

When asked about my personal connection to Zionism, I often struggle to explain my feelings. How can I explain how I connect to a concept that is so innately ingrained into the core of who I am? It's like asking how I connect to my family. Who am I without them? Who would I be without Israel? Typically defined as "a movement for the re-establishment and the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel", modern Zionism, especially as I relate to it, extends far beyond these basic notions. Not only is Zionism about the right we have as Jews to a Jewish nation in our ancestral homeland, but it is also about our obligation as an endlessly persecuted people to use our experiences and our strength to advance the equality and justice for everyone whose human rights are at risk, just like we are trying to do for ourselves in the land of Israel.

I grew up deeply connected with my Jewish community. As a conservative Jew living in Forest Hills NY, I participated in services at the Forest Hills Jewish Center every Shabbat and holiday, attended Solomon Schechter Jewish Day Schools from kindergarden through high school, and spent my summers at Jewish day camps and sleepaway camps. The seeds for my love of Israel were planted as soon as I was born and watered every day of my childhood by virtue of these experiences. I learned about Jewish history and the history of Israel in my classes at school, as well as through my summer camp programming. I spent half my day, every day, learning in Hebrew and connecting with my fellow students, most of whom were first generation American with Israeli parents who would only speak in Hebrew whenever I was at their homes. Israel was a part of everything I did just by way of being alive. It's hard to articulate the ever-present feeling of knowing that even though you were born in one place, there is a whole other country you belong to, that will always be there waiting to receive you with open arms. For much of my life, I thought that this was what it meant to be a Zionist.

Once I was old enough to begin researching and learning about Israeli politics, the Palestinian conflict, and all other topics pertaining to Israel that had been left out of my formal studies in school, I began to realize that Zionism is not just a feeling, but in fact a movement that requires me to take action. I had no idea about the extent of the hatred many people feel toward the country I see as home. As soon as I learned that this was the reality, I became a fierce advocate for the Jewish people's right to liberty and safety through Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state.

Nowadays, it can be incredibly difficult to find a voice for Israel in the midst of the social justice world I am so strongly part of. Many are quick to attack Israel over the plight of the Palestinians. While I, a progressive advocate for human rights and social justice, understand that the current political climate is hard, and oftentimes disappointing, I firmly defend Israel. I have given speeches regarding the misconceptions about Israel, what makes the BDS movement so atrocious, and why Zionism and social justice are not at odds, but rather catalysts for each other. It is Zionism that has taught me that no matter how much oppression a community endures, there is still hope, and there is still proof that human rights will triumph, and it is social justice that has taught me that all oppressed communities are entitled to justice and equality. It is the combination of these values that give me strength to fight for my right to have a Jewish homeland in Israel, as well as the security of all oppressed communities, beyond just my own, whose rights are at risk. I am proud to be a Zionist and to hold strongly to the values Zionism has instilled in me.