

3rd Place, Prose, Grades 7-9

### ***An Open Letter About Antisemitism –Milly Rosenberg***

Dear Educators,

Over a year ago I first heard about a group of angry Americans who stormed the US Capitol. On the news I saw hundreds of people break entry, ironically flying the American flag. But as I looked closer, I noticed that mixed in with the Trump regalia and Viking attire was the occasional 6MWE or Camp Auschwitz t-shirt. Now this made my blood boil. The meaning behind these shirts shows dark white supremacist history by mocking the Holocaust.

This hatred towards Jews is nothing new. The earliest recorded antisemitic prejudice dates back to antiquity. However, the amount of anti-Jewish incidents has been on a jagged incline since the late '70s but has skyrocketed since 2013. As a Jewish person of youth, I have seen the incline of prejudice. I have been the target of verbal attacks at school and through social media. I have seen shootings and hate crimes targeting Jews in the news.

I witnessed my century-old synagogue, my safe space, swarmed with armed security guards wearing bullet proof vests. Never had I felt so unsafe in my safe space. Shout-out to my 8th grade history teacher, Mr. Law, for diving deeply into the Holocaust and antisemitism. However, when I look at social media and talk to friends from different schools, I am disturbed by the apparent lack of historical knowledge.

Prior to this year, my synagogue was the only place I received education on my Jewish history. I understand that with all the recent social unrest and injustice it is hard to fit everything into school curriculum. I empathize with that, but the effects of less Jewish education in schools are becoming more and more visibly obvious. To deeply understand the recent prejudice, it is important to dive into the history of antisemitism, and I wish schools would do more of it.

Last year I wanted to know more, so I researched. A good place to start is in the late 19th century during a significant peak of Jewish immigration. Many of these immigrants were seeking refuge from the revolutions of Eastern Europe and came to New York. With them, they brought their language, culture, and morals. They established neighborhoods in Harlem, the Bronx, and Williamsburg, surrounded by their people. Partly due to discrimination, Jewish immigrants didn't work for big manufacturers and in assembly lines. Instead, they worked as tailors, bakers, and shoemakers, mainly for their own community. Parents immediately put their children in school, and adults took night classes after long work days. Education was instilled in Jewish culture.

Through the early 20th century, Jews were able to shift into higher positions in society such as bankers and politicians. With an incline of success came an incline of antisemitism. Many Americans were angry that Jews had suddenly inclined in social and economic status. Jews were stereotyped as greedy for money, demonic, and ugly. They were depicted in antisemitic propaganda as having big noses and dark excessive body hair. They were made fun of for their hair styles, their clothes, their songs, and their prayers.

Those stereotypes didn't just dissipate over time. In fact, they followed us through history. In modern day, we see ourselves in the exaggerated features of Disney villains and mean cartoon characters, yet no conversation has been started. Why am I the one who has to teach you this? It seems that in 2021 we have come so far, but it frustrates me how many people don't even learn about Jewish history in school. I could sit here and dive deep into antisemitism and the Holocaust and teach you about its horrors, but instead I want to talk about the aftermath. I want to talk about the mindset the Holocaust created.

It seems that for a period of time after WWII non-Jews learned about the tragedies of the Shoah. Non-Jews were able to set aside all of the problems and disagreements they had with Jewish people and come together to empathize with them. People were so horrified by what had happened that they felt empathy for Jews, regardless of what they thought of them before. For once, other races, religions, ethnicities, and cultures came together to support Jewish people. Over time this

support was diminished, and the respect for Jews died off along with that generation. But the prejudice remains... and without context and empathy, it seems to be growing.

The stories, the news, the artifacts, the knowledge, the hurt, the pain. We preach “never again.” We preach “education,” and yet somehow these lessons, teachings we were supposed to pass down from generation to generation, got fogged over and forgotten. We let this new generation walk this earth ignorant of what horrors were faced during the war. They will never understand the pain and empathy and unity that was brought on after it, and as a result, we see the modern-day effects of ignorance.

Social media isn't helping. Past generations had nothing to hide behind. No icon, profile picture, or username to use as a shield. Now this ignorance can be carried around behind a fake identity. Anyone can make any remark they want, because they know they have the protection of a phone screen to use as a barrier.

I recently saw a post commemorating the Holocaust. It showed a map of how many Jews were killed in each Eastern European country. The people hiding behind their fake profiles spewed antisemitism in the comment section. I scrolled through the negative comments. I know I shouldn't care what people on the internet say, but as I got deeper and deeper into the comments, I found myself screenshotting the most ridiculous ones. “The holocaust never happened, but it should have,” “never happened,” “haha money eating thieves,” “thank you Hitler,” “never happened,” “never happened,” “NEVER HAPPENED.” I think to myself, how could anyone ever think this? Google is free, people!

I look at the replies. To my surprise nobody called out these accounts. Instead, they agreed. How could they have agreed? Why do I feel so alone? Do Jewish people read these comments and let this slide? Their real thoughts unsaid and unheard? Are they afraid to speak up? How come nobody is talking about this? We need to start a conversation! I wanted to start the conversation. I wanted to interact with that comment, prove them wrong. But I felt so small. I too was just hiding behind a screen.

So I watched. Watched as synagogue after synagogue gets shot up. Shafrir, Beth Israel, Neve Shalom, Copenhagen, Poway, Halle, Tree of Life. And I think to myself, how can people be so full of hatred? Why is it that, because of hatred, I am reminded by the large men in black suit coats and bulletproof vests outside my synagogue that I am in danger? That I am not safe in my safe space. I ask myself, why? Why do people care so much about what I choose to worship? And then I draw the line. Not just antisemitism but racism, ableism, sexism, and all other “isms” connect back to one thing: lack of education.

We need to be taught about antisemitism in school, but just as importantly, we need to talk about sexism, the unfair gender wage gap, the Me Too movement, sexual assault, racism, systemic racism, police brutality, BLM, MLM, Stop Asian Hate, ableism. I am not that naive. Social inequality is only one part of history. It's hard to fit all of these things into an already packed curriculum, but I also know that as the world keeps on changing we can't rely on unreliable sources like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to inform impressionable minds about current events from a biased perspective. We must react to this trend by educating new generations so that as a society we can keep on improving.

So, dear educators, this is your call to take action to teach about the history of antisemitism and Jewish culture. I am not asking you to advocate; I don't want to create fake advocates. I am only asking you to tell a fuller history. One that leads us towards empathy rather than hate.

Sincerely,

Milly Rosenberg

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