

Gabriella Marcellus: Personal Statement

My first exposure to Zionism was at my Jewish summer camp, Camp Judaea, in Hendersonville, North Carolina. Both the American and Israeli counselors taught me to love Israel as my homeland. The camp's intercultural activities showed me how a Jew can always connect with another Jew wherever they are in the world. I learned Jewish unity is centered in both Jewish heritage and connection to Israel. In high school, I lost touch with the Jewish community since we moved out into a rural area in Virginia. I did not identify as Jewish on my college applications in fear that my Jewish identity would be used against me. This was due to my experience attending a rural public school where I encountered anti-Semitic comments for the first time. My experience at Christopher Newport University's Hillel helped me become part of a Jewish community again, especially after my Birthright trip. The trip fostered both my Jewish identity and connection to Israel. Camp Judaea planted the seed that Birthright was able to grow. Afterward my Freshman year Birthright trip, I became President of Hillel. The summer following Birthright, I worked as a Judaica Art Specialist at Camp Judaea. I was Hillel President for three semesters then Outreach Coordinator for two semesters (I finished my undergraduate degree in six semesters). I didn't want my fellow Jew to feel the need to hide their Jewish identity or connection to Israel. The conversations I had with students established trust that translated quickly into their participation in Hillel programming, which included Israel programming. Zionism is crucial for the continuation of the Jewish people. I am grateful for the opportunity to develop as Zionist in college. Without Zionism, I would still feel like a Jew who is fearful to identify as Jewish.

Zionism is recognizing Israel as a state and a holy homeland which is vital to the existence of every Jew's identity. I believe Zionism and Judaism coexist due to both their strong

connection to the land. Being a Zionist means being a positive representation of Israel. On my college campus whether I was the Hillel president or not, I welcomed questions about Israel. More importantly, I understood how I spoke of Israel could make an impact therefore I constantly have in mind speaking positively of Israel.

To be a Zionist today, I stay grounded and proud of my connection to Israel and Jewish heritage and share with others. The pride I have associated with Zionism fueled my personal involvement in Pro-Israel activities in Hillel. Whether I was president or outreach coordinator, I ensured to participate and to encourage others to join me. Encouraging Birthright participation and Israeli film night are great however there's a deeper issue that affects connection to Israel and Jewish heritage. So many of us feel scared and threatened by anti-Semitism. After the shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh, I hosted a Shabbat dinner. I discussed with students how to combat anti-Semitism with Jewish unity. We also had a public space at my university for all students, not just from Hillel, to write their condolences to the synagogue to raise awareness of anti-Semitism. A Zionist has a responsibility to help others combat anti-Semitism by eliminating the fear of being associated with Israel and being Jewish. Furthermore, being a Zionist means being standing up for what is right when something is not ok.