

Bringing Zionism to Life

Six Israeli campers change the face of Israel at Herzl Camp

Our newspapers regularly report on the American Jewry's declining interest in the State of Israel. This summer, a major study was released documenting American youth's apathy toward Israel. The authors of the study, sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman, found a consistent increase in alienation in each younger generation, with middle-aged Jews less attached to Israel than older Jews, and younger Jews less attached than middle-aged Jews.

So what is a summer camp rooted in Zionism to do? Herzl Camp's mission statement vows to create personal connections to and love of Israel. Each summer, we hire camp counselors from Israel, practice Israeli dance, eat Israeli food and myriad other small ways to explore and understand Israeli culture, history and relevance.

At Herzl Camp, our program is purposely "camper-led." In every area, we believe and practice that programs generated and led by campers themselves are more effective. Kids learn best from each other. This summer, with the help of our generous donors, we applied this ethic to our Israel education program. Six Kadimah campers came from Sderot, Israel. We hoped that they would make friends and in the process truly create personal connections to Israel for our American campers.

The program was a great success. Our Israeli campers spent 5 weeks in a peaceful, safe environment with their American peers. In sharing what they learned at camp, the Israeli spoke of understanding what it's like to be in the minority. Before camp, they said they hadn't given much thought to their Judaism – it's so much the fabric of their lives. At camp, they were able to see what it would really mean to create a Jewish life outside of the Jewish state.

Our American campers learned the basics of Israeli life. Some said they discovered, "Israel isn't all desert" and other learned that, "Israel isn't constantly at war. It's safe to live there." One Kadimanik, Ethan Friedman, wrote about his time with his Israeli cabinmates:

"If Kadimah 2010 was life changing without Tal Tiger and Michael Spitzer, which it was, there are few words to describe what it was like with them. Beyond life changing, I guess. It was a shock to go to camp like any other year, and find out you have two Israeli boys in your cabin. I learned so much about their culture, and I hope they learned about ours.

The American boys and I did not know how to handle them at first. Naturally, we asked Tal and Michael different questions to figure out how much about America they knew. It turns out they are very similar to us American teenage boys. Do you listen to American music? The answer was yes they have MTV. Do you watch the NBA? And so the questions went on, most of the answers being the same as an American boy.

Throughout the summer, I learned a lot about their culture, just as they learned about mine. I learned slang words and phrases that I would never learn at Talmud Torah. I learned about how



In 2010, six Israeli teens from Sderot participated in Herzl Camp's 5-week Kadimah program alongside their American counterparts

scary it is for them to live so close to the Palestinian territory. I could not imagine what it would be like to be in their shoes. And most of all, I learned how similar they are to us. They have the same interests, the same hobbies, and the same food. I was very fortunate to learn about all of these things first hand. Like I said, it was beyond life changing.”

Another cabinmate, Josh Roston along with his parents and grandparents, has already visited his new Israeli friend. Josh’s dad, Howard, describes their day with Tal:

“We went and visited Tal at his Kibbutz which is about 750 meters from the Gaza Strip. Tal spends his days cleaning stables and other similar work on the Kibbutz - and didn't complain once about it. It is easy to see he takes pride in the Kibbutz. Tal shared with us that several years ago, a mortar round landed in his front yard. Scattered throughout the Kibbutz are bomb shelters. As soon as we arrived, Tal made it clear to us the procedure to follow if we needed to seek shelter.

After that, Tal took us around his Kibbutz and explained with dignity and pride how they live and stay strong so close to danger each and every day.

Even though Tal is soft-spoken, it is easy to tell that he very much appreciated the opportunity to go to Herzl Camp in the United States and be with other kids his age. On the Kibbutz there are only 3 kids his age.

We learned so much that day. Our family talked for hours after our visit about how much Tal impacted our personal lives and about really understanding how important his Kibbutz is for the State of Israel.”

The success of the program speaks for itself and we are working to continue it in the coming years. Each year, this program costs \$30,000 – this provides round-trip travel expenses, camp room and board expenses, salary for an Israeli counselor to accompany the teenagers throughout their camp program and travel, and the pre-camp screening and preparations in Israel.

A donor who is committed to Israel education and Jewish camping has offered to match any multi-year pledges to this program. If you are willing to make a 2, 3 or 4 year commitment, this donor will provide up to \$15,000 per year for Israeli campers.

To discuss a commitment, please call Holly Guncheon at 952/927-4002 or return the enclosed pledge sheet.



Israeli camper Tal Tiger greets Josh Roston, his Herzl cabinmate, at his Kibbutz near Sderot