

**SHOAH TEACHING ALTERNATIVES
IN JEWISH EDUCATION (STAJE) PRESENTS:**

Guiding Principles for Teaching the Shoah in Jewish Schools



**MUSEUM
OF JEWISH
HERITAGE**

**A LIVING
MEMORIAL
TO THE
HOLOCAUST**

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SHOAH TEACHING ALTERNATIVES IN JEWISH EDUCATION: STAJE GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING THE SHOAH IN JEWISH SCHOOLS

The Shoah was a watershed event that altered the Jewish world almost beyond recognition. Regardless of whether or not our families experienced the Shoah personally, every Jew has been affected by this tragedy. Educators at Jewish schools have a special obligation to ensure that students learn about the Shoah, examining how Jewish heritage and values served Jews during this period, and helping students gain a deeper understanding of the impact the Shoah has on Jewish life.

Studying the Shoah raises difficult moral and existential questions: Why should we continue to maintain our identities as Jews when we find that our history has led to such suffering? Do Jews have a special responsibility to other victims of racism and genocide? What aspects of Jewish life did the Shoah alter, and how do these changes influence the nature of Judaism today? Has the Shoah challenged our faith in God and in humanity? These are not mere philosophical inquiries. Students are always asking these questions at Jewish schools, and clichéd answers fail to address their genuine concerns.

The Museum of Jewish Heritage-A Living Memorial to the Holocaust has had the experience of serving the educational needs of thousands of students and teachers from Jewish schools each year. Since opening to the public in 1997, the Museum has observed the unique challenges educators at Jewish schools face when teaching about the Shoah. Perfunctory commemoration ceremonies and routine lessons that are repeated year after year for every age group do not provide the meaningful learning opportunities educators hope to present to their students. Thoughtful teaching that captures the complexity and magnitude of the Shoah is essential so that students do not remain overexposed but truly undereducated in this important topic.

In presenting the Shoah to students from Jewish schools, the Museum employs methods that emphasize a narrative where Jews are the active agents in history, rather than as objects acted upon by history. Jewish students learn about the Shoah through the close examination of precious original documents, photographs, and artifacts, and find a profound connection through encounters with personal stories of individual Jewish

experiences. Students in Jewish schools discover that these accounts of struggle, sacrifice, and hope are a legacy left to our Jewish community today. The educational resources of the Museum, including tours, professional development programs, and curriculum materials, can help teachers draw forth this deep understanding from their students.

With these Guiding Principles for Teaching the Shoah in Jewish Schools the Museum shares strategies for making meaningful Shoah education a priority. While other guidelines for Holocaust education exist, these strategies are specific to Jewish schools. These guidelines encourage teachers to make changes to their curriculum that will help them address the specific questions of students in their schools and allow them to tackle the difficult issues that are raised by the Shoah in an intellectually meaningful and age-appropriate fashion.

There are many different ways to teach the *Shoah*, depending on factors such as the ages, backgrounds, religious affiliations and beliefs, and levels of emotional and intellectual maturity among students. Nevertheless, the basic educational principles outlined below provide guidance for developing strong pedagogical practices and comprehensive content that will benefit all educators and their students in Jewish schools.

We must recognize that how we teach (pedagogy) and what we teach (content) about the Shoah is just as important as why we teach about the Shoah. These guidelines will support teachers in their vital efforts to help students recognize the extent of this tragedy, with its implications for Jewish identity today and for the very sense of what it means to be “human.”

PEDAGOGY

1. Utilize a variety of resources in teaching the Shoah, emphasizing personal testimonies.

The Shoah is widely represented and interpreted in various media, such as drama, literature, music, and film. Teachers should employ resources that engage the various learning styles of their students. Most importantly, teachers should encourage students to actively explore their own family's history in relation to the Holocaust and also provide students with opportunities to meet with survivors or the children of survivors from the community, to ask questions, and to tell their own personal family stories to one another as a part of the curriculum. Teachers at Jewish schools should take the opportunity to draw upon the resources of their own Jewish communities, remembering the value of visits to local museums, memorials, or other cultural institutions that can offer insights into the study of the Shoah. In particular, the first-person stories of survivors are often available through videos, memoirs, and other forms of oral history encountered with the help of such institutions. Teachers should encourage older students to observe the nuances of both form and content in representations of the Shoah.

2. Coordinate an age-appropriate and sequential curriculum throughout the grades.

Students of different ages and grades have different levels of understanding and readiness toward learning about the Shoah. While students at Jewish schools are often aware of the Shoah at a younger age than those outside the Jewish community, these young students do not necessarily have a greater emotional or intellectual readiness for the material than their peers. Some Jewish schools are inclined to begin Shoah commemoration and education with younger students and then will repeat the same Shoah program year after year for every grade level despite the changing needs of their students. Rather, teachers should consider in advance whether the concepts are appropriate for the abilities of their students, and plan and coordinate a curriculum that extends appropriately across several years. Shoah education should be progressive, helping students build new understandings based on their growing intellectual and emotional abilities and upon the content of lessons that were presented in previous years.

3. Respond with sensitivity and preparedness to the reactions of students toward the material.

Teachers should present lessons that are appropriate to their students, and must anticipate and be prepared to address a wide range of possible emotional and intellectual reactions. Some students may respond intellectually, with challenging moral and ethical questions. Some students may respond emotionally, while others may exhibit withdrawal as a defense against human suffering. Some students may express their discomfort with inappropriate behavior, such as joking or loud and boisterous activity. Jewish students, in particular, may have strong and specific types of reactions to study of the Shoah. Teachers should address these various reactions with attention and sensitivity. They may need to attend to the student individually, to provide the student with a safe and supervised place outside of the classroom to assimilate the information, or to advise the student of ways to take personal time to respond to the information after class. Teachers should remember that the reactions of students are cues to the appropriateness of the material. Students need not be brought to tears every time the Shoah is mentioned, and neither should they be flippant or callous about the human tragedy. Teachers should be willing to give time and attention to these reactions, to change or add time their lesson plans, to pursue student interests that emerge, to involve parents, to consult with a school guidance counselor, or to seek out further resources or assistance if necessary.

4. Partner with others to teach across the disciplines, both in secular and Jewish studies.

Teaching across the disciplines is a way to help students integrate their knowledge about the Shoah through lessons that approach the subject from the multiple perspectives of world and Jewish history, literature and language arts, Bible, Jewish philosophy, geography, the arts, and even science. Units may be created in any of the disciplines to incorporate learning about the Shoah. Studies in each of these separate disciplines can be coordinated between the teachers. This is also an excellent opportunity for students to explore and appreciate the intersection of their secular and Jewish studies.

5. Incorporate commemoration activities with an educational curriculum.

Commemorative activities should complement the curriculum. Like classroom study, remembrance rituals work best when they contain both intellectual and emotional components. Having students take an active part in devising the annual commemorative aspects of the curriculum keeps them involved creatively and gives them a personal sense of responsibility for Shoah education. In many Jewish schools, the periods of *Kristallnacht* in the fall and *Yom HaShoah* in the spring have become important times for learning and ritual observance. In the summer, the period of *Tisha B'Av* is an important time of remembering the *churban* (destruction) of the Temples and also other devastations in Jewish history, such as the Shoah.

6. Avoid passing judgment on victims and survivors.

Students today learn about the Shoah from the security of the twenty-first century. It is therefore easy for our students to pass judgment, saying, for example, that if only the victims had responded differently the outcome might have been different. Since Jewish students in particular sometimes respond with criticism of the victims as a defense against their identification with them, these students should be guided to investigate the “choiceless choices” that victims were forced to make. They should always remember that the victims of the Shoah were not operating under ordinary circumstances, and that many decisions entailed mortal danger, ethical compromises, and complex deliberations with no simple solutions.

7. Avoid simulation activities.

We cannot possibly understand the extremity of circumstances endured during the Shoah. None of our students could ever imagine the hunger that Jews felt in the ghetto or the shock of confronting murder on a daily basis. Since we cannot even imagine it, we certainly cannot recreate it through activities that encourage students to put themselves in the place of victims, perpetrators, or other people who lived during this period. Students can best understand the reality of this history through interaction with documents, artifacts, and testimonies, which serve as primary sources for learning and understanding the Shoah.

8. Avoid shock techniques that focus on horrors.

Teachers should avoid techniques that simply attempt to “have an impact” on their students. Some students respond to shock techniques with juvenile responses that do not call upon honest intellectual investigation. Other students will feel threatened by these tactics. While students may be interested in learning more about the horrors of the Shoah, an emphasis on this aspect does not lead to a deeper understanding of the complexity of this period.

9. Avoid sectarian agendas.

A discussion of the implications of this time period in universal terms is useful and important; however, the Shoah should not be used to promote particular sectarian agendas with regard to why this atrocity happened, how it relates to current events, or how it can be prevented in the future. It is highly disrespectful to use examples from the Shoah to support theological, cultural, or political agendas today.

10. Avoid conclusions that lead to feelings of victimhood, fear, aggression, or insularity.

Some Jews adopt a mantle of victimhood in identification with the people who suffered during the Shoah. Over-identification with victims can lead to feelings of powerlessness or aggression. Association of the Jewish people in particular with a history of victimhood may inculcate a fear of physical, cultural, or religious destruction. Students may come to suspect potential enemies everywhere, and choose to avoid any contact with the rest of humanity. Such tendencies towards isolationism should be raised and discussed, especially among older students. Shoah education should not be used to promote feelings that could ultimately lead to stereotypes, prejudice, insularity, or violence against others.

CONTENT

1. Provide a context for the Shoah as an event in world history and Jewish history, including the impact of the Shoah on Jewish communities worldwide.

Allowing students to examine Jewish life before, during, and after the Shoah is a critical component of a Jewish school curriculum. Study should highlight the impact of the Shoah on *klal yisrael* (the Jewish people) and address Jewish survival. The curriculum should emphasize both world history and Jewish history, and should elaborate on the diversity of Jewish life in the various cultures where Jews have lived worldwide. After being introduced to the diversity of Jewish communities that existed before the war, students will further appreciate what was preserved and what was lost. They will also understand that Jews in various countries experienced the gradual progression of historical events in the world from 1933 to 1945 in different ways. Finally, students should continue their studies with lessons on the immediate effects of the Shoah on Jewish life worldwide after 1945, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the challenges and opportunities faced by different Jewish communities worldwide from that time until today.

2. Use Jewish sources that relate to the Shoah. Jewish religious and cultural texts, documents, and letters from the time period tell the stories of Jewish resistance, spiritual resilience, and cultural commitment.

Such sources provide Jewish perspectives from those who lived through the Shoah, illuminating how *limud torah* (study of Torah), *halacha* (Jewish law), and observance of *mitzvot* (commandments) played a role in responding to the Shoah, and providing a framework for understanding this event in relation to Jewish values and history.

3. Highlight individual stories of Jewish responses during the Shoah.

Curriculum materials are most effective when they highlight individual stories and testimonies, fostering empathy with the victims and personalizing the events. Students should be taught to think of those who suffered as individuals, rather than as faceless statistics.

4. Avoid portraying Jews as passive victims of the Shoah.

Investigate assumptions of students and the public, and explore the history of phrases such as “like sheep to the slaughter.” Enrich the curriculum by exploring the complexity of “choiceless choices” to avoid portraying Jews as passive victims during the Shoah, and introduce the concept of *kiddush hachayim* (sanctification of life) as a form of resistance.

5. Highlight the diversity of Jewish responses to the Shoah.

Students should become aware that there were many different ways that Jews responded to their oppressors and to the situations in which they found themselves trapped. They should learn to contextualize these responses without imposing a hierarchy on them. This is especially important for Jewish students as they begin to understand the complexity of Jewish experiences and responses throughout history, and can be related to their own understanding of Jewish identity and community today.

6. Highlight the deeds of Jews as active agents facing impossible odds during the Shoah.

Jewish students may find it difficult to relate to a time when the Jewish people did not enjoy the privileges of freedom offered by democracy or the empowerment experienced through the State of Israel. While studying Jews as active agents during the Shoah, students will come to appreciate the context for the various heroic deeds that allowed Jews to confront persecution through both great and small acts of physical and spiritual resistance against impossible odds.

7. Probe the actions of Nazis, their collaborators, and bystanders as secondary to the Jewish narrative.

The history of Jewish life should be central to curriculum in Jewish schools. Nonetheless, it is also important for students to have ample opportunity to question and probe the actions of the Nazis, their collaborators, as well as those individuals, organizations, and countries that were “neutral” during this event in world and Jewish history. Jewish students will have a special interest in exploring ways in which the world and U.S. response, or lack of response, may have been related to the fact that the victims were Jewish. Students should understand the origins and history

of anti-Semitism so that they can explore the question of how Jews came to be the victims of this tragedy. Teachers should encourage students to confront and discuss the difficult question of the existence of evil in the world.

8. Recognize other victims. Students must recognize that the Nazis singled out Jews as the one group intended for total annihilation, both in ideology and in practice. Students should also know that there were other victims of Nazi Germany beside the Jews, including those who were physically and mentally disabled, Roma and Sinti (gypsies), homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, political opponents, and Slavs. Students should be acquainted with the experiences of these other groups and extend their compassion towards all those who suffered during this period of Nazi persecution.

9. Emphasize acts of courage and hope. Educators should emphasize the importance of righteous behavior and acts of kindness performed amidst overwhelming circumstances by both Jews and others during the Shoah. It is particularly important for younger students to hear stories of courage and hope that exemplify the attribute of *chessed* (loving kindness). These narratives can protect the emotional fragility of younger students who need greater reassurance and emotional support at their level of psychological development. Stories of kindness and righteousness can be inspiring for all students and are a welcome ray of light during the study of a period of terror and desolation.

10. Discuss how and why the Shoah is relevant today. The Shoah has a lasting importance to the Jewish people, with its impact on aspects of Jewish life from religious observance and Jewish philosophy to the exercise of political power. Students should also understand the significance of the Shoah to the pursuit of *tzedek* (justice) for all humanity. After learning about the Shoah, students can reflect on the ramifications of the biblical commandment, “*Zachor; Lo Tishkach*” (“Remember; Never Forget!”) as well as the contemporary phrase, “Never Again!” by investigating other genocides that took place before and after the Shoah (Armenian genocide, Rwanda, Darfur, etc.) and taking action towards *tikkun olam* (repair of the world).

STAJE (Shoah Teaching Alternatives in Jewish Education) is a program of the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, generously funded by The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany—The Rabbi Israel Miller Fund for Shoah Research, Documentation and Education. Since 2003, the Museum has provided annual professional development conferences, developed curriculum materials, and conducted special Museum programs for students in Jewish schools through STAJE.

Please visit our website at www.mjhnyc.org for more information or contact us at 646.437.4310 to find out more about programs to enhance Shoah education at your Jewish school. Consider using the teaching resources available on our website and booking a trip to the Museum for your class.

Comments? Questions? Send your feedback on the Guiding Principles to the Museum Educator for Jewish Schools at the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, 36 Battery Place, New York, NY 10280.

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