

When I close my eyes, I feel the sun blanketing my skin, taste the warm freshly fried falafel, smell the wild flowers and olive trees, hear the cries of prayer at the Wall. When I close my eyes and think of Israel, I am home. I am lucky to be a Jew, with a homeland so historic and beautiful, to be living in a time where I have access to the beaches of Tel Aviv, the cobblestones of Jerusalem.

At its core, Zionism is the right for Jews to have a homeland, a place where they can freely express their Judaism. I've had a dear relationship with Israel since I was a baby. My mother grew up there, and my relatives live there today. Childhood summers included regular trips to Israel, where I would spend afternoons in the park with my great-grandparents, who survived the Holocaust decades before; I would anxiously write notes to give to Hashem at the Western Wall; I would buy white tablecloths for Shabbat at the shuk with my mother. Israel is the most important place in the world to me. I am not an "other" or an "outsider," and I can be proud of my Judaism and my family's history.

But in this day and age, Zionism takes on a much more complex meaning, and with it, I take on a much bigger and deeper responsibility. Within Israel lies thousands of years of holiness. Within Israel lies Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Spanish Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Arab Jews and LGBTQ Jews. There are Baha'i followers, Druze communities, Muslim neighborhoods, and more. For me, Zionism means working toward celebrating differences and diversity while preserving tradition. Zionism means remembering my grandmother's suffering in Auschwitz and telling her story. Zionism means lighting Shabbat candles and thinking about my Jewish sisters lighting candles in Eretz Yisrael. Zionism means shining light on every Jew, for we all came from bondage, and are all looking for our own liberation. And every Jew's liberation is wrapped in mine. We are together in this. And our crossroads meet in Israel.

My freshman year of college I was the Tzedek Chair of the Hillel chapter, putting my time and energy into fundraising for Israeli organizations, and creating resources for my fellow Jewish students to be in touch with their Jewish identity and heritage. My college career was intensely investigating my Judaism, in my personal life by taking classes at Chabad and exploring synagogues, and in my academic life by writing my thesis on water scarcity and technology in Israel.

I am committing my life to peace and safety in the Holy Land. I currently work for the Israeli organization Hand in Hand (or Yad B'Yad), a network of schools in Israel that brings Jewish and Arab Israelis together to learn side by side and grow friendships. I see in my day to day work how much effort and energy must go into making sure Israeli children are safe to learn and thrive as proud Israelis, ready to reach out to their fellow citizen.

And now, my next chapter with Yahel will take my passions a step forward. I am ready to put in that aforementioned effort and energy, and then some, into ensuring the people of Israel are safe, knowing peace is on the horizon. I would be beyond honored to receive a grant from the AZM, to add another color to the spectrum of what Zionism means to the Jewish community, make the bond of the Jewish community stronger, and most importantly, to make peace a reality. Bashana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim!



Passport photo

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