Opinion

Holocaust education needed

Common sense prevailed at a meeting of the Pittsburgh school board in the end, although two of nine board members voted against participating in a Holocaust education trip to Poland.

The educational program is funded by the nonprofit organization Classrooms Without Borders at no cost to the school district. Nevertheless, one board member insisted that Pittsburgh schools are doing enough Holocaust education and that the trip could be seen as taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She contended, despite the fact that the funds were granted specifically for the Holocaust education trip, that they should be reallocated to programs that focus on African-American topics, including slavery.

It’s sort of a tempest in a teapot – especially given all the other things going on in the United States and around the world right now – but it is illustrative. Pennsylvania has an excellent record on Holocaust and genocide education, especially since 2014, when the state passed a law to “strongly encourage school entities in this Commonwealth to offer instruction in the Holocaust, genocide and other human rights violations.” That’s a far more specific directive than the British Columbia curriculum requires.

A representative of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh responded to the board member’s criticism of the Poland trip.

“The notion that a trip to Poland to enhance the quality of Holocaust education in Pittsburgh public schools somehow discriminates against the Palestinian people is incomprehensible at best,” John Sayles told the Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle. “What’s more, the institution that in order to meet its effectiveness teach about slavery we must allocate resources away from Holocaust education, or vice versa, is disturbing, as teaching about these two very important histories are not and should never be mutually exclusive.

Coincidentally, but not unrelated, educators in Florida made a dubious decision to provide parents with an opportunity to opt their children out of a Holocaust education trip to Poland.

“We understand that a firsthand account of the Holocaust is compelling,” said Trepel. “It’s changing the very ingredients we eat. It’s changing the very food we eat and the nature of the consultation. Survivor speakers understand this hand is different and far less malignant. In both cases, the answer is more education, not less.”

Kudos to the J

Editor:

Your editorial reply of June 1 (“A paper covers events”) said, “When a newspaper covers a flood, it is not endorsing the river.” I think that succinctly captures the proper role of good journalism.

There are divergent views within our community about Israeli and Palestinian actions, and it is certainly your role to keep us informed.

You further said, “Our approach, generally, is to report events in an unbiased fashion and leave the raving tirades to others.” I apologize that this is not a raving tirade. It is simply a note of appreciation for publishing one of the best independent Jewish newspapers in the country.

Avi Dolgin, Vancouver

Manichean narrative

Editor:

For some Canadian Jews (and I think specifically of the letter writers in last week’s Jewish Independent), there is no Israel act so bad that it cannot be turned to good effect by invoking the Holocaust and suicide bombings – a never-ending source of rhetorical benefits. Can they not find even one little tear to shed for the far greater number of Palestinian children, women and men killed or maimed by Israeli armaments or incarcerated in Israeli prisons? Or are they so locked into a Manichean narrative of good Jews and evil Arabs that no present fact can touch them?

Marty Roth, Vancouver

Health

Digital impact on our lives

REBEKA KUROPATWA

Digital health is all around us. Our phones and tablets are changing how we communicate, how much face-to-face communication we have and the nature of the consultation. The question is not if these devices and screen time might be affecting, not just kids and teens, but, really, all of us.

Trepel said there are about 4.5 billion people using the internet right now worldwide, and a third of those people are children and teens. There are about five billion people using mobile phones and a little over three billion people on social media at any given time, he said. And, these are all increases of anywhere from five to 15% in comparison to the previous year.

“These trends are changing how we communicate,” said Trepel. “They are changing how much face-to-face communication we have and the nature of the communication itself. The previous generation would use talking and notes. Now, videos, pictures and memes are the preferred way to communi- cate. It’s changing the very ingredients we use to communicate with one another.

There are implications to this change, especially in children, whose not yet fully de- veloped brains are particularly susceptible to getting into trouble online. But, Trepel said, there is something that can be done – and it starts with adults getting off their phones and other screens, especially when around young people. We also need to start talking about these issues, as kids who come from homes that discuss such topics tend to be less at risk.

“When there’s a more negotiated amount of technology use and supervision and things like that, that is a good thing,” said Trepel. “But, there are many, many kids who have a combination of not a lot of supervision combined with having an immature brain, and these kids are the ones we are most wor- ried about getting into trouble online.”

“We worry that screens are displacing a lot of other activities that might be healthier than being on technology – things like getting adequate sleep or being outside. The amount of hours spent outside is now at about half of what it used to be. It’s gone from about 18 hours a week to about seven hours a week in one single generation. Getting a handle on this will not be easy, but it starts with parents making the time to fully understand the tech diet of their kids. Just like we monitor their food intake, we need to monitor their tech intake.

“Sit down with them and let them take you through a typical day,” advised Trepel. “What types of sites are they using and for how long? What types of interactions are they having on this site? The timing of this is important. Is it the first thing they do in the day, getting on their device? Is it the last thing they do before bed? Do they themselves detect any problems with their screen use? Are they running into any cyber-bul- ling or being taken advantage of? Do they feel better or worse after using their phones? Do they notice phones cutting into their sleep, or do they notice themselves having a difficult time stopping themselves from checking? This is the beginning of getting data about how your kids and teens are us- ing their phones. But, it’s also starting to ask the question of whether or not this is becoming a problem for your kid or teen.”

Trepel suggested that, when you moni- tor your kids, you want to make sure it is active monitoring – that you are co-view- ing and discussing the sites that they are on. It is also important to avoid spy-type programs, he said, as kids will find ways to work around them.

Aim to be playing together, following each other on social media. Use any opportunity for educational guidance – not so much making it a single conversa- tion, but, instead, an ongoing dialogue about the device. You can ask for their help learning about social media, for example. “I think that’s a very elegant way to cover a lot of bases,” said Trepel. “It allows the parent to learn a lot about what the kid is using, in terms of technology use. But, it also updates the parents as to what these social media sites are all about – how they are navigated, how they are used.”

“It may also be a great way for kids and parents to spend more time together, in- teracting with each other, teaching each