Combating Anti-Semitism: The Importance of Tolerance in Modern Times

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**An Introduction: Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Upstanders**

The Holocaust was the destruction and mass slaughter of individuals due to prejudice, bigotry, and hatred. With the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, the lives of millions across Europe were threatened by the horrors that would occur in the following years, during the 1930s and 40s. The largest group of individuals killed were the Jewish people. Hitler’s anti-Semitism—the hatred of Jewish people—ultimately killed about 6 million innocent individuals. I have learned over the years that anti-Semitism is not a new phenomenon; it is an ancient form of hatred of Jewish people, culture, traditions, and religion. For centuries before the Holocaust, the Jews were blamed for many of the misfortunes that had occurred: the killing of Jesus Christ, the Bubonic Plague, and many of the wars that had taken place all over continental Europe.

During the Holocaust, people were identified as belonging to one of the following three main groups: the perpetrators, the bystanders, and the rescuers, also known as the upstanders. While the perpetrators were anti-Semitic, hate-filled individuals, the bystanders may have not been openly hateful towards the Jews. Instead, the bystanders, knowing enough information about the treatment of their Jewish peers, felt either afraid or unaffected to speak up for their neighbors, friends, and fellow citizens. On the other hand, the rescuers, under the broad category of upstanders, felt the need to take action to save lives, thereby saving the human race one life at a time. This group of people took to heart one of the most well-known lines of the Talmud: “Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved an entire universe” (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5). The Righteous Gentiles, another group of upstanders, risked their lives to save Jewish people from Nazi persecution.¹ Throughout the years, there have been many individuals and groups who have

saved Jews from annihilation, there continues to be organizations that combat a new form of this hatred against the Jewish people, and there are numerous steps that we, as global citizens, can take to fight growing anti-Semitism.

**The Righteous Among the Nations**

There is currently a detailed exhibit by Yad Vashem at the Florida Holocaust Museum titled “I Am My Brother’s Keeper: A Tribute to the Righteous Among the Nations”—dedicated to individuals who risked their lives to save Jews from persecution during the Holocaust. These men and women, Dutch farmers, Polish workers, German soldiers, Lithuanian priests, Belgian nuns, and many others, defied all odds and refused to be bystanders of this unjust and bloody genocide. Early on, many of these rescuers were confronted by the mass killing and deportations of Jews from their homes. Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust, continues to uncover Righteous individuals on a yearly basis. Thus far, this museum in Israel has recognized Righteous from forty-four various nations—all Christian denominations, Muslims, Agnostics, and Atheists; men and women; people of all ages; highly educated, wealthy individuals to low-income citizens. One can conclude that the efforts to save the Jewish people from annihilation spanned many broad categories of humanity.

The Yad Vashem exhibit at the Florida Holocaust Museum featured an individual by the name of Varian Fry. Fry was a Harvard educated editor who resided in New York City as an editor and later became involved in the Emergency Rescue Committee. The United States,

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3 Ibid.
during the times of crisis in Europe, had made the visa policy more flexible, granting 200 visas
to refugees who were classified as “intellectuals.” Once the maximum amount of visas to the
United States was reached, Fry aided countless other endangered individuals by securing refugee
status to other countries via false records and documents. He had assisted 4,000 refugees. Once
the French government learned about his illegal actions, he was forcibly repatriated to the US,
where he remained under the surveillance of the FBI until the time of his death in 1967.\(^5\)
Although his actions were viewed as wrong by multiple governments and a major organization,
such bold decisions by the upstanders are what saved many valuable lives from annihilation.
Even though Fry’s bold actions were considered to be illegal, from an ethical point of view, they
were moral decisions—reiterating the idea that some illegal actions may be moral while other
legal actions may, in reality, be immoral in nature.

Waitstill and Martha Sharp, an American couple associated with the Unitarian Church in
Wellesley, Massachusetts, traveled with their church to Czechoslovakia and France to aid
countless fleeing Jews.\(^6\) They had managed to save Lion Feuchtwanger, a German-Jewish
historical fiction author who was at the top of Adolf Hitler’s wanted list. Martha Sharp had
returned to France to rescue a group of children (nine of them Jewish); with proper visas, they
safely arrived on US shores. After the end of the war, the Sharps raised funds to actively help
Jewish children, through the Youth Aliyah Program, return to their ancestral homeland of Israel.\(^7\)

Another unlikely source of refuge included the Eastern Asian city of Shanghai, then
Japanese-occupied China, in areas that had been earlier acquired by European powers—a foreign
concession in the International Settlement quarter. As early as 1938, the Committee for the

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid.
Assistance of European Jewish Refugees (CAEJF) and the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) began raising funds, along with the Chinese. In that specific year, numerous Russian and Polish Jews began immigrating to China. In 1941, many other Central and Eastern European Jewish individuals arrived. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japan shut off all immigration to China. While in Hongkew, the Jewish people experienced famine and war (between China and Japan). Countless Chinese families accepted and assisted impoverished Jewish refugees, introduced them to Chinese culture, and created lifelong friendships. With the kindness of Chinese families as well as the help of the CAEJF and the JDC, after 1946, about 16,000 Jewish individuals were helped with emigrating to further safety (Israel and the United States). I find the Shanghai refuge particularly intriguing because, although Japan—an Axis power—controlled Shanghai, foreign organizations stationed in internationally-owned concessions were able to come together with the Chinese community to create a welcoming temporary but new home. The Jews’ daily experiences with Chinese individuals proved to them that diversity is to be cherished—and everyone is a part of the larger human race.

**Modern-Day Groups Fighting Anti-Semitism**

This “mutating virus” of anti-Semitism has transformed into a type of hatred not only directed against Jews and Jewish culture, but the term has now come to include the dislike of the Jewish state of Israel. Throughout the Arab world, radical Islamic clerics, due to their contorted views of Islam, are vowing to destroy Israel. Most notably, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)
is continuing to fight anti-Semitism as well as incendiary language against other groups of individuals. The ADL’s motto is: “Imagine a World Without Hate.” Not only was the ADL formed to end the defamation of Jewish people but to ensure safety, equality, and respect for every human being.\(^\text{11}\) Therefore, this organization’s mission is to combat many forms of general bigotry and to fight for civil rights in addition to human rights.

Another organization that seeks to fight anti-Semitism, protect Israel, and preserve human rights is the Simon Wiesenthal Center, headquartered in Los Angeles, California. This organization maintains offices in the United States as well as in Jerusalem, Toronto, Paris, and Buenos Aires. Representatives of this organization often travel to colleges and universities to give presentations regarding hate groups and modes of promoting respect for one another. The Simon Wiesenthal Center has established museums of tolerance to spread the general message of respect for one another’s differences and diversity. Currently, about 400,000 US households support this group that promotes “international Jewish human rights organization dedicated to repairing the world one step at a time” by teaching lessons from the Holocaust.\(^\text{12}\) Various groups, including the United Nations, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe, consider this group to be an important international non-governmental organization (NGO) that strives to promote respect, human rights, and dignity.

Other groups, including college campuses, have formed to promote interfaith understanding and dialogue. For instance, the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) is a group that is composed of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith leaders. The IEA was formed by Dr. Yehuda Stolov to promote peace in the Middle East, between people of different faiths, through


discussion, interfaith study, and cross-cultural analyses.\textsuperscript{13} This organization uses religion, itself, as a remedy to unrest in the Middle East. Therefore, not only does the group’s members learn about one another’s faiths more thoroughly, but the members gain respect for Israel and Jewish individuals as well as for the diversity of humanity. This group is helping to alleviate anti-Semitic views held by Palestinians throughout Israel.\textsuperscript{14} In the United States, King Fahad Mosque in Los Angeles held a Passover celebration, with Jewish and Muslim discussion and reflection, and a 91-year-old holocaust survivor.\textsuperscript{15} Such “multi-faith harmony programs” are aimed at promoting interfaith understanding and to actively encourage dialogue along with religion as a method of healing and unity. These entities are environments where an individual can immerse oneself in other religious and cultural experiences and understanding to overcome hate and bigotry.

\textbf{The Fight Against Anti-Semitism}

Modern anti-Semitism, the hatred of Jewish people and culture, is paired with the dislike and defamation of the Jewish state of Israel. This new form of anti-Semitism is present in many corners of the world, including: Europe (Eastern and Western), the Middle East, and even the United States. Long regarded as the safest country for the Jews, the United States has recently witnessed a rise in extremist far-right wing groups as well as far-left anti-globalization groups who sympathize with the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) Movement.\textsuperscript{16} In the Middle East,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
many everyday individuals and high-level officials and intellectuals exhibit signs of hatred against Jews—in response to what they call “the Israeli occupation of Palestine.” At the 2003 Islamic Summit Conference, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad claimed that “Jews rule this world by proxy,” and Saudi Muslim clerics have proclaimed that Jews “occupying” Israel are “pigs and sons of monkey.” These modern anti-Semitic individuals dislike the Jewish people not only due to a long-brewing religious rivalry, but such hateful comments are also a result of the incorrect belief that Jewish individuals are not loyal to their countries of birth and seek global hegemony via “expansionist Zionist goals.” While it is uncertain what can be done to completely eliminate this form of hatred, multiple steps in various settings can be taken to increase respect, cross-religious understanding, and overall tolerance.

Certain education bills, such as the Florida Holocaust Mandate, are excellent ways of requiring schools to integrate Holocaust education and tolerance dialogue into their curriculum. In Florida, all K-12 public institutions are required to integrate Holocaust studies in classrooms along with a definition about the Holocaust that also seeks to combat all forms of prejudice, hatred, and discrimination, while protecting democratic values and institutions. I find such bills as helpful and integral to not only combating ant-Semitism but also for creating a welcoming, classroom-based discussion, centered on valuing one another’s differences. The Florida Holocaust Museum, in response to this Florida Holocaust Mandate Bill, has created a dynamic “teaching trunks” program—trunks with materials (CDs, Videos, Teaching Resources, Posters, and Books) regarding the Holocaust, genocide, and character education. These trunks allow

17 Ibid.
teachers to instill respectful values in students, while emphasizing cooperative learning and reading/writing skills. I would encourage other states to draft and pass such laws that would allow children—of all races, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity—to learn about a multitude of human beings’ shared and valued similarities. Other steps that I would take in the realm of education to combat hatred and anti-Semitism would be to create “Zero Tolerance for Hate” Zones and workshops with teachers and staff on combating and responding to anti-Semitism.

In the college setting, it would be helpful to create more inter-faith groups to help share cross-religious experiences and similarities. These inter-faith groups would seek to preserve the world’s pluralism while ensuring tolerance and understanding. Further, inter-faith clubs could also help different people to come together, explain one another’s perspectives, and clarify certain misconceptions that have existed for ages. I find civilized discussion as one of the strongest mechanisms for solving deep frustration, anger, and conflicts. International rivalries that are historically rooted (i.e. in religion or cultural differences) are often mirrored in modern-day global conflicts. To combat certain anti-Semitic movements, including BDS, on college campuses, other pro-Israel groups could be formed not to necessarily refute the views of others but to counter-balance malicious claims and unite the community as one coherent body of citizens of the world. I would emphasize that universities are free centers for learning and expression, but a sense of mutual tolerance for everyone’s different experiences and perspectives must be maintained.

Outside of academics, one can also combat anti-Semitic sentiment by volunteering at institutions that value human rights, creating neighborhood/community discussion sessions, and
raising money for an organization that fights anti-Semitism.\(^{20}\) Regardless of one’s actions to combat this evil form of hatred, remaining silent is the biggest promoter of anti-Semitism.

Throughout history, as mentioned in a previous section, many decided to remain silent on behalf of their Jewish peers and neighbors. One German pastor, Martin Niemöller, residing in Nazi Germany expressed his ideas regarding the silence of the bystander by writing: “First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”\(^{21}\) Therefore, it is important to be an upstander to anti-Semitism, thereby attempting to combat other forms of hate speech directed at multiple groups one definite step at a time.

Bibliography


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