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My personal connection to Zionism is a result of my family’s heritage. My maternal grandmother was born and raised in Haifa, so in addition to the ancient Israelites that made their home in Israel, I have a close ancestral connection to Ha’aretz. When learning about the history of modern Israel, it has always been important to me to connect the place with stories told by my grandmother about where she grew up. Although her ancestry can be traced back eight generations in Palestine, many of her relatives moved to Israel as a result of the Zionist movement. After one failed move to Israel that was the result of living in swamplands, my grandmother’s mother’s family decided to move to Palestine once again. Their commitment, along with that of the other early Zionists, inspires me, as it enabled Israel to become the modern country that it is today. While Israel is currently in a very different place than Palestine was then, I want to build on the contributions that my ancestors made towards its success. In addition to this physical connection to Israel, as the grandson of a survivor of the Shoah, the existence of a haven for all Jews is very important to me. In this respect, the present and future security of a place where my descendants and any Jew can move without fear of discrimination is something that I want to do my best to support.

 I define Zionism as the movement for the prosperity of Israel as a Jewish homeland. Specifically, I interpret Zionism to be equal parts supporting the current state, contemplating what components of the country should be improved, and acting on these sentiments. As a Zionist, it is crucial to be a voice in favor of the country amid its naysayers, yet also a critic among its proponents, so as to never be satisfied with a country that will always require adjustments. During my time in Israel, I want to learn how more equality and opportunity can be achieved for all the country’s residents. While at Middlebury College, I have acted as a Zionist both in my time as the Israel chair of Hillel, and as a student at a far left-leaning campus. As Israel chair and an active member of Hillel, I have had conversations with other Jewish students about our perceptions of Israel, and how we feel connected to the country. In conversations with critics of Israel, I have discussed how a productive dialogue can exist, and how together we can work to find a balancing point between the multitude of camps.

 Lastly, one topic that I have contemplated often is what is my role, as an American Jew, in the politics of Israel. I believe that this is a crucial question for American Zionists to ask, as it is necessary to not only contemplate and act towards what we consider to be best for the country, but also maintain respect for the autonomy of the country and its people. While I have yet to find a complete answer to this question, I look forward to discussing it with both Israelis and other visiting students during my time abroad, as I believe that this will be one of the best ways to explore the issue. I have great anticipation for this and all the other lessons that I will learn during my time in Israel, and I am sure that they will have a profound and lasting impact on my future as a Zionist.