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My Israeli-American Identity Crisis

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Hatikva and Star Spangled Banner. Eyal Golan and Bryan Adams. Omri Caspi and Michael Jordan. Benjamin Netanyahu and George Bush. Yoplait and Milky. Red, white, and blue...or is it just blue and white? Wait, Hebrew...or English? Israeli...or American?

Growing up in Jewish Brooklyn to Israeli Yemenite immigrants (a triple bonus) from southern Israel, I learned that defining my identity was not a simple task. I grew up in a warm and vibrant Israeli home with Mizrahi music, tradition, food, culture and a lot of energy. We were loud and proud Zionists who read books in Hebrew before bed, watched Israeli movies on VHS, stocked up weekly for the apocalypse at our local Israeli supermarket (with Jachnun of course), heard stories from our parents about life on the old farm, and went to a synagogue filled with other Yemenite Israeli Americans who were going through the same journey.

Starting from first grade, I spoke Hebrew in Judaic class fluently with an Israeli pronunciation that made heads turn because it sounded so different than everyone else's American one. The food I brought in for lunch was definitely not your average apple pie and neither was the way my mom dressed me and styled my huge head of black curls in a high bun. I hated my hair. I wanted to be just like the majority of my class who had American parents, manageable hair, and grandparents they could actually visit often without flying 6,000 miles. I aspired to fit in with the "American Americans," but was not American enough because of my foreign upbringing and, on the other hand, never felt Israeli enough during family visits because I did not grow up there, rather was the American cousin who was raised in the U.S. culture. I was so confused and just wanted to belong.

Don't get me wrong — I had an amazing childhood with the best parents, sister, and friends and never once experienced discrimination from within my community or schools. We blended in pretty well and had a great life, but I was dying to find my own inner personal bridge between the two worlds. My journey started at 15.

When I entered high school, that girl who started off proud to be of her heritage hid. I stopped speaking Hebrew and replaced all my Israeli music with American pop music hits. I started straightening my hair so its features looked less Yemenite and I even tried baking apple pie once — I burned it. My father always talked about how he dreamed I would grow up to become an Israeli minister or diplomat, but all I wanted to was stay out of politics. I watched the news, but did not care to understand what the root of the notorious Middle East conflict was because the only conflict I encountered was at 7 AM with my alarm clock. I knew that there were extreme radicals in the world who were trying to attack Israelis, but as long as my family was safe I did not question what my role was in all the mess — if there even was one.

I graduated high school, did a gap year in Israel, and came to Yeshiva University's campus in

August of 2013, where everyone is Jewish, thus continuing my life long chain of private education. I decided I wanted to study political science, but here's the kicker — I made sure to focus on every other international state **other than Israel**. I was not a self-hating Israeli. I just wanted to figure out my purpose without my background's influence. Additionally, the fact that then I did not know what to make of my dual identity made it infinitely even easier to pull back. My potential to spark change as an Israeli living in America was slowly waning. I found myself falling into the apathetic majority of students on campus that loved Israel in their hearts, but did not actively raise their voices to support her. Around February, I went to one Israel club event that year, fell asleep through the speech, and continued to stay out of the politics and Israel entirely. "*Hey, at least you tried,*" I told myself. I still did not know anything about this conflict and it all seemed so foreign.

But it was only a matter of time until I could no longer deny who I was and where I came from. And with all of my ignorance I has been right about one thing — the conflicts and tribulations Israel faces certainly do stem out of in Middle East, but I had never dreamed I would become its defender, here in the United States.

As the semester continued I started hearing the term BDS from other friends when talking to them about their college campuses. Because I had the freedom of being in a private and Jewish institution without anti-Semitism/anti-Israel sentiment, it took me a few weeks until I started hearing these things often enough that I decided to come out of my cave and look it up. Google's first search result was the BDS movement's website defining themselves as "*an anti-Israel site promoting the boycott divestment and sanction of Israel.*"

IS THIS A JOKE? WHY WOULD YOU BOYCOTT ISRAEL?

Well glad you asked Corrine, here is our logical explanation: "*...a call for a campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights. A truly global movement against Israeli Apartheid is rapidly emerging in response to this call.*"

Apartheid. Wasn't that between the races in South Africa? Why are they saying Israel is an apartheid state — does SJP own a dictionary? My family came from Yemen where Jews and Muslims were best friends and now lives just a few minutes away from Muslim villages and towns where the people are citizens of Israel treated with fairness, dignity, and full rights. Arabs are treated in hospitals and cared for regardless of religion. Arabic is one of the four dominant languages of our country and can be seen on every inch of road signs, food labels, and government messages and postings. On that note, we even have Muslims elected to the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) who have the same freedoms of speech as Israelis to say and preach as they please. Things are not perfect in Israel, but we never stop trying and are continuing to improve conditions for all. In a sane world, SJP and the BDS movement's argument would lose total validity in light of these evident truths, along with countless others, yet it grew. Is this what the news has been filled with all this time and I was just too unaware?

I watched videos about the BDS movement on campuses and could not believe what I was seeing. I grew up in one of the most inclusive Jewish communities outside of Israel and was then studying in a private Jewish campus in the heart of the Jewish hub in the U.S. I had never seen Palestinian flags or even heard much of terms like excessive force, settlements, apartheid, occupation, etc. That bubble my parents raised me in did a great job at keeping out of the lies and hatred. The things students were saying, as they abused their freedom of speech, were all blatant fabrications, fueled by hatred and ignorance.

The more I read the more I realized that this conflict was not something that was far from me — it

was something I was born into and lived with my whole life and could no longer deny — even if I had been raised in America and was unsure what my connection to it all was. I could go back centuries to connect myself to the Jews of the Temple, but I do not have to look so far back to connect myself with conflict and struggle for freedom.

When my family came from Yemen after persecution and adversities my grandfather enlisted in the Golani Brigade to protect and defend our land — he provided me with the freedom to live in my ancestral home. When his brother, who was guarding the newly formed moshav my family helped established, was shot by near by Arabs, his sacrifice provided me with the freedom to live in my ancestral home. When my grandmothers raised 14 and 10 children on their moshavim, they developed the agriculture of the land and made it possible for everyone living in Israel to benefit and develop our ancestral home. When my father was drafted into the Special Forces, he fought for our rights to live in Israel free from violence and oppression. When my uncles enlisted in the army at the mandatory age of 18 and then continued their careers as generals, officers, commanders, and lieutenants they committed themselves to protecting our rights and ones of those living side by side with us.

I realized that the sacrifices of my family and our nation as a whole were the reason I was where I was and who I was, even if I did not fully understand it. Their actions had a ripple effect on my life and the formation of my identity, even if I got lost along the way, and it was time for me to get act together and defend Israel back in the face of BDS, SJP, and the sake of American Jewry. In Judaism, when a person strays from G-d and then finds their way back, they are called a *ba'al teshuva*, meaning a *master of return*. In a way, I feel like I too have returned — returned to Zion, to Israel. To being proud to call myself Israeli. To being proud to call myself Israeli-American who has undeniably found her purpose as a delegate for Israel in every aspect of her life (one day hopefully officially) who defends and stands up for Israel in the face of ignorance, hatred, and arrogance for truth, integrity, and peace.

It is two years after my re-discovery and I have been fortunate enough to be able to involve myself in many college Israel organizations and snagged some incredible opportunities to hear and learn from Israel's finest diplomats, politicians, and leaders. I currently am a Hasbara Fellow, student of Ambassador Danny Ayalon, and student leader at the IAC, guiding and educating those who stand where I stood to help them find their identities within this duality. I also am proud to say that I have progressed in my attendance at Israel club events — I no longer snooze off, rather come a little too excited to hear MK's ambassadors and diplomats, sitting in the front row hoping my enthusiasm will be enough for them to hire me after graduation (jokes). This is only the first of many thoughts I have about Israel and everything that comes with it, but I wanted to start off with my journey in hopes that it will help you connect with my messages and me as well. Add me on Facebook, follow me on twitter, and let's start defending Israel together.

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