of larger, related units or modules, is not simply material to be conveyed to students.

At this point, we come to a fork in the road. Each of the teachers in Schweber's book has to make an extraordinarily difficult decision. What is the lesson they want to convey about the Holocaust? Their answers depend on many things, some logistical, some personal, some based on their students and their communities. Three of the four teachers featured in Schweber's book find answers that share a common pedagogic structure. They create integrated experiences for their students designed to affect them at an emotional level, be cumulative in their impact, and be anchored by some unexpected, visually compelling, emotionally engaging, and morally troubling presentations and discussions. The particular approaches they take, however, differ based on the context of their classes, their training, prior experiences related to Holocaust education, and a myriad of factors not fully explored by Schweber:

**Understanding Historical Facts:** Mr. Jefferson presents a factual approach to the Holocaust, presenting event chronologies and interrelationships with a largely frontal lecturing approach, culminating in a moral message derived from a focus on American liberation of the concentration camps.

**Facing Ourselves Through History:** Mr.

Zee teaches about the Holocaust as part of a wider curriculum approach, Facing History and Ourselves. Students are asked to confront the moral dilemmas and challenges to citizenship inherent in all genocides, with a focus on the Holocaust.

**Experiencing the Process of History:** Ms. Bess creates a simulation of the Holocaust called "Gestapo" so that students can experience some aspect of the process inflicted on the victims.

**Experiencing the Events of History:** Mr. Dennis uses a multimodal performance format, including songs, to provide historical information interspersed with highly dramatic, sometimes dramatized reenactments of situations, such as the capturing of Anne Frank.

An affective experience is a strong and perhaps essential correlate of internalization of learning. When the material itself is highly emotionally charged, it poses a particular challenge to create a balance such that emotions do not become overwhelming, to the point where the content becomes secondary to the emotion. In truth, the Holocaust is not unique in being an emotionally charged historic event. It may be that it is the most intense, but that does not automatically mean either that instructors are obligated to convey this intensity or that creating emotionally intense experiences are the best way to create an understanding of the event. Yet there are few guidelines for those engaged in Holocaust education with regard to these considerations.

Schweber's study has great value because it stimulates us to think at new levels of detail about what is possible in Holocaust education. Her three focal teachers have designed course experiences that are unique to them and emotionally charged; few, if any, educators could replicate what they provide. Indeed, in other hands, their approaches may well have an iatrogenic quality; such is the case with powerful techniques on powerful topics. So we must ask ourselves: what can be expected from Holocaust education as it is delivered in secular education and various Jewish educa-

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tion contexts?

What contribution is Holocaust education making to raising generations of youth committed to individual rights, the responsibilities of citizenship, and outspoken idealism with regard to genocide? Are we clear about the extent to which we want Holocaust education to produce outrage, action, or both, and with regard to what level of injustice? Do we want to use the Holocaust to teach moral lessons? If so, which ones?

How must we refine the general goals of remembering the Holocaust and preventing its reoccurrence? Can they both be reached


via the same pedagogy and curricula? Do we sufficiently understand the developmental exposure of students to Holocaust-related education from grades K-12 (i.e., how experiences such as the ones Schweber chronicles fit with past and subsequent learning)?

To me, it is the detailed look at exemplary “Lessons from Classroom Practice” that is the most compelling aspect of this book. Reading it should lead educators — individually and collectively — to seriously revisit the pedagogy and purpose of Holocaust education, to ensure it has the potency, coherence, and continuity to reach their goals. 

### Ethics, from page 20

The teachers, office staff, janitors, and administrators must learn and speak the new values language. In 1965, had you visited a NASA base and asked the janitor what his job was, his answer would be, “to put a man on the moon.” (Hopefully, today, that same janitor would say, “to put a woman or man on Mars.”) So too with executing a rich Jewish ethical context and culture: everyone must be, literally, on the same page. Everyone’s job is values and ethics education.

Second, parents need education in how to speak ethical language, in how to recognize what is important. For example, when a child comes home from school, parents, including myself, will ask, “How was your math test? or how was the athletic tryout?” Rarely do we ask, “Did you do a mitzvah today?” “Did you invite a lonely classmate to join you for lunch?” What parents ask is what we value. Changing the questions changes the vision for our children; changing the vision engenders ethical actions.

Third, the school’s trustees need education on how their language, decisions, and financial support impact the overall institution. What they spend and how they spend it is, perhaps, the most powerful creator of culture and context. I often teach school boards that the school’s budget is really a statement of what we, at our very core, believe and value. If there are large allocations for technology, then we value technology. If, however, there is serious discussion about teacher benefits, and large allocations for pension plans and medical care, then we value our faculty and their most basic human needs. In essence, we value our ethical obligations, our Jewish obligations, if you will, to our professional community in whom we place the ethical education of our children. Faculty who know this kind of support act in accordance with the board’s vision for the school, a vision that, without exception in our nation, includes in its mission a mandate to raise up a generation of successful people and ethical human beings. 

## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh’ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. Should Jewish schools use the Holocaust to teach moral lessons? If so, which ones?
2. How do we integrate the observance of Yom haShoah into Jewish educational curricula?
3. What is the rubric for teaching about the Holocaust in Jewish schools?
4. Does Holocaust education focus too much curricula attention on death?