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Hilda Specter Morgenstern Merit Scholarship

Involvement in government is built upon the idea that one must ask questions, challenge the status quo, and take action. These are also the ideas that the study of Torah is built upon: asking questions while being respectful of others opinions and striving to put into practice what you learn. Amudim, the gap year program I will be attending next year, is all about encouraging critical thinking and being exposed to multiple perspectives as a means of encouraging personal growth and personal responsibility.

My understanding of the importance of analyzing and understanding multiple perspectives in a historical government point of view, was brought to fruition in 11th grade; I had an incredible history teacher who taught me how to think critically and how to properly analyze a historical time period, source, and perspective. Her class encouraged me to delve deeper into my studies of government, motivating me to take an advanced placement course in US government this year. I not only learned the ins and outs of how our government functions, but also how to look at the political process more reflectively and even personally. I observed how the United States and its government evolved because of people who challenged the status quo, stood up for themselves and others, and fought for their ideas and ideals. I discovered that aside from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the backbone of our Democracy is debate engendered by our right to Freedom of Speech.

I was able to see these ideas in practice when I attended both the AIPAC Schusterman Student Conference this past October and a Model UN conference. At model UN, I was on the Commission on the Status of Women. In it, there were many different countries represented and we discussed issues pertaining to women such as how to involve them in

the political process. That experience really opened my eyes to the hardships that women endure from participating in the political process in countries all over the world. Being on the Commission on the Status of Women made me even more grateful that I'm able to have a voice in politics and empowered me to want to help women and all people around the world to participate in government and voting. Additionally, at both these events, I learned how to begin an effective conversation and how to properly listen and respond during the dialogue which ensued. When I experienced how powerful my voice could be even as a high school senior, I realized that government and public advocacy for Israel could, and would, be a part of my future.

The experience also made me recognize how much I wanted to hone my advocacy and critical thinking skills, to increase my knowledge of Israel, and, most importantly, to find and define my voice. A gap year spent in Israel would enable me to work on all three.

Interestingly, at each of the schools that I have attended, the place where I most engaged in the practice of debate was in my Talmud classes. It has been there that I learned how to grapple with ideas and perspectives and respectfully question and argue with both my peers and the text. I am eager to focus more on this aspect of my studies, and I specifically chose a gap year program which dedicates both its mornings and most evenings to the study of Talmud. Next year, I hope to further and deepen my independent study in Talmud and other Judaic subjects as well.

While in Israel, I also want to grow as a Jewish woman. I am inspired by women who begun essential conversations, which others feared to begin. At Amudim, these conversations are valued and promoted. Teachers are innovative thinkers at the top of their fields. Students are both motivated and self-reflective. Our classrooms are not only in the Beit Midrash, but also at Universities (Bar Ilan), museums, and within Israeli

society through internships and volunteer opportunities. There is no question, that the opportunity to explore ideas new and old with different people and in a different cultural setting will be empowering. Just like when we learn Torah, we use lots of sources to understand a ruling in the Gemara or to interpret what the Torah or a Rabbi said, we have to use lots of different ideas when we try to portray a concept or describe a challenging situation a community or individual is going through. As a Jewish woman who will have studied in Israel, I believe I will have a new perspective. I think that there is something special about living in Israel for a year, beyond just the time itself. You don't just get to see the Dead Sea and the other "touristy" attractions, you get to really experience the remarkable hidden gems of Israel.

I am convinced that I will emerge from next year with stronger analytic skills, a broader understanding of Israeli society and a voice that has much more to offer to the conversations that are important to me and the world around me. While I am not yet sure what I wish to do professionally, I know for sure that I want to stay involved with government, public policy, and public advocacy and not just on a macro level but on a more personal level as well. I am the daughter of a synagogue rabbi and have spent a lot of time with children at many different shuls, trying to understand their needs and encouraging them to fight for what they believe in. I think that advocacy starts small. It can start from standing up for your friend who is hurt, offering a suggestion to your teacher or even asking a hard question in class. I am also a woman growing up in the era of increased female empowerment. Knowing that the generations before me, at times, could not stand up for themselves, has made me appreciate the power of my voice. I feel the responsibility of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, as just two examples. I feel the strength of Blu Greenberg, Rabba Sara Hurwitz, and Hilda Specter Morgenstern who are trailblazers in the Jewish world. I feel the responsibility of my grandparents' generations to continue to grow and add to the Jewish people in so many

ways and fight for them all over the world. I feel the responsibility from the founding fathers and mothers, both of Israel and the United States, who believed in a democracy where everyone can be heard and understood that the very creation of both the United States and Israel were both challenges to the status quo.

When I graduate college, I hope to not only use my own voice to advocate, but to also promote and encourage other individuals and groups to use their voices to make a difference. I will use the guidance and experiences of the people who have come before me to continue my interest and passion for advocacy and government. My experience in Israel will be incredibly beneficial to me, and I hope to come out of it with the skills I need in order to continue my advocacy propelled by serious Torah learning and a sense of responsibility.

In the series by the Wichita Beacon, Mrs. Morgenstern reflected that “I was given a special responsibility when God gave the Torah on Mt. Sinai... try to pattern myself and all those I live among after Him so that righteousness, justice, and peace should flourish among all the nations of the world.” I cannot echo Mrs. Morgenstern’s words enough. God gave the Torah to the Jews, but with it he gave the tremendous responsibility to ensure that “righteousness, justice, and peace” are found throughout the world. I’m excited to properly fulfill this responsibility with the new knowledge and experiences I gain from my Israel experience.