

MOMENTS IN TIME

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Part I

My morning routine before a day of high school goes like this: alarm goes off. Hit snooze. Alarm goes off. Hit snooze again. Repeat four more times, and then suddenly jump out of bed in a surge of panicked adrenaline because the bus is coming in twenty-five minutes. Get dressed, brush teeth, pack bag, and run out the door.

While my routine may maximize sleep, it's not very effective. It makes weekday mornings feel jarring, never giving me enough time to mentally prepare for the day. I came to this realization one morning two summers ago at Camp Yavneh. I was in the counselor-in-training program called Kerem. Each morning we would leave our bunks and troop down to the center of camp for morning prayers.

I had attended Yavneh for five years prior to Kerem. On the first morning of my Kerem summer I calculated that I had spent six months of my life at the camp, which meant I had prayed every morning for 180 days. I felt so bored by the mindless minutes we spent praying and squandering time that I could be sleeping. Every morning felt like *Groundhog Day*, starring a bunch of bleary-eyed teenagers. We would mumble through the same prayers and then desperately rush to the *chadar ochel* for breakfast.

I decided that there had to be a better way. I resolved to make the most of the morning prayers. I put effort into reading and understanding the Hebrew and finding bits of the prayers that were meaningful to me each day. I tried attending different minyanim, from my usual egalitarian minyan to partnership, from a mechitza minyan to even a yoga minyan. The mornings became a period for reflection on my goals and preparation for the exhausting day ahead. This was a major moment in the development of my Jewish values: the realization that prayer is actually meaningful to me and helps me focus and center myself.

Part II

Eight months later, when my alarm went off at five in the morning, I didn't hit snooze. I immediately rolled out of bed and was rewarded with a view of a blazing orange sunrise over the Judean Hills. I could see a few cars slowly making their way down Highway 1 while trees waved in the breeze, arranged in the long, neat rows of the orchard. I was at Kibbutz Tzuba, on the NFTY EIE semester program in Israel. And today was a new month.

We had been invited to spend Rosh Chodesh at the Kotel with Women of the Wall, and I had enthusiastically accepted the opportunity. I looked forward to supporting the cause and engaging in meaningful morning prayer, something I hadn't done for a long time.

However, as davening began, the atmosphere was tense. Men had gathered up against the mechitza divider and harassed us; calling us pigs and yelling *Reformim!* in a disgusted tone. I had never heard "Reform" used as a derogatory word before. Orthodox women stood in front of us, blocking my view of the wall. They draped signs over their backs, accusing us of destroying Judaism from within and preventing the coming of the Messiah. A few women stood next to us, blowing whistles. They draped huge, brightly printed cloth over their bodies, obscuring their faces to make it hard for anyone to take the whistles away. The faceless women made me uneasy and their shrill whistles made it impossible to concentrate. Police stood around us in neon green vests, holding out a firm arm against any women who tried to disrupt the prayers, but still, people pushed and yelled loudly so we wouldn't hear the Torah reading.

I had never encountered people, let alone Jews, who despised my practice and didn't accept me into the community. I was disturbed that some Jews would deliberately interrupt other Jews' prayers. Standing at the wall, I thought back to Yavneh. The camp leans far more Orthodox than Reform, but they always tried to create inclusive spaces for the Jewish rituals and would never criticize anyone else's form of practice.

The experience at the Kotel became another major moment of development for me. I realized how much I value open-mindedness and tolerance, exploration of different types of Judaism, and spaces like Yavneh that foster conversation between Jews across the spectrum of observance.

Part III

When we entered the forest, I was struck by how beautiful it was. Sunlight streamed through the thin trees and lush greenery on either side of me as we made our way down a soft mulch path. As we walked further and further, the sense of peaceful quiet turned into uneasiness and dread. Soon trees surrounded us from all sides in an eerie, silent wall.

This was the Lopuchowo Forest. Located outside the town of Tykocin in Poland; it was the site of a massacre of over 2,000 Jews during WWII. We had traveled to Lopuchowo from Tykocin, where we had an exuberant service in the town's beautiful old synagogue and learned what Jewish life had been like in the shtetl.

We reached a clearing with three grassy mounds, which we learned were three mass graves that had now been turned into a memorial. The area was dotted with flowers, painted rocks, and Israeli flags. I was overwhelmed by the jumble of colors and the sound of everyone's footsteps around me which were magnified in the silence. I decided to try and take in smaller pieces of the memorial because if I looked at the three hills for too long, I felt like I would be swallowed up by my overwhelming sadness and anger.

I focused on a candle in front of me and realized that there was a name printed on it in Hebrew. As I walked around, I encountered more and more candles. I tried to read every name. Some listed the names of entire families, with their ages when they died. I wanted to honor the people who died by remembering their names, but with every step I took I felt them slipping out of my memory and I couldn't cling to them.

After ages of unbearable silence, we all reconvened in a circle for a small memorial service. I spent the entire service trying to contain the throbbing pain in my chest that was threatening to burst out in the form of hot, angry tears. We concluded the service by singing Hatikvah.

At each place we visited throughout the Poland trip, we sang Hatikvah. At the end of EIE, I bought a ring inscribed with the line “עין לציון צופיה”, which is a line from Hatikvah. When I look at the words inscribed on my ring, my mind is instantly drawn back to the emotional renditions of the song. I remember standing shoulder-to-shoulder with my best friends in the entire world, singing about the hope to freely practice Judaism in the holy land, a privilege that we now had. The trip to Poland reminded me how lucky I am to be able to visit Israel and how much I value my connection to the country. “עין לציון צופיה” means “an eye still looks toward Zion,” which traditionally signified the aspiration to return to the land of Israel. I choose to see the quote as a reminder to pay attention to Israel even when I am back in America, to value and support the country, but also to think critically about it.

These three moments encompass some of my core Jewish values. At camp I learned that prayer can be a valuable tool for focusing on my goals and examining what is going on in my life. With Women of the Wall I learned how much I care about acceptance in the Jewish community. While someone else may have a different form of practice, their practice is still valid and holds meaning for them. Conversations with people who are different than you will foster tolerance and unity. Finally, in Poland I learned about the rich Yiddish culture that existed before the Holocaust and gained a greater appreciation for the pieces of that culture that survived. When I returned to Israel after visiting Poland, I had a newfound appreciation for the privilege of a Jewish country. However, with that privilege, I think it is equally important to think critically about Israel’s policies and actions.

As I’ve grown up, there have been many moments that define and influence my Jewish identity. I’m still working to reconcile the variety of experiences I’ve had, and to incorporate what I’ve learned into my daily life. These three moments represent the evolution of my Jewish identity across time, as I connect to a rich Jewish past, work to improve myself in the present, and imagine a more tolerant and open-minded future.

