

Jacob Zeitlin

This past summer, I went to Israel for the first time. My camp, Crane Lake, goes on an annual trip to Eastern Europe and Israel for campers entering eleventh grade. Along with my camp friends, many of whom I first met eight summers ago, I decided to spend my summer on this so-called amazing experience.

What were my expectations? I guess I was expecting to have the experience my friends in grades above had described to me: The first week, which encompassed visiting death camps from the Holocaust in the Czech Republic and Poland, was very emotional and difficult to experience. After that, the four weeks in Israel were unforgettable—sleeping under the stars, visiting the Western Wall, and doing other touristy yet memorable things in the land of milk and honey.

I think it's fair to say that these expectations were *not* very representative of my actual experience. The day after arriving in Israel, while hiking in the Negev, we discovered that Hamas had begun firing rockets towards Israel. However, as our counselors explained to us, the IDF's Iron Dome system would be able to intercept any rockets that were a threat to us or anyone else in Israel. We learned that our plans might change for safety concerns, but no one truly felt worried for his or her safety at this point.

When we arrived in Jerusalem several days later, it felt that we were much closer to the conflict. We stayed at a kibbutz called Tzuba just outside Jerusalem, which was where we heard a siren for the first time. Although this siren was actually coming from far off in the distance in the city, we were still required to follow the protocol we had been taught earlier, which included going into the bomb-proof bathrooms of our hotel rooms for ten minutes. While this was a traumatizing experience for some, the substantial majority of my peers, including myself, were not scared for our safety—mainly because of the protection of the Iron Dome.

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That week was when our plans changed for the first time as well. One night, we were supposed to go shopping on Ben Yehuda street, but we were unable to as there had been two bomb sirens there earlier in the day. However, we were able to go there several days later when conditions were safer.

Throughout the trip, the attacks from Gaza showed us what living in Israel is really like. We learned that the people who live there are accustomed to hearing sirens and finding bomb shelters. As an American, it made me feel guilty to take my constant safety for granted. It also made me more appreciative of being able to live my life without feeling threatened by political hostility. We had multiple people speak to us about the conflict, including NIFTY administration, a middle east expert, and a Muslim woman who lives in Israel. Expectedly, they each had different viewpoints on the conflict, which helped us understand the imminent causes and effects of the conflict.

Being in Israel this summer definitely strengthened my connection to Israel, especially because I was there during this time of difficulty for the people who live there. It made the entire trip much more meaningful for me: climbing Masada, praying at the Western Wall, swimming in the Dead Sea, and everything else we did. To me, it is important that everyone understands what is going on in Israel and what the people who live there need to go through on a daily basis.

I believe the essence of my trip was captured just a few nights before I left Israel. We were sitting outside, having a discussion, when I saw two lights flying through the sky, one after the other. At first they appeared to be fast-moving airplanes, but they were flying too close to one another to be airplanes. Then I saw them collide and produce an orange flash of light. It was a rocket being intercepted by the Iron Dome.

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If I had the option to take the trip all over again, I would certainly do so. While it is nerve-wracking to be in proximity to a war zone, the experiences and understanding I attained outweigh that notion. And some people don't have the opportunity to make that decision. Those who live in Israel face a constant threat of being attacked by Hamas, and as Americans, we need to understand that this problem is real and affects us, no matter how far away it is taking place.