

WHERE LIGHT MEETS SHADOW: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HOLOCAUST EDUCATION IN ISRAELI AND AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Yaakova Sacerdoti

The Levinsky-Wingate Academic College (Israel)

Abstract

Across cultural and national contexts, educational systems play a central role in shaping how young learners first encounter traumatic historical events, a challenge that is particularly pronounced in the case of the Holocaust. This article examines how contrasting collective memories, Israel's heroic-national memory of the Holocaust and the American framing of the Holocaust as a universal moral event, are transmitted to young children through picture books centered on the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Based on a comparative analysis of 34 Israeli Holocaust picture books for early childhood, representing the full corpus published to date, and 20 books available to young readers in the United States, the study is situated within the global shift marked by the 2000 Stockholm Declaration, which positioned Holocaust education within an international moral discourse. The analysis demonstrates how children's literature actively constructs collective memory rather than merely reflecting it. Attention to narrative and poetic strategies reveals distinct pedagogical orientations in the two corpora. In American texts, Hanukkah is often reconfigured through familiar cultural symbols: candles, dreidels, and familial warmth, that function as affective mediators, framing the Holocaust within a gentle, nostalgic tone aligned with multicultural "holidays of light" discourse and inclusive educational settings. By contrast, Israeli works mobilize Hanukkah to reinforce a heroic-Zionist narrative that links ancient Jewish resistance to modern sovereignty. The miraculous dimension of the holiday is subordinated to themes of agency, national renewal, and collective responsibility, positioning the Holocaust within a broader framework of identity formation and civic socialization. By comparing these literary traditions, the study illuminates how curricular contexts and cultural narratives shape children's earliest encounters with the Holocaust and contributes to broader discussions of early Holocaust education that balance historical responsibility, developmental sensitivity, and cultural specificity.

Keywords: *Pedagogical ideology, elementary education, children's literature, cultural narratives, holocaust representation.*

1. Introduction

In early childhood education, traumatic historical events are rarely introduced through direct historical instruction. Instead, they are mediated through cultural and literary forms designed to align with children's developmental, emotional, and cognitive capacities. This mediation is particularly salient in relation to the Holocaust, an event that poses enduring challenges of representation while remaining central to processes of historical transmission. Addressing the Holocaust in early childhood therefore involves navigating ethical responsibility, developmental appropriateness, and ideological framing, often through symbolic narratives rather than explicit historical exposition.

Within this mediated educational landscape, children's literature occupies a central position. It functions not only as a cultural artifact but as a pedagogical medium through which collective memory, civic values, and moral frameworks are conveyed to young readers. Through narrative structure, poetic language, symbolism, and illustration, picture books shape the interpretive frameworks through which children begin to engage with the past. Rather than merely adapting historical knowledge to developmental constraints, children's literature actively participates in constructing the meanings through which historical events are first encountered.

This article examines Holocaust education through a comparative analysis of Israeli and American picture books for early childhood that incorporate the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. As a ritualized "holiday of light" associated with memory, family practices, and collective identity, Hanukkah provides a culturally

familiar framework through which difficult historical material may be introduced. The analysis is situated within the broader global shift associated with the 2000 Stockholm Declaration and focuses on how Hanukkah-centered narratives articulate different pedagogical orientations and collective memory constructions in Israeli and American contexts.

2. From national memory to global discourse

In May 1998, Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson, together with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and U.S. President Bill Clinton, initiated the establishment of an international task force for Holocaust remembrance. This initiative culminated in the first International Holocaust Remembrance Conference, held in Stockholm on January 27, 2000, with representatives from 46 countries in attendance, and concluded with the signing of what became known as the Stockholm Declaration, with Elie Wiesel serving as its honorary chairman. A close reading of the Declaration's eight clauses reveals not only an institutional milestone but also the emergence of a connotative and conceptual shift in Holocaust discourse: "The Holocaust," understood as a formative event in Jewish history and appropriated by Jewish and Israeli collective memory, is reframed as "Holocaust," a global historical event appropriated by the collective memory of the international community. This reframing signals a move from a particularistic mode of remembrance toward a universal moral discourse, positioning the Holocaust as a foundational reference point for international ethical reflection and education.

This move toward universalization, however, did not emerge in a vacuum. Several decades earlier, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (first published in 1963) articulated a similar repositioning by defining Nazi crimes as crimes against humanity committed against the Jewish people, a formulation that provoked intense public and scholarly debate.

This tension between particularistic and universal framings of the Holocaust was articulated explicitly within Israeli public discourse two decades before the Stockholm Declaration. At a special session of the Israeli Knesset marking thirty years of the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Law and the establishment of Yad Vashem, Holocaust survivor and then Knesset member Professor Shevach Weiss addressed the moral implications of Holocaust remembrance. Weiss emphasized the need to confront the Holocaust in its full historical depth while acknowledging the coexistence of grief, anger, and the impulse toward revenge. At the same time, he argued that Jewish historical experience entails a broader ethical responsibility: a moral obligation to respond to injustice wherever it occurs and to balance political power with moral vigilance.

Weiss's position reflects an acute awareness of the tension between two modes of Holocaust memory. On the one hand stands a particularistic approach, in which the Holocaust is appropriated primarily within Jewish and Israeli collective memory as a formative national catastrophe. On the other hand stands a universal approach that seeks to frame the Holocaust as a global moral event from which ethical imperatives can be derived for humanity at large. Although articulated within a political and commemorative context, Weiss's formulation resonates strongly with cultural and educational domains, including Holocaust literature for early childhood, where this tension is translated into narrative, symbolic, and pedagogical choices.

The present study is based on a corpus of 34 Israeli Holocaust books for early childhood, representing the full body of published works to date, and 20 books available to young readers in the United States. Within the Israeli corpus, a predominantly particularistic orientation is evident: 27 of the 34 works (79%) foreground Jewish and Zionist frameworks of meaning. By contrast, the American corpus demonstrates a stronger universal orientation, with 14 of the 20 works (70%) emphasizing humanistic and moral messages addressed to a broad, multicultural readership.

3. Hanukkah and moral mediation in American Holocaust literature

Israeli Holocaust literature for early childhood and its American counterpart constitute two distinct literary systems, each embedded within the broader cultural polysystem of the society in which it operates. As subsystems, both interact with dominant ideologies, educational frameworks, and collective memory formations, which shape their poetic, narrative, and pedagogical choices. This comparative framing establishes the conceptual background for examining how Hanukkah functions as a mediating cultural and pedagogical framework within American Holocaust literature for young children.

In Israel, the Holocaust was incorporated into a national-Zionist narrative that emphasized collective endurance, agency, and continuity. By contrast, in the United States a process of Americanization of the Holocaust began in the late 1960s, influenced by geopolitical developments, political considerations, patterns of Jewish assimilation, and the growing prominence of multicultural discourse. Prior to this shift, the Holocaust occupied a marginal position in American public memory: school curricula largely omitted

the genocide of the Jews, extermination camps were rarely addressed, and Jewish victimhood was subsumed under generalized narratives of wartime suffering (Zones, 2005).

During the Cold War, public and political attention in the United States shifted away from World War II atrocities toward emerging geopolitical threats. This shift reinforced a reluctance to confront Nazi crimes or to foreground the genocide of the Jews, further delaying the integration of the Holocaust into American public and educational discourse.

A significant reorientation in American Holocaust discourse emerged from the late 1960s onward, shaped by a convergence of political and cultural developments both within and beyond the United States. Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967 played a crucial role in this process, as it not only intensified the sense of pride among American Jews but also enhanced the public standing of Israel and Jewish identity within American society. This shift was later reinforced by the Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty of 1979, brokered by the United States, which positioned America as a global peacemaker and further normalized Israel's moral and political legitimacy in the international arena.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, World War II was retrospectively reframed in American public memory as a morally unambiguous conflict. Against the ambiguity and trauma associated with Vietnam, the war against Nazi Germany offered a narrative of moral clarity in which the American soldier could be reimagined as a heroic figure fighting decisively on the side of justice.

Political initiatives further consolidated this shift, most notably the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., following the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust chaired by Elie Wiesel. As scholars have observed, the museum's prominent location near the National Mall marked the Holocaust's incorporation into American national memory and affirmed its role within a broader moral narrative of American history (Magid, 2012).

Alongside these broader political and cultural developments, transformations within the American Jewish community, from relative homogeneity to increasing religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity, reshaped Holocaust remembrance. Interfaith families, pluralistic identities, and exposure to multiple narratives of collective trauma contributed to a reconceptualization of the Holocaust as a universal moral reference point rather than an exclusively Jewish catastrophe. This shift was reinforced by the rise of a global humanistic ethos, particularly among younger generations, who increasingly approached Jewish tradition as a resource for ethical engagement with broader questions of injustice and responsibility.

Within American Holocaust literature for early childhood, this universal orientation is reflected in narratives that foreground moral values and acts of kindness. These are conveyed primarily through two narrative channels: intra-communal acts of solidarity among Jews and inter-communal acts of rescue and compassion by non-Jews. Within the first channel, four recurrent narrative groups can be identified: Hanukkah stories, substitute parenting narratives, stories centered on Janusz Korczak, and stories focused on the Jewish child. The present article concentrates on Hanukkah stories as a particularly revealing site for examining the pedagogical mediation of Holocaust memory for young readers.

In American Holocaust literature for early childhood, the Hanukkah–Holocaust pairing brings together two traumatic historical events. The first, situated in the distant past in the land of Judea, involved religious coercion, decrees, destruction, and devastation, but also divine intervention, military victory, and the establishment of a Jewish kingdom. The second, occurring in the recent past on European soil, likewise involved decrees, destruction, and devastation; however, unlike the former, it was characterized by deliberate and systematic mass extermination and by the absence of divine intervention.

Within American Holocaust literature, the first event is largely marginalized. Its place is taken by the second event, which is presented not through explicit depictions of atrocity but through a paradoxically nostalgic and emotionally softened lens. Trauma and loss are present, yet they are mediated through a gentle, sentimental tone, even when the narrative setting is a concentration camp or ghetto. These works depict suffering while simultaneously evoking memories of familial warmth and moments of human connection, both before the persecution and during it.

This narrative strategy is exemplified in *Nine Spoons* by Marci Stillerman (2011). On the final night of Hanukkah, as the holiday candles are lit, grandchildren gather around Oma ("grandmother" in German) and ask her to recount, as they do every year, the story of the "children's menorah" constructed years earlier in a concentration camp. This frame narrative establishes the emotional register of the text, enveloping the child addressee, both internal and external, in a protective atmosphere of familial intimacy.

Within this frame, Oma returns to her memories of the camp and recalls four-year-old Leah running into her arms, exclaiming, "It's snowing, Mina [...] come and see how beautiful it is outside" (ibid., p. 5). Mina (later Oma) observes the falling snow and notes its white beauty as it covers the surrounding ugliness: "The snow covered the bare ground around the bunker, and small white piles filled the gaps in the electric fence surrounding the camp" (ibid., p. 6). She responds simply, "It really is beautiful" (ibid.). This moment raises questions about the function of aesthetic perception within trauma: whether it serves to preserve hope, to momentarily obscure violence, or to enable psychological distancing.

As the first snowfall marks the approach of the month of Kislev, Reizel, one of the prisoners, reminds the others that Hanukkah is near. With no menorah available in the camp, she proposes collecting nine spoons to construct one for the orphaned children in the barrack. At this point of narrative tension, Oma emphasizes that within the camp, a spoon was of greater value than gold, since "anyone who had a spoon could scrape the last drop of food from the bottom of the bowl" (ibid., p. 11).

Despite the risks involved, the women in the barrack cooperate to realize this plan. Mina offers to share a spoon with Reizel; Reizel with Hindel; Hindel, who sorts confiscated belongings, manages to smuggle out a spoon, despite the danger (ibid., p. 16). Miriam, who works in the kitchen, retrieves a spoon from the trash at the risk of severe punishment (ibid., p. 19). Leiba, who cleans the home of a guard in exchange for food, requests a spoon instead, despite her constant hunger (ibid., p. 21). Through these acts of solidarity, nine spoons are eventually gathered.

On the eve of Hanukkah, Reizel constructs a small menorah, which is lit in secret. "It was our own special Hanukkah miracle," Oma concludes (ibid., p. 27). The narrative then returns to the present, as Oma moves back from a past filtered through memory to the familial warmth of her grandchildren, who promise never to forget, and to the "children's menorah," which continues to burn.

Framing a Holocaust narrative within a contemporary realist story centered on Hanukkah enables the text to address multiple audiences simultaneously: Jewish and non-Jewish children, as well as their parents. In the United States, Hanukkah is the most familiar Jewish holiday, in part due to its temporal proximity to Christmas. In educational settings, it is commonly presented alongside Christmas and the African American holiday of Kwanzaa, all three framed as "holidays of light" through symbols such as the Christmas tree, the menorah, and the kinara.

Within this pedagogical context, Hanukkah functions in American Holocaust literature as a culturally accessible framework for introducing the Holocaust to children outside the Jewish community. Holiday rituals such as lighting candles, eating latkes, and playing with dreidels foreground domestic warmth and emotional security, serving as affective buffers in young readers' encounters with traumatic narratives. For Jewish children, the Hanukkah–Holocaust pairing also retains religious significance, invoking themes of divine presence, ritual continuity, and sanctification of tradition, as reflected in references to the Maccabees, the miracle of the cruse of oil, and remembered forms of communal solidarity. In these texts, however, religious meaning is embedded within a broader pedagogical strategy that emphasizes emotional containment and accessibility.

4. Hanukkah, heroism and national continuity in Israeli literature

Against this backdrop, the distinct orientation of Israeli Holocaust literature for early childhood becomes more apparent. While American texts tend to employ Hanukkah as a mediating framework that softens historical rupture through domestic intimacy and nostalgic framing, Israeli literature mobilizes the same holiday within a markedly different logic of memory and identity formation. Whereas American narratives often allow for a mediated return to the past, Israeli works largely reject nostalgic engagement with the diasporic past. This difference is not merely tonal but reflects divergent constructions of collective memory and national identity.

It is within this context that the pairing of Hanukkah and the Holocaust in Israeli literature should be understood. Although the conjunction may initially appear incongruous, it reflects the construction of Israeli collective memory and post-Holocaust national identity through the integration of ancient and modern histories into a continuous national narrative. On the one hand stands a selective version of the Hanukkah story that emphasizes the military victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus Epiphanes and the establishment of the Hasmonean kingdom, while marginalizing internal conflicts over assimilation and religious authority. On the other hand stands the Holocaust, two millennia later, marked by the systematic extermination of six million Jews across national, social, and religious distinctions.

The ideological logic underlying this pairing becomes clearer when viewed against earlier religious and cultural traditions. In the liturgical poem *Ma'oz Tzur*, divine providence is celebrated as the force sustaining the people of Israel across successive exiles, culminating in the miracle of the cruse of oil and the rededication of the Temple. Zionism, however, reconfigured the holiday by assigning it a new function within a secular-national narrative.

This transformation is articulated in Aharon Ze'ev's 1936 poem "We Carry the Torches," published in *Davar LaYeladim*. In explicit contrast to *Ma'oz Tzur*, the poem rejects divine intervention, "No miracle happened to us", and redefines Hanukkah as a celebration of human agency, labor, and sacrifice. Redemption is achieved not through divine grace but through physical exertion and collective effort. Biblical allusions, including Moses striking the rock and the ascent to the mountain (Numbers 14), are reinterpreted as models of initiative and activism rather than obedience, positioning the pioneers as creators of light through human action.

Within the Zionist ethos, Hanukkah was nationalized and transformed into a symbol of Jewish political autonomy, resistance, and self-definition. Mattathias was recast as a Moses figure of the Second Temple period, while Judah the Maccabee was aligned with Joshua son of Nun, the conqueror of the land. The Maccabees thus became prototypes of national heroism, retrospectively linked to later figures such as the defenders of Masada, ghetto fighters, underground resistance members, and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces.

This ideological framework is transmitted to young audiences through Israeli children's culture, particularly via Hanukkah songs commonly taught in early childhood settings. These songs emphasize themes of strength, sacrifice, and redemption, presenting heroic action as a recurring and normative response to historical threat. Within this pedagogical context, Hanukkah functions as the paradigmatic holiday of heroism, offering children a symbolic vocabulary through which national continuity and collective resilience are internalized.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Israeli and American Holocaust literature for early childhood indicates that children's books operate as significant pedagogical sites through which collective memory is articulated and transmitted. Examined through the shared cultural framework of Hanukkah, these texts reflect differing approaches to Holocaust education that are shaped by distinct historical experiences, ideological orientations, and educational contexts.

Within the American corpus, Hanukkah functions as an affective and symbolic mediator that moderates young readers' engagement with the Holocaust. Reconfigured through domestic rituals, familial warmth, and a nostalgic tone, the holiday is embedded within a broader multicultural discourse of "holidays of light." This orientation corresponds with a universal humanistic framework in which moral reflection, empathy, and emotional resilience are foregrounded for both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Trauma remains present, yet it is mediated through narratives of care, intergenerational continuity, and protective emotional framing.

By contrast, Israeli Holocaust literature for early childhood situates Hanukkah within a national-historical continuum that emphasizes agency, resistance, and collective responsibility. The miraculous dimension of the holiday is largely subordinated to a secularized, Zionist reinterpretation that links the Maccabean revolt to modern Jewish fighters, pioneers, and soldiers. Within this framework, the Holocaust is incorporated into a cyclical narrative of persecution and redemption, contributing to processes of national identity formation and civic socialization from an early age. Nostalgic engagement with the diasporic past is limited, while domestic symbols function not only as sites of emotional containment but also as carriers of ideological continuity.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Holocaust literature for young children does more than accommodate historical content to developmental considerations. Through narrative strategies, symbolic structures, and ritual frameworks, such literature participates in shaping the moral and civic interpretive horizons through which the past is first encountered. The use of Hanukkah as a pedagogical mediator illustrates how cultural rituals can simultaneously serve as emotional scaffolds and as mechanisms for transmitting collective values.

By bringing literary analysis into dialogue with pedagogical inquiry, this study contributes to broader discussions of early Holocaust education within a global context. It underscores the importance of attending to the cultural and ideological dimensions embedded in literary representations, particularly in relation to how young learners are introduced to traumatic histories that carry both particular and universal ethical implications.

References

- Arendt, H. (2000). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Magid, S. (2012). The Holocaust and the Jewish Identity in America: Memory, the Unique and the Universal. *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 18(2), 100–135.
- Stillerman, M. (2011). *Nine Spoons*. New York: Hachai Publishing.
- Zones, G. (2005). *Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Ze'ev, A. (1936). We carry the torches. *Davar LaYeladim*, 10.12.1936.