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Personal Statement

Helyn Reich Scholarship

American Zionist Movement

My passion for community has driven my entire life. As an only child of divorced parents, Judaism and Jewish rituals offered me an important sense of belonging as I was growing up. This sense of belonging has a long history in my family. Our family fled Lithuania and the Ukraine in the early 1900s and my grandfather originally grew up in a Jewish agricultural community in Canada, commonly known as “Yidn Bridge,” until his mother moved the family to Winnipeg, where he experienced the Great Depression from the frozen streets as a newsie and delivery boy. Even with the harsh winters and deep poverty, my grandfather felt the power of belonging to and being supported by a community and was an ardent Zionist with a strong connection to the Jewish people. When he moved to New York, he dedicated his life to building Jewish community throughout the fast-growing Long Island suburbs by creating Jewish community centers and summer camps. Although I did not grow up religiously observant and neither did my grandfather, our family has incredible pride in being Jewish and understands the importance of building Jewish community and a thriving Jewish state.

When I learned about the Zionist movement in college, I was struck by how much of it was related to our agricultural history and connection to the land. As an environmentalist, this was incredibly inspiring to me. I learned that many of the early Zionists were dedicated to re-learning our ancient agricultural practices, living with the seasons, and following our agricultural laws such as Shmita and Peah. There is a reason that so many of our prayers focus on rainfall—as an agricultural people, rain truly meant life or death. As a Jew, this also felt revolutionary to me—so much of our current Jewish practice is rooted in the synagogue or the home. Zionism to me offers a different way of engaging with Jewish practice and accessing that community—by engaging with the land, growing food, and caring for our environment.

My personal connection to Israel began in high school, as a fellow in the JCC Manhattan “Teen Greening” program. In partnership with a teen group in Israel, I was introduced to Israel’s innovative environmental conservation activities, all within the context of Jewish concepts of respect for and

preservation of the earth. That connection grew when I interned with Hazon, a Jewish environmental organization, and learned about Earth-based Judaism and how intimately tied our holidays are to Israel's rain and harvest schedule. For example, the book "This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared" by Rabbi Alan Lew discusses the timing of our holiest holidays: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. According to Rabbi Lew, Israel didn't receive rain until the eighth month of the Hebrew calendar. Because rainfall meant the success or failure of their crops, the seventh month became the moment when they considered whether they would live or die over the next year. And so, we have the month of Elul when we repent for our sins, and we hear the shofar blasting open the gates of heaven, and we fast and wonder if our names are being written into the Book of Life or Death. To me, this adds a deeper layer to our actions every year: these traditions and holidays are intertwined with our environment. Zionism brings together these two facets of Judaism that have long been separate: a dedication to an ancestral land and its environment, flora and fauna, and rain cycle; and spiritual connection to other members of your community and with God.