

July 2014

To Whom It May Concern,

I joined the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program as an *olah hadasha* to Israel (originally from Melbourne, Australia). I know Israel very well, and have been involved in various human rights activities in Israel and abroad – and I can honestly say, that the seminar was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

The caliber of the participants was of an extremely high standard; this made for hours upon hours of thought-provoking questions and discussions. Every participant came from a different background (nationality, religious persuasion, academic or vocational experience) – which in turn provided a kaleidoscope of perspectives and knowledge on every issue. Our group also consisted of a mix of individuals with varying exposures of Israel. From *sabras*, to *olim*, to people who had been only on Israel-based programs, to people who had not been to Israel for many years, and even someone who was on her first trip to Israel- this combination enabled us to learn from each other, particularly about connections to Israel and one's Jewish identity.

Something that I really appreciated, and could tell that organizers had gone to great lengths to implement, was that for each issue (including asylum seekers, Bedouins, East Jerusalem Palestinians, West Bank Settlements, religious pluralism in a Jewish State, democracy in the State of Israel, the list goes on), we met with at least two if not more people from different perspectives. A good example concerned asylum seekers - an international phenomenon with which the State of Israel is now grappling. We met with an Eritrean asylum seeker now living in a governmental detention facility, a representative from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and a resident of Southern Tel Aviv now living with the reality of tens of thousands of asylum seekers in her neighborhood. By meeting with and asking questions of a range of speakers, with vastly different experiences, this made for a more holistic understanding of each issue. This reinforced that no issue is ever one-sided – and that generalizations of left and right, secular and religious, and right and wrong, are far too simplistic when dealing with complex issues of human rights, particularly in Israel.

Personally, as someone who considers herself now an Israeli, as well as a Jew who grew up in a diaspora Jewish community, I felt the seminar reinforced both my connection to Israel and my Jewish identity. When moving to Israel, I was already well aware of the various human rights issues and dilemmas that the country and its citizens face on a daily basis. However, this did not deter me from picking up my comfortable life and relocating. On the contrary, for me, being Zionist is not just to accept Israel as a perfect place. Rather it is to understand that Israel is a country which faces a difficult mission of simultaneously being a haven for Jewish people worldwide, as well as being a democratic state, attempting to uphold the human rights of all its inhabitants. The seminar reinforced all of this, and I feel it enabled me to form a deeper, richer understanding of Israeli society as well as a desire to help improve it.

Importantly, the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program focuses on 'human rights through Jewish lens'. It is this desire to know about, and improve the implementation of universal rights of all people worldwide, which is a fundamental element of the year-long Fellowship Program. Only a few months in, the program has already caused me to critically analyse, explore and in turn strengthen my love for Israel and deep-rooted belief in universal human rights. I believe each and every participant has also been armed with greater knowledge of Israel and what it really means for them to be 'a light unto the nations'. I would have no hesitation in recommending the program to future participants and I look forward to the continued questioning and learning in the months ahead.

Sincerely,

Anna Landau, Rene Cassin Fellow, Class 2, Israel Hub