

alma.

The Holiness of Returning to Summer Camp

The optimism of this summer is incredible compared to the despair of last.

By [Eva Grossman](#)

June 9, 2021



DebraMillet/Getty Images

I am a camp person through and through. [Camp](#) has always been my happy place. For a long time it was the only place I felt genuinely Jewish.

I grew up being the only Jew most people in my hometown knew, and switched synagogues several times. I never felt attached to any Jewish community during the year, so my one month at camp had to provide all of my connection for the year. To steal

from an Instagram caption I wrote after my last summer as a camper: “If you aren’t a camp person and you’re wondering why I always talk about camp, here’s why: the people that will always be there for me are those I’ve met at camp.”

Camp shaped me as it allowed me to be wholeheartedly Jewish and explore hobbies I would never get to at home. Daily services were annoying as a kid, but I also learned every shacharit (morning service) prayer through experience rather than tedious studying. I learned every Lecha Dodi tune from weekly camp-wide Kabbalat Shabbat services. I got to learn how to make earrings in jewelry, paint with watercolor in art, and bake challah in cooking. I even got out of my comfort zone and climbed the ropes course every year.

I always connected more with people at camp than school because I felt like they just got it. Many of them could relate to being one of few people with their traditions in their school. Camp gives opportunities for structured learning and activities and free time. Living together capitalizes on the in-between moments and unstructured time that school doesn’t really have.

So naturally, when the time came, I transitioned pretty seamlessly from camper to staff. I had always known that I wanted to work at camp, so the decision to apply was easy. In summer 2019, I was a counselor as well as a ropes course specialist, so I spent most of my day working on the ropes course while still sleeping and eating with campers.

And then last summer happened. Due to the pandemic, camp had to move from in-person to virtual. During a summer of mourning and loss, camp was still able to provide some distraction from the real world, albeit in a much different way. We ran two weeks of online programming including teaching edah (units divided by grade) songs, bunk bonding activities, and maccabiah (color war). I was lucky to have high schooler campers who already had a lasting relationship with camp and would participate in any event we put on, but something was missing.

Every summer, counselors would remind campers that camp is not a physical space, but rather, it’s a mindset. They were right, but there’s no way to pretend that last summer wasn’t markedly different from all others. The community was technically there, but something about those Zoom calls was incredibly isolating.

Knowing that I will be back at camp this summer is the only thing that got me through the semester. I took the hardest classes I have since starting college, dealt with my parents’ divorce, and moved across the country after a semester at home. I’ve been incredibly lucky to get through a global pandemic without losing anyone I know personally. Even so, a huge part of my life has been missing.

In a normal year, camp is the most abnormal part of my life. But this year, camp will mark a much-needed return to normalcy. Calls with my camp planning for this summer are the only Zoom calls I don't dread anymore, because I know that they're leading somewhere better. Filling out tedious forms doesn't feel like a chore, it feels like a reward for the year we've been through.

I only lost a year of camp as a staffer. I feel immensely for my kids who lost a whole year of being campers, and the connection and kehillah (community) that comes with it. My childhood is intertwined with camp, and I would not have come to love camp as a young adult had I not been able to go as a child. I would not have come to love and want to explore Judaism in the same way. As Rabbi Mitch Cohen put it last year, "camp gives children a time to be Jewish, to learn about Judaism in a joyous setting, where young role models set the standard, providing opportunities for deep spiritual, ritual, and ethical development."

As a staff member, camp still affects me. I still learn and grow through both formal staff learning sessions and opportunities with my campers. I got to re-do 5th grade shacharit services, this time knowing every single word and helping my campers learn them as well. As a camper, I was never the teacher, and definitely never an expert on anything Jewish. I also get to make new connections with older generations of staff and Jewish leaders. I can ask them career-guiding or philosophical questions instead of when lunch is.

Of course, the pandemic has changed how camp will operate this summer. All staff members are required to be fully vaccinated before first session starts. Everyone will be getting tested often, and camp will operate as a bubble. Within the bubble, we'll have pods, and maybe by the end of the session we'll be able to come together as larger groups. But even though we'll be in pods, wearing masks and getting COVID tests often, we'll be back at camp. We won't feel the same isolation we've felt over the past year. Instead, we'll be within our community, surrounded by those we love. The optimism of this summer is incredible compared to the despair of last.

Camp gave me my best friends, college roommate, and love for Judaism. I would not be the person I am today without it. In geography, we discuss the concepts of space and place. While space is just a matter of measurements, place is a matter of meaning. People ascribe meaning to spaces, making them important places. Going back to that place always feels like returning somewhere holy, and I can only hope that this summer will be the same.



Eva Grossman

Eva Grossman (she/her) is a rising junior at George Washington University where she is majoring in geography. She is a proud Jew, feminist, Ramahnik, and dog lover.

Coronavirus

Friendship

Summer Camp