

Change and Difference

Saturday Night

October 27th, 2018

I almost dismissed it. I almost pushed it aside as if it weren't worth my time or acknowledgement. A brief flash of horror and a large wave of guilt immediately followed along with an acute sense of self-awareness. I felt obligated to feel something in response to the message I'd just received, but I was also justifying my initial lack of such a response. After all, I was on my way to a friend's birthday party. I should be celebrating. I wasn't supposed to feel sad, much less scared. I didn't *want* to feel that way.

I stood facing my mother in the kitchen, a bit frozen in place, like I was stuck in this moment with her words hanging between us. My coat was on, and I was practically halfway out the door. But our rabbi had sent an email to the congregation. There had been a shooting at a synagogue.

This was a shockingly familiar story. Even at fourteen years old I was practically desensitized to such news in the same way that many Americans are desensitized to stories of school shootings. I actually had to stop and make myself confront it. It was like a reaction had to be forced. I felt a bit ashamed. My mother told me she felt largely the same.

That night, I went to my friend's party. I had a good time. The next morning, I woke up early for Hebrew school.

Everything changed that morning.

Sunday Morning

October 28th, 2018

I actually struggle now to remember if that day was the first time I ever saw police cars in front of my synagogue. I think it was, and I have since become accustomed to the sight. The grief only really settled in when I saw the police presence. I remember staring out of the car window in shock as my mother and I pulled into the parking lot. I remember feeling a bit hollow, like my stomach was an empty void.

In addition to the police, adult community and congregation members had come and stationed themselves outside the doors. They were there to protect us. “Us” being Jewish children. “Us” including me. The doors themselves were locked. A new key card system was implemented, in which families and teachers were given access cards to scan for entry. Not much later, a second set of doors were installed between the main entrance and the classrooms. A key card had to be scanned here too.

Having already completed the education curricula leading up to my Bat Mitzvah, I was, at the time, part of a discussion class on ethics. A usually very animated group of people, we were deathly quiet sitting around the table that day. We didn’t know what to say. We didn’t know what to do. We didn’t really even know the full implications of what had happened. Later, I would learn that the shooting had occurred in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life Synagogue and that it was the deadliest attack on the Jewish Community in the US. But, at that moment, I sat silently in a room in which the blinds, usually open to allow light in, were drawn to conceal us from possible threats.

Everyone was serious that day.

I felt fear.

Dara Horn is an award-winning, Jewish-American author and essayist. In addition to publishing six books, her essays have appeared in publications as renowned as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* in addition to others (“About Dara Horn”). In an article published earlier this year in *The Atlantic* titled “Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?” Horn reports about her experiences traveling across the U.S. while meeting and interacting with Holocaust educators and museum curators. She relates the well-intentioned yet incomprehensive efforts of educators, the vast majority of whom are not Jewish, to inform younger generations about the horrors and violence that occurred during the second World War.

Amidst this, Horn exposes obvious gaps in curriculum and points to a glaring and harmful lack of education regarding contemporary Jews and antisemitism both before and after the Holocaust, explaining how this creates a situation in which people come to think of the Holocaust as an isolated incident. With a sense of confusion and disturbance, she also highlights how “exploitations of Jewish history” serve as lessons on morals and bullying, noting the frequency with which the term “bystander” arises in relation to Holocaust education. Intentionally provocative, Horn asks uncomfortable questions, challenges assumptions and common notions, and investigates the dynamic between education and antisemitism. By blending the genres of reporting, narrative, and argumentation, Horn produces powerful, emotional, and thought-provoking messages for her readers, whether educators or anyone else living in the U.S. today, to consider. One could easily learn more about Jews and Jewish culture through this one essay than through a public school education.

One especially prevalent and recurring assertion Horn makes throughout the article is that there is a gross lack of understanding regarding Jews and Judaism as a whole. She brings

common misconceptions to her readers' attention and articulates how little most people actually know about Judaism, even telling a story of a child asking if any Jews are alive today. To demonstrate this point, Horn includes an anecdote at the beginning of her essay, illuminating one of the most common misunderstandings of Jews:

“Let’s establish facts. Is Judaism a religion or a nationality?”

My stomach sank. The question betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of Jewish identity—Jews predate the concepts of both religion and nationality. Jews are members of a type of social group... a joinable tribal group with a shared history, homeland, and culture, of which a nonuniversalizing religion is but one feature... which would be illogical if Judaism were merely a religion.

The question with which Horn begins this passage is one I’ve been confronted with on a number of occasions. I’ve experienced the same sense of dread and looming disappointment of oversimplification and misrepresentation that Horn describes. By including this conversation she heard and witnessed, Horn is setting up an opportunity to show how Judaism does not fit the simple and too-narrow label of religion.

How can Judaism be simply a religion when I myself am both religiously and ethnically Jewish? How can Judaism be only a religion when I am entitled to a “birthright” trip to Israel, despite not being born in Israel? I even have a Hebrew name separate from my English one. Not to mention that my middle name (which happens to be my mother’s maiden name), Lowy, is a derivative of Levi, connecting me and my family back to one of the twelve original tribes of Israel and to the “tribal group” Horn mentions.

But what is a tribe of Israel? What exactly is Israel? How many know that Israel was a person before it was ever a place? How many know what Israel means? Meaning “to wrestle

with G-d,” Israel was the name given to the biblical figure Jacob, who was the grandson of Abraham. Thus, the twelve tribes refer to the groups formed by each of Jacob’s twelve sons, and the term “Israelites” came to refer to the Jewish people as a whole.

I think of the times I have been misrepresented or misunderstood because of my identity as a Jew. During my preparations for my Bat Mitzvah, I would often simplify it tremendously and describe it to my non-Jewish, public school classmates as a really big birthday party. It was far quicker and easier than explaining that this was a momentous occasion in a young Jew’s life in which they are called upon to read from the Torah for the first time and are officially accepted as an adult within the Jewish community. After becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, that individual may count as part of a minyan—the ten adults required by Jewish tradition in order to hold a public worship service. Such concepts are often difficult to understand for those who are not a part of the community.

Additionally, I frequently find that many people do not know that there are many forms of Judaism and many ways of being Jewish. The differences between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform practices are significant and highly varied. Someone I knew once walked up and asked me “How’s life without pork?” without even a greeting or lead up to the question. While I suppose I can appreciate his effort to prove his awareness of keeping kosher as an aspect of Jewish observance, I found it startling and somewhat rude. Not only was the question abrupt and unprompted without so much as saying hello to me, but he was making an assumption about me and my lifestyle simply because I was Jewish. I was raised a Reform Jew, which is a typically more modern and progressive sect that tends to observe the rules and traditions of Judaism in a looser manner, giving more precedence to ethics than to ceremony. For instance, I don’t observe Shabbat every week, but I’ll still fast on Yom Kippur and attend seder during Passover. The point

here being that I don't keep Kosher. Many Jews do, and many don't. That being said, I don't even like pork.

Later in the essay, Horn continues to expand upon the idea of an absence of understanding by acknowledging the first time she heard an actual Jewish belief used in education. While leading a workshop meant to help teachers develop curriculum for their schools, the director of education at the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum asked the workshop participants to identify the earliest example of antisemitism they could. This resulted in silence and struggle. Even more revealing was when the director pressed further and asked why the Jews had been singled out and discriminated against in such a way. No one had an answer until the director identified that the belief in one G-d made Jews different from their neighbors, especially in ancient times when societies often had multiple gods. Thus, Jews were perceived as being outsiders and threats to the power and legitimacy of such societies (Horn).

Horn also makes a point of illustrating another major problem with Holocaust education in the United States: namely the tendency to normalize Judaism and depict Jews as being "just like everyone else." Horn is quick to spurn this notion of normality and uniformity, instead declaring that "Jews have spent 3,000 years deliberately not being like everyone else." Essentially, she is arguing that combatting discrimination by attempting to force an image of sameness is problematic. When someone does not fit the mold of being like everyone else, then they are the problem and a disruption to this alleged sameness, so therefore they should be hated and even eliminated. And Jews have never actually tried to be the same as everyone else. I'm certainly not like everyone around me. I celebrate different holidays, pray in a different language,

and eat different foods. My experiences and identity differ from those around me, including other Jews. We are all unique in these ways.

At one point, Horn explores the reality that while antisemitism had been present long before the Holocaust, the change was drastic and sudden for survivors who were very young when the Holocaust began.

“All of a sudden, things changed” (Horn).

Certainly not, there was a build-up to the genocide during World War II as the Nazis gained power, and there had been prior instances of violence against Jews, but it felt sudden and new to children experiencing it for the first times in their lives. In this way, the Tree of Life shooting was my sudden change. Of course, I wasn't oblivious to antisemitism. I'd seen a swastika drawn onto a desk in a middle school classroom, and I'd been told jokes I didn't find very funny, often pertaining to the Holocaust. But something of this scale and consequence hadn't happened during my lifetime. I hadn't witnessed something change so much so quickly until this moment. The new security protocols at my synagogue were startling and frightening. While there was no indication of a direct threat within my community, the attack in Pittsburgh raised quite a bit of alarm. The Tree of Life shooting wasn't some distant, long ago story of discrimination and violence. This happened during my life, in my country, even in my state. It hit close to home in more than one way.

18 months after the shooting, I became employed by my synagogue to teach the fifth grade Hebrew class, a position I continued to hold until I graduated from high school. The security protocols remained then and continue to even to this day. I was given an access card specific to teachers, had to wear an identification lanyard at all times while in the building, was

required to participate in an active shooter situation training, and had to carry a walkie talkie with me in my classroom. It became routine for a police car to be stationed in the parking lot on Sundays when class was in session.

All of this just to be in a place of worship and community. A place that is meant to be safe and spiritual. A place where children receive an education regarding Jewish tradition and history. I feel a tremendous amount of anger and indignation when I think about the need for such measures just to feel safe in such a place, and I feel sad for the children—the ones I taught and the ones yet to even start school—who won't remember a time when it wasn't that way.

None of this is to say that I have lived a horrible life of fear and sadness. I'm very proud of and open about being Jewish. My identity has brought many joys and positive experiences to my life. I remember how close I was to my Sunday school classmates. I remember standing at the bimah, reading from the Torah during my Bat Mitzvah, reciting my portion perfectly because I practiced so hard for this moment. I remember dancing at the afterparty, surrounded by all my friends. I remember joining B'nai B'rith Youth Organization and becoming a very active member, spending weekends at conventions hosted by and for Jewish teenagers. I remember sitting in a circle during a havdalah ceremony, holding hands with the people on either side of me, our voices blending together in harmony as we sang. I remember my first year at summer camp, spending two weeks away from home to live in the mountains with other Jewish girls. The next year, I stayed for four weeks. Now, I'm a counselor at the same camp, watching girls learn to love their summer home as much as I do. I remember volunteering through Hillel to work in partnership with a hunger-fighting organization. I remember making challah with my mother, flour spread across the kitchen counter as we kneaded the dough.

Such memories and stories are exactly the kinds of things missing from education curriculum regarding Jews: stories of contemporary Jewish life that convey the unique experiences of Jews alive today. Rather than isolating us from our history, we should remain connected with the rich traditions and culture of Judaism and not only the ugly parts of our history.

So, how do we correct education programs that omit such things? Would U.S. public school education curriculum that includes material on contemporary Jews help to lower the recent rise in antisemitism in the United States? Is there really a connection between education and antisemitism, and, if so, how much influence does education have? Would teaching to respect and appreciate differences rather than view everyone as being the same and “normal” be a more effective and productive way of promoting tolerance? How can we come to understand one another better?

One thing is for certain: ignorance and injustice cannot remain the standard.

Works Cited

“About Dara Horn.” *Dara Horn*, Dara Horn, www.darahorn.com/about. Accessed 14 Nov. 2023.

Horn, Dara. “Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?” *The Atlantic*, 3 April 2023, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/05/holocaust-student-education-jewish-anti-semitism/673488/, Accessed Nov. 14 2023.