

Shira Bach — Hilda Specter Morgenstern Merit Scholarship Essay

Politics first entered my life not through textbooks, but around the Shabbat dinner table. As the only daughter in a family of boys, I learned early how to navigate disagreement. My chosen solution? A vote. This belief in compromise and diplomacy led me into student government as president, into a healthy obsession with the West Wing, and eventually, into a deeper fascination with politics itself.

As my interests matured, I came to understand that political outcomes are shaped not only by personalities but by ethical frameworks, economic incentives, and historical context. Israel represents the convergence of these forces. Its political system grapples daily with questions at the heart of political theory: balancing security and civil liberties, sustaining democracy in a divided society, and defining the responsibilities of a nation-state in an interconnected world. Studying in Israel would allow me to explore these questions in real time while strengthening my connection to Jewish history, language, and community. Thus, developing my Jewish identity is inseparable from my academics.

I want to study in Israel because I see it as the most meaningful place to deepen both my Jewish identity and my intellectual commitment to public policy, foreign affairs, and international relations. Israel is not only central to Jewish history and culture; it is also a living case study in democracy, diplomacy, and moral decision-making under pressure. Studying there would allow me to connect personal identity with academic inquiry, grounding my future work in lived experience. Especially as a Jewish woman, I am particularly conscious of the significance of representation as I join an historically-male-dominated area. Being surrounded by women of similar background and ambitions will have an incredible influence on my understanding of how identity – both of religion and gender – intersects with government.

Academically, throughout high school, my interest in politics pushed me to explore beyond the classroom. At the Tikvah Scholars Program, I studied the philosophical and economic foundations of political systems. I then applied these ideas through research at Lehigh University's International Relations Department, where I studied deception in domestic policy as a tool for achieving foreign policy objectives. This experience sharpened my interest in international relations and reinforced my desire to pursue a politics major at Princeton.

Princeton's politics major is especially compelling to me because of its integration of political theory, comparative politics, and international relations. Studying in Israel would complement this academic approach by placing theory alongside practice, allowing me to observe how abstract principles operate within a complex geopolitical reality.

Beyond academics, I have pursued hands-on experience in public advocacy. As an intern with StandWithUs and the American Jewish Committee, I engaged directly with advocacy work, learning how policy debates translate into messaging, campaigning, and education. These roles taught me the importance of informed, ethical advocacy, particularly with regard to Israel, antisemitism, and foreign policy.

After college, I plan to further these skills and pursue roles that bridge scholarship and public engagement through government service, policy research, or nonprofit advocacy. I am particularly interested in

working at the intersection of ethical governance and foreign policy, as my research experience reflects. Studying in Israel will prepare me for this path by exposing me firsthand to diplomatic challenges, security dilemmas, and the realities of policymaking in a region that is often discussed without nuance.

Finally, I expect my study in Israel to shape my identity as a Jewish woman interested in government and public policy. As I enter a traditionally male-dominated field, I am especially aware of the importance of voice, representation, and moral conviction. Israeli society and history offer a powerful framework for understanding how identity and governance inform one another.

In Israel, I hope to grow as a student, an advocate, and a Jew. By studying its politics, engaging with its people, and confronting its challenges, I will be better equipped to contribute thoughtfully to public discourse and policy in the United States and beyond. Ultimately, studying in Israel is not just an academic or spiritual opportunity for me—it is a formative step toward becoming the leader I aspire to be.