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Essay Contest- Annual Essay Contest in Commemoration of Yom HaShoah

*Question 1:*

*“At annual Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies a resounding message is “Never Again.”*

*What does “Never Again” mean to you? What responsibilities do you have as an “upstander” to ensure this phrase becomes a reality?”*

“6 million Jews were killed,” the teacher read, as the dull white slides moved quickly across the smartboard. Students, uninterested, sat hunched in their seats, eyes glazed, indifferent to the sound of 6 million people dying. Perhaps because they had previously heard the same statistic in their third and fourth period classes.

Living in a predominantly Jewish community, you would expect more students to be devastated to learn about the Holocaust, but it seemed the majority were uninterested. Why? Over time, a statistic becomes a number, and a number fails to remember each and every person who was stripped from their families, abused, and brutally murdered. There is no weight to a number, but a personal story can connect a reader to a cause.

In tenth grade, I had the incredible chance to read and examine Elie Wiesel's *Night* in my English class. The tiny blue book given to me as a homework assignment soon became one of the most impactful and eye-opening narratives I had ever read. The story follows Wiesel as he struggles to survive the Holocaust while being forced to choose between his life and his faith in God. Readers can feel Wiesel's anguish during these moments thanks to his personal narrative;

the impact of a personal anecdote allowed me to understand on the severity of the situation and reflect my own privilege having security and right to free expression.

We can hear about the slaughter of millions of people, but experiencing it is incomprehensibly painful. Seeing people get shot and fall to the floor, hanged in front of hundreds of people, and abused and beaten on the streets may seem fictitious, but Wiesel does not leave out any detail that has remained ingrained in his mind.

The events Wiesel expresses, echo the voices and struggles of the millions of lives that were lost during the Holocaust. The one experience of Wiesel leads to mind to imagine the terrors that millions of other Jews had to face. Although we can leave a 55-minute class and forget about what we learned about World War II, the survivors and the victims never had that option to “just forget.”

As a result, it begs the question, why should an event like the Holocaust worry someone who was not involved? Because it's not just about remembering a day and memorizing facts for an upcoming "World War II test," it's about never forgetting the day that shattered the world. It's about never forgetting the relatives, children, and lives lost as a result of a “opposing” religion. It's about never forgetting that people were thrown into camps, starved, assaulted, and left to die on the streets.

Later that day, after school, I brought up the subject with some friends. To my surprise, it seemed that the majority of my friends had little understanding of what had occurred during

World War II. It may have been due to a lack of attention on the subject in their own classrooms, or it could have been because they had simply blocked the information that they had crammed the day before their World War II exam. Nonetheless, it appeared that no matter what school a student attended, there was no influence or genuine empathetic understanding of the horrors of the Holocaust. And as time passes, these numbers and events begin to fade from memory, which can be dangerous.

In fact, according to a survey conducted by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (CJMCAG), a startling two-thirds of American millennials had no idea what Auschwitz or the Holocaust were. 66 percent of the 1,350 millennials polled had never heard of Auschwitz—the Nazis' biggest concentration camp constructed to carry out their Jewish extermination plan. A catastrophic incident that occurred less than 100 years ago appears to be fading the minds of younger and future generations.

Furthermore, recent events at the capitol building serve as obvious warning signs that action must be taken sooner rather than later. Amidst the chaos, a particular man caught the attention of several news outlets and individuals. On the day of the riot, Robert Keith Packer, a local, wore a sweater labeled "Camp Auschwitz," with a skull on the bottom to represent the death of millions of innocent Jews. We have not progressed as a country as long as people are comfortable rejoicing and displaying such heinous propaganda that glorifies the killing of millions of people. People wearing shirts that praised "Auschwitz" screams the ignorance and complete oblivion of our society that has lasted for years. While we advocate for change, there is

still injustice and suffering begging for our attention: victims of starvation, discrimination, and political persecution.

“Never again,” preaches the recognition and remembrance of lost lives. It’s not a day to revisit the sorrows of the past, but rather move forward to discourage tragedies from reoccurring. Our world appears to be in perpetual conflict and on the brink of total chaos; now more than ever it is our responsibility to accept events like the Holocaust so that they never happen again.

As time passes and Holocaust survivors pass away, it is critical that we share their stories and ensure that an event as horrific as the Holocaust never arises again. While we have the time and security now, we must act by constantly bringing up conversations about what happened rather than avoiding “difficult” topics. As an upstander, to avoid history from repeating itself, our generation and future generations must comprehend the atrocities of the past and share our new understandings with friends and family. We must no longer remain silent and must use our voices to express the fears of millions who did not have a voice in the Holocaust. As Elie Wiesel once said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”