

I stand anchored to my best friends in the whole world, the circle we form undulating under the stars. If I stare down, I see my feet alongside the roots of the trees that tower around us bestowing their fresh pine air. If I look up, I see the familiar constellations that my summer camp friends point out to me with the same enthusiasm each night even though their positions in the sky barely change. But instead, my gaze lands directly in front of me. The candlelight of three braided wicks being held up by my camp counselor captivates my attention; its flickering draws me in. The flame is radiant enough to illuminate all of our faces, even though the sun has long since set. We sway to the rhythm of the prayer we sing and I question whether I've ever experienced something so meaningful. This is the beauty of Havdalah.

Havdalah translates to Separation because it's the ceremony when we say goodbye to Shabbat and welcome in a new week, but in my experience it is where I feel the most connected. I grew up going to Camp Ramah New England from ages eight to sixteen and Havdalah was always the time I looked forward to most. However, seventeen year-olds don't return to camp at Ramah, instead we get the opportunity to spend six weeks in Israel with kids from all over North America, preceded by an optional educational journey in Poland, which I elected to take.

I would never presume to understand what it must have been like to experience the Shoah first hand, but my time in Poland was eye opening to say the least. When my group was in Treblinka we learned about the factory-like procession in which entire family trees were eliminated from the world. When we went to Majdanek we saw a massive dome of ash, remnants of real human lives stolen. We were even more shocked to learn that all the ash piled in front of us was just what the Nazis didn't get the opportunity to hide, scraps of a destruction much greater. That same day we prayed with one of the only Jews left in the city of Lublin, a former hub of Jewish life. Nearing the end of our trip we saw Auschwitz and Birkenau. Here I listened to my new friend Ayelet's great grandmother's story of her time at Auschwitz. I saw exhibits of human hair, Tallit, and every type of shoe you can imagine formerly belonging to people from every walk of life, each one with their own story. I found pages worth of my own family name in the Book of Names and wondered how many of them were my relatives. We also said the Shema inside a Gas Chamber like so many before us, who weren't given our same luxury to leave.

Throughout the week I felt the absence of all of the Jewish people who should have been there and walked through their shadows with my new friends. It felt impossible that we existed after learning how hopeless it was for our ancestors to survive.

"But you do exist." said our tour guide Alan, "Be the proof of survival and hope."

Saturday night it was time for Havdalah. Even though I was in a tour group full of kids I'd never met before five days ago, we all grew up at Ramahs all over North America and we were all Jewish. That night we swayed to the tune of the Havdalah prayer that we all knew. When I looked down, I saw the brick of the town square we stood on, outside an old synagogue that had been converted to a museum because there were no Jews left to davan in it. When I looked up, I saw stars in a different

orientation than I was used to and slightly faded due to the city air. But when I looked out I saw the same bright candlelight of three braided wicks, illuminating the faces of my new friends.

One of them, Mia, whispered to me, "Look, they're recording us." I looked up, surprised by what I saw. We were surrounded by Poles who stopped in their tracks at the rare sighting of one 180 Jewish teens praying together. They watched us with kind eyes, the beauty of it all captivated them and drew them in to stay a while. They also swayed with the people they walked with. They also gazed into the candlelight.

I have thought a lot about my time in Poland since coming home. Throughout my trip the immense scale of the holocaust was impossible to ignore yet unimaginable to comprehend. Millions of people were murdered, but even more were complicit in that murder, because the Shoah did not occur in a vacuum. Nations full of regular people were tricked into perpetuating hate, and our communities today are not immune to this trickery. It is not hard to spot the dehumanization of people in today's society due to our differences being emphasized far more than our similarities. Being in Poland taught me how the "jokes" I hear in school from other students and even teachers can snowball quickly into hate and violence. Since I've been home, I haven't let those jokes roll off my back. I don't combat these remarks with more anger, as this isn't a productive solution. I know that everyone, myself included, is capable of having lapses in judgment and a lack of understanding. Instead, I engage in conversations with people around me about my experiences and why it's important to hold ourselves to a standard of kindness. While it may seem like a small action, I believe empathy is the only way to combat hatred, and in my experience, true empathy occurs when we see the humanity in others through having experiences where we reach a mutual understanding.

Havdalah has been my favorite time to connect to my Jewish community since I can remember. However, when I think back to the faces of people in Poland, unfamiliar with Jewish traditions, also illuminated by the light of the candle, I think about how I connected with a community different from my own. We all brought light to the shadows of a horrific history which loomed over us. I am encouraged by the idea that taking the time to see beauty in those different from ourselves can prevent the spread of hatred in the future.