

Sword Hangs Over Our Heads

By: Sadaf Khan (10th Grade)

International School of Beaverton

Statement of Intent: I chose a story form, because I found that it allowed for a more subtle approach to acknowledging everyday oppression and how to stop it. All the names used are Hebrew in origin (even Raphael, which was conveniently a Hebrew name that is used in Spanish-speaking countries too), just to play with the concept of how the Jewish community reacted/ reacts to oppression now. I also tried to integrate quotes in a way that wasn't as blatantly awkward with the creative story form, and that was interesting. The form also lent itself to allowing exploration of many different sorts of oppressions and how they interact, while also acknowledging that one person being marginalized in one way does not necessarily mean that they are allowed to be oppressive in different ways, scott-free. Nuanced interactions are key to giving the subject of "how to fix oppression" justice, which consists of both parts advocating for self and advocating for others. I hope that this piece can convey that.

"Coming out of the closet," thinks Rebecca, is a bizarre way to phrase it. Yet fitting, she later reasons, because the sense of claustrophobia associated with being stuck in a dark room not meant for humans is entirely too similar to the steady fear of hiding a sexual orientation from an entire community. Rebecca mulls over this, and decides that at any rate, even if Sarah did come out *just* two days ago, it is a little too quick off the mark for others in their shared friend group to be scorning her, subtly or not. Or was that really appropriate at all? The thought settles uncomfortably too close to her heart, and creates the peculiar dripping sensation of anxiety in her furrowed brow. At least teasing was only words.

At lunch, she discovers that Sarah can take care of herself quite well after all. "So, what- do you stare at the other girls in the locker room? Isn't that disgusting?" says Jacob, the curve of a sneer just about appearing on his face. Sarah's face, in return, turns pink.

"As if you have any right to be talking," she leers. The performance would be impressive, if the slight waver in her voice was disregarded. Her hands are shaking. Her knuckles are pale spots. "You- you're almost as fat as

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the cafeteria lady, Jacob, how does that feel? Is it hard for you to walk?"

Now, Sarah is expressing discontent in her own way, rationalizes Rebecca- but nonetheless, she feels another pool of anxiety bloom in an upper ribcage like a sickly flower. She opens her mouth to say that targeting someone in that way is wrong, intrinsically, *somehow*- but it is lost to the ease of not speaking up as Jacob makes broken attempts at a retort. Lunch ends. English begins.

"Ackerman, Aaron."

Neomi looks distinctly embarrassed, and mutters to herself, "I thought the school had fixed that." She calls out "Here," and shuffles her papers for an excuse to look busy again.

"You're Aaron?" the substitute repeats, frowning uncomprehendingly as she looks from the name to student. The subtle sound of 'ah', the hard cut of 'r', the hum of 'n', all settling together to be masculine in timbre, unlike the holder, who is ambiguously feminine in her form, her stance. But- there is room for doubt.

"Yes," responds Neomi, tugging her hair nervously.

(She has only recently grown it out.)

"Aaron Ackerman?"

"Well," amends Neomi meekly, "It's- um, it's Neomi, now. The roster's outdated."

The sub pauses for a few moments, gears turning, and then calls out,

"Berkowitz, Deborah." Neomi's shoulders slump in relief.

It hasn't been easy for her, Rebecca recalls. Most of the grade had adjusted to the change of 'Aaron' to 'Neomi', and though most tentatively respected her identity-

"Excuse me?" Neomi is whispering to Adam when Rebecca snaps back. Neomi sounds polite, but her fists are clenched. "What did you just say?"

"I said, a man is a man and a woman is a woman, and *some* of us need to -"

Neomi has fire in her eyes. "Just because I have a-"

"-Go on, say it-"

"-doesn't mean I'm not as much of a girl as-"

"-Sarah, maybe? She's a lesbian, she's probably just as confused as you-"

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“-anyone else, you shut up, you shut up-”

“Quiet!” barks the teacher, cutting the argument off. “Page 32, someone start reading- you, Rebecca.”

She feels clawing in her stomach. Words are words are words, she repeats mentally to herself.

“*How was it possible that men, women, and children were being burned-*” she manages to get out, the text on the page blending surreally “*-And that the world kept silent?*”

“Why do you think the Holocaust was allowed to intensify to such a level?” the sub asks once the section is over. The class is hushed, steeped deeply in apprehension from the tense air held between Neomi and Adam.

“Allport’s Scale,” Raphael offers uneasily once the silence stretches too long.

“Um, you know. Antilocution. Avoidance....discrimination, physical attack, uh, and... oh. Extermination. Five stages of prejudice.”

“What’s *antilocution*?” Asks Isaac.

Sarah blurts the answer without being called on. “Hate speech.”

One harried glance of apology at the substitute, who eventually nods and signals her to continue. “Um. Well. It can be any sort of hate speech. Jokes... stereotypes. Or rumors. Against some sort of ostracized group, that’s when it really counts.” She glances guiltily at Jacob when she says this, who is avoiding her gaze. “Stuff like that escalates, right? You have to stomp it out when it starts, or it can become something awful.”

From the corner of her eye, Rebecca can see the perhaps-too-soft underside of Jacob’s arms, but she can also see the apologetic set of Sarah’s mouth.

“You know,” says Isaac the next lunch, “Homosexuals had to wear pink triangles in concentration camps.”

“Yes,” agrees Sarah. “And lesbians had to wear black triangles.” She twiddles her upside-down rose triangle pendant between her forefinger and thumb. It is painted black on the other side- shoddily, as if done at home with pharmacy nail polish, but an angry onyx regardless, as if daring the entire school to say something. Thankfully, everyone is shrewd enough to remain silent, and there are no casualties.

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In free period, Rebecca watches Erwin- who has a pale face and a straight nose- form the first three syllables of “Stupid wetbacks.”

Sarah’s, Jacob’s, and Neomi’s faces are etched behind her eyelids. She would hate for Raphael’s to join them.

“Shut *up*,” she utters with as much gusto as she can manage. “No one needs to hear that useless drivel.” Erwin recoils. He looks shamefaced for it. Her heart thrums tensely; but the associated anxiety of the last few days is suddenly nowhere to be found.

Later, when she walks home, Raphael will ask, carefully, “I heard about what happened with Erwin. That... isn’t like you, Beck, what’s up?”

She will practice the words in her mind a few times over before reciting, carefully, “Those who kept silent yesterday will remain silent tomorrow- Wiesel, xii,” her lisp whistling through the ‘s’ in ‘Wiesel.’

A pause. “We all deserve better than to not stick up for each other,” she will murmur worriedly to the ground. “We...we should really change that.”

“Yeah,” he will reply thoughtfully after a stretch of time, privately resolving to make it certain that Adam never speaks in English again. “I think we should, too.”

Some words were changed for public distribution.

Works Cited

Wiesel, Elie, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.