

I visited nine schools for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Here's what I learned.

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

I am rabbi of the only synagogue in Calabria, Italy, a region located in the "toe" of the Italian "boot." Calabria is the geographical size of the US state of Virginia and it is among the least populated and least affluent in all of Italy.

As Calabria's only rabbi and one of only a handful of Jews who live here, each year I am asked to visit a number of schools during the month of January in honor of the European Union's official commemoration, Holocaust Remembrance Day.

This year was no exception. In six days I visited nine elementary, middle and secondary schools and spoke to students ranging in age from seven to nineteen years. Audiences numbered from 24 little ones in a second grade class to over 100 students in their late teens.

This is what I learned.

In my 18 years in Calabria I have answered the call to bring Holocaust education to any school that desires it. At first my focus was limited to detailing the Holocaust horror that elderly camp survivors experienced, as well as the emotional trauma that my own father suffered as a liberator of the Buchenwald concentration camp. But over the years I've come to the understanding that as powerful as Holocaust testimonials are, these accounts are not enough.

For two reasons; first, a school program that highlights only survivor testimony risks emphasizing to young people, the vast majority of whom have never met a Jewish person, that more than anything else we Jews are victims. Our stories are poignant and often horrific and the students feel pity for us. I believe that pity and compassion for those who suffered the horrors of persecution is not inappropriate. In fact it is an emotionally healthy response.

But secondly and maybe just as important, is giving equal attention to the personhood of the Jewish people. That's why, in recent years, I've added a special component to my school presentations. It's called "Joyfully Jewish" and before I share the camp stories, I engage students with photos of Jewish life cycle events and Judaica brought from our synagogue.

Student comments are encouraging. One nine year old who viewed a large laminated photo of a Jewish wedding remarked, "There's a bride and a groom like in the church." Another student, fascinated with the large shofar I displayed, noted the similarity between the Jewish instrument and the one sounded by the Vatican to open the Jubilee celebrations.

Photos of kids dressed in Purim costumes reminded the children of Carnival while a Bar Mitzvah photo prompted questions about the Torah scroll and the Hebrew language.

Photos of antisemitic graffiti scrawled on a wall in a neighborhood where I once lived, allowed me to explain how frightened it made me feel and prompted this response from one middle school boy who said, "If we don't rub out the graffiti then people will see it every day. It gets in their heads and then in their hearts."

Personalizing the Jewish experience that includes examples of normal Jewish life, makes the segue into Holocaust testimonials more meaningful. The posters, artwork and displays made by each class offer students the opportunity to combine the important historical event with a real life Jewish cultural experience.

Balancing a joyful depiction of Jewish life with the tragedy that is the Holocaust will not, in and of itself, ameliorate antisemitism but given the reaction of hundreds of school children, I'm convinced it is a start.

Rabbi Barbara Aiello is Italy's first female rabbi. She has lived and worked in southern Italy for 18 years and is a founding member of the International Federation of Rabbis. This article first appeared in the online journal, Times of Israel.