

Gili Fleekop

Muhlenberg College

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My mother moved to America when she was a young woman, a few years after completing her service in the IDF, with some broken English, a few suitcases, and a constant uneasiness about whether or not she was making the right decision. She met my dad a few months earlier on a seemingly quick vacation to Philadelphia to visit friends, and as I like to say, she decided to stay forever. My mother's journey to America was the beginning of my own journey grappling with my ever-changing, ever-evolving, and extremely complex Jewish/American/Israeli identity.

My love of Israel was introduced to me from the day I came into this world. Bamba was stuffed down my throat as soon as I could chew. Hebrew was being shouted constantly and phone calls to and from Netanya were daily. The beat of Israeli music filled my house as my mom would run around the kitchen laughing and dancing as she made coffee for the guests that never seemed to leave. Ever.

As a child, I was always confused. I didn't know if I was American or Israeli or just Jewish. I didn't know what to identify as, and for the most part, I still don't know. But it was not until recently that I realized my self-identity crisis was what made me who I am.

One morning I could wake up and go to class and be "Gili", speak English, and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And one morning I could be "G-eelee!" and speak Hebrew and eat schnitzel and hummus. And that's okay. I know that my love for my religion and culture

do not need to be defined all of the time. I can go to Hillel one Shabbat and feel part of something. I can pray loudly and sing joyously and cry with excitement about how miraculous it is to be alive in such a beautiful world. And on other Shabbats, I can sit in the back of the service and think to myself quietly, confused about what exactly my religion means to me. And that's what I love about Judaism, it's okay to have all these feelings and questions. It's okay to be confused and lost. I mean, aren't we all?

My constant confusion is what made me decide to study abroad at Tel Aviv University next semester, in the fall of 2016. I want to get lost. I want to wake up and hear Hebrew. I want to go out of my comfort zone. Studying abroad in Israel will allow me to grow and mature into the Jewish woman that I know I am. I'm eager to go to class with a list of questions that I know can not all be answered. I am ready to be critical of Israel and understand its fundamental problems. And I am ready to immerse myself in a culture that feels like the perfect combination of comforting and foreign.

Earlier this year, I attended AIPAC's progressive student retreat in D.C. When I arrived at the conference, the room was filled with college aged students who were obviously eager to talk about Israel. I had not come with any friends or classmates, so I was afforded the opportunity to sit down and write my thoughts heading into the conference. I kept a journal the whole weekend with my notes on the various policymakers that spoke, the incredibly determined and inspiring students that I had met, and all of the ideas I wanted to bring back to my campus. It was an incredibly unique opportunity to meet other self-identified progressive supporters of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. I had never really met many kids my age who were as passionate as I am about Israel and all the challenges that come with being a supporter of Israel. Back at

Muhlenberg, I served as the Head of Israel Affairs on Hillel's Student Executive Board, as the Student Leader and President of Mishelanu, a national organization for Israeli American college students, as a member of PhillyIsrael, an Israel advocacy group centered in Philadelphia, a Cornerstone Fellow with a focus on Israeli Affairs and bringing Israeli culture and advocacy to camp, and as a Jewish Educator at the overnight camp where I spent my summers. Yet in D.C., I realized that there were hundreds of kids just like me. We all were working extremely hard to bring discourse centered around Israel to our college campuses, and most importantly, we were not alone.

After that weekend, I knew that I wanted to go into some profession related to government and public policy. I was already on the pre-law track, but I found some clarity in the goals that I wanted to pursue in the future. I envisioned myself working for a political organization one day, perhaps inspiring students like myself to engage in discourse on campus. However, before I graduate and pursue these goals, it is essential that I spend a semester in Israel.

Studying in Tel Aviv will allow me to form more complex and deep opinions about Israel. Because the truth of the matter is, up until I study abroad Israel will always be a temporary vacation spot for me. It will remain in the constant stage of my Birthright memories and fun times with my cousins at the beach. And as amazing as that is, I want it to be a home, not just a few weeks' stay. I want to experience the everyday life of being an Israeli. I want to engage in dialogue with Israelis on a daily basis and truly get a feel for the land that I spend so much time and energy advocating for. Because the most memorable moments in Israel are the ones that no one really expects. They are the taxi rides you take from city to city. They are the conversations

you have with people in the park. And they are the friends you make on the bus. Forget the touristy stuff and look closer, at the people and the culture. They are the restaurant owners and the school children that inhabit this raw, authentic “Israeli-ness”.

A few weeks ago I attended a retreat for Israeli Americans in New York City. I remember sitting in a group and being instructed to answer the question, “Is supporting Israel from America worth it? Do you feel hopeless?” A young man in my group spoke about the hopelessness he felt on his campus and saw no point in advocating for Israel anymore. He thought it was a waste of energy and that the only real way of supporting Israel was by moving there. I was a bit angered by his statement and responded respectfully that I disagreed with him. I told him that if he felt hopeless and tired then it meant he was doing something right. I told him his constant energy and time were being recognized and appreciated. I told him that if we love something enough, we don’t give up on it. If we love something, we criticize it, in an attempt to make it better. I told him the fact that he came to a retreat to be with other Israeli American college students was enough to see that deep down he still cared and had the passion and spark that all of us sitting around him had inside us.

After the activity, he came up to me and thanked me. He wasn’t used to the “chutzpah” and needed some tough love. Fast forward to today, February 15th. I am sitting on my laptop booking my ticket to New York to have this same friend bring me with him to an Israel Summit for Jewish Leaders. He is bringing me along with him for a five hour training session for student leaders, which will be held at the Federation of New York. I plan on bringing the same notebook that travels with me from retreat to retreat. I plan on taking notes and asking questions, because maybe I don’t know if I’m a Jewish American or an American Jew or an Israeli American, but I

do know that I'm Gili Fleekop, and I have a passion for engaging with others, asking questions, learning, and advocating for the place that I love with every single bone in my body: Israel, the Jewish Homeland.

P.S.

Mrs. Morgenstern's words: "My religion has helped me to find the rock on which to stand in the swirling conflicting tides of twentieth century thought and action."

This really inspired me.

Although I never got the chance to know such an incredible Jewish role model, I think that from this quote, I can say that Judaism and Israel have provided me a very similar experience to that of Mrs. Morgenstern's. Sometimes I feel as if I am drowning with all of the stresses and conflicts that seem to demand my attention. Sometimes I feel lost. Yet no matter how much I feel hopeless and confused, I never feel alone. Because as Mrs. Morgenstern so accurately stated, we have this special rock to stand on amidst the swirling tides...