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The lesson from International Holocaust Remembrance Day is to speak out against hatred

Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, guest writer



“What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander.” — Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel

The events of the Holocaust, the genocide of European Jewry by Nazi Germany, must never be forgotten. The Holocaust happened because people either actively participated in acts of antisemitism, or stood by and did nothing to counter the hate.

To preserve the memory of the Holocaust, we observe International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27; this is the date on which the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated. As the United Nations notes: In conjunction with remembering, we must also reaffirm an unwavering commitment to counter antisemitism, racism and other forms of intolerance that may lead to group-targeted violence.

Today, more than seven decades removed from the Second World War, this day is especially important for several reasons: Few Holocaust survivors remain to bear witness to the horrific conditions suffered by Jews and many others sent to concentration camps; waves of antisemitism continue to plague our global society; and the lessons of the Holocaust may help us better understand the evil aspects of human behavior that we encounter all about us.

Even in the United States, Jews still experience blatant and violent antisemitism, alongside many who experience other forms of prejudice against “others,” whether because of race, religion, ethnic background or sexual orientation.

Hate crimes can happen without notice. Just two years ago, a 19-year-old man fired upon a synagogue in San Diego, during services on the last day of the Jewish Passover celebration. The celebration turned into terror as he killed one person and injured three others.

In a moving response, his parents said: "Our sadness pales in comparison to the grief and anguish our son has caused for so many innocent people. To our great shame, he is now part of the history of evil that has been perpetrated on Jewish people for centuries. How our son was attracted to such darkness is a terrifying mystery to us."

How do we combat such evil? How do we begin to understand this “terrifying mystery”? It begins with education, especially for our young people who are understandably bewildered by such behavior and unsure of how to respond.

For more than 30 years, The Zekelman Holocaust Center has worked to engage, educate and empower people of all backgrounds by remembering the Holocaust. Through teaching about the senseless murder of millions, people come to understand why each of us must respect and stand up for the rights of others if we are to prevent future genocides and hate crimes.

Moreover, our staff travels throughout the state — Upper and Lower peninsulas — personally training educators to teach the Holocaust and genocide in understandable, age-appropriate ways, thereby fulfilling the requirement for mandatory genocide education in Michigan schools.

Early in the pandemic we also launched the Virtual Museum Experience as a way to bring the museum and learning (with artifacts) to the students who cannot visit us.

Remembering the Holocaust and making its lessons meaningful to new generations is a great responsibility.

Please join us in observing International Holocaust Remembrance Day, proving that constant vigilance, knowledge in the face of falsehoods and the integrity to speak out against any form of racism or hatred are hallmarks of a just and healthy society.

Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld is the chief executive officer of The Zekelman Holocaust Center, the first free-standing institution of its kind in the United States and the only Holocaust museum in Michigan (located in Farmington Hills).