

My Connection to Zionism

By: Eden Elimelech of Philadelphia, PA

When I tell people that I have Israeli citizenship, they assume I know everything there is to know about Israel. When I tell them I would like to learn and live in Israel they think that such a thing would be wasted on someone like me, except that is not the case. In truth, I actually hold dual citizenship in both Israel and the United States and, despite being raised and living in a Philadelphia suburb in America, my connection to the Jewish homeland and by extension, Zionism, has always remained steadfast.

For starters, both of my parents are from Israel and from birth, taught my younger sister and I about the importance and value of a permanent home for the Jewish people, both in a Biblical and modern context. Although young, I was appalled at the events going on during the first and second Intifadas in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. The fact that there were people screaming on the news—actually screaming—for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people, that innocent lives were being lost almost every day, I felt scared. Even from the safety of America and the barrier of an ocean between myself and Israel, the feeling was inexplicable as if I were there, in the midst of these suicide bombings and acts of terror that Israelis had to watch out for every second of their lives. Almost every Jew learns about the Holocaust from a young age and it seemed to me that this awful, historical event that had occurred decades before my birth was happening once again, that such hatred for the Jewish people could rear its ugly head once again. Since then, I have visited Israel several times to see family members or participate in organized trips like Birthright. Each time, I have learned something new about a country that holds

innumerable surprises even for the people who live there. Some of the more naive members of the population sometimes think of Israel as a constant war zone of chaos, death and apartheid, but the truth is that when you are there, you would never even know there was a conflict going on and that is one of the things I love most about Israel: It's uncanny ability to be more than meets the eye. So much of public perception spins it as such a negative place, but in reality, it proves you wrong on every account. The people are friendly, not child killers. The locations are scenic and beautiful, not mortared craters. And above all, there is no discrimination or apartheid. Where else in the Middle East could you find Arabs and Jews living side-by-side or an annual gay pride parade?

This constant backlash that Israel received since its inception and continues to receive only strengthens my resolve to get more involved with extracurricular Zionist organizations outside my home and that really took off during my years at Drexel University when the resources of several Jewish organizations were at my disposal. For example, during my time as an undergraduate, I became heavily involved with Hillel and Chabad, serving as the outreach chair, vice president and then president of the board for the former. Because of this, I was able to help organize a slew of Israel-related events like movie screenings, advocacy workshops and speakers who would shed the light of truth on the conflict in the Middle East. I also worked heavily in conjunction with a fairly new student group on campus known as Dragons for Israel, which organizes an annual Israel Peace Week in the spring, culminating in a celebration on Yom Ha'atzmaut with Israeli food, music and sports that is open to the entire college community. It is our answer to Israel Apartheid Week that plagues so many campuses in the United States. I was not only involved with these organizations, but a driving force behind them, actively reaching

out to Jewish and non-Jewish students alike in order to foster a better understanding of Israel, its history and what it stands for. Opponents of Israel often use the term “anti-Zionist” as an excuse to vent their truly anti-Semitic sentiments, even when they claim that the two are mutually exclusive things. However, how can a person stand in the way of Israel without standing in the way of the Jewish people? Biblical claims to the land aside, if you oppose a Jewish homeland, you oppose the very idea of what it means to be a Jew. My involvement with Chabad, Hillel and JLIC not only helped grow my leadership skills, but gave me a better appreciation for my fellow Jews. Everyone, regardless of how they were raised, learns at their own pace. Personally, I spent many hours over my college career in serious conversations with friends and acquaintances over Israel and I learned that even Jews can hold dissenting views on the country. We are not a hive mind and we all want different things from our shared heritage. Nevertheless, I am of the idea that we should all agree on the necessity for a Jewish homeland.

It may sound a little clichéd, but Theodor Herzl—perhaps the greatest Zionist of all time—once said, “If you will it, it is no dream.” Well, my dream is live and learn in Israel, the place I have been drawn toward my entire waking life and, if we are being honest, some of my sleeping life as well. That being said, I will myself to make the move and turn my dream into a reality. The existence of a Jewish state is of the utmost importance to me and my time spent supporting this notion, not just over the last five years, but my entire life, is proof of my undying love for Israel. For when parts of the world are no longer safe or welcoming for Jews, Israel will be that one beacon in the darkness like a lighthouse that will steer us away from rocky shores and to the one place where a Jew can be a Jew. Israel is not just my home or a home to the thousands of other

Jews alive today. It is a concept, an ideal that wherever persecution may exist, it is not allowed to cross the threshold of your home.