I define Zionism as the belief that there should be a land for Jews, a homeland to protect the world's historically foremost stateless people. The need for this arises from the unique history of the Jewish people and the goal of ending millennia of persecution and community-dispersion. However, I have always struggled to reconcile this belief with other ideas with which I was raised: that, in an ideal world, ethnic and religious affiliations are merely that and should have no bearing on how people are treated.

The idea of a land specifically for a certain people (and thus inherently less for other people) seemed fundamentally wrong to me. Growing up, I avoided the conversation, even in my own head, because it was too complicated to grapple with. Two years ago, while studying in Hungary, I became interested in Jewish history in Eastern Europe and felt both the pride and emptiness that came from seeing my people's impact on history and their utter disappearance from the present in that region.

Spurred by visits to concentration camps and old Jewish quarters throughout the area, the next summer, I went on Birthright and partook in an extended discussion about Israel. I was surprised by the connection I felt to the land and the culture. I made friends with soldiers who trained and fought everyday to protect their homeland, the only stable democracy and bastion of free expression in the region. However, I also extended to tour the West Bank, and spoke to Palestinian refugees about their desire to return to their homes and watched their kids walk through armed checkpoints on the way to school.

When I returned, I read everything I could find on Israel, Zionist history, nationalism theory, the conflict. When college began again, I became involved in the conversation around Zionism on campus. I was surprised to find out that, in a school that is more than a third Jewish, Tufts Hillel struggled to fill two 40-student buses each year for its trip. I interviewed Jewish friends about why they felt no desire to go. Most expressed some concern about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and worried Birthright would not provide an unbiased narrative. With similar concerns, I felt my trip itself did not foster much personal connection to Israel and Zionism for me. But my extension to the West Bank and further research definitely did, and I believe I’m not alone among my generation.

Millennials are the generation most acutely aware of American social and political difficulties, yet are the most socially and politically active generation in half a century. They are also the most liberal and multi-cultural in history. In working with Tufts Hillel, I argued that the opportunity for young American Jews to engage with Israel, not as a utopic promised land but as a living, breathing place with its own cultural difficulties and political debates, just like America, is essential to get American Jews to accept a stake in it.

In fact, I believe the future of Israel depends on it. Israel is a small country surrounded by enemies that are either becoming stronger or more volatile, while its Western allies are turning inward. Israel needs the support of the Jewish diaspora to continue to exist and statistics and my personal conversations show it is losing it among the younger generation. For Israel to reverse this trend and preserve its long-term stability, I believe it needs to promote a more inclusive brand of nationalism and a more stringent position on human rights. Thus, I believe intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and peace-building is essential to a modern Zionist narrative.