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Exploring the Holy City of Jerusalem. Shopping on the streets of Tel Aviv. Hiking up Masada to see the sunrise. Learning more about the holocaust at Yad Vashem. Floating in the Dead Sea. Discovering new interests with my friends. And of course, eating delicious Israeli food.

This summer I was fortunate to be able to spend four weeks in Israel with my closest camp friends through the No'ar Hadash Israel Experience program. Needless to say, this was one of the best summers of my life. After all, I had been looking forward to this trip for years; and until our plane touched down at Ben Gurion airport with 40 of my Jewish camp friends, it was hard to believe that it was finally here.

One aspect of my experience that had an effect of me and our group was learning about the political diversity even among Israelis. For example, during our trip we met with Israeli Rabbis of different denominations, a Palestinian woman living in the West Bank, and youth from a Druze community. Although these people are all a part of Israeli society, they view their experiences very differently, and I was not aware that such diversity existed in such a small country. One experience in particular was eye-opening to me and my peers, and it made our group more cohesive. On one of the first days of our travels, we met with three Rabbis: a secular, a conservative, and an ultra-orthodox Rabbi. In one discussion with the ultra-orthodox Rabbi, he shared his strongly held socially conservative viewpoints about homosexuality and women's rights. Members of our primarily socially liberal group were surprised and even angered to hear these words. After this conversation with the rabbi, our own group felt that we needed to debrief; and we came to an understanding that not all Jews have the same thoughts about politics and

social issues as we do. I found this particularly enlightening as I thought that Israel was more homogenous and accepting.

Through our travels, we drove as close as we could to the Gaza border, overlooked Syria, and walked up to the gate of the Lebanon border. It was surreal to me that I was looking over these borders. These countries were places that have been covered on the news, in our textbooks, and talked about by many people. For me, seeing these countries before my eyes made me think of how grateful I am to be living in America and that I should not take for granted the relative safety that I feel living in the United States.

My favorite part of the trip was a Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat on a Tel Aviv port. This was a very memorable experience because I loved seeing the sunset over the Mediterranean Sea while all of my friends and local Tel Aviv residents were relaxing in lawn chairs singing and clapping their hands to the music and prayers. This was like no other Shabbat service I had ever attended, and I will remember this for the rest of my life.

After spending four weeks in Israel I have learned a great deal about myself and my connections to Judaism. These connections have never been stronger. I cannot imagine any other experience in my life being as powerful as the one I had this summer. Traveling with my camp friends made the trip extremely special because we all shared our thoughts and feelings, and communicated with each other about our individual experiences. As my friends and I said to each other many times during our month in Israel, this truly was “the journey of a lifetime.”

