HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

The struggle about knowing and remembering the acts of genocide has a unique significance for the State of Israel, which is a country of people who were the victims of the Holocaust. The way in which the Holocaust and other genocides are taught in Israel is crucial and is influenced by the concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in world history, which is widely promoted in Israel. Two forces have led to the current attitude of the state of Israel and its leading institutions toward teaching and remembering acts of genocide other than the Holocaust. The pressure of the Turkish government against remembering and teaching the Armenian Genocide and the opposition of several high-powered Jewish-Israeli groups which are afraid that dealing with other genocides could damage the concept of the uniqueness of the Shoah.

In 1979, the Holocaust was introduced as an independent unit in high school curriculum and then, in 1981, it was introduced as a unit of the matriculation exams. In 1989, the Ministry of Education initiated a program for high school students that included a visit to Poland and the extermination camps. The program has become common in the last few years with about 25 000 high school students traveling to Poland every year.

Concerning the teaching of other occurrences of genocide in general, and the Armenian Genocide in particular, there has been practically no change over the years, at least in the official attitude; nothing is taught.

There was once an initiative to introduce teaching and remembering other genocides in the Israeli educational system but it was rejected by the Ministry of Education even though the minstry had initially supported the idea. The Ministry of Education promised that genocides would be taught but nothing has been done during the 14 years since that time. Some history teachers in high schools teach about the Armenian Genocide or other genocides, like the genocide of the Gypsies by using the rejected program. We can estimate that hundreds of high school and college students are learning in one way or another each year, since 1995, about genocides including the Armenian case.

Can an Israeli high school student learn anything about the Armenian Genocide or any other genocide through his regular textbooks?

Under these circumstances it is not surprising to discover that Israeli students possess little knowledge of other peoples' genocides. Nonetheless, the private initiatives undertaken by teachers and school directors who have decided to deal with other genocides in their schools are encouraging. Their influence is limited but it is a long-term influence. Furthermore, two university curricula are being studied in the Open University of Israel.

"The entire history of the brief 'millennial Reich' can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality" – Primo Levi, 1986.

Education has an extremely important role in keeping historical events in the collective memory of specific groups. One of its most significant goals is the transmission of a nation's collective memory to the next generation, and it has a great influence on the crucial question of if and how a certain historical event will be remembered in the future.

The struggle about knowing and remembering the acts of genocide has a unique significance for the State of Israel, which is a country of people who were the victims of the Holocaust. Since the Holocaust plays such an important role in Jewish identity, memory and in education in Israel, it wil also be involved in this discussion. The way in which the Holocaust and other genocides are taught in Israel is crucial and is influenced by the concept of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in world history, which is widely promoted in Israel. Part of the struggle against the occurrence of any case of genocide in the future is education, so that it would "never happen again," although, surely, teaching is not enough. But the reality is, of course, much more complex.

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TEACHING HOLOCAUST IN ISRAEL

Two forces have led to the current attitude of the state of Israel and its leading institutions toward teaching and remembering acts of genocide other than the Holocaust. The pressure of the Turkish government against remembering and teaching the Armenian Genocide and the opposition of several high-powered Jewish-Israeli groups which are afraid that dealing with other genocides could damage the concept of the uniqueness of the Shoah. We will elaborate a little on the subject of Holocaust education in Israel, because it seems indispensable to understanding the attitude of the Israeli educational system towards teaching other genocides in general and the Armenian genocide in particular.

The terrible tragedies that befell the Jews at the hands of Nazi Germany became an important element of Jewish and Zionist historical education. The educational institutions of the secular Jewish community in Israel, both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel, undertook the mission of constructing "the new Jew" as a moral, conceptual and political entity. Building Israeli collective was considered, and probably was in many respects, the continuation of the struggle for survival after the Holocaust. However, the roots of Zionist educational ideologies were so ethnocentric and goal-orientated that they did not enter into the moral dilemmas of the very foundations of Zionist education. This nation building project reflected and produced a special ideological philosophy in which there was no place for essential issues, such as the rights of the Palestinians.

After the end of the Second World War, Zionist historiography used knowledge about the Holocaust to build Zionist moral education.[1] This hegemonic version of Holocaust memories became the central educative apparatus. Historical memory was mobilized for constructing the new Jew as one whose ethnocentric collective identity would be ensured by a particular historical memory, in which the term "Auschwitz" was understood as an immanent and determinist characteristic of not realizing the essence of Judaism in its modern form – namely, strong, independent and part of a Jewish sovereign national state. The obligation to remember the Holocaust that served as the justification of Zionist morality and practice, was based on the biblical word *zachor*. One context of *zachor* is that of war, be it against Pharaoh or against the *Amalek*, the implacable enemy who lived in Canaan, the Promised Land, before the exodus of Israel from Egypt. *Zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek* [remember what Amalek did unto thee] (Deuteronomy 25: 17) refers to the remembering of God's command to be devoted to His teaching in order to reach the Promised Land and to exterminate *Amalek* men, women, children and even their animals. Gur-Ze'ev claims that:

> This zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek is part of the formation of the secular halutz and sabra myth in the collective Israeli identity. The zachor, remembering of the Holocaust victims, had merged into the zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek: the victim of Nazi Germany merged into the concept of "eternal victim," seeing every "other," every goy (other people), as "Amalek." Implicitly, it means that the Amalek's just fate is to be the just fate of "the other" in days to come.[2]

Some Israeli scholars divide the history of dealing with the issue of the Holocaust in the formal educational institutions of Israel into periods according to their orientation. Ruth Firrer and Dalia Ofer make the distinction between the "Zionist Period" (1948-1977) and the "Humanistic Period," characterized by its "Humanistic Approach" (1979 to the 1990s).[3] Firrer proposed what might also be called the "intermediate incubation years" between 1961 (the Eichmann trial) and 1977, including the wars of 1967 and 1973.[4]

In 1979, the Holocaust was introduced as an independent unit in high school curriculum, and in 1981 it was introduced as a unit of the matriculation exams, thereby sanctioning its teaching to graduating classes.

The genuine participation of Israeli youth in the dialogue about the Holocaust became more meaningful in the 1980s and 1990s. The opportunities for young Israelis to engage in the shaping of this dialogue also increased as the Holocaust became a more frequent topic of reflection in Israeli cultural life and because of political changes in Eastern Europe including the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1989, the Ministry of Education initiated a program for high school students that included a visit to Poland and the extermination camps. The program has become common in the last few years with about 25 000 high school students traveling to Poland every year and a number of studies have demonstrated the strong impact these visits have had on students' understanding of themselves and their Jewish identity.

I accept, in principal, the chronological distinction between the "Zionist period" and the "humanistic period," but I have reservations about the definition of the second period as a "humanistic period" or a "humanistic approach." Three facts should be mentioned regarding this period that reveal the ongoing Zionist oriented face of this attitude. First, the State Educational Law of 1953, which established the goals of the educational system in Israel, was changed only once, in 1980, when the Knesset decided to add the following statement: "The goal of the state educational system is to base education in the state on the consciousness and the memory of the Holocaust and heroism." The spirit of change in the State Education Law is clear; to base or to foster the consciousness and the memory of the Shoah and heroism, from a Jewish-Zionist perspective, as was the case with the law of Yad Vashem in 1953. Second, even in the "humanistic period," the Holocaust was taught, until 1999 and sometimes even later, in the framework of "Jewish history," which was separated from "general history." These aspects limit by definition the scope of the "humanistic approach." Third, the high school trips to Poland that began in the late 1980s do not foster the "humanistic approach," but rather the particularistic approach. They foster the Zionist perspective and sometimes, to a lesser degree, a Jewish perspective. The visits to Poland are perhaps the ultimate example of the goals of "teaching and mourning" colliding with each other.

Essentially, the major dilemmas facing the teaching of the Holocaust in Israel are similar to the dilemmas faced by all pedagogues in all subjects who must determine why to teach, what to teach, how to teach, what the student has to remember and how to help him to remember as well as when to teach and when to remember. In all cases, the danger lies in transforming the Holocaust into an instrument, a means, rather than an end in itself. In my opinion, the Holocaust is not over taught or excessively commemorated in Israel. Rather, it is being used for too many goals of Zionist ideology, such as renewing the sense of Zionism and Israeli pride among young Israelis. Accordingly, other Nazi victims and victims of other genocides are rarely mentioned in Israel.

Concerning teaching other occurrences of genocide in general, and the Armenian Genocide in particular, there has been practically no change over the years, at least in the official attitude. We will now turn to analyze this topic.

TEACHING ABOUT GENOCIDE IN ISRAEL

In the following paragraphs, we will describe and briefly analyze the controversies that exist regarding teaching and remembering other genocides in the Israeli educational system.

"Awareness of world suffering – Genocide in the 20th century" (subsequently referred to as A.W.S.)[5]

Genocide is a crime that we must struggle to prevent or reduce as best as we can. It is my belief that the essential first step is to learn about, and be aware of, its existence.

It was the conviction of those who prepared this study program that Israel, the national home of the Jewish people, who were the victims of the most horrendous of all genocidal acts, has a special moral and political responsibility to place the issue of genocide on the world agenda; to take part in attempts to preclude it from happening; to limit its scope when it does occur and offer aid to its casualties; to demand that the perpetrators be brought to justice and the victims be compensated for their sufferings; and to thwart the efforts of all those who attempt to deny its occurrence. First and foremost, we hold that this topic needs to be learned and discussed by young people in Israel, because the history of the Jewish people is replete with centuries of persecutions that culminated in the Holocaust. We also believe it is essential that our youths

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develop sensitivity to the suffering of others and strengthen the universal humanistic values that are well grounded in Jewish tradition. In this sense, I personally perceive teaching the Armenian Genocide as a very important matter for Israelis as well as for the cause of the Armenians.

My proposal was, at first, warmly received in November 1993 by the ministry in Rabin's government, then controlled by a member of the Meretz Party. The proposal suggested that the program be expanded to include the genocide of the Gypsies during the Second World War and more recent cases of genocide, such as in Bosnia or Rwanda.

The panel subsequently requested that I plan a special educational program, designed for high school, seminary and college students while organizing a supplementary instructive program for teachers.[6]

The program was set to begin in mid-December 1994, with the blessing and support of the Ministry of Education. A few weeks before the program was set to commence, the director of the Pedagogical Secretariat informed the special committee, the country's highest pedagogic panel, that the Minister of Education would personally have to approve the program and that meanwhile, it would be put on hold. Later it was said that his decision would depend on the approval of the Academic Committee on History, which was scheduled to meet at the end of January 1995. When the teachers were notified, they protested and claimed it meant the cancellation of a program which they had prepared to teach, and which the pupils were to be tested on within the framework of their matriculation exams. It was then decided to have the chairman of the committee make the decision, pro tempore, until the entire committee could convene to decide the issue. In December of 1994, the chairman decided to reject the proposed program, claiming it to be flawed and that it did not meet academic standards. The official statement was that "from a professional point of view" the program was unsuitable and should be abolished immediately.[7] It should be noted that all the textbooks in Israel are under the control of the Ministry of Education, which provides an annual list of official required and supplementary books.

This time the ensuing media storm exceeded previous levels of protest. The Ministry of Education was accused of succumbing to political pressure and using a thin "fig leaf" of pedagogical reasons to justify its actions. It was argued that even if there were flaws in the program, which is to be expected from experimental programs, the course was aimed at a small test audience and should be implemented, evaluated and then corrected for future use.

Things became more apparent when the protocol of the meeting of the Academic Committee became available to the press. At the meeting held on 19 January 1995, one professor rejected the course claiming that "we do not foster sensitivity, we teach," and that the place for education of values is in the youth movements and not in the schools. The main thrust of the criticism was leveled at the presentation of the Armenian Genocide.

As a result of the criticism directed at the Ministry of Education, the minister was quick to state that although the proposed study program was rejected, a new and improved program would be prepared and taught in the following school year. As promised, instead of "Awareness of world suffering" a textbook entitled "Minorities in History – the Armenian in the Ottoman Empire" was prepared. The book did not take a stand on the question of whether or not the murders of the Armenians in the years 1915-1916 should be called 'genocide.' The two contending views on the matter were represented but the question remained open. The second program was not implemented because of the criticism it had received. The Ministry of Education promised that the second program would be corrected, but nothing has been done during the 14 years since. In 2000, the Minister of Education at the time, Yossi Sarid, promised that the Armenian Genocide and the subject of genocide would be taught however he lost his post, but not because of this public declaration.

Some high school history teachers teach about the Armenian Genocide on their own initiative when they teach the period of the First World War. Others teach "Genocide in the 20th century" as a special subject in one way or another. More than 100 students from two high schools in Kibbutzim have been taught the subject in the framework of their enlarged history courses. Some high school teachers choose to use another section of the program, the section about the Gypsies. Virtually nothing about the genocide of the Gypsies appears in the curricula of Israel, including the many textbooks and educational programs about the Holocaust.

We can estimate that hundreds of high school and college students have been learning in one way or another about genocides, including the Armenian genocide, since 1995.

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The students and their teachers have become aware of the subject, at least partly, from the public discussions about the program and the Armenian genocide.

What can an Israeli high school student learn about the Armenian Genocide through his regular textbooks? The answer is quite clear; practically nothing.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to discover that Isaeli students lack of knowledge of genocides that involved other groups of people. A 1996 survey about attitudes toward genocide, which was the first study conducted in Israel about the subject, clearly demonstrates this lack of knowledge. The study sample consisted of 800 B.A. students from seven universities and colleges in Israel. The students were asked about their knowledge, feelings and attitudes concerning genocide. Among other questions, they were asked to assess their knowledge of the Armenian Genocide. Forty-two percent answered that they did not have any knowledge, 44% had little knowledge, 13% had some knowledge, and 1% reported that they are well informed about it.

When asked about their knowledge of the genocide of the gypsies, their answers were quite similar. Thirty-six percent reported having no knowledge while 49% had very little knowledge, 14% possessed some knowledge, and 1% had quite a bit of knowledge about the genocide.

I have given this questionnaire during the first lesson of my course on genocide, an optional B.A.-level course, attended by approximately 650 students for each of the last ten years. The student responses have yielded similar results with 85% to 90% reporting they know nothing or very little about the genocide of the Armenians. Between 85% and 90%, also answered that they know nothing or very little about the genocide of the Gypsies.

One of the achievements of the program, from my point of view, is that students are shocked when they discover and internalize their ignorance of the Armenian Genocide. They are usually shocked when they begin to understand, even partly, why they did not know about the Armenian genocide and even more appalled when they learn about the attitude of the State of Israel towards the Armenians.

Significant changes have occurred over the years regarding Holocaust education in Israel. Practically no changes have occurred over the years in the official teaching of other genocides, and the Armenian genocide in particular. Furthermore, the formal educational system has claimed that avoiding the topic of other genocides could be defined as "innocent." After many years of struggle, which has not achieved any practical change, it is clear that the official attitude is a conscious one, that wants to affirm the uniqueness and perhaps also the exclusivity, of the Holocaust.

The chances that there will be any changes in the official educational attitude are now more remote than ever. The forces in the political system that support the humanistic approach, that includes the recognition and teaching of the Armenian Genocide, have lost their influence due, in part, to the dependency of the educational system on the political system. The failure of the Israeli academy to deal with these trends, which we analyze through a different framework is another issue.

Nonetheless, the private initiatives undertaken by teachers and school directors who have decided to deal with other genocides in their schools, are encouraging. Their influence is limited but long-term. Recently, some achievements have been made. Currently, two university curricula are being studied in the Open University of Israel. *The Pain of Knowledge: Teaching the Holocaust and Genocide in Israel and the World* has been taught since autumn 2001. The second, *Genocide*, has been taught since 2005 and includes analysis and theories of the different aspects of the genocide phenomenon, as well as case studies of the Holocaust, the genocide of the Gypsies, the Armenian Genocide, the genocides in Rwanda and Tibet as well as the case of Native Americans. Each year, about 600 students choose to take the course.

I believe that it is essential to develop greater sensitivity among Israeli youth to the suffering of others and to strengthen universal and humanistic values, which are well grounded in the best of Jewish tradition. As we have seen, the Shoah constitutes an important and central component of the Jewish identity.

However, I argue that Israel must work towards finding a more suitable balance between the Zionist, Jewish and universal lessons of the Holocaust. When teaching the Shoah and inculcating younger generations with its memory, the basic approach must be that the value of human life is the same for everybody, whether they are Jews, Gypsies, Armenians or Palestinians. The way to work towards this goal is by combining some basic principles that appear to be contradictory. Emphasizing the unique historical characteristics of the Shoah and its uniqueness for us as Jews is important but relating to the other human catastrophes and genocides is also necessary. There are no contradictions between these approaches because they represent the integration between the unique and the universal that we struggle for.

NOTES

* To more elaborate and detailed analyze see Yair Auron, The Banality of Denial – Israel and the Armenian Genocide, Transaction, New Brunswick, 2003, Chapters 6 and 7: Genocide Education in Israel and A Moralistic-Humanistic Attitude—Sarid's Statemen,2000, pp. 137-199.

[1] Illan Gur-Ze'ev, "The Morality of Acknowledging / Not Acknowledging the Others' Holocaust/Genocide," *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1998, p. 164.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 165.

[3] Dalia Ofer, 1996 (op. cit.), pp. 889-890.

[4] The following paragraph is based mainly on Dalia Ofer in The World Reacts to the Holocaust, 1996, pp. 890-894, and Ruth Firer, Agents of Lessons, Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hmeheuhad,1989, pp. 177-187.

[5] Due to my deep personal involvement in this controversy, I will try to be exceptionally careful in presenting the events in this case (Y.A.). The following paragraph is based largely on a lecture given by Dr. Ariel Hurwitz, a member of the team that was set up to draft the program, which included also Orly Tzarfati and myself.

[6] Official protocol of the meeting held on November 11, 1993, the Ministry of Education, December 20, 1993.

[7] The Pedagogical Secretariat, Ministry of Education, December 28, 1993.

Ruth Firer, 1989 (op. cit.), p. 190.

Yad Vashem's survey, 1999 (op. cit).