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### American Zionist Movement Scholarship Application: Statement of Purpose

I never had a relationship with Israel growing up. After leaving Hebrew school, I barely had a relationship with Judaism. No summer camps, day school, or even services. It wasn't until I began thinking about a gap year after high school that I grew curious about what Israel means to me. All I knew was Israel was some hot-button issue people really liked to get mad about. When I told my friends I was going to live on a kibbutz, I'd use the disclaimer, "But I really don't know how I feel about Israel – yet."

I bought some history books and a subscription to Haaretz, but nothing prepared me for my time in Israel or the magnetic pull that still lingers in my chest, begging me to return. Expecting a few pleasant months to clear my head before college, I instead discovered my identity. The comforts of my early childhood returned. On Erev Shabbat I'd be surprised I remembered the prayers my mom recited when I was little. I loved that to my new friends, of course I wasn't the token Jew. I loved Hebrew. Israel felt so much like home that I extended my stay. When I scooped ice cream in Tel Aviv, customers would patiently remind me how to say "duvdevanim" for the tenth time. Distant relatives would invite me over for Shabbat. A waiter told me, "Let's try and read the Hebrew menu today, ok?" Going to Israel was like finding a family I never knew I had. It was realizing that this is *my* people, and that Israel is here for *me*.

That is why I want to be there for Israel, too. Returning to school and seeing how powerful anti-Israel sentiment can be here was devastating. When the Students for Justice in Palestine blocked the doors to our Friends of Israel event and distributed anti-Israel propaganda,

I felt suckerpunched. When protesters ignored me because of my affiliation, I felt hopeless. When I feared my friends in Israel had been stabbed because I hadn't heard from them, I was scared. When Ezra Schwartz's death rocked the Massachusetts Jewish community, but my non-Jewish friends had no idea, I wasn't deterred. People are always telling me to stay away from Israel – from the conversation, the danger, the conflict. But I know how much promise that land contains, and I'll never lose the home I found there. Whenever I see anti-Israel flyers, or something inflammatory online, I'm not discouraged. I'm motivated even more to educate myself, to understand the country, to actually experience Israel. When my opinions are challenged, I want the facts and first-hand experience to back them up. I want to understand the culture, people, and politics. I ache to study at an institution like Tel Aviv University and experience the city as a local. I know I have so much more to learn about this home my ancestors built before me, and I cannot wait to discover what lies in store should I be able to return.