Being Jewish came easy. From an early age, my parents stressed the importance of being a part of a Jewish community. Eighth grade was the highlight of my teenage years (every weekend, a new Bar or Bat Mitzvah) and I never missed a Friday evening Shabbat with my family. Growing up, I was surrounded by Jews in all facets of my life--my high school, my local synagogue, my “non-denominational” summer camp (comprised of more than 50% Jews), and most of my inner circles. I felt closest with my temple youth group, nicknamed “BELY” (Beth Elohim Temple Youth). I felt more connected to the members than to my high school friends. Our interwoven group pushed me to take huge risks: starring in plays (and discovering a hidden singing ability), leading mentoring programs, and constantly exploring my Jewish identity. I continued to expand my connections through a regional youth group (NFTY) and an international leadership program (Diller Teen Fellows), where I found meaning in interacting with other diasporic Jews from all over the world.

In college, I spent four months in Amsterdam, a 3,500 mile journey, on a study-abroad program. Besides being lost in both the language and culture, this was the first time that being a Jew felt like a minority. I took classes with all Dutch students, many of whom were non-religious or Christian. Initially, I felt lonely, like a piece of me was ripped from my body. I wanted to hide my Jewish identity for fear of being labeled as “different” or “unfamiliar.” However, I soon realized that being “different” actually meant being “unique.” When people would meet me, they would ask about my name, “Noam,” and it would bring about the story of my Israeli name and my Jewish identity. I soon realized the importance of sharing a Jewish story from the place of minority.

During my last year in college, I was sitting in my “Wandering Jews and Zionism” class, discussing the concept of Zionism with my professor. He had just quoted Theodor Herzl, arguing that Zionism “demands a publicly recognized and legally secured homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people.” I thought back to my time in Amsterdam, where at times, I felt lonely and isolated, and found it easy to relate to Herzl’s definition. As Jews, our people have been persecuted all our lives--from biblical slavery in ancient Egypt to current anti-semitism in modern European cities. However, I want to take Herzl’s ideas a step further: my Zionist definition is the support of a **Jewish, independent state** **that encourages the return of diasporic Jews and limits anti-semitism through communal connections.** Not only should we have a Jewish state, but we should establish measures to bring back diasporic Jews (such as Birthright) and limit anti-semitism through community connections and dialogue with all parts of Israel, including the Arab communities. Our independent Jewish state does not come at the cost of pushing the Arabic community out, but rather in creating two separate communities.

I’m currently in my second month of a seven-month stay in Israel. Through living, learning, and working in Israel, I will be contributing knowledge to the Israeli startup ecosystem, our “Startup-Nation.” Through both a Birthright Excel Ventures fellowship and a WUJS internship at Mindspace, I will be creating and supporting startup companies in Tel Aviv. My goal during these programs is not simply to immerse myself in the startup community of Israel but also deepen my understanding and connection to Zionism and the Jewish community more generally.