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On 9/11, the world changed. In a few short hours, Americans witnessed the greatest single act of religiously motivated violence in our history. The attacks by Muslim terrorists led some Americans to feel increased animosity towards Muslims; some even considered it their patriotic duty to attack Muslims. However, a true American would realize that religious tolerance is true patriotism; it is a civic value that binds all Americans together.

Religious intolerance has been the cause of much human violence; for example, religious persecution and fighting dominated Europe for centuries. But America's Founding Fathers, students of European history, were some of the greatest supporters of religious tolerance.

Specifically, Jews have suffered extreme persecution in Europe and the rest of the world, including discrimination, inquisition, and murder. Starting in the 17th century, Jews immigrated to America in order to live in a country based on liberty and equality, where they could gain the same rights as other citizens.

When America fought against the British in the Revolutionary War, the Jews supported the American side, primarily motivated by the opportunity for freedom. When George Washington, the hero of the Revolutionary War, became President, the Jews of a Newport Congregation sent a congratulatory letter. In response, President Washington wrote his "Letter to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport." In his letter, Washington expressed America's belief in the equality of all its citizens, regardless of religious faith. Washington proclaimed that the "...Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support." In this letter, Washington epitomized religious tolerance, by showing that America accepts its citizens based on their dedication to their country, not due to their religious beliefs.

Religious tolerance became stronger as time went on. Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States, embodied this spirit of acceptance. As the son of a Presbyterian minister, Wilson would have seemed unlikely to expand religious toleration. But in 1916 Wilson nominated Louis Brandeis, a Jew, to the United States Supreme Court. The possibility of a Jewish Justice on the Supreme Court shocked the nation and caused debate in Congress. However, Wilson believed that Brandeis was part of the "...great body of our Jewish citizens from whom have sprung men of genius in every walk of our varied life," and that Jews "...are not Jews in America, they are American citizens." Wilson nominated Brandeis based on his character and experience, not due to his religious faith. The same religious tolerance advocated by Washington was exemplified in a Christian President nominating a Jewish Lawyer for the Supreme Court.

I have also had a first-hand experience with practicing religious tolerance during a summer program at Cambridge University. I am not entirely sure if it was fate--or staffers with a sense of humor--that put a student from a religious school and a student from Dubai in the same room, but it certainly created an interesting situation. I knew that only a handful of Muslim countries recognize Israel as a state and many Muslim countries (including those who recognize Israel) continue to promote anti-Jewish beliefs. Indeed, my roommate was well versed in anti-Semitic epithets.

Our first meeting turned into an argument about Middle East politics. After a few hours of yelling at each other and a night to cool off, we finally set down some ground rules. We recognized that we were both teenagers that shared some--but not all--similar beliefs and values. We agreed that our argument should not be personal; rather, it should be a dialogue of our respective opinions. We would also respect each other's viewpoint. I have to say that I learned a lot about his side, as he did about mine; we ended our summer program with a greater understanding of the conflict between our peoples. Most important, we learned to practice religious tolerance, despite political disagreement.

As an American, I hold the value of religious tolerance very dear to my heart. America has consistently promoted freedom and opportunity; from Washington to Wilson and onward, countless American leaders have advocated religious tolerance. My task is to embody and practice the religious tolerance America has provided me. For example, I hope to fulfill my task by continuing to engage with Arabs and Muslims, to encourage coexistence. Hopefully, by promoting dialogue, I can help change the world for the better.