

Samuel Belmonte: Personal Statement

I studied Zionism in college, where I learned about the importance of the Balfour Declaration, Haddassah, Ahad Ha'am, the British Mandate and the White Papers, the history of the Ottoman Empire, and early American involvement in organizing for the realization of an autonomous state for the Jewish people. I learned about nationalism and how nations are made, how collective consciousness is shaped, created, established, and continuously cultivated with care. In high school I took an elective on the Holocaust and learned about this essential point in history for our people, a new world which was born: before and after tragedy, international human rights law, and the birth of a new nation.

I cannot imagine a world without Israel because I have never existed when the state did not. This feels particularly relevant as my home in New York has been the center of several recent anti-semitic attacks. Israel provides both a safe haven for Jews and a renewal of our thriving. Some see it as a religious fulfillment of a promise made to our ancestors. Some see it as a return to our home. For some, this is simply a place where we are in charge of ourselves as we have not been since the destruction of the Second Temple: an autonomous Jewish dwelling place where we determine the laws, create the culture, and are free to exercise our fullest contributions to society as scientists, artists, businessmen, artisans, writers, and much more. Here Jewish life flourishes, no longer reliant on a tolerant non-Jewish power.

Lived experiences in Israel like Selichot at the Kotel the night before Yom Kippur, watching the election results come in at HaMifal in Jerusalem, and being immersed in a Jewish majority, are irreplaceable. Zionism means taking a place in the long chain of our people's story: from the initial Exodus out of Egypt journeying, striving, surviving to become a people and arrive in our place, to the dreams of the early Zionists in the 1800s, the daring international statesmen and soldiers who made the state of Israel possible, and beyond into an unknown future.

It is human nature to worry about the future - politically, geographically, religiously, demographically - who will we be? How will we survive? We have learned to

live with tremendous amounts of uncertainty, precarity, and vulnerability. Zionism now asks great ethical questions: understanding the fragility of human experience through our own trials, how will we build our nation now that we have the chance? What will our values be as Jews from across the globe who take part in this experimental melting pot? How will we live together and who will we become together? How do we as a people reflect on the diversity of struggles which we have survived to get to this point, learn from them, value and honor the places we come from, and take these lessons to contribute to the good of our still relatively new nation? Can we, through the lens of our collective history, become compassionate, empathic forces of good on the international stage? How do we understand ourselves and our own stories? We can learn from the lessons of those who came before us and try to be the things we needed from the world when we were more vulnerable than we are now. I plan to contribute to this future by continuing my education with the aim to specialize in the psychology of traumatized and displaced people in addition to my continued commitment to lay leadership in my Modern Orthodox community.