

Lessons from Pain
By Max Rosenthal

Being Jewish, I have been educated about the Holocaust from a young age. I knew about it before many of my peers had even heard the word 'Holocaust'. Through my many years of Hebrew study at Shomrei Torah and the stories I was told of my grandma escaping Germany to Shanghai, I have always carried knowledge of the Holocaust with me. I understood what it was, what happened, how many people died, and why those people died, but I never apprehended it on an emotional level. I could not comprehend its emotional content at a young age. Now, being more mature, I truly understand. After having studied the Holocaust as a mature young adult, I can now feel the effects of the Holocaust on a personal level. My grandma's stories and the lessons I was taught in Hebrew school now have meaning. I now understand them. I have never before been so disturbed and moved. The Holocaust demonstrated the darkest facets of human nature, the parts of ourselves where our core values and morals of compassion and kindness are deceased and replaced by hatred, prejudice, and injustice, where cruelty and pain persist incessantly, where we think of people, not as people, but as animals. This horrifically traumatic event has imprinted a deep, painful scar on the world. From this scar, however, have sprouted universal lessons of tolerance, acceptance, and kindness.

The first lesson I learned was from lectures my teacher gave about the Holocaust: always stand up for something if you know it is wrong. Even if something which afflicts one person does not affect you, you still have an obligation to help. It is unbelievable how, on the scale of the world, few people stood up to the corruption present in the Holocaust. Few countries were adamant about helping the Jews escape death in Europe and many stood idle, too prejudiced and selfish to lend a hand. Even when fully aware of what was happening to Jews, many countries did nothing to help. The U.S. State Department purposely made obtaining visas a bureaucratic nightmare to prevent substantial immigration of Jews and stopped information about the Holocaust from coming into the U.S. We all must stand up to corruption if we see it. Whether it is someone being bullied or a government imposing unjust laws, we must make ourselves heard. Indifference only helps the oppressor, never the oppressed.

The next lesson I learned was from Elie Wiesel's Night: be grateful. Elie Wiesel himself once said, "when a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity." We must be thankful for everything we have, even if it is not much. Every second we spend alive is a gift. The suffering which Elie Wiesel experienced touched me on a profound level. I never knew someone could go through so much pain. This book made me realize how grateful I am for all the people in my life. I will never take my family for granted. Elie Wiesel describing his constant fear of being separated from his father made me feel what it was like to be in a position where your loved ones could be taken away from you at any second. My heart would beat faster when Elie Wiesel described the selection of his father because I felt like I myself was waiting to hear if my father had survived. I now never leave my home before telling my parents I love them. I am so grateful for everything in my life.

The greatest lesson to be learned from the Holocaust is this: Nothing is more precious than human life. Human lives are the most valuable entities on this earth. It is unfathomable to try and comprehend the 6 million lives lost. Every life is so sacred and unique. This is why the Holocaust is so difficult to study. Thinking about all the lives, each distinct and complex life, is near impossible. Every one of these people had a right to life and no one had the right to take it away. No matter your race, gender, ethnicity, physical characteristics, or age, you deserve to live.

The refugees fleeing for their lives from Syria have a right to life just like how the Jews running from Germany did. Our politicians need to recognize this and begin taking action. When talking about refugees, most politicians simply hear numbers and quotas, but I hear the cries of millions of people, the whimpering of scared orphans, wails of widows, the suffering of a people. These people are not numbers, they are humans. Failing to see the humans behind this crisis prevents people from taking action. This is dehumanizing. This is failing to see people as human. We all need to recognize the immense value of human life. We must treat others with respect and compassion, no matter what they look like or what they believe in, because everyone has the right to life.

Although it has deeply hurt the world, the Holocaust has many fruitful lessons which anyone can learn from. We must stand up to corruption, have gratitude, and recognize the tremendous value of human life. Treat others kindly and always follow the golden rule: treat others the way you want to be treated. By following this simple principle, we can make the world a better place.