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Hilda Specter Morgenstern Merit Scholarship Essay

From an early age, I have been deeply committed to strengthening Jewish life and community. I am originally from Los Angeles, but have straddled two worlds as I have extended family in Israel and visited there during summers. After high school, I decided to forgo college and instead moved to Israel in order to serve as a lone soldier in the IDF. Now, as a university student in Israel, I continue to dedicate myself to the mission of serving Israel and the Jewish people. Growing up, I struggled to find my place, and often felt like an outsider, “too Israeli” for my town because of my culture, but “not Israeli enough” for my family because of my American upbringing. Despite this challenge, I learned to value diversity, and strove to bridge the gap between these two cultures. I feel deeply grateful for the opportunities I have had to make a positive impact and support the Jewish community in meaningful ways, both in Los Angeles and in Israel.

For me, serving in the IDF was more than just a duty—it was an opportunity to lead, inspire, and shape future generations. The IDF unites diverse groups serving a common mission. This experience allowed me to contribute not just as a soldier, but as a mentor and a leader to young people. Being a woman in a combat role poses its own challenges, but I understand the importance of having women in these positions. As a Sergeant in the Isuf Kravi Brigade, I led by example, instilling values of respect, discipline, and integrity. I was selected for the Company Level Excellency Award during basic training, and later was named as the Outstanding Soldier for the Commanders Course. However, I realized that my greatest achievement wasn't demonstrated by the awards but my positive impact on those around me. The soldiers I led are now shaping Israeli society. Knowing I played a role in their growth not only as soldiers but also in their personal and professional roles fills me with pride and honor. Especially now, when national security and Zionism are more critical than ever, I feel privileged to have played a significant role during my service. This experience has profoundly shaped my life and reinforced my commitment to the importance of service, leadership, and personal growth.

Although it was challenging, my time in the IDF only strengthened my love of and appreciation for Israel and commitment to its future. Attending university and becoming involved in the Israeli community is a natural continuation on my path to giving back and making a positive contribution. I have been interested in diplomacy and advocacy from an early age, and recognize the potential that these fields offer for making a meaningful impact on the Jewish community, Israel and the world. I feel grateful to have had many opportunities to engage in different diplomacy programs and contribute to my community through advocacy and education. As a Community Outreach Intern with StandWithUs, and an intern at the Los Angeles Jewish Federation, I designed and implemented educational projects in various high schools, created curricula and organized events in an effort to foster awareness and understanding of Jewish history and combating antisemitism.

I was also selected for several prestigious governmental diplomacy initiatives. As a member of the Youth Advisory Council of the 33rd Congressional District, I met regularly with the council and with United States Congressman Ted Lieu to discuss various public policies and issues of importance within the district. We worked to design, write and pitch several proposed bills to the congressman and the rest of the board. I was also selected for the TOMODACHI-MUFG Scholarship as a student ambassador to Japan, representing Southern California. This program was a diplomatic initiative between the United States and Japanese governments designed to deepen the mutual understanding between Japanese and American youth in potential disaster areas and provided a first hand experience in the value of intercultural dialogue and exchange. I learned that different cultures bring their own ideas about how they view problems, but that those differences can be useful when devising potential solutions.

My work with the Righteous Conversations, an intergenerational program that fostered connections with Holocaust survivors through art, allowed me to collaborate with Holocaust survivors and create art projects that were displayed in galleries, promoting empathy, understanding, and remembrance. As President of the LA Museum of the Holocaust Youth Board, I led community initiatives, engaged with members, and managed funds to support various projects and events. I have been able to continue this type of work today through my involvement with the Foundation for the Welfare of Holocaust Victims, providing emotional support and companionship to Holocaust survivors and ensuring they have access to essential services and a network of care. This work has deepened my commitment to preserving the memory of the Holocaust and educating others about its significance.

I have been able to build upon my earlier experience in the US to help contribute to diplomacy and advocacy programs in Israel. I was selected for the StandWithUs Fellowship Program, a competitive program in leadership and public diplomacy designed to equip Israeli university students with the skills to become ambassadors and leaders for Israel. I also am serving in The DiploAct Excellence Program, a prestigious leadership initiative that provides comprehensive diplomacy training through workshops, lectures, and tours.

I feel exceptionally fortunate that these advocacy programs have given me the resources to pioneer my own projects as well. This semester, I took initiative and developed a project for UC Berkeley. After speaking with many students in the Jewish community at UC Berkeley, I was surprised to discover that despite the numerous Jewish organizations involved on campus, the students felt that there was a lack of education and understanding about how to productively address the conflicts they face every day as Jewish students. I am organizing a comprehensive workshop on Israel advocacy and combating antisemitism, which is scheduled to take place next fall. I have engaged with various key players, including students and faculty members who are actively involved in Jewish organizations at UC Berkeley, and organizations in Israel that will help facilitate the event. Their support and feedback have been instrumental in shaping the workshop's curriculum and objectives. My goal is to expand this initiative to all the UC Campuses, and the workshop at UC Berkeley will serve as a model for future workshops at other UC campuses.

Through these programs, I have not only learned how to actively engage in public diplomacy and leadership, but am also putting these tools into action by creating educational initiatives that will empower others to advocate for Jewish causes and promote Israel's many positive contributions to the world. After October 7th exposed the depth of global antisemitism and the ease with which even well-meaning college students are swayed into protesting against Israel, I feel even more of an urgency to get involved politically and socially. Because of my background, I will always have ties with both Israel and America, but now instead of seeing this as a detriment, I understand this mixed identity as one of my greatest assets. I aim to continue the work I am doing in public diplomacy, both during my time in university and after, to strengthen the long term connection between these two communities, My goal is to ultimately find a career where I can dedicate as much of my life as I can to giving back to the communities that have given me so much, and shaped who I am.