



Make Germany Great Again': How Trump has politicized Holocaust education in America - Opinion - Israel News

Steven Davidson

Apr 11, 2018 12:40 PM

"So, to recap from last class, how did Hitler mobilize German support for elections during the early '30s?" I asked.

Several hands were raised - promise jobs for every Aryan, down with the disgraceful Treaty of Versailles and the traitors who signed it, blame the Jews, fear the Jews.

Or, as one student answered simply: "Make Germany Great Again."

Whether to make the connections between then and now clear became the moral quandary of the two-month [Holocaust](#) unit I taught my 6th grade Hebrew school class in Brooklyn.

Connect [Donald Trump](#) with Nazi Germany, and I'm politicizing and trivializing the Holocaust - not to mention fueling the gaslit accusations of Nazism tossed around all corners of political discourse.

But seemingly every class, news broke that day hearkening back to our history lessons. In Poland, [state-sanctioned Holocaust denial](#). At home, a pile of [children's shoes](#) left at a march decrying "Never Again." A government official [refusing orders](#) to spread racist falsehoods. Not to mention the [many prominent](#) White House officials who [did so](#) in their spare time — and most frequently, the [deluge](#) of presidential tweets attacking today's "[lügenpresse](#)" and [stirring conspiracies](#) about "criminal" and "rapist" [outsiders](#).

We must teach the Holocaust because human beings just like us both suffered and committed such unspeakable acts, and so it can happen again. By understanding this past, the thinking goes, our youth are equipped to recognize and stem the forces of hatred that condemned our ancestors throughout Jewish history to such horrors before.

But we framed and honed this approach when preparing our kids for this scenario felt more like a fire drill than for anything imminent. Current events make it apparent to my students and myself it doesn't feel that way anymore.

Trump echoes and amplifies a nativist past - even its lexicon - too strongly to have gone unnoticed in our Hebrew school class.

Like when I explained how the majority of Americans in the 1930s sought to turn away Jewish refugees, fearing they were [Nazi "spies"](#) or threatened American jobs and way of life, several of my kids put [two and two together](#) themselves. I got around to the America First Committee - the non-interventionist group of Americans indifferent to Nazi persecution at best and trafficking in anti-Semitism at worst - and the parallels were quite literally spelled out.

With this past in mind, values like empathy and openheartedness are woven into the fabric of the Jewish-American outlook. These values are inherently progressive, and you see that when Jews go to the polls. But if a Hebrew school aims to teach children values, it's particularly difficult to avoid politics when a nation's leader demonstrates no values himself.

I am one of hundreds of Jewish educators across Canada and the U.S. to utilize the [Holocaust curriculum](#) developed by the non-profit organization, *Facing History & Ourselves*. Facing History, which describes itself as helping students "learn about hatred and bigotry so they can stop them from happening in the future," focuses its Holocaust curriculum on Nazi Germany's step-by-step escalation of persecution in the context of human behavior and individual choices, exploring concepts like in-group vs. out-group bias and scapegoating.

Since 1976, Facing History & Ourselves has educated over half a million students in the U.S. and Canada about the Holocaust. Its curriculum precedes Trump's ascension, but it was astonishing how relevant it has sometimes felt. One of my Facing History lessons explored the sociological concept of the universe of obligations - to whom we believe is owed society's protection and respect, and how we determine who we care for before others. The lesson tasked me with writing a quote on the board:

"I love my daughters more than my nieces,
my nieces more than my cousins,
my cousins more than my neighbors.
But that doesn't mean that we detest our neighbors."

Thinking of their own families, nearly all of the kids agreed with the quote - except for one always-skeptical student of mine. She wondered what ugliness you may find if you create a whole society that places kin over strangers.

I revealed to the class who said that quote: [Jean-Marie Le Pen](#), Holocaust denier and renowned xenophobe. The name sounded familiar, and I told them he is the father of Marine Le Pen, who had recently lost her [anti-Muslim campaign](#) for the French presidency fashioned in a similar populist vein as Donald Trump.

"[The quote] is like [America First](#)," a student realized.

Indeed, teaching the Holocaust has become politicized. But how we teach the Holocaust hasn't really changed; it's the circumstances we are teaching them in that has.

Educating Jewish children to shield the oppressed and those seeking refuge - recalling that you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt, a [spurned refugee](#) in America - never really felt political in previous years. But now, such human decency is a political statement itself. And as former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright [recently warned](#) on the same subject, "If one were to draft a script chronicling fascism's resurrection, the abdication of America's moral leadership would make a credible first scene."

That moral abdication isn't supposed to be normal in America. And to not acknowledge what isn't normal as such to my kids is how normalization occurs. As I told the class what Elie Wiesel once said, "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

Trump is such a cultural phenomenon, however, that even kids in America aren't neutral. My sixth graders generally hate Trump because nearly all their parents do.

But what makes Trump so personally relevant for them is how he surfaces in every crude meme online and bad impression on the playground. He hijacks the moral fiber of American culture in a way no politician ever has. They may know next to nothing about his policies, but all my students understand what Donald Trump represents - at least in their own social bubble.

The cultural transformation that German society underwent reverberated with my kids in this way. When I explained what a cult of personality is, it reminded one student of /r/The_Donald subreddit - the Reddit community of [MAGA trolls](#) that developed its own language communicating [bigotry](#) and [cruel jokes](#), serving as dutiful "pedes" to their proclaimed "[God Emperor](#)" - Donald J. Trump. During another lesson, a couple of students related the Brownshirts and Nazi rallies to Trump [encouraging](#) and [retweeting](#) violence on his behalf.

My students did not make these connections because they see death camps in America. They did because so much of what came before the camps - the conspiracies to stoke paranoia, the false equivalences to arouse indifference, the scapegoating to strip others of their rights and agency - reflect degrees of the world they are now growing up in. And as a Jewish history teacher, I must instill their people's past so they may better confront such a world.

I once presented to the class several Elie Wiesel quotes imploring them to stand up to injustice today. I asked them who it is we as Jews must protect. A couple said ourselves, while others answered Muslims, Latinos and other persecuted minorities. All of them, however, agreed: wherever injustice is found, Jews have an obligation to stand up and speak out.

And though young they may be, I already see that exhibited among my students who march, who walk out in protest, who answer the bigotry of today with "Never forget."

Steven Davidson is a writer and journalist whose work has appeared in The Times of Israel, The Forward, Salon and Narratively. Twitter: [@sdavidson169](#)