

Henry Ramek, z"l, Memorial Essay Contest 2019

7th Grade - First Place: Essay by Kayla K.

Prompt: How did the film represent the diversity of Jewish experiences (secular vs. religious, rich vs. poor, city vs. rural) and how did the experience of being a partisan change the internal Jewish social dynamics that were in place prior to the war? What lesson does this teach us that will help us be stronger as a Jewish community today?

“Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”- Yehuda Bauer

The faith and resilience of Jewish people has been tested many times throughout history, and the Holocaust during World War II attempted to bring the Jewish people to their knees once again. But the Nazis underestimated the Jewish people and their character. In the moment of crisis when all you have left is your faith - it takes courage, unity, and a community with strong cultural values coming together to fight against evil.

The movie “Defiance” is a 2008 American war film directed by Edward Zwick set during the occupation of Belarus by Nazi Germany. In 1941, when Nazis came to Belarus and started capturing and killing the Jews, three brothers managed to escape to the forest, and created a refugee camp that brought people together to fight against the Nazis. That camp was the Bielski Partisans.

Jewish people from different cities, economic classes and religious beliefs came to this camp. They came for survival and fought for freedom. The fight against Nazis united the Jews. Nazis were not fighting against different classes of the Jewish people,

rich or poor, orthodox or reformed, they were just killing the Jews. The need for survival erased all the lines that divided them. The hope for survival and freedom brought the Jews together. They became a strong army, a community, and a settlement hidden in the forest. The Jewish settlement of 1,200 people created an environment that was equal for all. Whether you were rich or poor, you had nothing. You either worked to support the camp or had to fight. "If you want to eat you have to work," Tuvia said when he had the meeting with all the camp members. Everybody had to participate, contribute, and work hard as they all had one common goal -- to survive and be free.

Before the war the Jewish people who came into camp believed they were all different. They came from diverse backgrounds, classes and different branches of Judaism. The way they expressed their faith divided them. Being part of this camp, when fighting the Nazis, freedom became their act of faith. When Tuvia was having a meeting with the campers he said: "Every day of freedom is like an act of faith". They wanted to survive in spite of hate that was around them. They refused to be slaughtered like animals. Tuvia said "Our revenge is to live." And they lived through very trying times. They lived through cold winter, hot summer, starvation, sickness, and consistent attacks from the Nazis. They maintained their beliefs, values and humanity. They didn't want to be treated like animals, they wanted to not just to simply survive - they wanted to LIVE. They maintained the normalcy of life as much as they could for themselves and their children. Over time they built structure in their camp, they educated the kids as they were their future generations, built hospitals and had a place to practice their religion.

Throughout the movie within the camp there were times of betrayal and fighting. For example, when Zus went to go join the Soviet partisans the brothers and camp felt betrayed. And the people in the camp were still human and weren't perfect. When the camp first came together those that used to be rich fought against the poor because they believed they deserved more food because of their status. However, keeping focused on coming together for one common goal brought them close together. Having a leader that kept them focused on what was important helped them look beyond what divided them.

The plot of "Defiance" is a page from my family's history. My great grandfather, Samuil, was part of the Partisan army in Belarus. He had courage and faith along the way and was fighting against evil to defend his community and family. Just like Tuvia, Zus and Aseal were in a small town in Belarus, my great grandfather's family was killed by the Nazis, and he ran into the forest to join the Partisan army to avenge his family's death. Not only did he avenge their death - he saved many people and his revenge was to live in spite of being captured multiple times, just like the Bielski partisan campers.

Bielski brothers teach us that when we believe in something bigger than ourselves we can achieve the impossible. My grandfather taught me that as well. These are lessons we must remember today as a Jewish community. While we might think we are all different, we are stronger united than apart. At the end of the day we all have one thing in common that will always keep us together - we are one nation, we are the chosen resilient people of Abraham that have strong faith and values and when united as one can achieve the impossible. Times of adversity call for resilience, courage and

faith - and when that happens we must remember what Asael Bielski said, “ Nothing is impossible, what we all have done is impossible!”