

Zionism, to me, is a contradiction. It is a secular religion, an unconditional yet limited devotion, a diasporic nationalist movement. Israel means to wrestle with G-d; Judaism means to wrestle with others (or at least it does in my family); Zionism means to wrestle with ourselves. It is a constant pull on my heart and my soul, turning me East every Friday evening and turning me inward towards my conflicted yet steadfast thoughts every other day of the week.

Not all Jews are Zionists and not all Zionists are Jews. It is not a requirement of our religion to support the Jewish state, nor is it exclusively a Jewish ideology. It is, however, uniquely Jewish to feel the connection to Israel, and I say “the” connection and not “a” connection because the one I describe is specific to those of the Jewish faith. It is to feel five thousand years of history and ancestors’ eyes on your back as you stand at the Kotel; it is that rush of excitement when you find out that your acquaintance was also in BBYO; it is the tears that fill your eyes when you hear of the murder of another Israeli you didn’t know and now never will. Zionism is a force strong enough to revive a once-dead language, a collective ideology powerful enough to unite people across the world with a national passion.

I have been to Israel four times, and by this time next year that number will reach five. I am studying International Relations with concentrations in Diplomacy and the Middle East, and minoring in Jewish Studies with Language. My combined interests in politics and Judaism made these areas of study an easy decision to make. My university does not have a study abroad program in Israel, so I took an academic leave of absence and applied directly to Tel Aviv University, where I studied in their Overseas Semester Program. For the first time, I was not a tourist in Israel; I was living there. I bartered in Hebrew in the shuk where I bought my vegetables, took the bus to the beach after class, froze in silence with the rest of the country when the siren sounded on Yom HaZikaron and felt the very air around me change and buzz with

excitement when the sun set and we welcomed in Yom Ha' Atzmaut. Months after my semester abroad ended, I returned to Israel with Hasbara Fellowships, an intensive 16-day program learning history, politics, and advocacy skills. The more I learn about Israel's politics and history, the more confused I become. Zionism to me means embracing the confusion, unabashedly asking questions, and eagerly continuing to learning. More than anything, Zionism is loving and advocating for Israel. It is anything but easy. It is grueling, confusing, and an endless journey.

Zionism is not a static state of being, but rather an ever-evolving notion. If Judaism is unconditionally loving G-d while still asking questions and challenging what we learn, then Zionism is unconditionally loving Israel while still learning and challenging what we think we know. It is loving, questioning, and fighting for our country. It is crying for Israeli victims of Palestinian terrorism, and also shedding tears for Arab victims of Israeli violence. It is supporting Israel's right to exist even when you may not support all of its policies. It is more than a passive ideology. Zionism is an active, burning, white-hot passion for Judaism, for nationality, and for culture. It is learning, it is questioning, but it is permanent. It's who I am, and who I want to be.