

Hilda Specter Morgenstern Merit Scholarship

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DISCLAIMER: I have a disability that impacts visual processing and as such have a hard time catching spelling or punctuation errors, please keep this in mind as you read the essay and may encounter some errors.

Hilda Morgernstern once said “As a Jew, I am commanded to be motivated by love of God and to teach my children about God.” I could not agree more with her. Jewish education is imperative to a strong Jewish future. Every Jew deserves a connection to their tradition and creator. Therefore Jewish education should be accessible for every Jew regardless of ability. Hilda goes on to explain that “it is not possible to love and serve God unless we also love and serve our fellow men and our community.” Through my own experience living with Cerebral Palsy and interacting with the disabled community I realized that an accessible Jewish education was not a reality for all and neither was an inclusive environment. I decided that my own experience living with a disability gives me the opportunity to contribute to my community and create the necessary infrastructure so that others like me can participate fully in life including having a strong Jewish identity.

This decision first materialized in middle school. My class was given a public speaking assignment and I wrote my speech on what it is like to live with a disability. I not only presented it in class but was also given the opportunity to present it at a world CP day conference and a number of other events. I saw the way I was able to help kids and adults alike better understand what my life was like as well as how to perceive and react to disability as a whole. I became an ambassador for Holland Bloorview, a kids rehabilitation hospital that works on disability inclusion. I have spoken at a number of their events over the years as well as done media interviews for local news stations on disability awareness. One of the most impactful opportunities I was given was when I was interviewed for a magazine article on the importance of disability representation in media. As a proud Jew, I believe that each step I take in creating an overall more accessible world fulfills the obligation that every Jew has to be a light unto the nations.

While it is important to share our light with the non-Jewish world we cannot shy away from the many issues within the Jewish community especially when it comes to disability inclusion. I believe every child deserves the right to an inclusive, accommodating Jewish education and that many children could be being accommodated in the Jewish Day school system but they are not being given the opportunity. As someone who has experience navigating the system with a disability I know the challenges but, I also know the benefits. I understand the impact of inclusion, of being able to fulfill my full academic potential while enhancing my knowledge and pride in Judaism. Through working and volunteering at Kalya's Children's Center which provides camp, education and recreation to children with disabilities in a Jewish environment, I have interacted with many children in a variety of capacities including providing one on one support and leading group activities. I know some of these children need the specialization of the center as well as the comfort of being around other kids like them but I also know that many could reap the benefits of being mainstreamed for school. I plan to obtain a degree in education and special education that will allow me to bring my experience to the forefront. I would love to teach or be an administrator where I could implement ideas and policies for a more accessible Jewish day school system in Toronto. I am willing to advocate for resources through the local agencies and federations, whether it means learning the rights

surrounding government funding or just raising awareness that more of the education budget at Jewish federations and schools needs to go towards accessibility. Even Though there may be finances required to fulfill the goal of equitable education, one of the biggest barriers to an inclusive educational environment remains the assumptions and stereotypes that exist surrounding disability. As such I have begun trying to break down barriers by co-leading the Tikvah Club at my school. We work together to plan educational and recreational events for committee members to help educate them and make them comfortable around the topic of disability, so that they are able to educate the school and larger Jewish community about disability. My co-heads and I lead them in planning and executing events for the school's inclusivity week and other school-wide initiatives involving accessibility and inclusion. Both now and in the future I plan to make Jewish education a more inclusive space where all children can thrive together.

The purpose of Jewish education is to foster Jewish identity, pride and countinty. Israel is a large part of both Jewish pride and continuity. Without Israel's existence the Jewish people would have no safe home to call their own, the destruction of Israel would have devastating and catastrophic impacts on world Jewry. Therefore Jewish educators must focus on instilling Pro-Isreal attitudes as well as the skills and knowledge to back them up. As someone working to become a Jewish educator I am participating in Hasbara's High school internship program to increase my own knowledge on Israel advocacy so that I can impart it to my students. The security that Israel provides the Jewish people is not the only reason that it is important to preserve the land. Israel is filled with rich Jewish History that should not be lost. I am looking forward to exploring the rich history of the land next year on various educational trips that will deepen my connection to Judaism, the land, and my fellow Jews. Studying in MMY will provide me with the opportunity to strengthen my Jewish knowledge through a breadth of high quality classes that take a deep dive into traditional Judaism , develop my religious identity further and create connections. The greater knowledge I have of Judaisim and the stronger my own personal Jewish identity the more I will be able to impart to my students and be the role model I wish I had. Disability representation is important, being able to see someone who faces similar challenges to you, shares your values and is able to create change is incredibly empowering. I hope to be that representation so I have to build my skills and a year of studying in Israel focused on growth is a great opportunity to achieve that.

I know that change will not come easily and a lot of the work I do will probably revolve around creating a mindset shift and resources so that the day schools can fill the current gap in support for students. It will take time but I am determined to do it one step at a time. Through studying in Israel I will be able to strengthen the passion I have for Judaism and my understanding of the importance of Jewish education which will allow me to redouble my efforts when it gets tough and it inevitably will. Hilda said "Sometimes it seems to me that no generation has ever needed traditional religion like those of us who are trying to make our way through the twentieth century." As the world becomes increasingly more polarized and objective morality is slowly disappearing, I have been able to use my Judaism to stay grounded in values and tradition that guide my thought, speech and action. I can only imagine that the world will continue on its current trajectory making Jewish education even more important thereby increasing the need for every child to access it. I plan to not only raise my children with the

Jewish pride, knowledge and values I have come to view as necessities, but to raise as many students as possible on those same foundations.