A post written by Sarah Tuttle Singer, an editor for Times of Israel newspaper, comes to mind:

“Zionism is a work in progress. It's imperfect, yes, but it's about striving and improving and making things better. It's about building, planting, tending and reaping sweet fruits. Zionism is about wanting what's fair and just. It is NOT about subjugation or humiliation or occupation - but unless we stand up and defend Zionism by doing what's right, we will lose the right to say we are a light unto the nations.”

To me, Zionism is the basis of which the Jewish question can be permanently removed, and a reality where Jews would no longer have to live as second class citizens, and face systematic racial and religious persecution. Zionism encompasses the self-determination of the Jewish people and the idea of a national home.

Although a part of my family lives in Israel, I didn’t feel a personal connection to Zionism until after the Gaza war in the summer of 2014. I had just started school at UC Berkeley as a transfer student, and decided to join a Zionist club on campus called Tikvah during club rush after getting acquainted with a couple of friendly Jewish students, not really knowing what Zionism meant. In the first month we organized a counter-protest against a group called SJP (Students for Justice in Palestine), who would be protesting on campus to promote BDS, namely divestment from Israel including cooperation with Israeli researchers, professors, and study abroad programs between Israel and UC Berkeley. On the day of the protest I came face to face with students who were vehemently opposed to Zionist ideology, for the first time in my life. Headed by Dr. Hatem Bazian, the co-founder of SJP, I heard students chanting for their support of an intifada. They spoke of the injustices that Israel had committed against the Palestinian people, and their rhetoric centered on the Israel’s legitimacy to exist as a nation. Had their views been less extreme, Israeli-activism wouldn’t have been on my list of things to get involved in. It was my first time being exposed to anti-Zionism and borderline anti-Semitism, and something in me changed. When I was younger, I had heard stories of my mom narrowly escaping a terror attack on a bus in Haifa, and was aware that my uncle lived in a town in northern Israel where attacks had occurred, but none of it struck any nationalist sentiments inside me until I was exposed to students who were against the existence of a country that gave my family a place to call home when Iraq decided to expel Jews in 1949.

Since then, I became involved in various campaigns and events in Tikvah for two full years before graduating, and had the opportunity to learn what Zionism is beyond just the legal definition. Being a Zionist to me means to educate oneself on all aspects of the conflict, to think critically instead of blindly accepting pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian propaganda, and to promote solution-oriented approach rather than favoring the interests of only group without considering the other. Being a Zionist is not just being pro-Israel; rather it is the acknowledgment of the plight both Israelis and Palestinians have faced, without undermining Israel’s right to exist as a nation-state of the Jewish people. Last of all, as I learned through a story told by a Tikvah alumni whose activism I admire, Zionism means the courage to stand up for one’s beliefs, even in extreme cases where the opposition group is chanting anti-Zionist rhetoric and burning the Israeli flag on campus.