

“What is that?”

It was Friday night and I was sitting with my friends in the synagogue. I had walked in late, and hadn't noticed my friend's apparel until a few minutes into the services.

“What do you mean ‘what is that?’ It's my *tallit* and *kippa*,” my friend responded, and went back to the *siddur*, oblivious to my confusion.

My friend was Ariella, a girl. To some, such a sight—a girl adorned in traditionally male religious paraphernalia—would be the norm. To others, nothing could have been more foreign, more unusual, or more unexpected. Right then and there, as I sat next to Ariella while her *tallit* brushed against my forearm, I knew I was out of my bubble.

Most of my previous summers had been fairly routine—I would go to the same summer camp with the same kids, for 6 weeks of the same activities I have done since I was nine years old. Last summer, however, was anything but ordinary. I was accepted as a Lauder fellow to Camp Szarvas, an international summer camp in Hungary that promotes the Jewish growth of Eastern European youth and the connection of the global Jewish teen community. Approximately 20 Americans ages 14-18 would attend Camp Szarvas for a session each summer, spending two weeks with almost 500 teenagers from around Europe, getting to know their transatlantic counterparts and connect with their personal heritage.

Before Camp Szarvas began, one of the things I had looked forward to was not only meeting teenagers from all over Continent, but also American kids my age with varied backgrounds and beliefs. The Lauder Foundation assembles an eclectic group of

American teens from all over the country and across the spectrum of Jewish affiliation. I have been, and probably will always be modern Orthodox, living in a tight-knit community, with family like me and friends like me. I have met and interacted with family members and acquaintances who have fallen outside the relatively circumscribed boundaries of American Orthodoxy, but very few living, breathing peers who are Reform, Conservative, or other denominations have really entered my world. I had always viewed the Reform and Conservative movements with narrow eyes and judgmental vision—people who deemed themselves such had just seemed lazy to me, unwilling to perform all of the *mitzvot* that are necessary in order to be a “good Jew.”

Then I met Emily. And Alex. And Michael. And Sara and Sarah and Roxanne and Lauren and Ariella and Arielle and Yaron. Hearing all of them discuss their own Jewish identity and religious beliefs, and even having the privilege to speak to some intimately about their opinions in great depth, I found that these amazing people are anything but lazy. Almost all are active members of youth groups, take part in various charity and *chesed* projects, attend their respective synagogues regularly (which, I must confess, is more than I can say for myself—many a Saturday morning have been spent sleeping in bed) and are proud of their identity. I was shocked to hear them speak so passionately about their own brand of Judaism and believe so firmly in their practices. Their lives are starkly, unequivocally different than mine, as I learned late at night in a Budapest hotel room, or by the side of the pool having a group meeting, but the lives my new friends lead are meaningful and rich with purpose and drive.

After leaving the cocoon we had formed in Hungary and re-immersing ourselves back into our routines and lives, almost all of the Americans have stayed in contact with

my Szarvas friends who attend public and community day schools. Friday afternoon, my phone is ringing off the hook with “Shabbat Shalom” wishes from my fellow Szarvasians across the country; some will observe Shabbat, some will not. My stay in Hungary opened my eyes, allowing me to not only look past nationality and origin, but to also go beyond labels and titles, and to see the real person beneath the surface.

That Friday night in camp, a few minutes after I posed my rhetorical question, Ariella turned back to me.

“You don’t think it’s weird? My *tallit* and *kipa*. I mean, I know you’re not used to it, but you don’t think I’m a freak or anything?” Ariella asked.

I smiled and shook my head, reflecting on my new-found friends and experiences. “Of course not.”

“Good,” Ariella replied, and we both turned back to our *siddurs*.