
Thoughts on Holocaust Education, Anti-Semitism, and Overcoming Bigotry: Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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With the spate of anti-Semitic incidents in recent weeks, we have heard many calls for increasing education about the Holocaust. The prevailing wisdom is that when people—especially young people—learn about the horrors of the Holocaust, they will become more sympathetic to Jews and more aware of the dangers of religious and racial hatred. With more knowledge about the Holocaust, it is assumed that people will be less prone to anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviors.

It should be agreed that the various efforts at Holocaust education have had a positive impact on many. Millions of people have visited the various Holocaust museums and memorials. Large numbers of students have learned about the Holocaust in their social studies classes.

And yet, Holocaust education—unless handled very well—can have negative consequences. For those who are steeped in anti-Jewish hatred, Holocaust education may actually encourage their anti-Semitism. They see that millions of Jews were systematically slaughtered, while much of the world stood aside. They see Jews as a relatively defenseless minority group that is an easy target for hatred and violence. In the minds of rabid Jew-haters, the Holocaust is an ideal...not a disaster.

Holocaust education—unless handled very well—can have negative consequences for Jewish students. Jews—especially young and impressionable ones—may wonder why they should maintain Jewish identity if it can be so risky to do so. While I believe that most Jewish students will be moved to greater sympathy and identity with Jewish Peoplehood, some may be impacted in the opposite direction. They will see no particular virtue in being part of a hated minority, victimized so cruelly by the Nazis...and still subjected to anti-Jewish hatred today.

There is no one “silver bullet” for putting an end to anti-Semitism. Holocaust Education can successfully reach many people with a message of the dangers of hatred, the value of tolerance. Interfaith and intergroup conferences are helpful in creating normal human interchanges where all participants are viewed as fellow human beings...not as stereotypes. When Jews and non-Jews interact positively as neighbors, as business associates, as co-workers, as responsible citizens—positive attitudes naturally ensue.

With all the current news about anti-Semitism in the United States, people (including Jews) sometimes forget that national polls have found that Jews are among the most highly regarded religious groups in America. Jews are recognized for their sense of social justice, their leadership in so many fields, their contributions in education, science, medicine, the arts etc.

This is not to ignore, or downplay, anti-Semitism or anti-Jewish behavior. But it is important

to keep things in context. It is also, unfortunately, a fact that extremism in general has been increasing against other groups. The civil discourse in American society has become harsher, more strident, and angrier. There is a malady in the United States (and other countries), of which anti-Semitism is a symptom.

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Sholom Aleichem wrote a story about a Jewish young man who was conscripted into the Russian army, and was trained how to use his rifle "At the firing line the sergeant noticed Yechiel shooting up in the air instead of ahead; he poured a flood of curses and abuse on his head, with all the worst names for Jews in Russian to boot, and showed him where to aim his gun. A little later the sergeant again saw Yechiel aiming up in the air. This time he was flabbergasted: What, he wanted to know, was the matter with that crazy Jewish soldier? Hadn't he told Yechiel where to aim his gun? 'Yes,' Yechiel replied, 'but there are people there!'"

This seemingly amusing story points to a serious truth. When people see each other as fellow human beings, it is difficult to shoot at them. To engage in violent action first requires a process of dehumanization of the victim. People need to be trained to hate the "enemy," to see the other as a villain unworthy of life.

The root of hatred in our society—in all human societies—arises with the planting of seeds of mistrust, fear and vilification of those deemed as "the enemy." Once the victims are dehumanized, violent action against them becomes possible. There's no need to show mercy on people who are now deemed to be vermin.

Jews know as well as anyone—probably better than anyone—how dangerous it is to become victimized by haters. Once the hatred seeps in, violent words and actions follow. Once people come to dehumanize others, they become capable of acting against them with egregious cruelty.

It is impossible to ignore the growing polarizations within our society today. The level of hateful discourse has led to increasing acts of violence.

We Jews certainly feel the pain of being dehumanized, negatively stereotyped...but so do almost all people who are targets of one hate group or another. There are those who demonize Jews, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, Christians, Muslims, immigrants, homosexuals...the list goes on. Because hatred is aimed at virtually everyone, virtually everyone needs to rise and resist it.

Demonization of any one group threatens the moral fabric of the entire society.

Unless society as a whole can address the plague of dehumanization and demonization, all of us—of whatever background—are at risk. Each of us, in our own way, can contribute to creating a more harmonious, tolerant, humane society.

We need to strive for a society where we look into each other's eyes and see a fellow human being. As Yechiel in Sholom Aleichem's story said: There are people there!

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