Third-Place Essay – Isabella Reish, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

On July 21, 1925, the historic Scopes Monkey trial ended with a guilty verdict, condemning public school teacher Scopes for teaching evolution. Although his fine was overturned, the Tennessee Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the ban on teaching evolution (Encyclopedia Britannica). And on April 6, 2018, Tennessee House Bill 2368 became law, requiring “In God We Trust” to be displayed in “prominent locations” in every public school in the state. Today, Tennessee legislators are attempting to restrict same sex adoption rights, and to impose a bathroom bill allowing schools to force transgender students to use the bathroom of their birth sex, both of which hide behind “religious freedom” to mask what is truly blatant discrimination.

In 93 years, despite some slow progress being made, it seems that my government officials care more about their religious views than my First Amendment rights. But my life has not always been like this. Five years ago, I moved to Murfreesboro, Tenn., from Oak Park, Ill. Everything was so much more simple there: I could be Jewish with no concerns or limitations, I was never reprimanded for leaving out the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance (which were not in the original pledge), and people of different faiths seemed to coexist with few qualms. But Murfreesboro is like another universe. Suddenly I am being taught science by people that do not believe in climate change or evolution, parents are demanding that Islam be removed from the world history curriculum because they felt that it would be used as a tool to convert their children, and legislators place their own faith over the rights of the citizens of the state. For the first time in my life, my blindfold was removed to reveal the harshness of our society.

Around here, politicians’ minds seem set on ignoring the plight of LGBTQ people, criminalizing abortions, and forcing God into my school system. Of course I do not agree with any of these viewpoints, but I would be more willing to respect them if they came with a logical argument. However, the only basis my representatives use to rationalize their choices is their Christian faith. Does the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution, the highest law of the land, not prohibit the government from making a law “respecting the establishment of religion”? But it stands that the citizens of my state, if not sitting quietly by and accepting that their privilege as Christians grants them complacency, tend to value the Bible as a holier document in our governmental institutions than the Constitution itself. History has shown us that change will always win, that an unstoppable force will always push through an object that is far more movable than it is perceived to be.

Trying to convince state and national governmental representatives of Tennessee of my position has not been easy. Traveling to Washington, D.C., to speak with my senators and representative on behalf of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism (RAC), a liberal lobbyist group that uses religious values to meet religious conservatives in the middle, I advocated for the passage of the Equality Act, a piece of proposed federal legislation that would change the lives of LGBTQ people everywhere by outlawing discrimination on the basis of
sexual orientation or gender identity. I spoke directly to senatorial staff, as well as Rep. Scott DesJarlais (R-Tenn.). I could tell that they certainly did not agree with me, but because of my involvement with the RAC, they were respectful.

In a strange way, the only manner in which we can approach the governments of red states like Tennessee, so dominated by religious values, is to come at them with more religious values. It is a way of reclaiming religion for the left, using it to create change and equality, things that, at their core, many religions actually value. If I had advocated for LGBTQ people from a secular standpoint, my representatives would have shut down. I would have placed a wall between my own ethos and theirs, forever separating our viewpoints. But because I advocated with a religious group, I was making a statement. I was saying to my legislators, “As a religious individual, I have my personal political stances, but I do not push these onto people because I care about the First Amendment.”

This is the way in which we need to be approaching these politicians, never directly calling them out, but showing them that religion is inclusive rather than isolating. This is how my generation, one of unprecedented openness and acceptance, excels. I never thought that I would be able to have productive political debates with my peers in Middle Tennessee, but I have. Seeing the willingness of people my age to reach across ideological lines and to embrace compromise is uplifting. In fact, a Forbes report says that members of Generation Z are “constantly connected to their digital and offline friends, [and] they value diversity and social justice within a whole new global context and they’ve been raised to learn in teams and work for the collective” (Meehan, Mary).

Today’s young people, shaped by the horrors of political polarization, will be the ones to create positive change. We have a unique skill set for modern times: We can organize massive groups through social media, we can communicate with other young activists across the country, and we have the knowledge required to build the America that we want to live in. I recently started a chapter of March for Our Lives at my school, an act that would have been impossible without my exposure to the organization through televised news broadcasts and Twitter, and my ability to coordinate with national representatives of the organization via email and iMessage. This concept of globalization, of interconnectedness, of combined activism, has the ability to power a political force able to break the policies that bind the church to our state.