



Where Do We Draw the Line? The Importance of Highlighting Multiple Perspectives in Jewish Education

Dr. Meredith Katz

Meredith Katz is a Clinical Assistant professor of Jewish Education in the William Davidson School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary. She teaches courses in constructivist pedagogy and curriculum development, the teaching of Jewish history and research methods. Meredith works extensively with the Davidson School's distance learning students in the MA and Executive Doctoral programs, and is a former Project Director for the Jewish Court of All Times online simulation program, funded by the Covenant Foundation and JTS. Current research interests include citizenship education in Jewish schools, particularly as it relates to the teaching of Jewish history and schools' efforts to engage with issues of diversity. She explores the teaching of controversial issues in day schools at both the institutional level of administrative decision-making and in teachers' work in the classroom.

Dr. Katz completed her EdD in 2010 at Teachers College, where her dissertation, *Mature Love Is Complicated: Israel Education as a Microcosm of Challenges to Educators in Liberal Jewish Day Schools*, focused on curriculum development for Israel education in Jewish high schools. She holds an undergraduate degree in History, with honors in Education, from Stanford University, as well as an MA in modern European history from Columbia University.

Dr. Katz has considerable teaching and administrative experience in both day school and congregational school settings. She draws extensively on these experiences in her work with JTS students as they explore together the intersections of theory and practice.

Recent/Current Studies

- She has published a recent study in the *Journal of Jewish Education* on teaching the Holocaust in Jewish Day Schools entitled: **"Can I Alter the statement?"- Considering Holocaust Education as a Catalyst for Civic Education in Jewish Day Schools**
- With her colleague Dr. Rebecca Shargel of Towson University she has a chapter in a soon-to-be-published volume by Teachers College Press about Teaching with Primary Sources: **Maintain, Destroy, or Transfer? Integrating Artifact Analysis and Role-Play to Discuss Controversial Issues**
- She is completing a study of the process by which novice teachers develop skills and confidence to facilitate controversial conversations in the classroom.
- With Davidson colleagues Abigail Uhrman and Provost Jeff Kress, Dr. Katz is also completing a study of the approaches of day schools across the country to engaging with issues of race and racism in the curriculum and school community.

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Where Do We Draw the Line? How do Jewish Educators Handle Challenging Subjects?

Source 1: Definition of Controversial Issues

(Judith Pace, *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*, 2021)

“significant questions that divide public opinion whether about the past or present”

Source 2: Rationale for Controversial Issues Discussions in Schools

Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom*, 2009

- “Discussion is a proxy for democracy itself.”
- “Engaging in discussion with people whose positions are different from your own builds political tolerance.”
- Civic Mission of Schools/Civic Education
“Schools are probably the best sites we currently have if our interest is using schools as a lever to improve the quality of U.S. democracy.”
- “Discussion is not only a way to learn, but is also a skill to be learned. It cultivates skills and habits and a deeper understanding of public issues.”
- “Teaching WITH and FOR discussion”
- “Participating in controversial issues discussions can build pro-democratic values (such as tolerance), enhance content understanding and cause students to engage more in the political world.”

Source 3: Rationale for Controversial Issues Discussions in Jewish Schools

Walter Parker, “Advanced Ideas about Democracy: Towards a Pluralist Conception of Citizenship Education,” *Teachers College Record*, 98 (1).

“How can we live together justly, in ways that are mutually satisfying, and that leave our differences both individual and group, intact and our multiple identities recognized?”

Source 4: Pace's Strategies of Contained Risk-Taking

- Cultivate a supportive environment
- Prepare thoroughly
- Think through teacher stance
- Communicate proactively
- Select authentic issues
- Choose resources and pedagogies
- Guide discussion
- Address emotions

Source 5: Example of Student Voices in JCAT

Responding to Hate Speech- Yitzhak Rabin and Ayman Odeh

Moderator introduction:

"First we looked at how the writers of the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights framed free speech in the First Amendment, taking particular note of what was included and what wasn't. You weighed in on which of the included forms of expression meant the most to you in your lifetimes. ...I found the following exchange between former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arab-Israeli politician Ayman Odeh particularly interesting:"

YITZHAK RABIN:

" I am a former prime minister of Israel and this is my opinion on the most important "freedom" in my life. In my opinion, I think it is freedom of speech because I could stand up at a rally and convince people that peace was the most important goal for our country."

AYMAN ODEH:

"Mr. Prime Minister, I absolutely agree with you, but let us not forget that your own life tragically ended by a hateful fanatic opposed to peace between Israelis and Palestinians, precisely when you were 'standing up at a rally.' This [freedom speech issue] is complicated."

Source 6: Introduction of Controversy

Art Jones, neo-Nazi Holocaust denier and congressional candidate, requests to speak at the Skokie Commemoration

JONES:

“Why are you all having this event...?”

If it's to bring REAL meaning to the events in Skokie, shouldn't it include a wide range of voices?

Everyone has a right to free speech, right?

I am just as deserving of a seat at the table as any [one].”

Source 7: Freud and Jones Interaction

(Freud -middle school student character; Jones- teacher ed. student character)

FREUD: Public Statement

“I do not believe Mr. Jones should attend this commemoration. He says he wants to open up his opinions to others . This event is supposed to be solemn and there isn't supposed to be any physical violence or hate speech. We are there to support our loved ones and to remember the people that died in the Holocaust.”

From JONES to FREUD:

“I did not see it written anywhere that this event in Skokie is to remember the people who supposedly died in the Holocaust. And what do you know about this-- you were not in Germany at that time, and you died in 1939! You seem very confident that you know what this event is about. But what if the entire event is based on false premises?”

From FREUD to JONES:

“We don't blindly accept what we have been told. I had to escape the Nazis and flee to England to avoid being killed just because of my religion. There are survivors from this time that have told their stories...The Nazis documented well and there is a lot of evidence against your point; there are stacks of pictures from this time that the Nazis documented. Do you really think Jews would put this much effort to make something up this horrible just for a little bit of sympathy? There is no denying it, sorry!”

Source 8: Teacher Ed. Student's Reflections about Teaching with Controversial Conversations

CHALLENGE:

"I think there's multiple approaches to how to deal with younger people.

And one of them is, you know, we expose him to everything and we guide them through it. And I think that's good.

Another thing is to sort of say we need to really influence them positively when they're young and build up good value systems.

And I think it's obviously a mix of both, but I get worried about giving too much exposure to really negative ideas. I think that kids are vulnerable at a certain age. They don't have capacity to understand, to distinguish so well. And so I worry about too much exposure to racism, that instead it could maybe make them more used to racism as opposed to more capable of recognizing it and fighting it. I think it's a delicate balance and I don't feel like I fully understand."

CHALLENGE:

"The Internet is really hard to control as educators. It's not like when kids [went] to the public library for a book, their parents or school librarian approved it, and none of them would give them a white supremacist book...It's different now. *A white supremacist website is a click away.*"

BENEFIT:

"If this [Hate Speech/Holocaust Denial] was actually happening, the students might go into self-protective mode and be [say] 'you know what, I'm just going to sacrifice exactly what I think about free speech right now for this political end.'

So creating the simulation where they know that nothing is really going to happen I think gives more freedom to consider the depth of the issues. "

BENEFIT:

" Holocaust denial is real. I want them to learn how to fight it off. So maybe this is a good to simulate Holocaust denial so they know what it is next time."

Source 9: Middle School Student Characters Responses to the Confederate Memorial

Civil rights activist ANDREW GOODMAN:

“I voted to destroy the statue because it is supporting slavery. As a civil rights activist I do not support slavery, so it should be taken down.”

Former New York City mayor MICHAEL BLOOMBERG:

“I agree that it should be taken down and removed to a museum so that we don't lose part of our history even though it is incorrect nowadays (and was still morally incorrect then).”

Singer/Entertainer BEYONCE:

“This Confederate Statue is very important for some people. I think it was a sign of respect for the people who fought in the war. I don't ...have a connection to this monument, but from what I can see I think this statue tells a lot of different stories that were important to these people – which I find very painful as a Black woman.”

Source 10: The Artist's Response (Played by a Teacher Ed. Student)

“As the creator of the monument... The statue...represents the heroism and sacrifices of the men and women of the South. I was there for the unveiling, and it seems only proper that I am buried at its base. If you take this away, how will you honor these sacrifices? Must all of those in a war be on the winning side in order to be remembered? Do the sacrifices of these people become less a part of the American story because they were on the “wrong side of history?”
-Moses Ezekiel

Source 11: Middle School Students Reflect on Discussing Controversial Issues in a Simulation

“Racism was a tough thing to talk about in character because it is a sensitive topic and it is hard to say the right thing especially when you are not speaking for yourself.”

“It has engaged me to help stop racism if I have a chance to, I would love to do this [JCAT] again because it was fun and educational. It has brought on the conversation to help end racism and help people get their way of rights!”

“While I was doing JCAT, I realized that some people were not knowledgeable about things like hate speech, racism, and antisemitism. I had an epiphany that if people who use hate speech knew more about the topic, then maybe they would change their mind. This simulation definitely gave me new ways to think about the topic.”