

June 2013

To whom it may concern:

I would like to share some of my thoughts regarding the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program and the study tour in Israel that we recently completed.

I am 28 years old and live in Jerusalem. Though I was born in Israel, I spent significant portions of my childhood living in Europe as my parents were sent as *shlichim* (emissaries) to Austria and Germany. We returned to Israel when I was ten years old, at which time my parents enrolled me in the religious school system where I spent large portions of the day focusing on religious studies. After completing high school, I wanted to further immerse myself in the world of Jewish intellectual thought and began a one-year study course at Yeshivat Shvut Yisrael. After completing my studies there, I served as an Intelligence Analyst for a commando unit of the Israeli Air Force. Following my military service, I had the opportunity to follow in my parents' footsteps as a *shaliach* in San Francisco, where I taught Hebrew and Judaic Studies in a local Jewish day school and tried to impart to my students my love for Israel and Jewish tradition.

Though I truly enjoyed working with the Jewish community in the States, I knew that I ultimately wanted to return to Israel and contribute to my homeland, so I enrolled in Bar-Ilan University's Law School. While at BIU, I became largely involved in legal public interest work through the Legal Aid Clinic, which provided free legal services to low-income individuals. I served as the chair of the BIU Law School Student Council and was a teaching and research assistant for several professors. At BIU, I learned not only about the law, but I was also exposed to liberal universal schools of thoughts, which profoundly changed the ways in which I viewed the world and the society I was a part of. I wanted to combine my knowledge of Jewish tradition with the new perspectives I gained at BIU so following graduation I joined Ein Prat: the Israeli Academy for Leadership, in an intensive study program focusing on Judaism, philosophy, and Zionism. Most recently, I clerked for the honorable Justice Miriam Naor, the vice-president of the Supreme Court of Israel. I was admitted to the Israeli Bar in 2012 and now work in a private law firm in Jerusalem.

I have always been passionate about both Judaism and human rights, but it can be challenging to find ways in which the two can co-exist when, at times, they may seem in conflict. I am particularly interested in exploring whether or not Israel can simultaneously be both a *Jewish* and *democratic* state; though many claim that the two are diametrically opposed, I disagree, and I hope to find ways to solve the tensions that seem to exist between the two.

The aspiration of the Jewish people to build a State in their homeland in the land of Israel is as relevant today as it was 65 years ago. But surely, defining Israel as a Jewish State raises many important questions regarding the State's capacity to uphold the democratic values it aspires to. My personal ideology lends itself to believing that the Jewish people has a right to a land, a nation and a State, but also mandates that I reject racism and xenophobia in all its forms, anywhere in the world, including in the State of Israel. I am, therefore, compelled to search for ways in which Israel is able to embrace its *Jewishness* without compromising its democratic values. Participating in the RCFP study tour in Israel, which we recently completed, has proved to me that I am not alone in my aspirations and dreams for Israel. During our trip, we met with many inspiring individuals, from all sectors of Israeli society, who have dedicated themselves to making Israel a better country for all who reside within her borders. Despite all the obstacles we have yet to overcome, I am left feeling hopeful about Israel's potential and ability to be a more just State.

Not only I am walking away from our study tour with a better understanding of how Israel may realize both of her distinct identities, I am also walking away with newfound friendships with some exceptional individuals. My RCFP co-fellows have inspired me through the significant contributions they have made and continue to make in both the Jewish and human rights arenas. My co-fellows have enriched me with their views about Israel, Judaism and human rights and have shed new light and refreshing perspectives on issues I previously only considered through my own prism of experiences.

The RCFP has strengthened my desire to unveil the democratic voices throughout our Jewish texts and traditions, in efforts to help the State of Israel actualize her destiny to be neither compromising in her identity as a Jewish State, nor in her ambitions to embody democracy for all. The RCFP has demonstrated to me that this mission does not fall on the shoulders of Israel's citizens alone, but rather, is incumbent upon each and every individual who believes in the values of Judaism and its mandate to create a better world for all mankind.

I want to express my deep gratitude to the incredible staff of the RCFP for giving me the opportunity to take part in this fellowship. I look forward to continuing on this journey.

Sincerely,

Gilad Wiener  
Rene Cassin Fellow-Israel Cohort