

Yom HaShoah: Understanding the Holocaust

UNIT OVERVIEW

Essential Question: What moral choices did people make during the Holocaust, and what do these choices teach us about Jewish values and human responsibility?

Unit Learning Objectives: By the end of this series, students will be able to:

- Understand the historical context and causes of the Holocaust
- Analyze the moral choices people made during the Holocaust
- Understand different forms of resistance and survival
- Connect Holocaust lessons to Jewish values (tikkun olam, pikuach nefesh, chesed)
- Evaluate their own moral agency and responsibility
- Understand Yom HaShoah as a commitment to Jewish values and justice
- Recognize their power to make moral choices in their own lives

Lesson 1: The Holocaust and Moral Choices

Duration: 60 minutes | **Objective:** Students will understand the historical context of the Holocaust and recognize that people had moral choices.

Materials:

- World map showing Europe 1930s-1940s
- Timeline poster (1918-1945)
- Chart paper and markers
- Photos of Rubin and Luba Litterman (from Stories of Strength document)
- Lesson 1 Student Handout

Instructional Sequence:

HOOK

Ask: "What does it mean to make a moral choice? A moral choice is a choice about what's right and what's wrong. Today we're going to learn about the Holocaust and about the moral choices people made during this terrible time. We're going to learn about Rubin and Luba Litterman, a couple from our community whose story teaches us about love, hope, and moral courage."

Take 2-3 responses. Say: "Rubin and Luba's story shows us that even in the darkest times, people can make choices that honor their values."

MINI-LESSON: THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS CAUSES

Explain: "The Holocaust was a genocide—the systematic murder of six million Jewish people by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. It happened from 1933 to 1945."

To understand how the Holocaust happened, we need to understand the conditions that made it possible:

- **Economic Crisis:** After World War I, Germany was economically devastated. People were poor and desperate.
- **National Humiliation:** Germany had lost World War I. People felt ashamed and angry.
- **Antisemitism:** Hatred of Jewish people had existed in Europe for centuries.
- **Propaganda:** The Nazis spread lies about Jewish people, blaming them for Germany's problems.
- **Totalitarianism:** The Nazis took complete control of the government and eliminated democracy.
- **Indifference:** Many people didn't speak up or help when they saw injustice.

The Holocaust didn't happen by accident. It grew out of specific historical conditions and the choices people made."

Create a timeline on the board:

Year	What Happened
1933	Hitler takes power. Laws take away Jewish people's rights.
1935-1939	Discrimination increases. Jewish people are excluded from jobs, schools, public places.
1939-1941	Jewish people forced into ghettos. Conditions are terrible.
1941-1945	Concentration camps and genocide. Millions are killed.
1945	War ends. Survivors are freed.

MORAL CHOICES DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Explain: "During the Holocaust, people had choices. These choices had real consequences.

Some people were perpetrators—they actively participated in the Holocaust. Some people were collaborators—they worked with the Nazis. Some people were bystanders—they didn't actively help the Nazis, but they didn't help Jewish people either. Some people were resisters—they actively fought back. Some people were rescuers—they risked their lives to help Jewish people."

Create a chart: "Choices During the Holocaust"

- **Perpetrators:** Actively participated in genocide. Made a choice to do evil.
- **Collaborators:** Worked with the Nazis. Made a choice to benefit from evil.
- **Bystanders:** Did nothing. Made a choice to remain silent.

- **Resisters:** Actively fought back or helped. Made a choice to do good.
- **Rescuers:** Risked their lives to help. Made a choice to do good at great personal cost.

Ask: "What does it mean to have a choice? Did people really have choices during the Holocaust? What would you have done?"

RUBIN AND LUBA LITERMAN'S STORY: LOVE AND HOPE

Read aloud: "Rubin Literman was born in Plock, Poland in 1923. He came from a merchant family. He was one of eight children. After high school, Rubin and three of his brothers set up an accounting office.

Luba was born in Stopnica, Poland in 1928. She came from an Orthodox Jewish family. Her father owned a successful business selling yard goods. She attended Hebrew School every day.

In 1939, when Rubin was 16 and Luba was 11, the Nazis invaded Poland. Their lives changed forever.

Rubin and his family were forced into the Plock Ghetto. Conditions were terrible. People were starving. Many people died. Two of Rubin's brothers tried to escape but were captured and sent to Auschwitz, where they died.

In October 1942, Rubin was sent to a concentration camp called Skarczisko, where he had to perform hard labor in a munitions factory. He had to look healthy because those who appeared ill were sent away and never returned.

Luba and her family were forced into the Stopnica Ghetto. In 1942, the Nazis said that if all the young people would willingly go to labor camps, they wouldn't touch the older generation. Luba and four of her siblings went to the camps, hoping to save their parents. But their parents were later taken to Treblinka, where no one survived.

Luba was sent to Skarczisko—the same camp as Rubin! But they were separated and sent to different camps. Rubin was moved to Buchenwald, and Luba was moved to Leipzig.

But Rubin made a choice. He found a way to send secret messages to Luba. He wrote about his love for her and his dreams for their future. He refused to let the Nazis take away his hope or his humanity.

In the camps, Luba had her sister. They made a choice to stay close and support each other. When things were darkest, they would meet secretly and sing songs and recite poems. They chose to remember beauty and joy, even in a place designed to destroy the human spirit. They refused to be dehumanized.

After the war, Rubin and Luba found each other again in Germany. They got married and came to America. They settled in Buffalo and built a beautiful life together. They had children and grandchildren. Rubin always told his children: "We survived because we refused to let them take our spirits. We held onto love and hope."

Ask: "What moral choices did Rubin and Luba make? How did love and hope help them survive? What does their story teach us about the power of the human spirit?"

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Students complete their handout: "Understanding Moral Choices"

Prompts: "The Holocaust happened because... Rubin's choice to send messages shows... Luba's choice to sing and recite poems shows... A moral choice is..."

CLOSURE

"The Holocaust grew out of specific historical conditions and the choices people made. Rubin and Luba's story shows us that even in terrible circumstances, people can make moral choices. They chose to maintain their humanity. They chose to love and hope. They chose to survive. Next lesson, we'll learn more about different forms of resistance and what they teach us."

Lesson 2: Resistance, Survival, and Moral Courage

Duration: 60 minutes | **Objective:** Students will analyze different forms of resistance and understand moral courage.

Materials:

- Chart paper and markers
- Lesson 2 Student Handout
- Photos from Stories of Strength document

Instructional Sequence:

REVIEW & HOOK

Quick review: "Last lesson we learned about the Holocaust and the moral choices people made. We learned about Rubin and Luba Lierman and how they chose to maintain their humanity and hope. Today we're going to explore different forms of resistance and what they teach us about moral courage."

FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Explain: "Resistance means refusing to accept what's happening. During the Holocaust, there were many forms of resistance:

- **Spiritual Resistance:** Maintaining faith, hope, and humanity
- **Cultural Resistance:** Keeping traditions alive, singing, praying, teaching
- **Emotional Resistance:** Maintaining love and connection with others
- **Intellectual Resistance:** Refusing to believe propaganda, thinking critically
- **Active Resistance:** Helping others, sharing food, protecting the vulnerable
- **Armed Resistance:** Fighting back against the Nazis

All forms of resistance were important. All required courage."

RUBIN AND LUBA'S RESISTANCE

Read aloud: "Rubin and Luba's resistance was spiritual and emotional. They refused to let the Nazis destroy their spirits.

Rubin's secret messages to Luba were an act of resistance. By maintaining love and hope, by refusing to be broken, Rubin resisted the Nazis' attempt to dehumanize him.

Luba's choice to sing songs and recite poems with her sister was an act of resistance. By remembering beauty and joy, by refusing to let the Nazis take away her humanity, Luba resisted.

Their resistance wasn't armed resistance. But it was powerful. It kept them alive. It kept them human. It gave them hope."

Ask: "What does it mean to resist spiritually and emotionally? Why was this form of resistance important? What does Rubin and Luba's story teach us about moral courage?"

MORAL COURAGE

Explain: "Moral courage is the courage to do what's right, even when it's difficult or dangerous. Rubin and Luba showed moral courage by:

- Refusing to give up hope
- Maintaining their humanity and dignity
- Helping each other survive
- Remembering beauty and joy
- Refusing to be dehumanized
- Rebuilding their lives after the war

Moral courage is different from physical courage. It's about making choices that honor your values, even when it's hard."

REBUILDING AND LEGACY

Explain: "After the war, Rubin and Luba faced an enormous challenge. They had lost their families. They had lost their homes. They had lost years of their lives. But they didn't give up.

They came to America. They built a business. They had a family. They stayed connected to their Jewish community. Rubin always told his children: 'We survived because we refused to let them take our spirits.'"

Ask: "What does it tell us about human resilience that survivors could rebuild their lives? What values did Rubin and Luba pass on to their children and grandchildren? How did they honor their survival?"

JEWISH VALUES AND THE HOLOCAUST

Explain: "Jewish values teach us about moral responsibility. Let's think about how these values connect to the Holocaust:

- **Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World):** We have a responsibility to make the world better. During the Holocaust, people who helped others were doing tikkun olam.
- **Pikuach Nefesh (Saving a Life):** Saving a life is one of the highest Jewish values. People who helped others survive were honoring this value.
- **Chesed (Kindness):** We are called to show kindness and compassion. During the Holocaust, acts of kindness—sharing food, offering comfort—were acts of resistance.
- **Tzedakah (Justice):** We have a responsibility to work for justice. Remembering the Holocaust and working to prevent future atrocities is an act of tzedakah.

Rubin and Luba's story shows us these values in action. They showed chesed by helping each other. They showed pikuach nefesh by choosing to survive. They showed tikkun olam by rebuilding their lives and their community."

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Students complete their handout: "Analyzing Resistance and Moral Courage"

Prompts: "Rubin's resistance was... Luba's resistance was... Moral courage means... Jewish values teach us..."

CLOSURE

"Rubin and Luba's story shows us that resistance takes many forms. Spiritual and emotional resistance was powerful. Moral courage helped them survive. Jewish values—chesed, pikuach nefesh, tikkun olam—guided their choices. Next lesson, we'll learn about Yom HaShoah and what it means for us today."

Lesson 3: Yom HaShoah, Jewish Values, and Our Responsibility

Duration: 60 minutes | **Objective:** Students will understand Yom HaShoah as a commitment to Jewish values and recognize their responsibility to make moral choices.

Materials:

- Chart paper and markers
- Lesson 3 Student Handout
- Optional: Candle or memorial object
- Photos or names of community members (with permission)

Instructional Sequence:

HOOK

Ask: "What does it mean to remember? What responsibility comes with remembering? How can we use lessons from the Holocaust to live according to Jewish values? Today we're going to explore Yom HaShoah and what it means for us."

Take 2-3 responses. Say: "Yom HaShoah is a day to remember, to honor survivors, and to commit to living according to Jewish values."

MINI-LESSON: YOM HASHOAH AND JEWISH VALUES

Explain: "Yom HaShoah means 'Day of the Holocaust' in Hebrew. It's a day when Jewish people around the world remember the Holocaust. But it's more than just remembrance. It's a commitment to Jewish values and to preventing future atrocities.

When we remember the Holocaust, we're saying: We will live according to Jewish values. We will show chesed (kindness). We will honor pikuach nefesh (the value of life). We will work for tikkun olam (repairing the world). We will work for tzedakah (justice)."

Create a chart: "Yom HaShoah and Jewish Values"

- **Chesed (Kindness):** We commit to showing kindness and compassion to all people
- **Pikuach Nefesh (Value of Life):** We commit to protecting and honoring human life
- **Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World):** We commit to making the world better
- **Tzedakah (Justice):** We commit to working for justice and preventing atrocities
- **Remembrance:** We commit to remembering those who died and honoring survivors
- **Moral Courage:** We commit to making moral choices, even when it's difficult

SURVIVORS IN OUR COMMUNITY

Explain: "Many Holocaust survivors came to America after the war. They built new lives. They had families. Some are part of our community. Their children and grandchildren are our neighbors, our friends, our community members."

Share: "Rubin and Luba Literman survived the Holocaust. They came to America and built a beautiful life together in Buffalo. They had children and grandchildren. Rubin always told his children: 'We survived because we refused to let them take our spirits.' His family is part of our community today. When we remember Rubin and Luba's story, we're honoring their strength and their legacy."

Ask: "Why is it important that survivors are part of our community? What responsibility do we have to their stories? How does knowing Rubin and Luba's story change how we think about Jewish values?"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO REMEMBER?

Explain: "Remembering is not just about feeling sad. It's about honoring people. It's about learning. It's about making promises."

When we remember Rubin and Luba Literman, we're saying:

- We honor your strength and courage
- We celebrate that you survived
- We celebrate that you built a beautiful family
- We promise to show chesed (kindness) to others
- We promise to honor the value of life
- We promise to work for justice
- We promise to make moral choices
- We promise to tell your story

Remembering is a way of saying: Your life matters. Your story matters. And we will carry your story forward."

OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS THE NEXT GENERATION

Explain: "You are the next generation. Survivors like Rubin and Luba are not here anymore. But their families are. And you are part of this community. You have inherited their stories and their responsibility."

What does that responsibility mean?

- Learn the stories and tell them to others
- Live according to Jewish values: chesed, pikuach nefesh, tikkun olam, tzedakah
- Make moral choices, even when it's difficult
- Stand up when you see injustice
- Include people who are left out
- Treat others with kindness and respect
- Work to make the world better
- Protect human rights and dignity
- Remember that your choices matter

You have more power than you might think. Your moral choices matter. Your voice matters."

Ask: "What does it mean to be a 'keeper of memory'? How can you carry forward Rubin and Luba's values? What moral choices will you make?"

Prepare Students for Respectful Listening:

Say: "We're going to have a special guest who will share their family's story with us. This person's family member survived the Holocaust. We need to be respectful listeners. This is an honor and a responsibility."

Create a chart together: "How to Be a Respectful Listener"

- Listen with your whole heart and mind
- Don't interrupt
- It's okay to feel sad, moved, or emotional—all feelings are valid
- Ask kind and thoughtful questions
- Thank them for sharing
- Remember what they shared
- Respect their experience
- Think about what their story teaches us

Generate Questions Together:

Ask: "What would you like to know about their family's story?"

Write student questions on paper. Guide them toward respectful, thoughtful questions that connect to moral choices and Jewish values.

CLOSURE

"Yom HaShoah is a day to remember, to honor, and to commit to Jewish values. Next lesson, we'll hear directly from someone in our community about their family's story. This person's family survived the Holocaust, and they're going to share what that means to them and what they want us to know."

Lesson 4: Guest Speaker & Reflection on Moral Responsibility

Objective: Students will listen respectfully to a community member's family story and reflect on their own moral responsibility.

Materials:

- Guest speaker (relative of Rubin and Luba Literman or another Holocaust survivor from the community)

POST-VISIT REFLECTION DISCUSSION

Ask students:

- "What did you learn from the guest's story?"
- "How did that story make you feel?"
- "What will you remember about this story?"
- "How does knowing this story change how you think about moral choices?"
- "What did the survivor's family member teach us?"
- "What responsibility do you feel after hearing this story?"
- "How will you live according to Jewish values?"

ACTIVITY: COMMITMENT LETTER

Students write a commitment letter to themselves:

"Dear [Your Name],

I learned that _____. This story teaches me that _____. I commit to showing chesed (kindness) by _____. I commit to honoring pikuach nefesh (the value of life) by _____. I commit to tikkun olam (repairing the world) by _____. I promise to _____.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]"

CLOSURE

"Our community is strong because of survivors and their families. When we remember their stories, when we live according to Jewish values, when we make moral choices—we're honoring their strength and their legacy. You are the next generation. You have the power to make moral choices and to live according to Jewish values. Thank you for listening with your whole hearts and minds."

Trauma Informed Teaching Notes

- **Emphasize resilience, resistance, and moral agency**, not victimization
- **Use respectful language** and avoid graphic descriptions
- **Focus on what people did** (survived, resisted, helped each other, made moral choices, rebuilt) rather than what was done to them
- **Normalize emotions:** "It's okay to feel sad, angry, or moved when we learn about injustice."
- **Provide safety:** "These terrible things happened a long time ago. You are safe."
- **Have support available** for students who become upset

If a Student Asks Difficult Questions:

Q: "How could people make moral choices in such terrible circumstances?"

A: "That's a great question. Even in terrible circumstances, people had choices. Some people chose to maintain their humanity. Some chose to help others. Some chose to resist. These choices were difficult and sometimes dangerous, but they were possible. Rubin and Luba's story shows us that moral choices are always possible."

Q: "What would I have done?"

A: "That's an important question to ask. We can't know for sure what we would have done in those circumstances. But we can think about what we would want to do. We can think about our values. We can practice making moral choices in our own lives, right now. That helps us be prepared to make good choices when it matters."