

I think the definition of Zionism is bound to the personal experience of being Jewish. What it means to be Jewish is different for many people. For myself, I grew up in a blended household celebrating both Christmas and Hannukah, and got so good at finding the Afikoman at Passover that hiding it is now my responsibility. Having grown up with these traditions and hearing the recitation of the Jewish people's history during high holidays, I became curious in high school about our family lineage and the family stories. I have always been close to my paternal Grandmother Miriam but I think we became closer when I began asking questions about her roots. The story goes, as many similar diaspora histories do, her mother was one of twelve living in Poland on the brink of WWII. Great Grandma Rae escaped to Canada, finally settling in Buffalo, NY where she married her sweetheart who had also found refuge. One brother and one sister survived where they had sought refuge in Israel, then known as Palestine. This is as much as we know. What I do know is that the Holocaust solidified what it means to be Jewish for many people when they remember the tragedies of their family history. In the eyes of some, I have Jewish blood, and in the eyes of others I am not Jewish enough. I have Jewish heritage and a deep respect for my family's history, but does this make me Jewish?

I think Zionism approaches this bridge of what it means to be of Jewish heritage without the necessary credentials of having Jewish mother. From what I know, the idea for the Zionist movement gained momentum once Theodor Herzl used his journalism background to publicize the movement. Obviously religion underpinned the commonality for these early settlers, however, as tensions increased and war broke out, religion became less of a unifying factor. The shared experience of living in Israel and building a unified state superseded both ethnic and religious differentiations. The definition of Zionism is bound within this idea of shared heritage and the continuation of the Jewish people but also by something new, a revival of what it means to be Jewish and embracing the many variations this includes. I find most solidarity in these early movements of settlers who were agriculturally based. They started with very little but through ingenuity, perseverance and a work ethic that can still be seen today, they were able to gain independence and create a country where the U.S. and other foreign sectors get much of our technology and agricultural innovation from. The future spirit of Zionism resides in the pride that people regard the beauty of which they have created through their resilience. Through our work and our advocacy we can create better connections as a diverse people.

I see Israel as a tumultuous and contested space but as someone who is close to my Jewish Grandmother, I see the pride in her heritage and the beauty of human ability to transform something out of nothing. I see the transformation in Israel, in sustainable agriculture, as an exciting place to be. I would like to learn more from the guiding professors at Arava but I also know that I bring many abilities and strength of character to the table. I wish to use this internship as a stepping point towards a career in agricultural development and of personal development by connecting with my Jewish heritage.