

Hi everyone. This summer I travelled to Israel for the first time as part of the Alexander Muss High School in Israel program. I lived on a campus and studied the history of the Jewish people, beginning with the Torah and ending with Israeli politics and security today. Each week, we took multiple *tiyulim* (trips) to locations relevant to what we were learning.

We had class atop Mount Gilboa, where King Saul and his sons were killed and learned about the book of Judges. We saw where the stories we were learning about had taken place. We then hiked and swam in Gan HaShlosha National Park's natural springs. Another day, I woke up at 3:30 to climb Masada and watched the sun rise, before climbing down and covering myself in mud and swimming in the Dead Sea.

During Beit Binah, I had always heard how incredible the Western Wall was. And when we made our first trip to see the Kotel during my first week, I expected to be overwhelmed by the magic of the Kotel and for it to be a life-changing experience. But as I pressed my forehead and hands against the wall and closed my eyes, I was disappointed by how little I felt. Sure, it was exciting to finally witness what was supposed to be the epicenter of the Jewish people and the only remaining piece of the second temple, but I was unable to connect.

However, after four more weeks in Israel, my class returned to the Western Wall, this time to celebrate Shabbat. Instantly, I was pulled into a circle of Israeli women dancing and singing and a grin was plastered on my face the entire evening. Surrounded by Jewish women from every corner of the globe, I began to understand the Kotel's importance. And I returned to the Kotel one last time on Erev Tisha B'Av, the holy day of mourning, fasting, and remembering the continuous suffering of the Jewish people. As I squeezed my way through the crowd to lay my head on the warm, rough stones, I thought of all the adversity Jewish people have faced and tears surprisingly rolled down my cheeks. I finally understood the importance of the Kotel. The Western Wall exists as a memory and of proof that the Jewish people have continued to survive and thrive, no matter what adversity has, and will, come our way.

Although I have always felt connected to the Jewish people, I did not always feel connected to Israel. Israel seemed like a fairytale to me; it was where my dad studied for a college semester and swam in the sea that was so salty you could float, where he rode camels, ate funny food, learned Hebrew and grew his hair out long. Israel had given some of my Hebrew school teachers funny accents and made them a little stricter and a little louder than my American teachers. Israel was the place that we prayed to and for, the place where we hoped to spend our next Passover seder, the country where our Tzedakah money went to, and where I knew I would travel someday.

But when I joined the Marin/San Francisco Jewish Teen Foundation which focuses on *Tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*, I started to really love Israel, a country I had never been to but I still dreamed I would visit one day. And after spending my summer in Israel and studying about it, I understand what a special place Israel is and hope that we all can understand how important the country is to the Jewish people and the importance of protecting our country.