



Finding community in peculiar places



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Hayati, like many other young Palestinians in Denmark, understands the feeling of not fully fitting in – therefore she doesn't expect me to.



I went to my first Jewish summer camp when I was 19. The following year, this year, I attended four more. Here is a chronological sum-up of my summer camp summer 2024: I was a counsellor in Vermont for seven 5-7-year-olds. I was a counsellor in Norway, but now as part of a team of 20 counsellors for approximately 90 kids aged 10-13. In Greece I was one of 350 European Jewish kids aged 18-30. In Nigeria I was one of 5 counsellors for 15 kids aged 5-7. I am so incredibly grateful for these experiences, as working at Jewish summer camps has helped me find communities that feel like home.



One of the beautiful things about Jewish summer camps is how incredibly intense they are. For both the kids and the counsellors. I rarely, if ever, experience as many meltdowns as I do at a Jewish summer camp. My own and the kids alike. If you are interested, I have made a graph below with my cry count for the four summer camps this year.

The summer camp in Vermont was my first experience as a camp counselor. *Kehila* (community) was the theme of the camp - which I felt in every single aspect. The feeling of togetherness and belonging in a space for learning and growing together. The camp consisted of just me, the coordinator of the camp, and my seven adorable kids. We spent half of the day by the synagogue looking for insects, singing songs and following whatever creative ideas the kids had for art and play. The other half of the day was spent by the creek exploring.

This approach to learning and living in nature felt very familiar. Some of my favorite childhood memories are of my grandmother and I looking for insects in her backyard, befriending frogs by her pond, or hiking Bear Mountain. Throughout my life I've found little pockets of nature in Denmark that remind me of these moments. Danish nature is so lovely. Danish nature is home. Right by the house I grew up in, I found a creek hidden in an enclosure for pheasants. I was most definitely trespassing, however the pheasants didn't seem to mind, and neither did I. Rarely do I feel as spiritual and as whole as I do when I am surrounded by nature.

Having the privilege to share my love for nature with these kids made me so happy. Seeing their curiosity blossom when given the space and time to explore was so beautiful. I feel so lucky to have hopefully been part of making sure that these kids also feel at home in the outdoors.

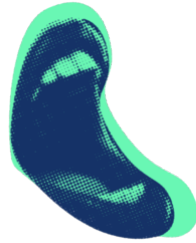


I went to Norway directly from Vermont. The theme of this camp was *Achim* (siblinghood). This summer camp was a whole different experience. We had been planning the program over Zoom for months in advance, so the schedule was very much in place when the counselor prep-weekend came around. I met most of my co-counselors for the first time when I arrived in Oslo. I quickly realized that they all attended this summer camp growing up. Two of my co-counselors, the cutest couple you can imagine, had originally met as kids at this summer camp. Despite the fact that everyone around me had known each other forever, I never felt left out. I was immediately part of the community. A community where I saw young girls going through struggles I remember going through myself but surrounded by their supportive camp family. These kids have something in common with each other that I didn't have with my peers. They all knew how it felt to be the odd one out in the otherwise homogenous Danish society. But they seemed to deal with it better than I had, perhaps because they had each other. Or perhaps as city kids growing up in Copenhagen, they experienced more tolerance than I had in my small village.

But I also realized that had I grown up anywhere else, I wouldn't have met my beautiful community of kids who also didn't fit the Danish mold of who we were expected to be. When I was twelve, my community might not have been Jewish or typically Danish, but it was warm and welcoming, and it felt like home. I was able to be as loud and as chaotic and as expressive as I wanted. I was encouraged to take up space as I was. And that, to me, is what I wish for in a community.

And then I went to Greece. In Greece I reunited with a group of girls that I frequently refer to as "the loves of my life." Ah, in Greece I was surrounded by "my girls." Girls' girls. Whenever I feel down, they are able to lift me up, even from across the world. Rarely have I had relations where I feel as safe and accepted as I do with these girls. We spent the days going to seminars, exploring, and spending time by the pool. We spent the nights on the dance floor, providing listening spaces for each other in our room, and jamming underneath the stars. Even though this summer camp was the only one where I attended as a camper, not a counselor, it might have been the hardest. Knowing that this incredibly rare and beautiful safe space I was living in was fleeting. Every moment that passed brought me closer to the moment I would have to leave. And even though I tried to distract myself from this fact, it was almost impossible. The better you have it, the more you have to lose, I guess.

Rarely have I ever felt as much at home as I do with these girls. However, it has happened before. In the community I became part of when I was 12, there was one specific girl, who became one of the most important people in my life. For her privacy, let's call her Hayati. Hayati and I have known each other for more than eight years now. She knows me better than anyone, except maybe my sister. She understands me to an extent that honestly scares me. She feels like home.



After Greece was Nigeria. Oy, Nigeria was INCREDIBLE! I learned so much!! The kids were adorable, the nature was beautiful and once again, my colleagues were amazing. I really connected with the other girls on the counselling team – both Nigerian and international. Again, seeing the beauty of friendships between women made me so incredibly happy. Even though we all came from totally different backgrounds, we immediately were there for each other. Whenever we had the chance, my Nigerian co-counsellors would try to teach me how to dance. By the end, I was told that I could almost twerk! (I did do dancehall for four years as a teenager, so being able to “almost” twerk was maybe not quite the compliment my colleagues thought it was). FYI, I am a strong believer that trauma sits in the hips, so I left Nigeria feeling very healed.

Dancing with girls that make me feel safe is the common theme for every single community I have felt a part of. We did it in Greece, in Nigeria and we do it at events in our community here in Denmark. And at one other moment in time, I did this frequently. When I was 12. Hayati and I were the youngest girls in our circle. Whenever we had recess, we would kick the guys out of the classroom, roll down the blinds, play Nancy Ajram from the speakers, and dance until the bell rang. The older girls had so much fun teaching me and Hayati. And we had so much fun learning. This was the first time in my life I fully felt part of a community outside of my own family. Hayati and I started speaking like each other, I started eating her mother’s food more often than I ate my own, and eventually her culture felt like a part of mine and my culture felt like a part of hers.

In case it wasn’t clear by now, Hayati also isn’t just Danish. (Notice: both Hayati and I are fully Danish, just like we are fully also our other identities. I have a hard time accepting that one can be half something and half something else. You are 100% all your identities. Or at least you should be able to identify as such, if that is what you want.) Hayati, a Palestinian girl who moved to Denmark from Syria when she was 11 years old, was the first person to understand and embrace the complexities of my own identity, before I understood them myself. And you might not have heard a story like mine before, but I promise it isn’t special. I am not one of a kind. Hayati, like many other young Palestinians in Denmark, understands the feeling of not fully fitting in – therefore she doesn’t expect me to. She understands the frustrations of not getting time off for the holidays – because she doesn’t either. And she understands that my identity cannot just be confined to one place or one people - because nor can hers. And that’s what made us feel part of each other’s homes and communities.

