

Good morning and Shabbat Shalom! My name is Bill Mowat. Over the last five years, I have become involved in the education work of the Anti-Defamation League here in Seattle. The ADL was established almost 100 years ago, with the mission of stopping the defamation of the Jewish people and securing justice and fair treatment for all people. Recently, the Northwest region of the ADL was chosen to receive a special donation by Robert B. Sturm of Denver to work with a group of high school students, teaching them about standing up against bigotry and hate. One of the highlights of this mission was a trip to Washington DC in late March to visit the US Holocaust Memorial Museum – using that visit to connect the lessons of the Holocaust to contemporary issues and offer modern day examples and role models for standing up against bigotry. I volunteered to chaperone these students, and am here today to give you a little taste of what the trip was like.

Before I begin, I want to point out that today's Torah portion, Korach, has some relevance to what the trip was trying to teach. The Korach story begins with a challenge to Moshe's leadership of the Jewish people. The challenge is complex, because Korach argues that all of the Israelites are holy, since all were present at Sinai. God eventually punishes the rebels by swallowing some of them up in the earth, and burning up others with fire. The fate of these rebels is a catastrophe involving significant loss of life. With catastrophe comes confusion, dismay, and often the inability to speak. I view Korach's initial challenge to Moshe as destructive. And it doesn't make sense to Moshe. In Ba-midbar chapter 16, verse 4, we read *Va-yishmah Moshe va-yipol al panav*. [Moshe listened and he fell on his face.] To his credit Moshe is not defensive, and he is not belligerent. At first, he has no words to make sense of Korach's speech and behavior. Imagine if we were put in Moshe's position!

Our tradition, I think, asks us not to be bystanders to the stories of the Torah, but to think deeply with one another to make sense of these stories. At first we may have few ideas. We may be as speechless as Moshe when Korach challenges him. Later we may (often with the help of others to think with) develop our ideas and find our words. While we cannot literally step into the Torah and try to persuade anyone to think differently, when we discuss Torah's meaning with one another we go from perhaps having few thoughts or words, and maybe many incomprehensible feelings, to beginning to formulate our sense of who we are in relation to the actions of those we read about. What an amazing model for human life. I think this model of dialogue and pursuit of understanding underlies the work of not being a bystander. It has great application to what I witnessed during the trip to Washington.

There were a total of 48 people on the trip – 40 were students, and 8 were chaperones; about half the group came from Denver. We selected these students based on diversity of opinion, experience, and background, willingness to learn and commitment. Only one-third of the selected students were Jewish. Many came from public schools. Our Seattle group met three times prior to the trip to become more familiar with documentation of the Holocaust. The trip itself began at Sea-Tac airport at 4am on Sunday, March 21. The Denver organizers of the trip thought it would be nice for our group to meet their group as soon as we could. Therefore, we left Seattle very early, and joined up with the Denver

group when we changed planes in the Denver airport. After an ice-breaker at the hotel Sunday night (boy, were we tired!), we began the real work of the trip Monday morning. We wanted to show these students not only how to stand up to bigotry, but why it is so important to do so. Two trained facilitators worked with the students giving them several useful strategies to challenge ignorant, biased comments while defusing often tense situations among peers. At lunch on Monday, Warren Marcus, Education Director at the Museum, told us a little about what we would experience the next day, and asked us, as we looked at the photos in the museum, to consider who was taking the photo, and why. Warren also pointed out several misconceptions people have about the period leading up to the Holocaust. For example, many students do not know that the National Socialist Party actually won a plurality of votes in 1933, and after taking power, then suspended constitutional civil rights.

Tuesday, we arrived at the museum at 9am, and spent the rest of the morning exploring. The museum is powerful not only from the exhibits, original artifacts, photos, and movies, but also from the architecture. The entry is designed like a disorienting, scary train station – very industrial, with huge brick walls and black metal doors. The main exhibit space is designed in a descending spiral, in rough chronological order. After over three hours immersed in the exhibits, we all met in a conference room with Warren, ate lunch, and then debriefed. The debriefing exercise that Warren chose for us emphasized bystanders. We were given a list of people either closely or distantly connected to the Holocaust – for example, a German train conductor, a quote-unquote uninvolved German civilian, and the Pope – and asked to evaluate how responsible each was for the Holocaust. We could only make four choices: very responsible, responsible, somewhat responsible, or not responsible. After each of us individually ranked all 30 in the list, we met in small groups and discussed differences in our rankings. Finally, the whole group discussed places where there were large ranking disagreements, and talked about why we chose the way we did. Our discussion was wide-ranging and thought provoking, with Warren bringing up facts to heighten the debate. For example, some students argued that the train drivers who took Jews to the camps should be only “a little responsible” for the Holocaust because they may not have known what they were doing, and that they might have been severely punished for stating that they wouldn’t drive trains to the camps. Warren pointed out that the train drivers certainly did know what they were doing driving the trains to the camps, and that no German drivers were ever disciplined for refusing assignments during this time; they were simply reassigned to drive other trains.

We came away that afternoon feeling that it is awfully easy to be a bystander and to be silent when the opposite, speaking up, is morally necessary. Sometimes easy silence is ultimately dangerous. To bring this forward to today, many of us are grappling with how to understand and respond to difficult issues about Israel. Do we stand by silently when conversations among colleagues or friends descend into anti-Semitism? If we do speak up, what do we say? Knowing what to say requires that we wrestle with and attempt to understand complex issues so that we are then capable of speaking up in a thoughtful way when we feel it necessary.

That evening, we had dinner with a special guest – Estelle Laughlin, a Warsaw Ghetto survivor. Estelle told us her story of living through the Warsaw ghetto uprising, her family's deportation to a series of concentration camps, and her ultimate, but very unlikely, survival. Estelle spoke to the group for about an hour, and then took questions. One student asked Estelle how she managed to move on in her life after her experience – to raise a family, and not be consumed by hate. Estelle answered that hate has to stop somewhere, and she decided that it would stop with her. Estelle's eloquence and dignity, and the power of her story made this event the highlight of the trip for many of us.

We ended the day with a quiet reflection circle, where each person had a chance to tell all of us a little about what resonated for them from this experience. This closing circle also affected many students deeply. For me, hearing the students speak about the impact Estelle's story had on them – watching them reflect and mature before my eyes – that was my own personal highlight.

One Seattle student, after returning to his school, texted another student that he had "stopped defamation three times already that morning." Another told the group that she had changed her career choice from medicine to pre-law at Seattle U to be able to help others overcome discrimination. Recently, the students presented individual reflections of their experience including poetry, art work, and essays. They are now working together on a group project to advocate for tolerance among their peers which will be shared with the larger Seattle community. This amazing group of students included two Beth Shalomers – Dani (DAH-nee) Nurick and Julia Snyder. We will be looking for a new group of high-school sophomores and juniors this fall to be part of next year's group. So please let ADL know if you have someone to nominate!

And by the way, if you are older than high-school age (as a few of us are!), the ADL has ways to encourage us to move from being bystanders to being allies for others!! For example, ADL has a great year-long program for young adults called the "Glass Leadership Institute" that illustrates the full range of ADL's mission. It culminates in a trip to Washington, DC, to lobby national leaders on Capitol Hill. These are just two examples of ADL's meaningful programs.

I believe the experience of this trip – the dialogue and pursuit of understanding between high school students – underlies the work of not being a bystander, and that's what made this such a powerful opportunity for these students – not to mention something unique for me to witness. In truth, dialogue and pursuit of understanding underlies the real work of not being a bystander – no matter what one's age. I'm sure you would agree. Thank you for allowing me to share my experience with you today. Shabbat Shalom!