

Remembering who we are

For the Jewish people, history isn't just a subject at school, it's a central part of our identity.

ILL be with you in a minute ... give me a bit more time ... I'm seconds away ... Years ago ... Is it possible to have a conversation where a concept of time or memory is not invoked?

The understanding of time is a taught skill. A baby lying in a cot has little concept of time (and I say this as a sleep-deprived father of young children). However, if taught well, it may gradually develop a sense of space, light and dark and go on to differentiate its behaviour at different times.

Schools, like parents, teach time. In the Australian Curriculum, chronology (ordering events in sequence) is a taught skill that can be assessed. After all, without a concept of time we would be lost.

The decision to teach "history", however, is a relatively recent one. In Ancient Greece, common subjects were drama, public speaking, government, art, reading, writing, mathematics and music. In biblical Israel, yeshivah-based teaching revolved around the topics in the Mishnah and the Torah (other parts of the Tanach were being written around them). History was, quite simply, not part of the curriculum.

At this point I must declare a conflict of interest. I am a history teacher, and therefore like all teachers, I regard my own subject as critical. It is the basis of our memory, our identity, our sense of community, others and self. It interweaves with literature, science, technology, languages, health – I could go on.

When the British came to write their first National Curriculum, they divided the subjects into two groups: core and foundation. Core were seen as, well, core, to be taught to the age of 16 with a high weekly lesson allocation. They were mathematics, English, science and history. The foundation subjects were pretty much every other subject – languages, geography, music, technology, physical education and so on.

Shortly before the National Curriculum was published, a final change was announced: history was to be moved from the essential core subjects, to the important-but less-crucial foundation subjects. There was outcry, but to paraphrase the then-prime minister, "you move if you wish to – the Lady is not for moving."

I believe that British education has never recovered from this disappointing decision.

In Israel, the subject we know as history is called "historiah", adapted from the English word. This is because there is no biblical Hebrew word for history. The Jewish concept of history recognises the centrality of the subject to our personal and communal identities, and instead uses *zichron*: memory, or remembrance.

As a community, we do not

School of thought

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need to be reminded of the importance of history. Indeed, the Israeli politician Yair Lapid said, "There is not one family in all of Israel whose members sit at the table and say 'Oh well not much happened to our family in the last 300 years.'" The Jewish people have been through a lot – and the scars of history are quite literally etched on the forearms of our grandparents.

For Jews, events are not in history – they are in our history. The other name for our new year, Rosh Hashanah, is Yom Hazikaron – the day of remembrance. Rosh Hashanah is translated in English as New Year – but we also call Rosh Hashanah the birthday of the world, but actually it is the remembrance of creation of the world.

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With the national education agenda increasingly encouraging "personalisation", our community can honestly proclaim that we are already doing it. During our blessing over wine on Friday nights, we remember the days of slavery in Egypt. And on Passover, we say that we remember the days of slavery, and we are commanded to behave "as if you yourself were there".

If history is important in the secular world, it is an imperative in the Jewish world.

The Jewish lens of history, of remembrance, thrives on historical proof; but because it invokes memory as well, it levels the playing field because we are not reliant on history being taught to us. We are required and obligated to remember it, to sit down with bubba and zaida, with grandma and grandpa, and find out about the past.

What Jewish school does not have a family history project as part of its curriculum? With Jewish festivals, we relive the events. We bring together objective history, documented history, factual history, with family and collective memory. We create living history.

The Australian government is currently reviewing the National Curriculum. I applaud our leaders for ensuring that history is at the centre of the new Australian Curriculum, and it is essential for the collective memory of our young that the centrality of the subject continues. Most importantly I applaud our parents for making considerable sacrifices in order to send our children to our Jewish schools, where we do not just learn about history – we remember it as well.

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