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Yiftach Meiri from Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies presents a Yad Vashem Mobile Educational Unit to the participants
(Courtesy Yad Vashem/ Noam Rivkin Fenton)

"This Could Only Happen at Yad Vashem"

International Jewish Educators Conference

By Aaron Goldman

“ Who am I?”, “*Qui suis je?*”, “*¿Quién soy?*”, “*Кто я?*” Regardless of language, place or culture, this is one of the key questions that preoccupies young people as they mature and develop into adults. How they answer the question has significant ramifications for themselves, their families, and their communities. In the Jewish world, educators are finding, and studies are telling us, that fewer and fewer young Jews are including “Jewish” as part of their identities. Ergo, “identity” has become the single greatest challenge in Jewish education today. To educate the next generation of young Jews to make space in their lives for the “Jewish” part of their identity is one of the main objectives of Jewish education in the 21st century. Modern Jewish educators are struggling to make the wisdom, story and collective experience of the Jewish people relative and meaningful to their students. Modern technology is forcing educators to reconsider how we teach, what tools we use to reach the hearts and minds of young people, and how best to impact our students.

Based on recent studies, most notably the 2014 Pew Study, the Shoah remains one of the central touchstones that resonate and inspire Jews to identify themselves as Jewish. This is cause for both concern and promise. Educators are concerned because we do not want the next generation to make the Holocaust their defining Jewish experience. The Jewish religion, culture and history is rich and full. It can and should instill pride and be the main source of Jewish identity. It is important that we not view ourselves as perpetual victims. Yet, the fact that the Shoah is such an important factor in many peoples' Jewish identity can be a source of encouragement and hope. Yad Vashem believes that awareness of the Shoah and understanding its complexities and meanings for life can provide great importance and deep significance to every level of Jewish

activity. Shoah studies can be a helpful tool to educators the world over as they attempt to motivate, inspire, educate and empower their students who are navigating the complex challenges facing the Jews and Jewish community of the 21st century.

Towards that end, this past December Yad Vashem convened an unprecedented conference of over 215 principals and heads of Jewish day schools and prominent educators in the field of Jewish education from across the globe to discuss how Shoah studies can be used as a key tool in their efforts to impact Jewish Identity. The conference was conceived by Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev when he declared, “Our major challenge today [as educators] is to ensure that young people will be able to deal with the Holocaust, that it will be significant for them, that they connect to it, that it helps build their identity as Jews and human beings; this conference is geared to help educators accomplish these goals.”

The conference was supported by several other organizations involved in worldwide Jewish education. Some of these entities sent representatives to participate in the plenary and various workshop discussions. Specifically, Genesis Philanthropy Group (GPG), a long-standing partner of Yad Vashem in various areas of Holocaust education and commemoration, participated in the conference. GPG CEO Ilia Salita said: “The long-term partnership between Genesis Philanthropy Group and Yad Vashem has brought about many benefits for the cause of Holocaust research and education, especially in closing the gaps in the history of tragedy and heroism of the Jews of the Former Soviet Union. This conference continues the well-established tradition of academic and practical exchanges between scholars and educators from all over the world, which is enormously important for the future generations of students of the Holocaust.” Dorit Golender, Vice President, Community Relations, represented GPG at the conference.

Each day of the conference was dedicated to one of three

significant areas of concern: the role of Jewish identity during the Shoah, pedagogical approaches to teaching the Shoah, and the Shoah in contemporary Jewish identity. Participants attended lectures by world-famous Shoah scholars and educators, as well as workshops and discussion groups focusing on information, strategies and practical tools that can be used as resources in their classroom.

As the conference took place during Chanukah, there was an emotional candle-lighting ceremony at the end of each day. What made these ceremonies unique was the fact that Yad Vashem chose to use menorahs that survived the fires of the Holocaust and are now safeguarded at Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem Council Chairman Rabbi Israel Meir Lau was honored to light the candles at the opening ceremony of the conference. He lit a menorah from late 18th- or early 19th-century Krakow, the birthplace and early home of his mother. Rabbi Lau spoke about the Shoah's ability to create meaningful impressions of courage and dedication about Jews upon all Jews, regardless of their background or religious affiliations. "It is befitting to hold this conference during the Holiday for Jewish education and identity, Chanukah," Rabbi Lau said. "You [Jewish educators] hold the key to the future destiny of the Jewish people."

The theme of the Conference was introduced by Dr. Eyal Kaminka, Lily Safra Chair of Holocaust Education and Director of the International School for Holocaust Studies. "I believe that this is the essence of our role as educators - to ensure that future generations keep the debate open and continue to argue, as the Jewish people have done since the beginning of time, about what Judaism is and where it should go from here. Our educational role is to help our students stay involved in the ever evolving, ever arguing game, while seeing themselves as the subjects of the Jewish discourse. To have our students stay dedicated and part of the holy Jewish covenant of debate."

Dr. Kaminka was followed by Professor Yehuda Bauer, Yad Vashem Academic Advisor and one of the most prestigious scholars of the Shoah in the world today. At the conclusion of his talk, Professor Bauer compared the nations of the world to instruments in an orchestra: "We [the Jewish people] are a small people, few in numbers. We are like a piccolo in the Orchestra of Nations; we have a beautiful and essential voice that can and must be included in the harmony of the world symphony."

The International School's Pedagogical Director Shulamit Imber, Fred Hillman Chair in Memory of Janusz Korczak, demonstrated how firsthand testimonies illustrate the fact that Jewish identity was used to create hope and light during terrible times of darkness, and that many victims never relinquished their belief and concern for the future of the Jewish people during and after the Shoah. During a discussion after her presentation, Imber pointed out that at one point there were 500,000 Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, of which 100,000 died of starvation. She said the challenge of educators in today's world is to learn how the other 400,000 were able to stay alive. Those experiences can now be an example of strength and inspiration for all Jews, wherever they are.

As in every major conference at the International School, the conference also included emotional meetings with survivors. Elie Elbaz, a participant from Strasbourg, noted: "I left the session with a great sense of unease because only now do I realize the complexity of Jewish identity in the Shoah. Now I understand why testimonies are so important."

One outstanding panel discussion covered a plethora of issues facing world Jewry today. Topics included the educational impact of trips to Poland, coping with the "New Antisemitism," Holocaust denial and BDS on college campuses, teaching

Israel, Zionism and the Shoah, and Shoah programming in informal Jewish educational settings. "We are not dealing with Holocaust denial, but Holocaust minimization," said Evan Gottesman, from Rutgers University. "People throw around flagrant comparisons to the Holocaust, which serves to minimize it. We need to be careful how we employ Holocaust vocabulary, especially in political speech, and how we use that imagery." However, Yosef Tarshish, President of the World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS) UK/Israel, added, "Jewish students don't let BDS define their experiences on campus."

During the roundtable discussions, participants had a chance to share with colleagues their achievements in Shoah education, their frustrations, and their hopes for the future. Yad Vashem staff were on hand to hear how they could assist local schools and communities to create more effective and meaningful Shoah programs. "One of the most valuable products of the conference was the professional exchange among participants," says Rabbi Moshe Cohn, Head of the Jewish World Section at the International School. "While there are differences between youth from Spain and Hong Kong or France, the similarities are overwhelming. Many of them expressed the desire to revamp traditional Holocaust education to meet the needs of future generations of Jewish youth. Some even posited that the history of the Holocaust should not be restricted to Jewish studies programs. Yad Vashem's International School is a natural partner to help develop these ideas." Principal of the Yeshiva of Flatbush Rabbi David Hertzberg, a leading Jewish day school located in

Brooklyn, NY, agreed: "We want to implement a more inter-disciplinary approach that focuses on cultural and religious heroism from both pre- and post-war experience."

In keeping with tradition, the conference's closing session was dedicated to the memory of Izzy and Babs Asper on behalf of The Asper Foundation, long-time supporters of Yad Vashem's many activities. "It is incumbent upon us all to continue to teach the legacy of the Shoah in a way that directly addresses our future generations," said Shai Abramson, Consultant for The Asper Foundation-Israel. "We wholly identify with this legacy, and we stand with you as we face—together—the challenges of education on the Holocaust, against Holocaust denial, against antisemitism and keeping Holocaust history relevant and engaging."

When asked to sum up his feelings about this most extraordinary event, conference organizer and Director of the International Seminars and Jewish World Department Ephraim Kaye said, "This was the first international conference for Principals and Heads of Jewish Day Schools. There were representatives from 150 schools from 34 countries. Every Jewish denomination was represented. They had the opportunity to meet, discuss and brainstorm regarding issues and challenges of common interest. This could only happen at Yad Vashem."

The International Conference is generously supported by The Asper Foundation, the Adelson Family Foundation, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Genesis Philanthropy Group and the Israel Ministry of Diaspora Affairs.

(L to R) The Honorable Irwin Cotler, PC OC, Shai Abramson, Dr. Eyal Kaminka, Dorit Novak and Natan Sharansky at Yad Vashem's Conference on Jewish Identity and the Shoah (Courtesy Yad Vashem/ Isaac Harari)



Shulamit Imber, Pedagogical Director of Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies and Fred Hillman Chair in Memory of Janusz Korczak, conducts a roundtable discussion with participants of the International Conference of Jewish Educators. (Courtesy Yad Vashem/Isaac Harari)