

## The Need for Holocaust/Genocide Education in Our Schools

We recently moved to West Hartford, Connecticut, from Israel, with our three young boys.

In Israel, we have a Holocaust Day. It is not on the international Holocaust Day, which is on the day that Auschwitz was liberated, but rather on the day of the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It is also called the "Remembrance Day for the Holocaust and Bravery". The day is dedicated to discussions and remembrance of this unfathomable occurrence from almost 80 years ago. Actually, the week leading up to this day is very solemn, with many programs on television and radio talk shows highlighting various aspects and stories. On the eve of the Holocaust Day, shops, cafés and entertainment sites close early and there are gatherings for ceremonies in the communities. At exactly 10 am the next morning there is a State wide two-minute siren, and everything and everyone stop to pay respect and take a moment to gather their thoughts on the "Shoah". Cars and buses stop on the side of the road, pedestrians stop, business meetings break, doctors take a pause from examining their patients and students and teachers stand together in silence. I used to step outside to our balcony on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor on a busy intersection in the Tel Aviv area, right before the siren, and feel the intense shutdown of the busy city. And then the "quite" return to the hustle and bustle.

The Holocaust Day is followed by our Memorial Day, exactly a week later – a remembrance-day for the fallen soldiers and civilians in battles and terrorist attacks. Here too, the whole week is dedicated to war stories and personal loss narrations. On Memorial Day, there are two one-minute sirens, one on the eve and one in the morning at 11 am. The culmination of these two Days, and very intense two weeks in the media and in schools, is the Israeli Independence Day, which is the day after the Memorial Day. Those two weeks and specific days, allow us to properly solute and remember the sacrifices made and appreciate the true reason why we need a safe, morally strong and companionate, Jewish State. Only then, can we properly and comfortably celebrate the establishment of this remarkable homeland.

When my oldest son started pre-school, at the age of 3, I was amazed that he came home from school with experiences from those two Days which were building him up to learn more during the following years. Each year the educational system was adding more pieces to the puzzling events of war and remembrance. Since the whole country is dealing with these issues openly during this period, and there are the silence breaking sirens, it is important to give the children some age appropriate context.

When my son was in second grade, he started coming home with questions during the week before the Holocaust Day... *Did this really happen?? Can't be...It must be one of those stories that are mythical like the creation of the universe. What is the moral of this unbelievable story Mommy?* Again I was amazed. How can it be that my son doesn't believe what he is taught? I resolved it by understanding that in his precious

innocence, he believes that people are not cable of carrying out such horrors. He even said to himself out loud "well it was just Hitler that did it". I calmly explained that Hitler had many willing followers and in order to wreak such devastation there was a "team effort". I did not mention then, but plan to instill in him later on in life, that throughout history and even today, there are always forces which seek to annihilate the Jews, and we must always beware, and our strength and savior is where we stand together as a community.

It IS unbelievable... and yet 60,000,000,000 (60 million) people died in World War 2. Of those, approximately 6,000,000,000 (6 million) were Jews. There are 4 million identified names in Yad Vashem. There were multiple complete generations of families and communities lost, so much so that there was no one to remember them and give their names. I like to demonstrate the quantities by stating that my grandmother's mother was one of 13 healthy, adult siblings. Before the war, my grandmother (my Bobbie) had over 100 first cousins. Think of your first cousins... After the war, she had only a handful left.

Three of my grandparents were Holocaust survivors. The fourth, my maternal grandfather, had immigrated to the USA a few years before the War, and was a soldier, a medic in the US allied forces and visited the liberated camps where he found his youth-sweetheart (my grandmother), all skin and bones. He also found 2 nephews and a niece. Three of the twenty-eight children of his siblings had survived.

My paternal grandfather's wife and daughter were exterminated in Dachau. My grandmother was his second wife. My father grew up hearing his father have nightmares.

My two grandmothers worked in Auschwitz. Each lost siblings and parents in gas chambers.

I went to Poland during my sophomore year in high school, on a March of the Living. I showed the Auschwitz pictures to my Bobbie. She was able to identify her "block" – block C2. She was amazed that there was grass in the photos. And said that when she was there, there was no grass. *If there would have been grass, people would have eaten it.* My Bobbie was on line to the gas chambers twice. The first time she switched with another girl, whose sister was on the line and wanted to stay wither her. My grandmother wanted to be with her two sisters, who were not "on line" (she didn't even know it was a line to the gas then). Next time she was saved by a woman guard who told her and a small group of women to run and showed them to where. My Bobbie's testimony is logged on video in Yad Vashem and Spielberg's IWitness testimonial program. I also have a copy of it.

It is up to us, the third generation of survivors, to keep the memory alive so that it never happens again.

While there are many genocide (the systematic destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group) occurrences in history and now, that need to be taught and discussed, ours was the most methodical and extreme.

I write this letter urging legislators to mandate Holocaust education. People ARE capable of such unbelievable acts, and the education of the causes and effects of such events need to be taught in school and discussed at home in order to prevent and stop them in the future. These topics are not pleasant to discuss, but it our duty as educators and parents to allot the appropriate time, content and framework for this.

Never again.

Sincerely,

Alisa Sadka