

# עכשיו! ACHSHAV!

The Official Magazine of USY

Fall 2011-Winter 2012  
סתיו-חורף תשע"ב



The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

## Here Comes The Sun

*A look back at the  
experiences that transformed  
lives in the Summer of 2011*

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# From the Editors

## A Strange Band of Characters

by Dani Leopold and Elias Strober-Horowitz

Participating on USY summer programs is an experience, the quality of which is not easily found elsewhere. The relationships built and the memories cherished are of a unique nature. We were so impressed by the submissions we received for this issue, although we weren't entirely surprised. While reading these articles, we realized that the individual anecdotes remembered so fondly aren't special because of what actually happened; the small, weird places you visited, or the interesting people you met along the way. You remember everything you experienced this summer because of those with whom you shared the experience. Being a member of USY, and even more so attending a USY summer program – such as USY on Wheels, USY Israel Pilgrimage, or a regional encampment – means being a part of a community with whom you share more than almost any other community you have ever been or will be a part of.

There was one word that kept popping up while we were reading your submissions: family. Yet even this, in our minds, is not a sufficient way to describe the connection that is created when teens relate to one another this way. When you are a part of a family, you are constantly trying to find aspects of yourself and your personality which differentiate you from your siblings and parents. However, when you are with USY, you are looking for the similarities. You are looking, essentially, to experience a truer sense of belonging. Somehow, you fit almost perfectly in the network of personalities and quirks that make up your diverse group. It's not something that we can explain, nor in all likelihood that anyone else would be able to explain in a way that captures the utter truth and simplicity of the connection.

The closest we came was this quote by the renowned American humorist, Erma Bombeck:

*“We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.”*

USY, we are the little group, trudging through life, acting humanely, ridiculously, morally, inappropriately, and a thousand other ways, all in their correct time. We are all trying to figure out who we are as individuals and as a people. But most importantly, we know who we are as a group. We are USY, three letters that symbolize more than can ever be described. And we fit perfectly.

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# From the UP

## Hatikvah: My Hope

by Dann Weitz

Hand-in-hand, I march down a road where many of my ancestors took their last steps. I look to my left and right – destruction is the only thing I see. Behind me lies a little path leading into the woods. If I were anywhere but here, I would think I was in a park. I keep walking, periodically glancing ahead to see the silhouettes of my friends ambling just as I am, hand-in-hand with one another. Railroad tracks to my left, destruction to my right, and a memorial behind me. I wonder how my ancestors must have felt walking this same path. Anger? Pain? Grief? I feel these emotions too. I want to sit down in the middle of this road and cry.

I look up towards the front of the line and see two Israeli flags on the shoulders of my best friends. I look around me and see my family; one that I have only known for three days, but already I know I will be with them for life. The walk, this experience, has brought me so close to these people. I know that they will cry with me once we've left this place. I know that they have cried with me at this atrocity. I know, in my deepest heart, that they love me as much as I love them.

I taste hope. This yearning desire has built in my gut over that past few minutes. I hear myself whispering. The whisper becomes a tune. The tune becomes a song. I have tears flowing down my cheeks. My family, one by one, starts singing with me. *Kol od balevav penima ...* Hope fills my feet and legs. *Nefesh yehudi Homiyah ...* My arms tingle, hope slowly filling my body. *Ulefa'atei mizra'h kadima ...* My chest is suddenly lighter than air. *Ayin le tziyon tzofiah ...* Then it strikes my heart, faster and stronger than anything I have felt before. Hope fills my being. It becomes a part of me.

With the song ringing in my ears, I think about all that I have learned. I am compassionate, loving, and hopeful. The best aspects of human nature have shown themselves to me and I have accepted their gifts. The road I am on, however, has also held the extremes of human nature. Many were shot, killed, or left for dead by the previous owners. Rage, fury, and extermination have all had their fair share of vengeance here on this ground.

I look up, seeing the gates ahead of me, a sign of freedom that some have never known. I slow down to take in the effect. Then it hits me. I have just done something that my own grandparents, cousins, family, were not able to do. I have just walked out of Birkenau.

My experiences with my USY Israel Pilgrimage group are some that I will never forget. They helped me forge a bond with people that can never be broken. While this is one experience I had on a USY summer program, there are so many more that you each can go and experience for yourselves.

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## From the Director

### Seeing God in Different Ways, Different Places by Jules A. Gutin

Ever since the summer of 1970, when I staffed the USY Israel Pilgrimage for the first time, my summers have often brought new experiences and opportunities. That was certainly true this past summer.

This was the second summer that our Eastern Europe/Israel Pilgrimage program included Berlin in the itinerary. For many years I personally resisted visiting Germany. It was a difficult decision when we decided to take one of our groups there. Even though thousands of USYers have visited Poland over the years, there was still a powerful symbolism of visiting Germany, where the plans to destroy European Jewry were developed. While

the few days spent there with this year's Eastern Europe/Israel Pilgrimage group were difficult for me, I understood the value of the experience as I shared it with this wonderful group of USYers. Although Germany is home to the fastest growing Jewish community in Europe, the richness of German Jewish life as it was before the Shoah no longer exists. What is left are memories and museums which remind us of what was destroyed.

A few weeks later, I finally got to visit Yellowstone National Park (with USY on Wheels Mission Mitzvah). Some of my most memorable and most inspiring moments have been spent with USY on Wheels groups visiting places like the

Grand Canyon, Crater Lake and Yosemite. Somehow, until this past summer I had never managed a visit to Yellowstone. Very often, after I return from visiting a beautiful place filled with natural wonders, one of my good friends will ask me if I "saw God."

Each one of us "sees" God in different ways and in different places. For me, Yellowstone was one of those places. From boiling mud pots, to erupting geysers,

to thunderous waterfalls, to close-up views of wildlife, Yellowstone provided a constant array of natural wonders unlike any I had seen before. It wasn't just sightseeing. It was truly a religious experience,

reminding me of God's awesome power and majesty.

So I had two very different first time experiences this past summer. One reminded me of the terrible evil which can be perpetrated by human beings, while the other reminded me of the miracles and beauty which surround us each day. And, the best part was that I was able to share those experiences with USYers who helped me to understand and appreciate those unique opportunities.

If you haven't done so already, I hope that you, too, get to share experiences like these with other USYers. I have no doubt it will transform your life.



USY Director Jules A. Gutin addresses USY Israel Pilgrimage participants during *HaEvent*, a day of inter-group fun, games, and camaraderie

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USY on Wheels is the kind of summer program that participants are talking about 40 years later, regardless of where they end up in life.

This unique six-and-a-half week program takes USYers from across North America, some of whom have never attended a USY event before, on a tour of major (and many not so major, but definitely interesting) landmarks throughout the United States and Canada.

These articles, filled with fond memories and crazy stories, made us insanely jealous of everyone who ever went on USY on Wheels.

Luckily, we were able to live it through all of those who submitted!

One line which we think describes the feelings of Wheelniks perfectly:

You can take me out of my Wheels bus, but you can never take my bus out of me.

## It's Raining *Ruach!*

by Isabel Malmazada  
METNY

When I think back to my summer on USY on Wheels, where I was with 45 other teenagers, five staff members, and Karen, our wonderful bus driver, several memories come to mind:

the awesome people we met, the group bonding experiences we went through, and the meaningful Shabbatot we spent together. Oh, and I will never forget that being within 75 feet of a bison is breaking state law in Wyoming. But, the most cherished memory that I will never forget was that hike up the Grand Canyon.

The thing is, I'm not a hiker. I never was and never will be. So when I found out we would all be hiking the Grand Canyon, I wasn't thrilled to say the least, but I figured it'd be fine and I even had Mallory, my friend, who would stay with me.

I don't know if any of you realize this, but the Grand Canyon is beautiful. Not just beautiful, rather special. It simply amazes you. Being able to pray Shacharit there was a unique experience that will never leave me for the rest of my life. When we first started walking down the trail, I thought the hike wouldn't be so bad; it was downhill and a pretty easy walk. Just 15 more minutes down, then 45 back up. Piece of cake.

What we didn't realize was that it was going to rain. As we ascended up the trail, Mallory and I were already out of breath after about five minutes. Typical. And then God decided to split the heavens and let a torrential rain down pour upon all of us. So just imagine about 25 people trying to hike

back up the Grand Canyon in a rain that could have rivaled the storms of Hurricane Irene. It was horrible!

I was one of the last to walk up, but there was one thing

really helped me through it. It was the boys leading the front of the group. About five minutes into the rain, they started shouting *ruach* songs like I've never heard before. I don't know how they did it since I, for one, was so out of breath. But hearing them with so much spirit, happiness, and glee in their voices shouting out *Dodi Li*, *Ana B'koach*, and so much more really made me feel that God was with us. We were one unit that couldn't be broken no matter the obstacle.

Just think about it; hiking up the Grand Canyon in a downpour with some of your closest friends screaming *ruach*, it is truly a sight to see, to hear, and to experience. This is why I love USY. I love the connections you can make with God and each other in any place, with any person, anywhere. And this is one out of hundreds of stories people can tell you

about USY on Wheels that made it special for them. I will never forget USY on Wheels and the magnificent people and experiences along with it.

When I think back to being on a bus with 45 teenagers, five staff, and Karen, I think of the Grand Canyon, the *ruach*, and especially the feeling of *kehillah*, of a community I had with everyone on Bus C 2011.



# The Time of My Life in a Whistle Factory

by Sean Haimowitz  
Hagalil

This past summer, I had the privilege to travel with 30 kids from all over North America, many of whom are now my closest friends, on USY on Wheels: East. Before the trip, I knew that I would have a good time, but I didn't know exactly what to expect. Would I get along with my fellow USYers? Would I like my staff? Would I miss my home and friends in New Jersey? By the end of the first day, I knew the answers to all of these questions. Within a few days, I realized that I was not having a good time, but the time of my life! The staff and the other kids on my bus were like family to me, and I did not miss home for a second. Rather, once the time on my "Great Summer Escape" ended, I missed my new family from the trip.

My favorite thing about the trip was the constant laughter bubbling throughout every conversation (except during prayer, of course). I could say, without



exaggeration, that I laughed more in one day on USY on Wheels: East than I had in several weeks leading up to it!

Another aspect of my trip that my friends and I always loved were the random and unusual stops we had in be-

tween major cities. One day, our staff told us that we were going to the American Whistle Corporation, the only company in America to still make metal whistles. We thought that this would just be a place to walk around and stretch from a two-hour bus ride. Oh, were we wrong! This "factory," which was hyped up by our staff, was ultimately a whirlwind of activity. Our tour consisted of the corporation's president walking us through a very small factory cooled only by a single fan in a corner. He went on to tell us how much he loves Walmart and how much they support the company by buying whistles. Not exactly your idyllic summer moment.

In retrospect, something about our "tour guide" seemed a little "off." But it was moments like these, where you didn't know what to expect, that made USY on Wheels: East so great because you couldn't possibly know what to expect. Moments when we were standing in front of the single fan in a whistle shop, trying to cool ourselves from the scorching summer heat, listening to how amazing Walmart is. These were the moments from which we were able to step back from a situation and laugh our hearts out. These were the moments that made USY on Wheels: East, the time of my life.

## Mishpachat Bus D

by Elyssa Ronik  
Hanegev

When I first returned home from USY on Wheels and saw my friends and family from South Florida, everyone asked me the same two questions:

"How was your summer!?" To which I usually answered: "Amazing. Oh wow, the best experience of my life,"

This was usually followed by: "What was your favorite place that you went to?"

This was the truly difficult question to answer. After having traveled from the great historical landmarks of Washington, D.C., to breathtaking national parks like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, to fun, but, mildly overrated spots like Disneyland and Hershey's Chocolate World, to bizarre, little-known places like the Cadillac Graveyard and Circus World, it was difficult to pick any single destination as my favorite. While all the stops on

the bus greatly contributed to my summer experience, picking a favorite seems almost silly. I answered the question several ways before I came up with the answer that I really believe. It was not where I was or what I was doing, but who I was with, that made my summer so unforgettable. So my favorite place? The bus.

On August 4, I left Newark, N.J., our final destination, a completely different person than I had been when my summer adventure began. I had a newfound independence. I woke myself up in the morning, did my own laundry, and walked around huge cities with my friends, things I would NEVER have done this time last year. I discovered some of my strengths and weaknesses, and how to work with them. But most of all, I have a summer full of memories that I will never forget.

# My Summer of Unforgettable Memories

by Lena Backal  
Hagesher

My countdown to USY on Wheels started at 157 days. I couldn't wait to leave home and finally experience this supposedly amazing summer program for myself. As soon as I walked into the room of 44 Jewish strangers, my life changed. It was the first day of USY on Wheels, and my bus was already having a dance party in the group room. Though it was hard to pinpoint the source of it, I felt an immediate connection to these crazy, crazy people.



The next morning was the start of an amazing summer. Many people think that spending six-and-a-half weeks on a coach bus is boring, but they are completely wrong. They don't realize that spending time on a bus doesn't mean sitting quietly for hours on end. In fact, I don't think there was a single bus ride where I stayed seated. I was always walking around and socializing with my new best friends. On the long bus rides, my friend and I would always go and sit with the staff. We

called this "staff hour," even though on most occasions we spent a lot more time than that hanging out with them.

My USY on Wheels staff was phenomenal! Without them, the summer wouldn't have been the same. Yeah, they were in charge of us, but we also created amazing friendships with all of them. I was so lucky to have great staff that got along with everyone on the bus and with each other.

This summer created so many un-

forgettable memories. For the whole trip, my bus did everything together, and no matter what we faced we never did it alone. In Yellowstone National Park, a bunch of my friends and I ended up stuck on our porch due to a wild bison. Who else can say they broke a law because they were closer than 75 feet to a bison? Who else can say they've turned a miserable hike up the Grand Canyon in the rain into a spontaneous *ruach* session? Who else has the experience of

running through Walmart, frantically shopping for food just before an unbelievable and relaxing Shabbat?

Unfortunately, the summer couldn't last forever, and it came time to leave my best friends, amazing staff, bus, and my new family. Even though months have passed, I still can't go a day without talking to them. USY on Wheels taught me the importance of friendship, responsibility, and Judaism. It was the summer I'll never forget.

## Early Morning Outing

by Jordan Pomerantz  
METNY

Normally, I can't say getting up early is something I enjoy. In fact, normally I'd say it's kind of awful. This time seemed no different. I was in the middle of my summer on USY on Wheels, and we had travelled all the way to the Grand Canyon, just to wake up early. Great.

However, all my friends and I stumbled from the bus, carrying our *tallisim* and *tefillin* along with our normal day packs. We walked until we finally stopped, unpacked our *tefillah* gear, and looked out over the massive canyon in front of us. A brisk wind blew across my face, blowing the *tzitzit* on my *talit* up and down. We began to pray.

As the surrounding area got brighter, I realized more and more how stunningly beautiful a place I was in. The Grand

Canyon, covered in light from the rising sun, captured my attention. I felt small by comparison. Standing there, early that morning, I wasn't upset about being awake anymore.

Prayer takes on an entirely different meaning when it is encountered like this. By this point in the summer, I had developed some of the closest friendships of my life. Standing there with them, reciting prayers that had been written thousands of years before, in front of one of the most amazing aspects of God's creation, I felt truly connected with Judaism. Each prayer, seemed so much more true than it ever had before. I will never forget the experience that I had at the Grand Canyon. I will never forget what it truly means to appreciate the world that we are so lucky to live in.

USY Israel Pilgrimage trips are all structured around four weeks touring and exploring Israel. However, there are several different options that make up the various USY Israel Pilgrimage experiences. **Israel Adventure** is an intense four-week marathon, while **Israel Adventure Plus** also includes Gadna, an exciting week-long experience in the Israel Defense Force. USY Israel Pilgrimage/Poland Seminar begins in Poland with visits to concentration camps, memorials, and other sites related to the Holocaust. Italy/Israel Pilgrimage uncovers the Jewish community in Italy, while the Eastern Europe/Israel Pilgrimage brings you to Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. The newest opportunity, *L'takayn Olam*, lets you connect with Israel by volunteering in communities.



Regardless of your trip you choose, all of the groups meet up for one day of fun-filled competitions and team building exercises in a *ruach*-charged *HaEvent*. These articles offer just a glimpse of all of the wonderful opportunities that USY Israel Pilgrimage has to offer.

## The Real Israel: Seeing *Eretz Yisrael* through the lens of volunteer work

by Shayna Solomon  
Seaboard

It was a beautiful day on the beach in Haifa, and my USY Israel Pilgrimage group had come out in force to clean up the trash on shore. *L'Takayn Olam*, to repair the world, was our name and our goal.

The *L'Takayn Olam* group was new to USY, even somewhat experimental. We saw Israel, but in a very different way than the other USY Israel Pilgrimage groups. Of course, there was still no escaping that we were tourists, but we were also able to step out of that role and work within everyday Israeli life. The lens of social action through which I saw Israel changed my perspective of the country, creating a beautiful vision of Israel for me which goes beyond the physical.

I'm going to take the liberty to skip ahead a bit to when I had just gotten back to the U.S. I was eating breakfast in the kitchen, still slightly woozy with jet lag. The *Washington Jewish Week* sat on the table, so I picked it up and started reading. To my surprise and de-

light, there was an article about a high school group that took a trip to Israel. I thought the trip described would be a lot like mine, because the article claimed



the group saw the "real" Israel. But as I began reading, it sounded only vaguely familiar.

Apparently this teen group had seen the real Israel by talking with victims of terrorism, tragedy, and war. And yes, that is part of Israel. My group also saw this

reality. We cried at Har Herzl, Israel's military cemetery, and we visited memorials in Jerusalem. But still, this aspect was only a small fragment of the real Israel that I saw.

My first volunteer work was in Haifa at the Shilo Day Care Center for the Elderly. The center was not a nursing center, but offered entertainment and other services to the elderly. None of these elderly people were invalids and, yet, the Israeli staff at this non-profit found it to be their responsibility to offer them opportunities that they would have given to their own parents or grandparents. Although some spoke Hebrew, others Russian, some Spanish, and others Arabic, there was an overwhelming sense of community as

they all ate and played Bingo together. As I tried to hold conversations in my awfully fragmented Hebrew, I realized that these people were happy. They were happy to see us. They were happy to have the op-

*Continued on Page 9*

# From a Story to Reality

by Jessica Schwartz  
Pinwheel

While I was teaching Hebrew School, one of my eight-year-old students, Bella, asked me about the Holocaust. She told me that she wanted to hear the story of it again.

"I don't remember the story, but I remember that it's the only one that doesn't scare me," she said.

I was impressed. I'm 16-years-old, and, after all I have seen this summer, the Holocaust is scarier to me than it has ever been.

This summer, on USY Eastern Europe/Israel Pilgrimage, I saw the Holocaust unfold. In Berlin, we learned the causes of the Holocaust. From the Reichstag in Berlin to the home of the Wannasee Conference, we discovered how and why the Holocaust began, and how it escalated to such extremes. In Prague, we spent *Shabbat* in a beautiful city and saw the effects the Holocaust had on the Jewish community. We visited Terezin, which is located about an hour from Prague. Terezin was a model



concentration camp where members of the Red Cross were brought to dispel the rumors of extermination camps.

The most powerful moment I had the entire summer happened in Terezin. There was a small synagogue hidden as a storage room, and on the walls were quotes from Jewish songs and prayers. Written on the wall in peeling rust colored paint were the words of *Acheinu*:

אחינו כל בית ישראל, הנתונים בצרה ובשביה,  
העומדים בין בים ובין בניבשה,  
המקום ירחם עליהם, ויוציאם מצרה לרוחה,  
ומאפלה לאורה, ומשעבוד לגאולה,  
השתא בעגלא ובזמן קריב

"Our brothers the whole house of Israel, who are in distress and captivity, who wander over sea and over land – may God have mercy on them, and bring them from distress to comfort, from darkness to light, from slavery to redemption, now, swiftly, and soon. And let us say: Amen."

As we sang the song together, there was not a dry eye in the room. When we arrived in Poland, the crying didn't stop. As we traveled from concentration camps to extermination camps to mass graves in the woods, we learned the most important lessons: how to cope with tough situations, and how to support and comfort our friends. From Terezin to Auschwitz, Majdanek to Treblinka, we all grew both individually and as a group. We

learned about ourselves and we learned about our friends. Someone whose name I didn't know yesterday is someone whose hand I hold today. Whose shoulder I cry on. A best friend to keep my secrets, the silent power of our tears begging for a comforting hug.

In Eastern Europe, I studied the Holocaust. In Israel, I studied the homeland of the Jewish people. From experiencing *kibbutz* life and to exploring Tel Aviv to participating in many social action projects all over the country, we learned

about how the country started and thrived.

The most amazing part of USY Israel Pilgrimage for me, however, was the relationship I developed with Jerusalem. The Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, our base and our home, is located in the heart of Jerusalem. In the short time we spent there in Jerusalem, I learned how to navigate the city and studied the historic sites surrounding me in depth. We sang slow *ruach* songs at the *Kotel*, and Jeff Buckley's *Hallelujah* in the City of David. We bought *rugelach* from the Marzipan Bakery in the market before *Shabbat*, and then had *ruach*-filled *Kabbalat Shabbat/Ma'ariv* on Friday nights. We learned about the Holocaust from another perspective at Yad Vashem, and visited the graves of Yizhak Rabin ז"ל, Hannah Szenes ז"ל, and Michael Levin ז"ל, studying how each of them served Israel and how we relate to them.

I learned about the meaning of friendship, the meaning of life, and the person I want to be. USY Eastern Europe/Israel Pilgrimage was the most powerful experience of my life.

# Behind The Words, Feeling The Emotions

by Shani Shahmoon

Far West

As a result of my taking part in the USY Israel Pilgrimage/ Poland Seminar, I constantly get asked, "How was Poland?"

Although it sounds like such a casual inquiry, there is a lot behind my answer. I have been alive for 16 years, and not once have I felt the emotions I felt in Poland. The hardships I read about in stories, the stories passed down from survivors in my family, the stark reality of the Holocaust, all came to life. It had me jumbled with mixed emotions about the atrocity, but never once did I feel alone.

We visited multiple locations, not only to see, but also learn about what happened in each particular place. Each group member would feel a different connection in each place. Some broke down where others did not, and others did not break down at all during trip. Our staff constantly reminded us that each person reacts differently to such strong experiences. I did not fully understand what they meant until I walked in Majdanek.

Above the hill, the entire death camp was visible. The different gas chambers, the bunks in which millions slept and millions died in. Our tour guide told us to point out what was around us. As I stopped, looked, and listened, I noticed crows. When another group member pointed the crows' presence out, another told him that her grandmother told her that every crow is a life lost. The myth brought goose bumps to my arms. We

sat in different bunks, we walked through the gas chambers, and we touched the fence that divided the inhabitants of the death camp from reality. Everyone was emotional, yet everyone showed their emotions differently.

The kids in my group never held back emotions. Tears were no sign of weakness; we were encouraged to express our feelings. A week of friendship may not be long, but a week of experiencing what we experienced made us so much closer than seemed possible in such a short time. We were not just a group, but we were also not yet a family. For that week, we were a giant support system. If someone would be seen crying, there was always someone beside him or her, ready to provide comfort and empathy. If someone was walking alone, someone else would reach out and walk beside him or her.

We managed to lighten up tough days with funny bus rides and once, we even managed to dance the streets of Lublin in the rain. There are two types of memories you make in Poland: historical and sentimental. I carry both with me at all time. So when I'm asked about how visiting Poland was, I always have one response:

"It was hard, but important, and not once did I feel alone."

Experiencing that extra week with my group helped us build a bridge from a group to a support system to a family.

## The Real Israel:

### Seeing *Eretz Yisrael* through the lens of volunteer work

*Continued from Page 7*

opportunities and community that the center offered them. The center saw past the physical needs of the elderly and understood their mental and social needs as they grew older and lonelier.

Perhaps the disabled adults we worked with were the most striking example of community caring. Some could barely speak. None of them were capable of living by themselves because many couldn't feed themselves or go to the bathroom alone. They were offered all of the help they needed with those aspects of daily living, but they also received a remarkable number of enrichment opportunities. We helped this group do an archaeological dig and explore tunnels from the *Bar Kochba* revolt that occurred in Israel thousands of years ago. These

experiences were as amazing to me as was the chance to provide the wonderfully enriching experience for these disabled adults. Afterwards, we went back to their facility and had lunch. It was actually one of the better meals that we had during our trip (and that's saying a lot because I love Israeli food). These people were not treated like second-class citizens. They were certainly not just sitting in a facility all day as the nursing aids only helped with basic needs and otherwise watched TV.

And everywhere we went, our mission felt important. We always heard, "You're here to help us?" When we were cleaning up the beach in Haifa, a vendor who couldn't speak English thanked us in his own way by giving all of us Pop-

sicles and water as we worked. Serving was heartwarming, but it also connected us with the organizers of these programs for the needy and those who we were benefiting. We understood the passion that persists in the hearts of many Israelis to make the world a better place.

So, here's my real Israel. It is a place where everyone gets treated as equals, as important and worthy citizens. The sages teach us that Jews are family and are responsible for each of our fellow Jews as though each one is our brother or sister. In Israel, this isn't just a saying; it is the practice in everyday life. Israel is a place that survives on the principles that we strive to achieve. The aim is to use Torah to really begin to fix the world, *l'takayn olam*. That is the real Israel.

# Living Judaism on USY Israel Pilgrimage

by Lucas Eager-Levitt  
METNY

Prior to this summer, I had never had the privilege of visiting our Holy Land. To be able to walk in the path of our forefathers, thousands of years after they lived, to see what they saw, to be where they stood, to pray where they worshiped, is an incomparable experience. Not to mention seeing, touching, and living in the land over which so many valiant Israelis have fought merely for their country's right to exist. I call my visit a privilege, because it was exactly that. To experience what I have experienced, to see what I have seen, to feel what I have felt is a remarkable thing, as a Jew, to be a part of. Because of this amazing opportunity I had the chance to partake in, my summer in Israel was the single most meaningful period in my life.

Day by day, as I walked the streets of Jerusalem, something grew increasingly apparent to me. On our way to go spelunking through Hezekiah's Tunnel, we passed by a traditional Sephardic *Bar Mitzvah* headed towards the *Kotel*. This Bar Mitzvah was complete, just as it would have been performed in the days of the Temple, with traditional garb, a *chuppah* to escort the Bar Mitzvah boy, men blowing shofars, and the women around them all singing *niggunim*. When navigating the bustling streets of the *shuk*, jammed with Israelis and tourists alike, I took note of the traditional market atmosphere energizing the place.

Lastly, we ventured on our much awaited trip to the *Kotel*. Before walking to the Western Wall itself, our tour guide brought us to a museum where we examined plaques on the wall, detailing the timeline of Jewish settlement in the Promised Land. We then walked to the *Kotel*, I approached the Wall with such amazement, such awe. I placed my hand on the smooth, ancient brick. I leaned in closer and shivers descended through my body, tingling through me until I pulled away. The combination of these events brought me to my realization: the State of Israel is nothing new.

While the State of Israel is in its infancy as a nation at a mere 63 years of age, the Jewish homeland in what we now call Israel has been settled by Jews for thousands of years.

After an exile by the Babylonians, then again by the Romans, and now again in the Diaspora, the Jewish People have always returned to *Eretz Yisrael*. We have returned to the ways of old. *B'nai Mitzvot* are performed at the site of the Great Temple just as they would have been performed thousands of years ago. Sales are conducted in a frenzied market with Israelis screaming competing prices back and forth in Hebrew, much as it had been in the squares of ancient Judaea. We sing the same songs, we speak the same language, we say the same prayers. We are the same people.

There was no greater part about experiencing Israel than being a part of Israel. Whether it was eating *shwarma* at *Moshikos*, floating about in the Dead Sea, or tasting tomatoes straight from the vine on a *kibbutz* in the *Negev*, experiencing the wonders of Israel firsthand was an eye opening experience. When you are in the land of your forefathers, you

feel like you belong. For me, I have never felt more comfortable with myself than during those four weeks in Israel. Kosher food was the norm, Judaism was the dominant culture, and Hebrew was the spoken language. For the first time, I was not cautious about wearing my *Magen David* necklace on the outside of my shirt. For the first time, I not only felt proud to wear a *kippah* every day, but I also felt obligated to. I wrapped *tefillin* and put on a *tallit* each morning and excitedly participated in *Shacharit*. For the first time, expressing my Judaism was simply being a part of the community, and being a part of the country. This is what my Israel experience meant to me: being a part of the Jewish people, just as we have done for thousands of years.

I hiked up Masada and visited the ancient palace of Herod. I walked the narrow alleys of the mystical city of Tzfat. I navigated the trenches at Ammunition Hill and mourned at the grave of Michael Levine in Har Herzl. From the Golan Heights down to Eilat, I have experienced mere snippets of what Israel has to offer. However, in my little time sampling Israel, I became connected to the land and to the people, and I have never in my life felt such a sense of belonging.



# How USY Israel Pilgrimage Changed My Life

by Arielle Gordon  
METNY

This summer, while many of my friends were busy taking classes at prestigious universities or windsurfing off the coast of Italy, I decided to embark on a trip that I knew would be *slightly* more meaningful to me. This summer, I decided to spend four weeks in Israel.

It was not the first time I had been to Israel. I'd gone with my family on a fabulous UJA tour in 2008 for my *bat mitzvah*. However, this time was different – after spending four weeks in Israel, I began to feel at home. I left feeling less like a tourist, and more like a true local. This difference between my previous trip to Israel and the time I spent there this summer begs the question: Why was this trip different from any other trip?

On any other trip, I would not be able to explore every inch of Israel. I would not spend a week hiking in the Galilee and Golan Heights (which actually turned out to be infinitely more fun than it sounds), and I would not spend that same week living and working on a *kibbutz*. I would not have been able to visit the Sephardic synagogue in Tzfat, eat *shwarma* on the boardwalk in Tiberias, or visit a 900-year-old fortress in Akko. I would not have had hours of epic raft wars with my best friends on the Jordan River. I would not sleep in a Bedouin tent or camp out under the stars in the Negev desert. I would not dance on a disco boat in Eilat or tour the beautiful Ba'hai gardens in Haifa. I stood in the spot where Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated and sat in the chairs where the Israel's independence was declared. I stood in the Red Sea during *Shacharit* and welcomed in Shabbat at the *Kotel*. On this trip, I was able to truly see the vastness of the “small” land we call Israel.

On any other trip, I would not live like an Israeli. I would not shop in Israeli supermarkets, eat at local hole-in-the-wall restaurants, talk to protesters at the Gilad Shalit tent, or pick potatoes to feed the needy. I would not be able to practice Hebrew slang with young Israelis, or learn how to navigate the busy streets of Jerusalem with ease. I would not witness firsthand the protests going on over housing prices, or hear about them firsthand from citizens of Jerusalem. I would not walk away with a running list of at least ten synagogues in Jerusalem, and be able to tell you which ones had the prettiest staircases. On this trip, I returned with knowledge of what it is like to live every day as an Israeli.

On any other trip, I would not pray twice or more daily, and I would not say *Birkat Hamazon* after every meal. My trip with other Jewish teens, led by Jewish adults, gave me the freedom to practice Judaism to the fullest extent that I wanted to. At home, in my secular, albeit mostly Jewish, public school, I would not feel comfortable saying *Birkat Hamazon* after lunch, or reciting *shehechyanu* after trying something new for the first time. I would not feel free to talk about religion, theology, and Israel with my friends at home. However, in Israel, Judaism is an inseparable part of their culture. It was all around us

and thus became ingrained in our every day lives. Boys that were on my trip noted that their favorite moment was holding a Torah at the *Kotel* during services. This connection to their religion solidified everything they had come to Israel to gain. For most of the girls, the favorite moment was the circle formed after the group's first visit to the *Kotel*. We hugged, cried, and sang Naomi Shemer's *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* together. That moment sticks out in my mind as one that changed my life forever – in that moment I felt connected with Judaism past, present, and future.

I learned on this trip that Judaism is more than just something you learn in a Hebrew School classroom or read about in the Torah. Judaism is something that is a part of our lives every day, giving us comfort and direction. I walked away from my summer with a new found connection to my religion and the land that my religion calls home, *Eretz Yisrael*.

## Through My Eyes

by Alex Hamilton  
SWUSY

I had a great time this summer. I went on USY Israel Pilgrimage/Poland Seminar, which is one of the best decisions I have ever made. We *davened* three times a day, including twice at the holy *Kotel* at the egalitarian section called Robinson's Arch, which is just spectacular.

There were a lot of places where we prayed that were incredible. We *davened Shacharit* on top of Masada while looking at a beautiful sunrise. We *davened Mincha* in Birkenau, amazed at the ability of the Jewish people to overcome hardship and tragedy. We *davened* at the *Kotel*, rejoicing in the arrival of Shabbat, overlooking the Old City. Now I see this view every Shabbat. These experiences were so spiritually overwhelming that I had to constantly remind myself that I was at this great historical location that I read about in the Torah, and I am actually fulfilling the *mitzvot* there.

There were a lot of great times at the home of Conservative Judaism in Israel, the Fuschberg Center. There are two dormitory buildings, a synagogue, and a Conservative *Yeshiva* on the complex. My favorite time was when the girls were off doing some other activity just for girls, and the guys were playing a combination of Capture the Flag and Freeze Tag across the entire complex. We had to run around looking for four jerrycans, which our staff hid in various places. We played Freeze Tag, with the staff being able to freeze us, and vice versa. Up stairs, through tunnels, across courtyards we stormed. It was a blast. All of us were drenched in sweat with huge grins on our faces.

# Rock You Like a Hurricane: Surviving Irene

by Elissa Pehr  
METNY

METNY Encampment 2011, truly the happiest place on earth, did not have weather to rave about by any means. While at camp, we were faced with the threat of severe rain due to the oncoming hurricane, Irene. It was expected that there would be torrential downpours, along with high speed winds. It was crucial to keep everyone as safe as possible while still having fun – no easy task, however, the METNY staff was determined not to give up.

Just before *Shabbat* it was an-

nounced to all of camp that none of the services would take place on the amphitheater. Even with a bunch of extremely discontent seniors, it was important to have the best services possible. They were phenomenal and, aside from indoor services, *Shabbat* was wonderful! The rain started to come down, and for *chofesh* the USYers were confined to certain “safe spots”; it was unacceptable to just be walking around outside. Other than that, the effects of the weather went seemingly unnoticed. After all, in

METNY, the only thing that matters is that we are together as a community, not where we are located.

Just before the conclusion of our Saturday night, all of camp was informed of possibly the worst news any girl could ever hear: all girls were to sleep in the Beit Am together, a large building with only two bathrooms, no showers, and mattresses on the floor. Extremely discontent, the girls went back to their bunks, got an overnight bag together and moved all their stuff over to their new location for the night. The lines for the bathroom were seemingly infinite while everyone was getting ready for bed. This did not seem like night we would all benefit from. The boys, on the other hand, were safe and sound in their respective bunks.

To all of our disbelief, that night turned out to be one of the best at encampment, helping us develop stronger bonds with the people we were staying with, as well as providing some people with the opportunity to step up and take leadership roles. Senior boys went to other bunks to check up on their underclassmen and just provide them with some brief entertainment. Girls made the best of their situation and had girl-bonding time, speaking to younger USYers about their common disappointment in the situation and then finding they had plenty in common besides being trapped in a large room with a mass of unwashed teenage girls.

This encampment proved METNY region can be stopped by nothing, not even dear old Irene. To take so many kids and put them in a less-than-satisfactory situation under the supervision of a caring, yet developing, staff, and have it all go well is truly amazing. We overcame these obstacles together and ended up stronger. This encampment, despite the challenges, rocked us like a hurricane.

## "What Brought You Into USY?"

by Maggy Kay  
Seaboard

We were sitting in a puddle, a post-slow *ruach* state. Some were crying thinking about their amazing summer adventures after singing the songs which brought them back to from the summer, the memories which will last a lifetime. They brought them back to their summer where they made memories that will last a lifetime. After a minute, the regional director asks a question.

"What brought you into USY?"

After a *Shabbat* full of talking about our board positions and getting new members, we were asked how we entered USY. This seemed like a simple question, but one with no quick answer. For some people it was just one

person that extended a friendly hand at a Kadima or USY event and the bond lasted for a lifetime. Other people, like myself, knew they were going to be in USY for years because their parents had been active and now it was their turn.



We all had our own story, all it took was knowing one friend, or reaching out to one per-

son in order to bring the now leaders of Seaboard USY into our community. That night at the dance we all knew what we had to do, open our arms to a new member of the community, make them see that USY is welcoming and friendly place full of people who want to know the real you and see you succeed.

# Encampment, LTI, and Other Summer Adventures



Encampment is one of the most successful programs that some regions offer. The week-long event provides an irreplaceable time to form bonds with other USYers in the region, as well as a phenomenal way to kick off the year. Hear about various encampments programs, including the completely new encampment, Camp XL! And, believe it or not, some people had incredible experiences that stretch beyond the USY community.

## There's No Place Like "Home"

by Erin Miller  
EPA

As soon as we stepped off the bus at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, I knew it was going to be an amazing week at Quad-Regional Encampment. The four regional boards of EPA, Hagesher, Hanefesh, and Tzafon greeted us with *ruach*, ensuring the week was going to be one to remember.

The week consisted of prayer, fun activities, learning experiences, and lots of USY love. We enjoyed icebreakers, Israeli dancing, a yoga Shacharit service, art projects, a talent show, a dance, and more. The best part of the weekend was by far the color war. The theme was "The Wizard of Oz-rael," and the teams were split in such a way that members from different regions were able to mingle and meet new friends. Everyone had the chance to participate in their own way, from the banner, to the skit and song competitions, to the Apache Relay and sports showdowns. The blue team, the Munchkins, were the victors over the orange Flying Monkeys, but both teams had tons of spirit and everyone had a really amazing time.

*Shabbat* was also a highlight of the week. A relaxing spiritual experience with other Jewish teens, most of which you haven't met, was a welcome experience. It's such a beautiful thing when 100 Jewish teens unite in prayer, and many participated in the service as well. Anyone who needed help with either leading a service or reading Torah was assisted happily by someone more experienced

with the prayers.

Four regions united at one camp for a week of fun and prayer. Everyone went home having made at least one new friend, even the Kadimaniks! Quad-

Regional Encampment was by far the highlight of my summer and I can't wait to see all of my new friends again at International Convention in Philadelphia.

## Camp XL: So Happy Together

by Liana Rothman  
CRUSY

Arriving at the beautiful Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, most of us had no idea what to expect. We knew the name of the event, Camp USY XL, and the regions involved: CRUSY, CHUSY, EMTZA, and SWUSY. And that was about it.

The first night, we had a bonfire on the beach with kosher S'mores, singing, with lots of time to schmooze and get to know each other. The first day and a half there we had plenty of ice breakers, from saying the names of vegetables without opening our mouths to playing name-games, all of which were a great success. Almost immediately, the four different regions felt bonded and close-knit, thanks to the wonderful staff and programs set up for us.

On Friday night, we had a beautiful *Shabbat* service on the lawn in front of the lake with the Family Camp that was going on at the same time. Led by USYers, the service included lots of *ruach*: dancing around the *Bimah*, singing,

holding hands, and even laughter.

With *havdallah* on the tennis courts, we immediately came back together for the much anticipated opening ceremony for the 2011 Maccabiah Wars! Breaking up into teams by colors, everyone began writing cheers and drawing banners for their teams, to be used the next day during the actual competition.

With events ranging from sandcastle building and balloon tossing, to relay races and basketball, to Simon Says and so many more, it was a full day of running around, shouting cheers, and representing our teams. The climax was probably finishing up the day with a full-team relay race. The Daisy Team was the winner, but everyone was a winner that day after a totally fun-filled 24-hours!

By the end of the camp, everyone was connected and filled with *ruach*, happiness, and memories!

# Flying Paint, Musical Chairs, & Running with Scissors

by Mindy Fliegelman

Hagalil

Anxious, I paced back and forth around the room, moving the blue paint next to the yellow crayons, checking the hallway. The children were supposed to be here already.

“Where are they?” I keep thinking. “Everyone should be here ... I hope this all goes well.”

Suddenly, the unmistakable pitter-patter of little feet began to dribble through the classroom door. Within a few moments, I heard shouts down the hall, and feet running around the building. Excitement filled the halls; everyone’s plans for their activities were set into motion. My group was drawing American flags and playing musical chairs among other hand games, as a part of our theme, “USA Day.”

One girl entered the room. She was small and black, she seemed nervous. She tugged at my friend Ally’s hand as she followed her. Behind her, there was a mob of girls, varying in ages and sizes, all with somewhat tattered clothes. Each one of them appeared unsure of approaching us, because it was clear we were different. My friends and I were white, Jewish girls from the greater New York area and they were black, Ethiopian Jews who had recently moved with their families to an absorption center near Jerusalem. My friends and I were there to volunteer as counselors at a day camp for these Ethiopian children for three days. We were all given specific instructions about how to work with the kids. We felt we knew what we were doing; after all, we had babysat before and come out alive. Even with prior experience and all of this new advice, there was no possible way to be prepared for the next few hours.

More girls entered the room, and within a few moments I lost count. Each girl was different and unique, each with their own story. But I couldn’t keep track of ev-

ery one of their stories and smiles, even though I really wanted to. Mentally, I attempted to document each girl with a name and face. That way, I could walk away with that much information and tell my friends and family each girl’s story. I tried very hard to do this, but there was too much chaos in the room.

My friends and I had planned to play musical chairs, but we did not have a stereo. We were left to sing songs and hope the classic game would work. Much to my friends’ dismay, they could not keep all of the young girls’ attention with the singing and their game was a failure. Around the room, the teenage girls continued their efforts to carry through with their plans to draw American flags. However, the girls were really only interested in drawing pictures of blue skies and color filled rainbows. My friends and I did have some success though since the girls were very interested in English. We wrote letters to them with English letters and the few of us who knew Hebrew translated these short messages for them. Many of us also wrote their names out in English letters for them. This was quite a difficult task for some of the girls because of their unorthodox names were hard to hear and then translate. I tried my best, and I’m sure my friends

followed suit. The room was filled with chaos, even though in a small corner peace was kept with

the sharing of cultures and languages.

However, not every room was able to keep a minimal sense of control like mine. About 30 minutes after the nervous little girl entered the room, the whole building was thriving. Kids were running around looking like they had not seen a jar of paint their whole lives. Many of them decided to dip their hands in a bucket of paint, subsequently covering everything in sight. (To this day I wonder whose brilliant idea it was to bring paint, however the culprit has never been identified.) One little girl came up to me and grabbed my hands with hers and the next thing I knew my hand was smothered in light pink paint. She even managed to get paint on my camera! Startled, I pulled away and tried to calm myself down and I hurriedly scraped the paint of my camera. Thankfully, I was able to get most of it off before it dried. A little of the paint is still crammed in the bottom right corner of the screen, though. Even though I am unhappy about the paint, I think it gives my camera character – some true remnants of my past adventures to take with me on my new adventures. I doubt all of my friends would agree with me.

Another hour or two passed by and it was time to leave the absorption center. Most of the “counselors” were ecstatic to leave the adorable children for the chance to sit down on our air-conditioned bus, and to have a moment to breathe again. I am positive my friend, Max, was glad to be back on the bus when I heard of his adventures with the Ethiopian kids. His group decided to make paper airplanes and were given scissors with their supplies. During my own paint fiasco, I heard him shout down the hall “Amanda! How do you say ‘stop throwing scissors’ in Hebrew?” From that moment on, I thought my chaotic day was fairly “zen” in comparison.



# A Snapshot of Seminar

by Ethan Shapiro  
Hanegev

In 1985, my dad spent an entire year in Israel; while he was there he visited his counselors from Camp Tel Yehuda on *Kibbutz Keturah*. About 26 years later, I travelled to Israel and discovered this connection.

When I got to Israel, I didn't feel much different until about a week into the trip. My group's second Shabbat was at the *Kotel*. Upon seeing the ancient wall, I was taken aback by the spirituality of the Old City. We had walked a long distance to get to the building overlooking the Wall; I was lost in the beauty of my surroundings. I started to shake inexplicably, mesmerized – no picture could accurately capture the splendor. We were staring at not only the *Kotel*, but at what it represented. My breath was taken as the whole world opened up to me and excitement overcame me.

After the initial shock began to wear off, we held an uplifting *Kabbalat Shabbat*. The prayers were harmonious and the dancing was incredible due to the strength and spirit of everyone, heightened by the Wall. From that moment

forward, we were one tight-knit unit.

After the beginning of *Shabbat* services, we proceeded down towards the *Kotel* where many Jews were praying, including two friends from home. At that moment, I realized what Judaism represented: bringing Jews together from all over the world to embrace that Jewish connection. I prayed independently, pressed up against the *Kotel*, feeling a more religious connection to Judaism than I'd ever felt before.

Towards the end of the trip, we went to the south of Israel, the *Negev*, where we lived on different *kibbutzim*. One night, while talking on the phone with my Dad, I was telling him I was at *Kibbutz Keturah*. My dad told me that his counselors from Camp Tel Yehuda lived there. I was so excited that I got in touch with them right away and met them. We talked for a few hours about Israel, college, and many other facets of life just as my Dad once had.

I was connected to Israel across the generations.

# Hurricane Irene Brings Change of Weather, Emotions to Encampment

by Rina Haleva  
Hagalil

I have been looking forward to my final encampment since my freshman encampment four years ago. But, when it finally came, it was bittersweet. On one hand, I was a senior. I was the one in charge, who knew what was going on. I was the one who others could look up to, as I did when I was a freshman. On the other hand, this was my last encampment. This was the start of my final year as a USYer.

When I first arrived on the bus to Starlight, Penn., I saw many familiar faces and along with quite a few new ones. I hugged all my friends and we all caught up with each other about our phenomenal summers. Encampment was in full swing. There was always something going on, and Hagalil was having a great time with grade competitions, a talent show, and meeting Scott Fried, a motivational speaker. The white team won Maccabiah, my only win since my first Maccabiah four years earlier. It was so exciting! We had our first incredible *ruach* session with the new regional board. I even learned sign language and Zumba.

And then all of a sudden, it was over. Hurricane Irene was on its way to camp, forcing us to return home early on Friday, before *Shabbat*. Even though it was upsetting, we all knew it was for our own safety. The seniors gathered together by the most beautiful part of the campground and had our own private slow *ruach*. Even though it was a few days short, Hagalil Encampment 2011 was still the best week of my life. It was a week filled with my best friends, my USY family.

## About Achshav!

*Achshav!* is written by, edited by, and produced for USYers. *Achshav!* is the news portion of the publication, which includes articles about USYers' experiences with the organization, and features Shalhevet, the creative arts section, which includes art and creative writing by USYers. Writers of all levels of experience are encouraged to submit material.

*Achshav!* submissions should be sent to [achshav@usy.org](mailto:achshav@usy.org); Shalhevet submissions should be sent to [shalhevet@usy.org](mailto:shalhevet@usy.org).

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