

Elyana Schwartz
Hilda Morgenstern Scholarship

I want to study in Israel for two main reasons: First, I hope to grow spiritually and intellectually by continuing my religious studies and experiencing Israeli culture first hand. Second, I hope to use what I learn in Israel after I return home to help me become a committed and effective advocate for Israel in the American public sphere.

My Modern Orthodox day school has five core values: Torah, chochmah (knowledge), derech eretz (respect), Yisrael (Israel), and achrayut (responsibility). I have been shaped by an institution that esteems critical thinking, Torah values, a strong knowledge of Jewish studies, and a love for Israel. There is an expectation that the students from my school will spend a year in Israel, so it was never really a question of whether or not I would go to seminary. Although every year there is a group of students who go straight to college, I have learned the value of and developed an appreciation for taking a gap year in Israel.

This is the reason I want to go to Midreshet Lindenbaum. Lindenbaum is one of the most rigorous seminaries attended by American students, and I know that I will be able to expand my knowledge of Torah and have a year of spiritual growth. Despite having been engaged in Jewish learning since I was in kindergarten, there is still much of Judaism I do not know. For example, this year at school I was expected to memorize the order of all Sifrei Tanach. As I was going through the names of each book, I realized that I do not even recognize many of the names on the list, and I could not recall the storyline of the books that I did recognize. Therefore, one of my strongest motivating

factors for studying in Israel is developing a broader knowledge of Judaism and a stronger foundation of textual learning. I want to confidently be able to tell someone the history of my nation and draw lessons from the leaders in Tanach and the mistakes Am Yisrael made in the past.

Additionally, for the past year and a half, I have been taking Midrasha, an advanced, double-period Gemara class for 11th and 12th graders. Upon joining the course, I had a low Gemara vocabulary, and my reading abilities were below par. After the past 18 months of chavruta learning, I have grown tremendously in my reading and understanding of Torah and Gemara, but I am not yet an independent learner.

Therefore, next year, I want to learn enough that I will be able to open a Gemara in the future and read it without any problems.

Also, as I take many honors classes, my courses are very text-based. I often focus on text rather than learning about the spiritual aspect of Judaism, and I want to be able to wake up in the morning and learn halacha, machshava or taamei mitzvot. Next year, I want to gain a greater knowledge of these topics that I have not yet explored. I want to involve myself in conversations next year that explore the power of Hashem, solidify my Jewish identity, and create a stronger appreciation for Hashem as I prepare to enter the adult world. I am seeking a year of spiritual growth, and I want to take advantage of the opportunity to learn and be more confident in my Judaism.

Finally, I want to explore Israeli culture, improve my Hebrew, develop a stronger connection with the land, and experience a year of being in my home away from home.

Israeli culture is something I have always wanted to immerse myself in, and next year is a chance for me to experience what it means to truly live in Israel.

However, my own personal growth is only part of why I want to study in Israel; once I am back home in the United States, I hope to pursue a career in public policy and to advocate for Israel and for Jewish issues. While my school inspired me to be interested in Judaism and seek a year of spiritual growth, my experience on Capitol Hill and my involvement in AIPAC have produced my interest in public policy and government. This past summer I interned for Senator John McCain. This was an opportunity I pursued because while I appreciate living in my Jewish community, I also wanted experiences that would expand my worldview. This internship brought me together with other high school and college students with varying ideologies and backgrounds, and I learned so much by being exposed to new ideas and people. Prior to this internship, I had had few relationships with people who were not Jewish, but for most of my summer, I talked, worked, ate, and bonded with teens and adults from different cultures and learned about their lives. I was amazed by the places they have been, the people they have met, and the experiences they have had. I also experienced a much broader range of American life by sorting mail from constituents, answering their phone calls, and giving tours of the Capitol. I heard from homeless Americans struggling with addiction who begged for help at 2:00 a.m. over the phone. One woman called so often that my colleagues and I could identify her voice within the first two seconds of listening to her call. They had nothing and turned to the government for help.

These people taught me what government is all about. Prior to my internship, I thought politicians worked for themselves. Based on their own ideas, they would pass laws and do what they wanted. But as an intern, I was instructed to record the complaint of every single phone call and every letter, whether from a constituent or not, so that Senator McCain would know where his people stood and what they needed from him. I learned what it means for our senators to represent the people, and I learned that they serve not themselves but the people who elect them. After this experience, I discovered my passion for government, and I realized that I want to serve others through advocacy and involving myself in government.

While I was interning, I also realized that I was an ambassador for Jews on Capitol Hill. Being the only observant Jew in the office, I involved myself in hour long conversations with my colleagues, explaining my religion, practices, rituals, and love for Israel. I realized how little others know about Judaism and Israel, and I discovered that in addition to having a career in politics, I also want to become an advocate for Israel and Judaism.

Working in Senator McCain's office taught me a lot about politics and how the government works. It also got me interested in the government and the politics of decisions. Therefore, within the next few months, I will be interning for the Department of Defense and will be shadowing an army general. As someone who esteems the efforts of the government, this experience will further expose me to different ways the government operates and how decisions are made.

Furthermore, I have been involved in AIPAC since my freshman year in high school. My involvement has ranged from writing school newspaper articles about AIPAC and Israel advocacy to attending the policy conference every year for the past four years. My AIPAC experiences taught me how important it is to advocate for what you believe in and spread the truth about Israel. One of my most influential experiences was when I heard Mosab Hassan Yousef speak at the 2016 AIPAC conference. He is the son of Hassan Yousef, one of the founders of Hamas, and he worked undercover for the Shin Bet, betraying his family and community. He spoke of his experiences, challenges, and desire to spread the truth about Israel. Later that day, I watched *The Green Prince*, a documentary about Mosab Hassan Yousef, and after the conference I read his book. A few months later, I had a private dinner with John Calvin, the grandson of a different Hamas founder named Said Bilal. Although his story was different from Mosab's in the way he escaped his home, where he ended up, and the type of person he is today, he also left Hamas. These stories were inspiring and enlightening, as I learned about a different culture and other people's life stories, and they also reminded me that it is important to act on behalf of your beliefs.

My experience in Senator McCain's office and the encounters I had with family members of Hamas leaders helped me to realize that I wish to spread Jewish awareness while being involved in the political sphere. Therefore, whether I work for the U.S. government or a public policy organization that promotes Israel and Jewish interests such as AIPAC or the ADL, I plan on pursuing a career that combines two of my interests: public policy and Jewish advocacy. I have recently been accepted to the

University of Maryland Scholars program with a public policy major. As I will be studying public policy and living in the Washington, D.C. area, I see myself continuing to participate in AIPAC and interning on Capitol Hill or for a Jewish political organization. Perhaps I will want to work for an organization such as The Israel Project, an American organization I spent a week working for in the summer of 2015 that is dedicated to spreading the truth about Israel.

With the career goals I have, it is important to spend a year in Israel. As I will be taking advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have a year of spiritual growth, I also seek an opportunity to shape my identity as someone interested in public policy and government. Israel faces unique challenges that are not present in the United States. To study Israeli politics, to learn about Israel's relations with other countries, and to read articles about Israel is one thing, but actually experiencing these things is another. Spending a year in Israel will give me the opportunity to immerse myself into Israeli society, as I will internalize how the state operates--from the different form of government to the safety concerns of average people. There is only so much I can understand about Israel while living in America, which is why it is critical to spend a year in Israel and experience the life. Only then can I truly be a good, well-informed advocate.

After a year of learning and exploring the land, I will have had first-hand experiences that will help me relate to what I plan to achieve in the future. I want to use my time in Israel to focus on my Jewish identity and develop a stronger Jewish foundation so that I

can be a proud Jewish woman in the secular adult world once I return home. My year in Israel will help me to maintain my Jewish values and practices in the modern, professional world. With a stronger identity, attachment to the land, and developed thinking skills, I will be able to channel my spiritual growth towards my career in public policy.