

June 2013

To whom it may concern,

I have the distinct privilege of being one of the fellows selected for the inaugural class of the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program (RCFP.) Having just returned from our Israel study tour, I feel so incredibly inspired at this moment and am very grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to participate in this innovative program. But before I can explain why the RCFP means so much to me (and only two months in to the fellowship!), I must first start at the beginning.

I was raised in a traditional, Zionist Jewish home in the suburbs of Detroit, where the importance of observing Shabbat, loving Israel and engaging in *tikkun olam* (the Jewish mandate to help repair the world), were all equally imperative. From the earliest of ages, I had a very strong sense of how integral a role Judaism played in my and my family's life. My siblings and I attended Jewish nursery schools, day schools and overnight camps. We spent summers with our grandparents in Israel. We observed Shabbat, the Jewish holidays and *kashrut*. We engaged in *chesed* projects, from volunteering in food pantries to visiting the elderly in nursing homes. I grew up deeply connected to my Jewish roots and with a very strong sense of Jewish-self. I lived my Judaism. I breathed it. I felt it. I carried it wherever I went.

I enrolled in Barnard College for my undergraduate degree, by-and-large, to be a part of the active and vibrant Jewish community on Columbia and Barnard's campuses. I found my niche at Hillel amongst the clubs dedicated to promoting Jewish pluralism and social activism. As my passion for social justice was so deeply rooted in my Jewish faith, participating in AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, seemed like the obvious next step following college graduation.

Through AVODAH, an organization dedicated to working for social change through anti-poverty work, I dedicated myself to issues largely relating to homelessness and youth development. During my AVODAH year, I witnessed many injustices and socioeconomic inequalities which left me shattered and lost. But I was fortunate enough to come home every night to nine AVODAH housemates with varying perspectives and opinions representing a wide range of Jewish thought, belief and practice. My housemates listened to me, inspired me, and helped me grapple with the inequalities and injustices I was witnessing day after day. The experiences I had during my AVODAH year continuously challenged me to challenge myself and my preconceived notions about the world. I became a better person, a more knowledgeable activist, and a more nuanced critic of societal "norms."

But right after completing my AVODAH year, I entered into a new reality: the world of medical school at Tel-Aviv University. Suddenly, there weren't enough hours in the day for classwork, anatomy practicals and studying, let alone to actively engage in social justice issues. And sadly, that is where I feel like my passion for combining my Judaism with social justice work came to a halt, that is, up until I joined the RCFP.

Though medical school and residency consumed my life for several years, I have finally reached a place in my career where I can again devote myself to endeavors outside of the hospital; so when I first heard about the RCFP this past winter, I jumped at the chance to apply. Now, being a part of this Fellowship Program, for the first time in almost a decade, I finally find myself once again surrounded by like-minded Jews who care tremendously about their Jewish roots and identities, but also about the world-at-large. No words can properly express how life-changing and empowering it is to be in the company of individuals who strive to make change and be change.

To show how unique of an experience the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program is and the Israel study tour was, I would like to compare it to my last visit to Israel as a participant of the JDC-Pursue Service Learning Trip to Israel in March 2012. On the Pursue trip, we witnessed similar human rights violations in Israel, but I did not come back from that trip inspired to make change. I returned dejected and feeling alienated from a place

I had always loved and cherished. But, in contrast to the Pursue trip, the RCFP study tour has invigorated me. Though we just spent the better part of our ten days in Israel using the country as a case-study for human rights violations, I have returned to the States inspired and motivated, rather than depressed and discouraged. After witnessing so many human rights violations, it would be easy to feel disheartened and pessimistic about the future of the State of Israel and the people whose rights it is violating, but for every human rights violation we were exposed to, there was an individual, a cause, an organization working to change policy and help those in need.

While in Israel, I spent countless hours on the trip discussing with and learning from my co-participants, who are a dynamic and inspiring bunch. During our time together, we taught each other and pushed each other to strive for more, and I, as a result, feel enlightened and enriched. And at a time in Jewish history when tensions between individual Jews and Jewish groups seem more prevalent and destructive than ever, it is especially important to foster strong ties between the large Jewish communities scattered across the world, including in Europe, Israel and North America.

As this fellowship is beginning, I am excited to see where this journey takes me, not only this year, but in to the future, as well. Working as a physician with under served, low-income, minority populations in the Bronx, I am constantly confronted with glaring social injustices, such as homelessness, hunger, illiteracy, and lack of access to medical care. It often becomes easy to ignore the needs of others once one arrives home and is sheltered in the comforts of one's own community, but I don't want to be complacent. I find inspiration and meaning in Mother Teresa's wise words, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

As a Jew, I believe it is my obligation to engage in *tikkun olam*--and that obligation extends not only to the communities I am a part of (including where I live and work) and to the communities I hold dear to my heart (including the State of Israel), but to all communities in need. Both as a Jew and as a citizen of the world, I believe that it is incumbent upon me to constantly grow and evolve in my attempts to better the world, not only in America, but overseas, as well. And though I have spent much time in my life engaging in volunteer work and advocacy, it is not enough. I will continue to strive to give more and do more. I believe in the possibilities of a better world. I want to create positive change. I want to help realize the mandate we as Jews were given to "be a light unto the nations." I am confident that my participation in the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program will help me do all of those things.

Sincerely,

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Rene Cassin Fellow-U.S. Cohort