Finding Judaism in a Unexpected Place

After the lights in our tiny Sunday School classroom became fully illuminated, the Rabbi bent over to press the “Eject” button on the VCR which stood next to him. Out popped a movie that would soon change my life forever. The movie was called “Schindler’s List.” The Rabbi turned around, and asked the class, “How do you feel after watching this movie?” I knew how I felt inside, but I did not want to answer the Rabbi’s question, for I might sound stupid, and I did not want the girls in the classroom to think I was stupid. That night as I lay in bed, the pictures of mutilated bodies began to run through my mind. I could not understand why the Rabbi was lecturing about the Holocaust to a classroom full of scrawny, little sixth graders who all had braces and would rather be playing Super Nintendo. I could not figure out how the Holocaust affected me. I have been Jewish all my life, and I am proud to be of that heritage. In the 6th grade, the only part of Judaism that I cared about was my Bar Mitzvah because that special day was going to make me rich. It was a little piece of blue stationary that came in the mail the following week that would change my feelings about being Jewish for the rest of my life. I opened it and slowly read the contents. I groaned as I realized that it read, “6th Grade Trip to the National Holocaust Museum.” I could not believe I was going to be spending a day in a place that is also known as hell. I tried to imagine the horrors I would be setting my young eyes upon, but every time I talked to the Rabbi, he would say, “You can’t imagine the horrific exhibits that are on display at the museum!” The night before the trip, I was lying in bed trying to prepare myself for the emotional journey I would be experiencing the next day. I thought I was ready to witness the hell of concentration camps and murder, but I was wrong. I could never prepare myself for the horrors that lay ahead of me at the Holocaust Museum.

When the tour bus came to a complete stop, I glanced out the window to find that we were parked in front of a massive building made of red brick. It looked like a prison, but my wandering caught sight of the huge silver letters that were looming high above on
an adjacent brick wall. When my slow mind had finally compiled the letters, I realized that they spelled out "The National Holocaust Museum." I slowly closed my eyes, and tried to imagine the horrific sights that I would be witnessing once I had stepped within the brick wall. I took a deep breath and walked very slowly toward the two revolving glass doors that provided an entrance into the lobby of the museum. As I pushed my way through the doors, a feeling of sickness rushed to my stomach. I slowly entered the lobby, bracing myself for the horrors that lay ahead. To my astonishment the lobby was just a large room made of marble, and the pictures of mangled bodies and mutilated children which I had expected, were nowhere in sight. I thought to myself, "Why have I traveled 500 miles to see a lobby that was made of marble?" I turned my head and found the same silver letters from earlier hanging from a sign, except this time they read "Elevators to Exhibits", and there was a arrow that pointing straight ahead. My stomach ache returned and I found myself short of breath. As I got closer to the sign, three massive elevator doors came into view. My heart began to beat out loud, for I was so nervous, I thought I was going to explode. I was only 12, and my fragile young mind was not ready to witness the horrors of 12 million people being savagely murdered. I could not believe I was about to get on an elevator that would lead me to the exhibits which provided insight into the savage murders of six million Jews. Suddenly the massive silver doors opened, and a tour guide motioned for me to get on. I felt faint in the head, but my father pushed me on saying, "Come on Albert, It is not that bad." My dad can be wrong sometimes, and this time he was completely wrong. As the elevator began the slow ascent up to the fourth floor, the lights in the elevator soon shut off. I began to panic, for I thought something was wrong. I could not breathe. I had never suffered from claustrophobia before, but the overwhelming feeling of being bunched into a elevator with 15 people while waiting to see pictures of mangled children was enough to make me completely sick. Suddenly a television monitor inside the elevator turned on, and I realized that the power outage was part of the tour.
A video began to play. “Welcome the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.,” the narrator of the video exclaimed. “Imagine that the year is 1938, and you are living in Europe. Adolph Hitler, a racist and mad man, compiles together the most horrific army that has ever been established, called the Nazi’s.” As the narrator, who I later discovered was Steven Spielberg, talked about World War II, images of Hitler and the Nazi’s flashed onto the screen. “Pretend you are taken from your home against your will,” said the narrator, “and you are sent on a crowded train car to the most horrible place on earth, a concentration camp. These are the stories of the survivors.” All of a sudden the elevator stopped, and the lights went out. The doors slid open, and directly in front of the elevator stood a picture that I have not forgotten since that very day. The picture was a black and white photo of Nazi’s throwing dead bodies, which were fresh from the gas chamber, into a open pit. I shuddered as I looked as this poster which took up the whole wall. I tried to get back onto the elevator, but it was gone, so I was stuck, stuck in hell. I walked past the first poster, trying to cover my eyes. Directly next to it was another photo, but this time, it was a picture of a man burning on a stake in front of his family and friends. I began to realize what kind of place this museum was. The main objective of the museum was to provide the most horrific photos and evidence of the Holocaust to the visitors, so they would never forget the pain and suffering the original Holocaust survivors had to endure. I stood in front of the picture for what seemed like an eternity, but was only 15 minutes according to my dad. I began to cry because I realized how lucky I was since I would never have to experience the horrors of the Holocaust. I stood in front of that picture in full astonishment, for I could not understand how a single army could commit this kind of cruelty to ten million helpless humans. Whenever I have a feeling of hate inside me, I just remember those two pictures, and I forget that burning hate.

My father called to me, “Albert! Albert! Let’s go, the group is already to the next exhibit.” I turned my head to find my father standing directly in front of me.
I slowly grinned and muttered, "All right dad, let's move on." I sulked away from those two photos with my head down knowing I would never feel the same way about my religion ever again. I wandered through halls which contained endless pictures of mutilation, torture, and murder. I could not get the two pictures from the start of the tour out of my mind. Every time I glanced at a child lying dead in an unmarked burial sight, all I could think about was the two posters. I finally understood why the pictures were so engraved in my mind. The pictures that sit outside the elevator doors became my first impression of what really happened during the Holocaust. The lectures from the rabbi in Sunday school were interesting, but just to witness the true nature of what went on at such concentration camps as Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald, makes a person stop and think about how cruel one human can be. The pictures of children burning with their favorite teddy bear by their side will always stay in my mind, but to me, the only purpose the extra photos had was to build on the point that something like the Holocaust can never be forgotten. The first two photos I witnessed will always remind me of the Holocaust, but it was two other exhibits inside the museum that would make me remember the kind of suffering six million Jews went through before being savagely murdered. As I turned the corner from watching a movie about Hitler, I was blown away by the sight which loomed in front of me. In the middle of the room, sitting on a 16 foot segment of track, stood a gloomy old boxcar. Suddenly I realized that this boxcar was part of Holocaust history. In order to transport Jews from concentration camp to concentration camp, the Nazi's had to use trains, for the amount of people that were transported on every journey sometimes exceeded the number one thousand, so planes could not be used. The Nazi's forced 300 people on to a boxcar for every journey, and those unfortunate souls had to stand for 3 days on the journey toward death, which awaited them at a concentration camp. The train never stopped, and the prisoners never got off, so they went to the bathroom in their pants, and the smell was so horrifying that
most would vomit onto the floor, making the smell unbearable. Most times the people were so packed together that over one hundred people would die on the train from suffocation. The only air that drifted into the rickety old boxcars was from cracks in the wood because the train was so dilapidated. The train had been taken from Auschwitz, and now was looming over my tiny little body. I walked into the train car, and I could still smell the wastes and rotting corpses that had been left on the train over 50 years ago. I was sick at the stomach, but at that very moment, I began feel close to Judaism, for I discovered that once the Holocaust was over, a extremely large portion of Jews in the world had been decimated. I began to feel that it was my duty to continue the legacy of all the Jews that were killed in the Holocaust. I know I cannot account for six million people, but one person is better than none, and if I can influence people the same way the Holocaust museum influenced me, then more people can understand how important it is to be close to their religion.

As the tour was coming to an end, I thought about the exhibits that had impacted me as a Jew. The boxcar, the two posters in front of the elevator, the gas chambers and ovens from Auschwitz, or maybe it was the only Torah that was saved from the oldest temple in Europe, which Hitler ordered to be burned to the ground. All of those exhibits are important to me, but the one exhibit that touched me the most was the storage cases. I came to a long dark hallway with glass situated in certain places along it. As I looked into each, I realized that they provided a window into a two story tall storage case, each case holding different contents. As I made my way down the rows, my heart crushed into tiny pieces. The storage cases held hats, suitcases, glasses, and canes of the people who had died at the concentration camps. When a person was to be killed, the Nazi’s would take their belongings and ship them to a warehouse in Berlin until they were brought to the museum. The final glass window gave view to a sight that still makes me cringe.
Inside the final storage bin were pair's of children's shoes that had been collected from the kids before they entered the gas chambers. Since there were so many shoes in the storage case, the shoes literally touched the ceiling. I fell to my knees and cried for ten minutes. I could not speak, for the sight of tiny little ballerina shoes and tiny boots made such an impact on me. How could a human have the heart to take a three year old boy and girl into a shower, and spray deadly gases onto them. I decided at that moment, when I was laying on the floor, sobbing from the horrors of that horrible sight, that I was going to educate people about the Holocaust, and make them aware of the tragedy that occurred during the 1940's. The Holocaust Museum changed me life forever, for I was so moved by the impact of the exhibits, that I had to change my life and change the way I feel about being Jewish. I refuse to go back to the museum, for I do not need to relive the emotional journey I went through that one day. Every night I think about the exhibits to remind myself that it is my job to inform the world about the sufferings of the six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust.