

Antisemitism and Education

For those engaged in Holocaust studies, there is a mix of irony and horror in opening the local newspaper and finding the word “antisemitism” emblazoned across the front page in the day’s principal headline (see "Anti-Semitism charge thickens plot," *Keene Sentinel*, Tuesday, February 6, 2007). Rationally, one might assume that the attempted destruction of Europe's Jews during the Second World War rendered obvious the terrible power of antisemitism while inoculating humanity against its return. But like a sinister virus capable of reappearing after lying dormant for generations, antisemitism is apparently an inherent vestige of the human condition—sometimes active, sometimes passive, but never entirely eradicated. With this disease, the only effective booster is education.

In fact, given its institutions, education is singularly important in the United States. As Americans, we are both blessed and cursed with freedoms that allow and protect us to live as we will and think as we choose. Among the most courageous commitments of the Founding Fathers was embracing liberty as a paramount value of the United States: i.e., the right to think and speak freely and without fear of being punished for one's ideas. Based on that commitment, no American has the right to ban speech deemed hateful—it is simply not allowed by the First Amendment. And that liberty is remarkably precious. John Stuart Mill expressed most eloquently its underlying import. "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

There is, of course, a hazard inherent in such liberty as its possession serves to underscore the greater responsibility our teachers hold to educate citizens regarding the falsehoods sometimes spoken by others. While embracing liberty, John Stuart Mill stressed that knowledge emerges through a conflict between truth and error. When bigots arise to preach antisemitism in our society, their ideas must be exposed and debated. Falsehood is recognized for what it is through public exposure, and such exposure is achieved only through exercising a free press and fostering reasoned yet unfettered debate in our schools. We commend the *Keene Sentinel* for its commitment to this process.

What then is antisemitism? Scholars link the phenomenon to the Diaspora—the dispersal of Jews throughout the Mediterranean world, and later throughout Europe, occurring after the destruction of the ancient state of Israel. By continuing their existence as a distinct community within other cultures, Jews inspired a complex brew of fear and hatred far more resilient than anything comparable in human history. This enmity has marked Western culture—whether Christian or secular—and, more recently, Islamic culture. Jews are alternatively condemned as deniers of Christianity, Christ killers, rapacious capitalists, communists, cultural corrupters, and racial defilers. Sometimes they've even been targeted as non-human—indeed, as the devil incarnate. What sets antisemitism apart from other forms of xenophobia, in addition to its long pedigree, is the belief, more widely ascribed today than some wish to admit, that Jews exercise an evil influence that is omnipotent and universal. Such is the peculiarity of antisemitism. Its danger rests in part in its amorphous nature.

Antisemites deal in gross generalizations, overarching indictments, and broad-based theories that are never subjected to either empirical evidence or rational analysis. And this is where the Cohen Center must step in, for it is our mission to teach "the facts and lessons of the Holocaust, motivating successive generations to recognize an ethical responsibility to respond to prejudice and hatred." At issue is our conviction that the Holocaust resulted from ignorance—ignorance of the malignant power of antisemitism. But it was also the product of silence among those who perceived that evil. We thus embrace education as the only tool capable of ensuring that history does not repeat itself.

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