**Helyn B. Reich Scholarship Essay**

**What is your personal connection to Zionism? How do you define Zionism, and what does it mean to you to be a Zionist today?**

I wrestled with my relationship to Zionism in college. Before attending college, I lived and studied in Israel for a year. My time living there fostered a connection to the people and the place; I was drawn to the strong sense of community and shared responsibility, and loved feeling thousands of years of Jewish history underneath my fingertips. Yet afterwards, I struggled to reconcile my identity as a Zionist with my friends’ negative view of Zionism. Often, I feel like discussions involving Zionism and Israel are analogous to an action film, where the world’s complexities are left outside the movie theater door. The main characters are either heroes or villains and, in my experience, Zionists are typically relegated to the category of villain.

Hoping to leave the movie theater, I started a weekly dialogue group on my campus that brings together students with diverse perspectives and opinions on Zionism. By engaging with a range of thoughts about Zionism we complicated the action film narrative, making it harder to reduce it to binaries. During these discussions, I came to realize that the diverse understandings of Zionism within the Jewish community are vital to its purpose, as it enables Zionism to grow and develop alongside the Jewish People. As the needs of the Jewish People and Israel change, so too does our understanding of and connection to Zionism.

At its core, Zionism supports the right of Jews to be a people and a nation in a land in which Jews have a strong historical religious connection. Jews can now be a modern nation in Israel with their own flag and passports. Yet Zionism is much more than the right for the Jewish People to play the ‘game of nations.’ Zionism is a philosophy and a dialogue – it is both timeless and changeable as it seeks to preserve the uniqueness of the Jewish People.

The Hebrew language has two words for nationalism: *leumiut* and *leumanut.* Both words have similar roots, but very different meanings. *Leumiut* originates from the premise that the world is split into different groups based largely on language, culture and religion. Members of these groups share a history and seek to share a future together. Each group has the right to preserve their uniqueness and autonomy. *Leumanut,* on the other hand*,* is the belief that the rights of one nation supersede the rights of others. This concept has historically led to violence against many groups, including the Jewish People.

The essence of Zionism, for me, is *leumiut.* Zionism seeks to preserve the unique character of the Jewish People in Israel. Being a Zionist today means that Jews, just as much as other groups, have a right to maintain their heritage without discrimination or persecution. Yet, *leumiut* is a difficult vision to achieve. While *leumiut* and *leumanut* posit radically different worldviews, both words share a root. To me, this is symbolic of the difficulty of upholding *leumiut* without perpetuating *leumanut*. Thus, in order to achieve *leumiut*, Zionism cannot be understood as a static concept or a movement that has a foreseeable end. Rather, Zionism is a philosophy that needs to be discussed, debated and continuously revisited to ensure that it is accomplishing *leumiut.* These actions are also at the very heart of Zionism – Zionism did not arise from a single set of ideas; rather it emerged out of debate, discussion and even conflicting visions. By leaving the action film and engaging with the diversity of ideas about Zionism, together we can build a strong and peaceful Jewish state together in Israel.