

I feel greatly honoured to have been selected as the recipient of this year's G. J. Cooper Scholarship. I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to the scholarship committee and the Ottawa Jewish Community Foundation for selecting me to represent this year's award. I feel truly honoured and privileged to have been given this opportunity.

I have always been raised Jewish, but despite going to Hebrew school for the first 13 years of my life, I never really had an appreciation for what that meant to me until recently. Somewhat ironically, it was only in May of 2021 when I was faced with the rampant antisemitism related to Israel surging online that I was truly able to recognize the resilience and importance of the Jewish identity, and why it was so crucial to protect it. It was then that I was finally able to connect with it with a pride I had always been aware of, but never truly understood before.

At the time, I was in high school and like many Jewish high school students, it was not uncommon for me to see or experience antisemitism. However, before this point I had never really taken a step back to think about it and what it meant. As a Jewish student, it's easy to feel powerless and expect the worst when even getting time off for Jewish holidays can feel like a challenge. But even the smallest voices can have a rippling impact. And that is something my later experiences in the Jewish community taught me most significantly.

This was the first time I began to really take an interest in advocacy specifically related to the Jewish community. I enrolled in the Hasbara Fellowships Internship to learn more about antisemitism and Israel, and I went on to speak to my school board about my experiences with antisemitism as a Jewish student, as well as what must be done if they wanted to encourage and protect Jewish students, advocating for better Holocaust education, better antisemitism training for staff, a Jewish equity coach, and more positive Jewish representation as a whole among other things. In my last few years of high school, I met with several members of the Ottawa- Carleton District School Board one-on-one to discuss this further, and additionally organized and ran a virtual Jewish 'hangout' during the month of May for Jewish Heritage Month. I was lucky enough to be given the chance to speak about antisemitism at a school board-wide staff training and went on to publish an article about my experiences as a Jewish student in the Canadian Jewish News.

During this time, what struck me as most interesting and somewhat disheartening was how surprised so many staff seemed to be about the reality of antisemitism in their schools. But this also served as a reminder of the importance and necessity of speaking up, and a reminder that even just that can make a world of difference.

Of course, it's not like everything can be fixed overnight. But in speaking myself and hearing so many other brave and capable Jewish students beginning to speak up as well, I can't help but feel hopeful. Change is slow, but it's not impossible. And I'm proud to see the beginning of it starting to take place in the school board I left last year.

After my experiences in high school, I wanted to continue to advocate for Jewish students and my Jewish community in general. I was given the chance to speak at Rise Up Ottawa during November and additionally had the honour of being the first recipient of the Jewish Student Activism Award at the event. My studies took me to the University of King's College where I enrolled in a journalism and creative writing program in order to learn to write stories that could better represent my community, especially during a time when I have personally seen so much misinformation about Jewish people and Israel circulating online. I want to be able to write the Jewish stories I never got to read. To be able to bring attention to antisemitism of course, but also to shine a light on the stories of

Jewish pride and joy, stories which I feel are not covered nearly enough. It's a difficult time for Jewish people, I think all of us have been reminded of the fact recently. But it's not all bleak, and it's important to write stories that show that too.

As someone who is queer as well as Jewish, I rarely have the opportunity to see myself reflected in the news or in the books I read. My hope is to one day change that with both Jewish and queer stories of positivity and hope, so that kids like me can see themselves reflected and represented in the way I wish I could have when I was younger. The money I receive from this scholarship will go into helping fund my studies in this program, allowing me the chance to continue to speak about and uplift Jewish voices as much as I can as I continue to learn to write the stories I never got the chance to read.

As my studies continue, I am continuously looking for ways to keep learning and keep advocating for my community. I am currently enrolled in Jewish on Campus' Ambassador's Program in which many Jewish students across North America gather in order to write resolutions and stand against antisemitism on university campuses specifically, and I am always looking out for opportunities to speak with members of the Jewish community in Halifax to find ways to write on Jewish topics in my academic courses. There is nothing that feels as important and valuable to me as continuing to harbour my sense of Jewish pride, whether it be in speaking up whenever I am able or learning to tell the stories I never got to hear. Now, more than ever I find my Jewish identity to be an inseparable aspect of myself, and I feel exceptionally grateful to have a community that has and continues to support me as I discover what that truly means to me, and the meaningful places that Jewish pride will continue to take me.

I would like to once again thank the scholarship committee and the Ottawa Jewish Community Foundation for granting me this incredible opportunity and privilege. I feel very grateful to have had so much support from the Jewish community over the years and I hope to continue to make my community proud as the years go on.

With heartfelt appreciation and gratitude,

Talia Freedhoff

2023 George Joseph Cooper Scholarship Recipient