

Zionism, in essence, is defined by a mission to provide a home and safe haven for every Jewish person in the world in our ancestral homeland of Israel. Zionism has created a Jewish and democratic state that opens its doors to any Jew in need of shelter. Over the past 60 years of Israel's existence it has sheltered Jews escaping from genocide in Europe, expulsion from many Middle Eastern countries following the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, along with Jews evacuating countries such as Russia and Ethiopia, among other countries. Zionism -- the right for the Jewish people to have a homeland and determine their own fate and destiny -- is a mission that was accomplished in 1948 but remains something that Jews and our allies must actively defend, promote, and, most importantly, educate others about.

I grew up in a Zionist household, attended Zionist summer camps, and spent kindergarten through eighth grade at a Zionist Hebrew day school. I learned about Israel from my parents, from my Israeli teachers, from my Israeli camp counselors, and from books, pictures, videos, songs, and posters. I grew up daydreaming about Israel and praying that I would one day have the opportunity to visit my homeland.

In high school I was granted the opportunity by the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee to travel to Israel as a Bob Malkin Young Ambassador (BMYA). I remember feeling so completely consumed with excitement upon receiving my acceptance letter to travel to Israel. When I arrived at Ben Gurion Airport I felt a great sense of relief wash over me, -- all of my hoping, my praying, my hard work, it had paid off -- I was home. I was, and still am, completely mesmerized by Israel. I am inspired by the passion it has stirred within me. I remember thinking, "Two weeks is not nearly enough to truly connect and investigate this land I've spent my life daydreaming about."

I was fortunate enough to return to Israel a year later on the March of the Living (MOL). After spending one utterly devastating week in Poland, we traveled to Israel to celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut. We danced, chanted, sang with all of our beings because Hitler's Solution failed and we prevailed. MOL inspired me to study Judaic Studies in college; it is the reason I ran and became the president of Hillel in my senior year; and it is the reason I am eternally dedicated to the survival of Israel and the Jewish people today and always.

In college I studied Religion with a focus on Judaic Studies. I found myself passionately invested in studying Jewish history. In the summer before my second year of college I lived in Jerusalem for two months studying Orthodox Judaism and interning at the World Zionist Organization's Office for Combatting Antisemitism. In college I was granted opportunities to attend AJC and AIPAC conferences and I worked over the summer at Camp Ramah Darom meeting and befriending numerous Israelis who inspired and enlightened me. My college experience culminated with a published thesis that documented the ghettoization and forced conversion of Jews living in the Italian Peninsula during the sixteenth-

and seventeenth-centuries. My thesis focused on historical trends, such as Renaissance Humanism, the Catholic Reformation, and Christian Hebraism, that I argue altered the dynamics between Catholics and Jews leading to the latter's ghettoization.

My studies and travels in college further emphasized the need for a Jewish state. Zionism in today's world is oftentimes portrayed in a negative light, however I do not see it that way. Zionism is the right for a Jew to have a homeland. It is that simple. For over 2,000 years Jews have wandered, searching desperately for a home and most often they were crucified, tormented, evicted, forced to convert, and/or murdered in search for this so-called home outside of their ancestral homeland. My education taught me that Israel is a country that fights with all of its being to call itself a safe haven for the Jewish diaspora. Zionism is what could have saved our ancestors from torment, eviction, forced conversion, and genocide. Today Israel signals a new age, an age where Jews have a safe haven, a world where Jews do not have to fear forced conversion, torment, eviction, and genocide. I will fight for Israel until my last breathe on this earth because without Israel, who am I?