

ZACHARY SCHWARTZ SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



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is a senior at Solon High School. He loves reading all kinds of books and listening to music. Zachary plays the French horn and guitar. He is active in Model United Nations, enjoys extemporaneous speaking, public debating and writing—he has recently started to write and perform slam poetry. He would like to attend Northwestern University and have a career devoted to public service.

They were supposed to be the best three weeks of my life. In sixth grade, to the roaring approval of a New York City auditorium, I won the National Bible Contest, receiving an all-expense paid trip to Israel to represent America in the Chidon HaTanach, or International Bible Contest the next year. I remember standing on the stage glowing, absolutely glowing, with happiness. I remember this moment well because of the sharp contrast that was soon to come. For in the land of milk and honey, I found something not quite as sweet. The Chidon was comprised of Orthodox teens from all over the world, and I was half-Taiwanese, the youngest, and a Conservative Jew—a recipe that immediately branded me as different. A group of boys took it upon themselves to single me out, constantly questioning my commitment to Judaism and, in their worst hour, gleefully hollering the word “chink” repeatedly in the hallway outside my door. By the end of the trip, the damage was done: I felt terrible about who I was and guilty that I was not as religious or “ethnically Jewish” as these boys wanted me to be.

I came home that summer distraught and angry. I felt especially distant from Judaism. If my own supposed people could not accept me, who would? My bitterness subsided into religious apathy. I felt no inclination to do anything “Jewish.” It took me a long time to realize the extent that I was holding onto my bitterness. Eventually but reluctantly, I decided to give it another try. Two years ago, I revisited Israel with an Ambassadors group comprised of Orthodox Jews. I visited the same land, with a group of similar religious makeup, but this time, I found nothing but love and acceptance. In fact, I found myself embracing Judaism again, realizing why I had loved it in the first place. My second trip, full of joy and appreciation of who I was, had effectively dispelled all the hard feelings and bitterness I had accumulated towards my religion.

In life, we have a choice: Which trip do we remember most? Do we wallow in self-pity or do we pick up the pieces, give others another chance, and move on? I have chosen to focus on the positivity of the second trip, not the negativity surrounding the first. Multicultural tolerance is imperative if we are to end hatred and discrimination against one another.

This year already, I have helped organize an “Ethnic Expo” in my school celebrating multiculturalism; I also planned and moderated an Israeli-Palestinian-conflict debate, carefully ensuring that both sides took the time to understand the other’s points. I intend to continue planning events such as these in the future—in college and beyond. I believe it is not the evil mind that discriminates, it is the closed one. Thus, I fully intend, through community events and my personal conduct, to broaden minds—to forever ensure the existence of those “second trips.”