

MELEKTE MELAKU SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



MELEKTE MELAKU

is a senior at Mayfield High School. Originally from Ethiopia, she emigrated to the United States with her family at age two. She is an avid debater and treasurer of Mayfield's World Affairs Club. She loves creative writing, painting and dancing. She plans to study political science, social work and anthropology and later attend law school with the dream of defending the disenfranchised.

I was enrolled in a private Jewish school upon arrival to the United States from Ethiopia. I distinctly remember my first day. There were no other Ethiopian Jews in attendance, and I became the token "African" at first glance. A little girl approached me at my miniature locker, "Wow", I thought to myself, "My first friend." "You're Jewish?" she whispered hesitantly, uncomfortably shifting her gaze from mine. "Look at your skin, you can't be Jewish. It's not the same for you, you're not like us. Right?" I was too stunned to answer; I was shocked just processing her claim. I didn't know how to respond to such a confrontation and my silence reassured her belief.

In that moment, my childhood insecurities were cemented in my mind. I was different and I could never belong. My peers perceived my skin color as a blatant affront to their Judaic ancestry, and a physical manifestation of lacking Jewish credentials. Yes, technically I am Jewish, yet my color of my skin somehow undermined my beliefs. It wasn't simply the sharp contrast of my skin tone compared to my Caucasian counterparts; it was the symbolism beneath it. It meant my holiday traditions weren't threaded in Yiddish ancestry, it meant my great grandparents could not recall their painful ordeals of the Holocaust, and it ignited a spark of inferiority which distinguished me from my classmates.

As I matured I realized I couldn't be ashamed of who I was, and my identity is too important to compromise. My ability to overcome adversity inspired those who were different, and established an unwavering sense of pride and strength within me. I realized belonging came with tolerance. My peers became educated on the plight of the Ethiopian Jews, realizing they faced the anti-Semitism and hardships parallel to their Eastern European ancestors. Understanding my culture and familiarizing themselves with my ethnicity catapulted a dramatic change. They became educated, and in turn, allowed me to belong.

To stop hatred and discrimination, I propose student and faculty led seminars and activities throughout the school year. These seminars would promote honest dialogue in regards to discriminatory issues. Each student would be required to complete a project each semester, outlining ways in which they addressed discrimination in their community, and their methods of ending it. Speakers would visit students and inform them on their experiences with hate and how they grappled with discrimination in the past. For the community, I propose nontraditional forms of education on the negative affects of prejudice and hate. Nontraditional forms of education would include peaceful group discussion and therapeutic exercises for those victims of discrimination.

To shatter the chains of prejudice one must dare to be different, and accept the differences of others. For if the world were made of black and white, with differences neutralized, condemned and cast aside, there would be no room to mature. I have continued to carry this philosophy with me, that tolerance for others begets respect. True confidence comes with celebrating your identity and appreciating the beauty of uniqueness.

