Connecting Ethics and History Through a Jewish Lens

by Jan Darsa

Director of Jewish Education, Darsa here proposes integrating the study of Jewish history with Jewish ethical sources to increase student interest and bolster Jewish identity.

As teachers of history, we are faced with the challenge of making history relevant to our students and helping them connect history with their own lives. By using the ethics and values of our sacred texts as one lens to study Jewish history, we can make history and Jewish texts come alive, while at the same time encouraging students to examine the relationship of these studies to their own decisions and actions.

Last year, Facing History and Ourselves published a study guide entitled Sacred Texts, Modern Questions: Connecting Ethics and History Through A Jewish Lens. The guide links history, specifically the history of the Holocaust, to the larger moral questions of our time. Its pedagogy integrates intellectual rigor and historical understanding with emotional engagement and ethical reflection. For example, examining the role of bystanders and upstandards in society, both past and present, illustrates that even small choices by individuals and groups can make a difference. There were individuals whose actions embodied courage and compassion in the face of evil in both modern Jewish history and biblical stories, and juxtaposing these in a thematic context for students brings together Jewish history and Jewish studies.

Biblical stories like those in Exodus exemplify such situations and responses from individuals who act on the basis of their internal moral compass. Moses, Shifra and Pu'ah (the midwives), Moses' mother and sister (Yochved and Miriam), and Pharaoh's daughter all take a stand against the edicts and norms of a dictatorial authority and corrupt political system. Students can be encouraged to examine the personal and psychological factors that shaped the decisions of these people and think about how such factors may have played a role in the choices and decisions made by upstanders and rescuers during the Holocaust. Doing so may help those students to find connections to their own decisions about when to stand up or speak out about injustices they see in their own lives.

There is one story of a rescuer named Marion Pritchard (featured in a film entitled Courage to Care) who saves the life of a Jewish father and his three children during World War II by hiding them under the floorboards of a country home outside of Amsterdam. When she was discovered by a Dutch policeman, who was a collaborator of the Nazis, she shot and killed the policeman in order to prevent him from taking the father and his children to a death camp. The complex issues in both this story and the story of Moses' splitting of the Egyptian taskmaster raise similar questions about people who act on their conscience rather than the "law of the land." Students see these dilemmas and examples of moral courage as universal issues that promote deep reflection and emotional engagement, which makes the study of history more powerful and personal. Thus, the Jewish history class and the text study come alive in new ways.

In the beginning of Shemot (verses 9-11), a new king arose who knew not Joseph and said to his people, "Behold the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we: come, let us deal wisely with them lest they multiply, and it come to pass that, when any war should chance, they also join our enemies, and fight against us, and so go up out of the land." From this moment in the story, the children of Israel were enslaved, and this eventually led to the edict of all male children being cast into the river, a genocidal decree that threatened the future of the children of Israel.

The Ramban interpreted "dealing wisely with them" as a slow and deceptive process. He stated, "It would have been gross treachery to smite without reason a people that had come into the land by command of a former king... Rather Pharaoh would do it wisely so that the Israelites would not feel it was done in enmity against them... Afterwards he secretly commanded the midwives to kill the male children... Essentially, Pharaoh did not want to charge his executioners to slay them by the decree of the king." He also may have wanted time to convince the public that
the Israelites were a dangerous threat and one could make a case that his words against the Israelites was the first instance of propaganda against the Israelites.

It is not difficult to see parallels between these examples from the Exodus story where Jews are excluded from society and the slow and insidious steps the Nazis took against the Jews in their early years in power. The Nuremberg Laws in the mid-1930s in many ways constituted bondage and hardship because Jews were forced out of their jobs, children were eliminated from schools, and Jews lost their citizenship and membership in German society and were also portrayed as the enemy of the state through Nazi propaganda. This happened years before the systematic killing of the Jews took place in 1941. Both the biblical account of the Israelites in Egypt and the modern account of Jews during the Holocaust are related to the perceived threat that Jews presented in the society in which they lived. Both events can serve as a reminder that one must pay attention to the warning signs of dictatorial regimes, such as the denial of civil liberties for Jews and non-Jews as students explore examples of injustices they see in the world around them.

The issue of membership—who in a society is deemed to be a member of that society and who is not, along with what that membership means—can be asked about any particular history. We might think about that question in terms of what Facing History calls our “universe of obligation”: to whom in our world do we have some sort of responsibility and how wide is that circle of obligation? The concept of membership is helpful in studying Jewish history; many times Jews felt like they belonged somewhere, yet after years of living in a place where they experienced a sense of comfort or relative peace, their neighbors turned against them. One must ask, How is it possible for neighbor to turn against neighbor?

The answer is complex and unique to each situation and its historical and geographical context. Anti-Semitism, certainly one cause of actions against Jews, is a disease that has spread throughout the world and has manifested itself in many insidious ways across time and place. Of course issues of membership and exclusion have not been limited to the Jews. We need only look to events in recent history, like Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia and South Sudan for other examples.

As we discuss these events with our students, it is an opportunity to remind them of the concept of areivut. This is a term central to Jewish tradition, and refers to an individual’s obligation toward others. Judaism advocates a continuously expanding sense of areivut, as individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for the world in which they live. Through this contemporary lens, we can help students find ways to act against such injustices. This lends an opportunity to encourage students to not only be students of history but participants in history.

There are many stories in Genesis that guide us in conversations about neighbors turning against neighbors, and to ask, What is our responsibility in the society in which we live? How can we take a position against morally reprehensible acts? How can we bring Tikkun Olam into the conversation, as one of our aims as global citizens and Jews? There is no shortage of examples in our biblical sources of how our own traditions and history have dealt with these issues. From Cain and Abel onward, we have studied and discussed what it means to be our “brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.”

The biblical story of Joseph exemplifies how quickly groups or individuals can become the “other.” If petty jealousies and bad feelings can develop between siblings to the extent that they are willing to kill or leave their brother in the desert, then how easy might it be for strangers and even neighbors to exile someone from their “universe of obligation.” This story can also be read as an account of the development of areivut, particularly if the focus is not only on Joseph, but also on Judah, his older brother, who becomes an example of an individual who learns to reach beyond himself and take responsibility for his own actions and for others.

There are many rich opportunities within the day school curricula to reach into our students’ hearts and minds, intellect and spirit, to synthesize the rich sources of biblical, rabbinic and midrashic texts with the teaching of history. What better way is there to help give deeper meaning to student learning that reaches all aspects of a school’s learning objectives and outcomes and taps that moral philosopher that dwells within each of our children?