

# **The Summer of my Jewish Exploration**

by Cole Rehkugler

This past summer I spent on a trip with NFTY exploring my Jewish heritage through visits to historical areas in the Czech Republic and Poland, finishing with modern day Israel.

On my trip to Israel we got a deep insight into how life was like for the people living there in the past and now. We learned about the Muslim faith, and we learned about life as a Bedouin. We also looked into the land and its meaning to the people of Israel; historical sites, the desert, the Western Wall, and other things that are important to not only Israelis but to Jews all across the world.

This summer began in the Czech Republic, where we learned about the prospering Jewish life before the Holocaust. We visited graveyards and then went to see a temple that celebrates much more modern versions of Judaism.

In Poland we visited many different concentration camps including Auschwitz Birkenau, a truly unforgettable experience. The somber shells of buildings left an eerie sight. The remaining foundation within the showers left a feeling of unease that stuck with us for the rest of the long tour. The tour left me with an empty feeling of disbelief. How could people allow this to happen to other human beings?

In Israel we spent much more time; we went to a mosque, visited a Muslim family, and got deep insight into the Muslim religion. We visited the Old City and navigated the water tunnels. We visited multiple different synagogues with different views and saw how much variation there is within just the Jewish faith.

I found our look into the Muslim religion to be very interesting and educational. The main focus of the interactions was to identify Muslims as more of a religion that's slightly different than us in practice, and not as the extremists groups that are portrayed in the news.

One of the most amazing parts of the trip was a four day camping trip in the Negev just outside Eilat, We drove about an hour north-west from the city of Eilat to a rocky open "camping ground" near Mount Schlomo. After a

rough night sleep we woke up at 3:30 to make breakfast and start our hike. After several hours of early morning yet very hot desert hiking up and down a nearly vertical slope we arrived at our bus taking us to the beach at the Red Sea. We went to a mall for a late lunch followed by another amazing beach. After our fun we boarded the bus again for another campsite. Next morning's hike was a much easier one, in a dried up riverbed where the flood water washes through. Another day was spent snorkeling off the coast; we saw many fish and even a small shark.

One night we slept in Bedouin tents on the west side of Israel, got up bright and early to hike up Masada to see the beautiful sunrise. The Bedouin are a nomadic people who live in the desert. While there we learned about Masada and the history of the four different sects of Jews living in the Roman Empire. The Jews living on Masada were so committed to their Jewish way of life that they took their own lives rather than be enslaved by the Romans. After scrambling down the snake path we got in the bus to go to a spa near the Dead Sea, where we spent the better part of the day relaxing and enjoying the sea and mud. I went far enough into the sea that I 'stood' up and my toes didn't touch but my head was still far out of the water!

One of the most moving parts of the trip was our visit to the Western Wall. The emotion and power at the wall was overpowering. While standing at the foot of the wall you can feel the presence of all the Jews that have come to the exact same spot before you. It was surreal, looking at this wall with a heavy quiet radiating around you and feeling the power of the Jewish faith over thousands of years embracing you. Israel was an amazing experience, and seeing how the thousands of years of history can bring us to this modern country was incredible. After learning about all these places, and hearing all the stories from our very own Temple Sinai it was moving to see them and experience them in person. After this experience I feel much more connected to my Jewish heritage.