



HOLOCAUST  
MUSEUM LA

# THE ART OF ERIC LICHTBLAU-LESKLY

ART AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

TEACHER GUIDE

# The Art of Erich Lichtblau-Leskly

## ART and SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

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### Objectives

This lesson uses artworks in Holocaust Museum LA's collection to encourage critical thinking around art and the Holocaust and implores students to contemplate contemporary social issues. Students will study how Erich Lichtblau-Leskly utilized art as a form of spiritual and intellectual resistance during his time living in the Theresienstadt camp.

### Learning Outcomes

- Understand the ways in which minority groups are persecuted and how hate rhetoric can lead to genocide.
- Identify the importance of art as a lens for resistance, expression, and healing.
- Use art as a tool for personal expression, and to reflect and examine elements of history through the lens of a Holocaust survivor's story.
- Examine how thoughts and feelings can be transformed into artistic expression to reflect student's own experiences and voices.
- Understand how artists use art to process painful memories and implore contemporary audiences to remember and reflect on what happened in order to create a better future.
- To elevate agency on current social issues by integrating real world connections to historical events such as the Holocaust.

### Essential question

How can art be used as a form of spiritual resistance and in what ways can it give voice to people or social issues?

## INTRODUCTION

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Throughout history, artists have used art to document injustice as a form of **activism** and to provoke thought on issues happening in the world. Artists utilize their art to amplify and give voice to social and political issues through artistic activism. Artistic activism can spark social change using artistic approaches that provide a critical perspective on the world as it is but also by imagining the world as it could be. Artists can use the creative power of the arts to move us emotionally while rooting elements of activism in their work to bring about social change.

During the Holocaust, creating artwork in secret was a way for Jewish victims to resist the Nazi regime. Many artists in the **ghettos** and camps risked their lives to produce art despite horrific living conditions. One of the motivations to produce art for these artists was to create eyewitness reports of the horrors going on all around them, as well as to resist the Nazis' systematic efforts to dehumanize, degrade, and diminish. Artists who were imprisoned in camps struggled to maintain their sense of self through art in the face of Nazi dehumanization, and their art also served to provide them with a reason to live and persevere. **Spiritual resistance** during the Holocaust is defined as attempts by individuals to maintain their humanity, personal integrity, dignity, and sense of civilization in the face of Nazi attempts to **dehumanize** and **degrade** them. Spiritual resistance also refers to the refusal to let anyone break one's spirit even during the most horrible degradation. Cultural and educational activities, maintenance of community documentation, and **clandestine** religious observances are three examples of spiritual resistance during the Holocaust.

Erich Lichtblau-Leskly's artwork not only documented and recorded life in Theresienstadt, it also documented the people who lived alongside him and became a living memorial for those who perished there. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." These artworks speak to us across time, reminding us of those whose voices are no longer to be heard. Lichtblau-Leskly achieves a form of spiritual resistance through his artwork by documenting life in Theresienstadt through the use of **satirical** imagery playing on the cruelty of the Nazi's treatment and giving humor a space when all else seemed bleak. By analyzing his artwork closely, the aim of this lesson is to have students gain a deeper understanding of Lichtblau-Leskly's works as well as the ways in which art can be used as a form of spiritual resistance and activism.

# GLOSSARY

## Activism

A doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.

## Ghetto

A confined area of a city in which members of a minority group are compelled to live. The first use of the term “ghetto” for a section of a city in which Jews lived was in Venice, Italy in 1516. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, approximately 3 million Jews lived in Poland. The Nazis began plans for the ghettoization of Polish Jews shortly after.

## Spiritual Resistance

Refers to attempts by individuals to maintain humanity and dignity in the face of efforts to degrade them. During the Holocaust, countless Jews—whether in ghettos, concentration camps, or in hiding—engaged in resistance by refusing to allow their spirit to be broken even under profoundly dehumanizing circumstances.

## Dehumanize

To deprive someone of human qualities, personality, or dignity.

## Degrade

To bring someone to low esteem or into disregard.

## Satirical

A way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc. : humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.

## Clandestine

When something is marked by, held in, or conducted with secrecy.

## PART 1

### ERICH LICHTBLAU-LESKLY & THERESIENSTADT

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Erich Lichtblau-Leskly was born on June 16, 1911, in the small Moravian town of Hruschau (Hrušov), then in Austria-Hungary. Lichtblau-Leskly worked as an apprentice decorating store windows, and around the year 1930 Erich enrolled in the Hamburg Decoration School where he studied commercial design. After his studies, Leskly worked in Ostrava and as a commercial decorator, and married Elsa Silbiger in

March of 1937. In March 1939, Germany invaded the Czech lands of Czechoslovakia.



Figure 1  
Erich and Elsa Lichtblau-Leskly in Pisek, Czechoslovakia, 1940.  
Courtesy of the Leskly Family

Erich and Elsa moved to Prague after the German occupation, where Erich found employment as a construction worker. In early 1940 they moved to the small village of Dobešice near Psek in southern Bohemia.

There, they joined a Zionist youth group carrying out agricultural training on the

farmlands of Dobešice in preparation for emigration to the British Mandate of Palestine.

While in Dobešice, discriminatory regulations implemented by the Nazis forced Erich and Elsa to work as slave laborers, and In November 1942, the couple received transport orders for deportation to Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt served as a transit camp for Czech Jews whom the Germans deported to killing centers, concentration camps, and forced-labor camps in German-occupied Poland, Belorussia, and the Baltic States. It also served as a labor camp.

The Nazi regime falsely propagated the existence of Theresienstadt as a residential community, where elderly or veteran German and Austrian Jews could "retire". When Erich and Elsa arrived in Theresienstadt, Erich was assigned to the construction yard

and Elsa to cleaning children's homes and working in the kitchen. Erich also worked many other jobs designing projects for the camp theaters. Later Erich was assigned to the Graphic and Reproduction workshop within the Technical Department, where he worked on designs for the camp theaters. This job also afforded him access to certain materials that he used to create his art.



Map of Europe 1933, Czechoslovakia and Theresienstadt courtesy of USHMM.

The International and Danish Red Cross heard alarming reports circulating about the fate of Jewish victims under Nazi rule. German authorities permitted Red Cross representatives to visit

Theresienstadt

and prepared for the visit by creating a façade. The Nazi's accelerated deportations, sending prisoners to their death to reduce the crowding of the camp. They also ordered the remaining prisoners to "beautify" the space in order to appear as though the living conditions were humane. They made prisoners plant gardens, paint houses, and renovate barracks and even went so far as to stage social and cultural events for the visiting dignitaries. After the Red Cross officials left, deportations from Theresienstadt resumed and did not end until October 1944. The Germans deported nearly 90,000 German, Austrian, Czech, Slovak, Dutch, and Hungarian Jews from the camp to killing sites and centers in the East; only a few thousand survived. More than 30,000 more prisoners died in Theresienstadt itself, mostly from disease, torture, and starvation.

While imprisoned in the camp between 1942 and 1945 Lichtblau-Lesky secretly created visual narratives that documented prisoner interactions, personal encounters, and stories from the camp. During the summer of 1944, in an incident dubbed the "Artist's Affair," the SS deported several well-known artists to Auschwitz after discovering their clandestine artwork. Fearing the same fate, Lichtblau-

Leskly removed captions and slogans from his artwork and cut the remainder into small pieces. Leskly's wife, Elsa, hid the pieces of his artwork under the wood floor boards of her barrack. After the Soviet liberation of Theresienstadt on May 9, 1945, Elsa retrieved the hidden pieces of her husband's paintings and sketches, and the couple began restoring them in Czechoslovakia. Lichtblau-Leskly also began to produce new versions of those paintings that had been lost or destroyed.

Lichtblau-Leskly convincingly challenged the Nazi racial ideology by secretly creating a pictorial narrative of life that unfolded around him. As a way to survive the horror around him, Erich recorded life in Theresienstadt through the lens he knew best, painting. His satirical and ironic cartoon style differs from other work from Theresienstadt, commenting on the social and political environment and giving voice to the experiences that were too horrific to put into words. "I painted what I saw, and that's how I saw it," he said later. Through defiance, humor, and satire, his works illustrate the horrors of the ghetto. Painting became a means of survival and spiritual resistance for Lichtblau-Leskly. He later reflected, "For me not to paint would be not to live."

# GLOSSARY

## Zionist

A *Zionist* is a follower of *Zionism*, a movement that resulted in the establishment and development of the state of Israel.

## Ghetto

A confined area of a city in which members of a minority group are compelled to live. The first use of the term “ghetto” for a section of a city in which Jews lived was in Venice, Italy in 1516. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, approximately 3 million Jews lived in Poland. The Nazis began plans for the ghettoization of Polish Jews shortly after.

## Killing centers

The Nazis established killing centers in German-occupied Europe during World War II. They built these killing centers exclusively or primarily for the mass murder of human beings. Nazi officials employed assembly-line methods of murder in these facilities.

## Concentration camps

Throughout German-occupied Europe, the Nazis established camps to detain and, if necessary, kill so-called enemies of the state, including Jews, Roma and Sinti, political and religious opponents, members of national resistance movements, homosexuals, and others. Imprisonment in a concentration camp was of unlimited duration, was not linked to a specific act, and was not subject to any judicial review. In addition to concentration camps, the Nazi regime ran several kinds of camps including labor camps, transit camps, prisoner-of-war camps, and death camps.



### **Forced-labor camps**

In German-occupied areas, the Nazis singled out Jewish laborers for cruel treatment. The ghettos served as bases for utilizing Jewish labor, as did forced-labor camps for Jews in occupied Poland. In the Lodz ghetto, for example, the Nazis opened 96 factories. The ability to work could save one's life, but most often only temporarily. Jews deemed unproductive by the Nazis were often the first to be shot or deported.

### **Liberation**

The act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression; release.



Figure 2  
Entrance gate to Theresienstadt camp with slogan, "Work Sets You Free," 1943. From *Archives of the Holocaust*, ed. Sybil Milton and Ronald Klemig, vol. 1, part 2 (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1990), No. 658



Figure 3 (top)  
On the Way to Work, Theresienstadt camp; from the Nazi propaganda film *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*, August 1944. From *Archives of the Holocaust*, ed. Sybil Milton and Ronald Klemig, vol. 1, part 2 (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1990), No. 671

Figure 4 (bottom)  
Theresienstadt camp Street Scene; from the Nazi propaganda film *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*, August 1944. From *Archives of the Holocaust*, ed. Sybil Milton and Ronald Klemig, vol. 1, part 2 (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1990), No. 668

## A Closer Look

Take a look at figure 2, what do you think is the meaning of the slogan "Work Sets You Free" on the gate to Theresienstadt?

### Propaganda

The deliberate spreading of ideas, ideology, or information with the purpose of manipulating public opinion to gain support for one's cause or to discourage support for another.

Review the visit to this camp by the Danish and International Red Cross delegations. How and why was the reality of the camp disguised from them? (figures 3 and 4)

How did the Nazi's use Theresienstadt for their own propaganda purposes? What are some of the dangers of propaganda?

## Discuss

1. What form(s) of spiritual resistance is Lichtblau-Leskly practicing by creating his art? (*Hint: think about the three forms of spiritual resistance mentioned in the introduction*)

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2. In what ways do you think Lichtblau-Leskly's art might give voice to the atrocities of life in the camp and what it was like to live there?

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3. How do you think creating art helped Lichtblau-Leskly maintain his sense of identity while imprisoned in the camp?

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## ANALYSIS

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1. Take a closer look at the painting above. What do you notice first?

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2. What objects can you identify in this painting? Why might they be important?

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3. What do you think Lichtblau-Leskly is trying to communicate in this painting?

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4. The text in the image says "Transport Worries". Why do you think Leskly used those words?

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5. Who might the person be in the painting? What does their facial expression tell you about how they might be feeling?

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**CAPTION SYNOPSES**

**TRANSPORT WORRIES**

There was rarely enough time for packing in [the] one-hour...before departure to the east.

- Erich Lichtblau-Leskly

Prisoners dreaded the summons to be transported to the East. The distraught figure portrayed in this painting is overwhelmed by what to pack for a journey to an unknown destination in addition to saying goodbye to loved ones. The latter painting includes the phrase "Enrolled in the transport to the East, only one hour before departure." Though scarcely believing in a future, prisoners gathered their belongings and reported to the deportation site, hoping they still might have a chance to live.

Theresienstadt period, 1943





## **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS**

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1. Imagine having to pack all of your belongings and having to say goodbye to loved ones. Why do you think Lichtblau-Leskly created this painting and what was he trying to communicate?

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2. After learning more about this piece, why do you think people brought certain possessions with them to the camps? What objects would you take with you if you had to pack your life into one suitcase?

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## ART PROJECT-CREATE A LOST CHILDHOOD OBJECT

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### Supplies:

- Paper
- Scraps of Fabric
- Tape
- Scissors
- Any recycled material in your home (soda can or bottle, old magazines, etc.)

### Project Directions:

Think about a beloved object from your childhood. Think about why this object might be important or significant to you and your life. What memories does the object bring up? Think about how an object can connect you to your individual identity, hobbies or passions, or to your family's history. This activity also establishes the idea that each member of the community has an important story to tell, similar to the mission of the founding Survivors of Holocaust Museum LA when they established the Museum in 1961. Objects have their own history and stories to tell; you will be interviewing a family member about one of their most cherished childhood objects they no longer own. Your goal is to get as much information as possible from your family member about the object so that you can recreate the object out of material found at home. Keep in mind that the object is being created based off of someone else's memory and verbal description not an actual visual image.

### Directions

1. Interview someone about an object they owned and cherished as a child. Ask questions that help you to understand the shape, size, texture, colors, form, etc. Keep a mental picture of that object.
2. You will now recreate this object using any materials you have at home with you. Do not be afraid to be creative using old towels, cereal boxes, tape, string, anything you can think of to use around the house to create the object. Please keep in mind this does not need to be perfect, the objects are supposed to look handmade.
3. Give the object to the family member you interviewed.

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**IN BEIT HALUTZOT (HAMBURG BARRACKS), ROOM 305**



## ANALYSIS

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1. Take a closer look at the painting above. What do you notice first?

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2. What objects can you identify in this painting? What do you think the objects were used for?

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3. What do you think is happening in this scene?

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4. Do you notice any symbols or symbolism in the painting?

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5. What do the living conditions look like in the painting? How does the artist use dark and light?

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**CAPTION SYNOPSES**

IN BEIT HALUTZOT (HAMBURG BARRACKS), ROOM 305

Every Friday evening there was Oneg Shabbat [celebration of the Sabbath]. Young people sang Hebrew songs. They also learned [the] Hebrew language. Many lived with a dream of moving to [Israel] after the war.

- Erich Lichtblau-Leskly

Room 305 in Beit Halutzot (Pioneer Club), officially the Hamburg barracks for women, was home for Elsa Lichtblau-Leskly and 25 other Jewish women. As an example of spiritual resistance, the women would hold Shabbat in their barracks to honor their traditions, heritage, and Jewish identity.

Czechoslovakia postwar period, 1945-1949



## FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS

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1. What can be learned from this painting about the importance of someone's heritage or religious traditions? What form of spiritual resistance do you think this is?  

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2. After learning more about this piece what do you think the significance of the objects are in the scene? Why would someone take these objects with them to Theresienstadt?  

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3. Imagine if someone was trying to prevent you from practicing your beliefs or family traditions. How would that make you feel? Why did the Nazi's prohibit or deny art, education, and religious practices from Jewish people?  

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## ART PROJECT-HERITAGE SILHOUETTE

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### Supplies:

- Paper
- Tape
- Your choice of: markers, colored pencils, crayons, pastels
- Flashlight or phone flashlight

### Project Directions:

Heritage and symbolism can be found in everyday objects like the menorah in the image above, and we can explore this further by looking at historical artifacts. In 1961, Holocaust survivors living in Los Angeles came together and realized each of them had carried personal artifacts and precious mementos with them from Europe, items such as photographs, documents, and memories. These treasured objects represent the personal histories of each individual. Each artifact represents something significant to the survivor it belonged to, acting as a connection to their families, traditions, and culture. These objects signify each survivor's story and personal history and can be found in the Museum. Each of us has our own story to tell and a unique heritage. This heritage is an important part of our identity and our family story. Think about your heritage and the things that you identify with in your life. Think about what symbols, icons, images, and more that you feel represent you and your identity. You will be creating something called a heritage silhouette where you outline your silhouette and fill it with icons and symbols you feel represents you and your heritage.

### Directions

1. You will need one other person to help you with this project at home. Hang a piece of paper on a blank wall area.
2. Turn lights low or off around you.
3. Stand to the side of the paper so your silhouette is projected onto the paper from the flashlight.
4. Now have someone trace your silhouette onto the paper.
5. After your silhouette is traced you can fill the inside of it with symbols and imagery that you feel represents you and your heritage.



## Baptized Jews are Coming



## ANALYSIS

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1. Take a closer look at the painting above. What do you notice first?

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2. What symbols do you see in the painting? Why do you think the symbols might be of importance or used?

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3. What are the types of clothing you see people wearing in the painting?

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4. What do you think Lichtblau-Leskly is trying to convey in this painting?

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5. How are symbols connected to heritage and/or identity?

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6. What symbols are important to you in your life and why?

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**CAPTION SYNOPSES**

**BAPTIZED JEWS ARE COMING**

We could see people coming in various clothes related to their origin and beliefs.

- Erich Lichtblau-Leskly

Nazi racial laws determined who was Jewish and who was “Aryan.” Having two Jewish-born grandparents was enough to be classified as Jewish, even if the family had been Christian for two generations. Lichtblau-Leskly portrays this dichotomy by dressing Jewish stars in traditional outfits of different cultures, showing both the wide variety of Jewish life as well as the absurd racial ideology of the Nazi government. The Israeli period piece widens the group to include representations of the Catholic church as well the inscription “Grüß Gott,” a common greeting in Southern Germany and Austria to wish God’s blessings to others.

Theresienstadt period, 1943





## **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS**

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What does the term identity mean and how do you determine your identity?

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What does it mean to have to pretend to be someone you are not? How would this impact an individual living under a false identity?

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The symbol of the Star of David is deeply rooted in Jewish heritage and identity. When the Nazi's used the symbol to identify and segregate Jewish people, how do you think the symbol of the Star of David changed?

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After the Holocaust ended the Star of David transformed into a symbol of heritage and identity again. In what ways can symbols be transformed or changed in terms of their meaning?

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## ART PROJECT-SHAPE AVATAR

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### Supplies:

- Paper
- Markers, colored pencils

### Project Directions:

As one strives to maintain their humanity and beliefs, identity becomes a form of spiritual resistance. Lichtblau-Leskly portrays this dichotomy by dressing Jewish stars in traditional outfits of different cultures, showing both the wide variety of Jewish life as well as the absurd racial ideology of the Nazi government. Do you feel any symbols have been imposed on you? How do you see yourself? How do you want others to see you? Consider this an opportunity for you to create a form that is entirely your own. This project is aimed at looking at the ways in which we see ourselves and the ways others see us. You will be creating a shape or symbol that is uniquely your own to showcase how you identify yourself. This project is based off of work from artist Tschabalala Self, whose uses shapes to create self-images. Her work focuses on the iconographic significance of the black female body in contemporary culture. In this assignment you will be creating self-shapes that focus on symbols you feel are connected to you and how you identify yourself.

### Directions

1. Create a symbol or shape that you feel represents you using your marker. This should not be an existing symbol or icon or realistic depiction of yourself. Think about what you associate most with yourself.
2. Fill in the shape or symbol with color, pattern, images, or additional symbols that you feel represent you. Create a title for your piece.

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## PART 3

### REFLECTION

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#### **BUILDING EMPATHY USING ART**

1. How do you define the word empathy?
2. Can artwork build empathy within its observers? Think specifically about what an image can convey or what story it has to tell.
3. What can be learned about the camp prisoners from Lichtblau-Leskly art? Think about their experience and living conditions.
4. How can art memorialize or pay tribute to those that have perished?
5. What power does art have to tell stories? Whose stories is Lichtblau-Leskly sharing in his art?

#### **ZACHOR-TAKING ACTION**

1. What is the purpose of remembering the Holocaust? What are the consequences of forgetting?
2. What is the significance of using art as a way to document injustice or advocate for social change?
3. In the Jewish tradition, there is a command to learn about the past, called Zachor (“remember”). Zachor is not just about memory, it is also about positive action to make the world a better place. Think about Zachor and the idea of taking positive action in your community for a moment. Are there any ways that you feel you make positive changes in your community?
4. List at least one change you would like to see in the world or your greater community. What are some steps or actions that you can take to create positive change?