



Hidden Treasure: An Outsiders View

Helen Grogutt

As a lay clergy member from the Anglican Church, I arrived as an outsider to Jewish camp.

During the summer of 2023, I traveled from England to America to visit with family who were working at Tel Noar, a Jewish residential camp in New Hampshire. That visit turned into a longer stay working at the camp as a Camper Care Specialist. Every aspect of this experience was quite incredible, and I am so blessed and privileged to have been a part of a Jewish camp. From the moment I first arrived, I could sense something special. People were open, vulnerable, and present in ways they are not in the “real world”. Camp friends quickly become best friends.

I am quick to admit, there was some getting used to. I was struck by the kosher food and communal blessings before and after each crazy and noisy meal. But the magic I experienced was found during Shabbat. To quote the *siddur* they use on Friday night:

Shabbat is: Beauty, feeling at peace, getting dressed up, watching the sun set over the lake, not needing to impress anybody, feeling like a family, chilling, putting the world on pause, imagining a world without suffering, making something holy, togetherness, rebooting, celebrating, feeling blessed, letting go, singing, dancing, praying, being with friends, being amazed, joy, taking a deep breath for 24 hours.

It was indeed, all of this and more. A hush would descend upon camp at about 5pm. An hour later more than 200 8 to 16-year-olds would emerge from their bunks scrubbed and polished, girls in pretty blue or white dresses with neatly braided or plaited hair, boys in shorts and smart shirts. We would gather at the flag pole and then walk to the outside chapel by the lake for the Friday evening service. The day was replete with singing, holding hands and dancing, delicious food, rituals and real moments of joy and friendship.

Shabbat concluded each week after dinner on Saturday when everyone gathered at the beach area in front of the lake for the Havdalah service in which we marked the end of Shabbat and began the journey into the new week. As the sun set, the kiddish cup was raised, the spices were passed around, the Havdalah candle lit. A final blessing was said:

Blessed are you Adonai our God, Majesty of the Universe who separates holy and ordinary, light and darkness, Israel and other peoples, Shabbat and the six days of work. Blessed are you Adonai who separates holy and ordinary.

Everyone linked arms and songs were sung as darkness fell over the lake and around the community. My joy came from being able to celebrate Shabbat with such a large group of young people who were free to be openly Jewish. This is of huge significance for many of these young people for whom the religious aspect of Judaism held far more importance at camp than in their everyday lives, where some were Jewish by culture rather than by faith. I hadn't realized until the last week of camp that summer, that only 0.2% of the world population is Jewish compared to 30% Christian. Nor had I considered that many of the young people attending camp might be the only Jewish person at their school or even might fear antisemitism so much that they don't ever openly speak with their friends about their heritage. I hadn't considered that Jewish children might well assume that a Christian like me, or a person of no faith could have an interest in and an empathy with them. I hadn't studied the sheer level of persecution of Jews over time, nor had I understood that loving kindness is the core ethical virtue of the Jewish people and this includes treating those who hate you with love.

That summer was special, because I had the honor of living and learning amongst the Jewish community. Camp is a magical place for children, not just because of the magic of first experiences, overcoming fears, taking on challenges, sharing a room with 10 strangers who become lifelong friends, and watching the sun set over the lake. But rather, it is magical because it is the place where Jewish young people can truly be themselves and connect to their people authentically. It is hard to put into words the immense spirituality and peacefulness captured at camp. It is hard to put into words the love that flows through and out of the Jewish people. It feels impossible to put into words just how uniquely special the relationships campers and staff have with each other.

George Orwell said, "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle." As an outsider, it is easier for me to point out what is right in front of your nose. Jewish camp is a treasure. I am filled with admiration and fondness for a people for whom tradition, culture, food, song, dance and prayer are so important. At Jewish camp I encountered youth engaging as part of the global Jewish people. My hope is that this remarkable treasure continues to be cherished, strengthened, and shared with generations to come.

Helen Grogutt is the Bishop's Adviser for Licensed Lay Ministers in the Norwich Diocese.