

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 participation 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 insinuation that in order to most effectively 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 presentation by a Holocaust survivor.

Parents of students at St. James Middle School in Murrells Inlet, Fla., received a letter saying, “We understand that a firsthand account of the atrocities of the Holocaust may be sad or difficult for students to hear. Students may opt out of this assembly and complete an alternative activity. Students who opt out will watch [a] video about the Holocaust in the media centre as an alternative activity.”

The letter assumes that the survivor speaker would not present at a level appropriate to middle schoolers. Second, and more significantly, it implies that difficult aspects of history should be sugar-coated – that was the word used by the survivor.

No matter the topic – the Holocaust, slavery, current events, writing, reading or arithmetic – effective education is delivered at an age-appropriate level. Survivor speakers understand this as well as any teacher.

The opportunity for today’s young people to hear firsthand accounts from witnesses to the Holocaust is a benefit no future generations will receive. To do anything but try to maximize the number who experience this opportunity firsthand is a tremendous loss.

This is especially true when a recent poll commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany indicates that many Americans are unaware of the most basic facts of the Holocaust. (See jewishindependent.ca/basic-facts-not-known.)

This is fraught territory and headlines can be deceiving, such as the one in *Newsweek*, which declared: “One-third of Americans don’t believe six million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.” Contrary to the headline, the poll suggested not that these Americans have heard the truth and rejected it, but rather that they have not been educated enough in the topic to have the facts. The issue is not Holocaust denial, in this case, but plain ignorance.

Denial of the facts is one thing, ignorance of them is different and far less malignant. In both cases, the answer is more education, not less. ■

Kudos to the JJ

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

Manichaeian narrative

Editor:

For some Canadian Jews (and I am thinking specifically of the letter writers in last week’s *Jewish Independent*), there is no Israeli act so harsh 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 Manichaeian narrative of good Jews and evil Arabs that no present fact can touch them?

Marty Roth, Vancouver

Digital impact on our lives

REBECA KUROPATWA

Dr. Simon Trepel, child analyst and psychiatrist at the Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre, is seeing an increasing number of children and teenagers using phones – even during sessions.

“I was hearing more and more from parents about some difficulties they were having around technology and screen time,” said Trepel. “I was noticing, even in my own family, how pervasive screens are becoming ... as a preferred source of entertainment, as well.

“When this stuff marinates in you for awhile, it makes you curious about deeper questions about what’s going on. It ultimately behooves anybody who is working in mental health to start wondering about all the ingredients that might be contributing to someone’s mental health.... I became more curious about how these devices and screen time might be affecting, not just kids and teens, but, really, all of us.”

According to Trepel, using technology in daily life is no longer a choice. It is a fundamental part of how we all get by. Most of us check our phones several times a day, and conduct business and communication on our phones or tablets almost exclusively.

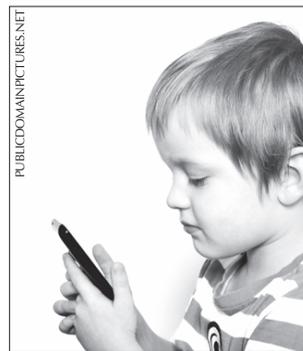
He said there are about four billion people using the internet right now worldwide, and a third of those people are children and teens. There are about five billion people using mobile phones and a little over three billion people on social media at any given time, he said. And, these are all increases 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 words and texts. Now, videos, pictures and memos are the preferred way to communicate. 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 developed 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 worried 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



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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-bullying 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 using 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 monitor your kids, you want to make sure it is active monitoring – that you are co-viewing 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 conversation, 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, interacting with each other, teaching each