

“Sometimes We Know Best”

I let out a sigh; that was all I could do. As I sat in the backseat, captive to my parents’ will and vision for how I should spend my summer, I dreaded my destination. To my dismay, there was little traffic, so we were moving fast. Trees drifted by—seemingly at the same speed as my evaporating summer. “Sometimes,” my parents droned, “We know best.”

In the summer of 2009, my friend, Sam, and I went to Camp Eisner, a Jewish sleep away camp. Our respective parents were hoping that he and I would become more religious after attending a two-week Reformed Judaism (opposite of Orthodox Judaism) camp. The camp’s reviews were universally extraordinary, and my parents believed my summer was universally and extraordinarily unstructured, so they decided to send me to Camp Eisner.

My parents and I first heard of Camp Eisner from Sam’s father, who had sent Sam’s brother to the camp. Sam’s father, a guidance counselor, assured us that we would enjoy Eisner because—simply stated—he “knew what teenagers liked.” Plus, Sam’s father confidently yet incorrectly informed me that Paul Simon went to Camp Eisner. After watching testimonials online and speaking with Sam’s parents, my parents were convinced that I should go to Eisner. After all, I was only going for two weeks. How bad could it be?

On August 16th, at around two P.M, I arrived. My parents and I pulled into a field filled with cars and counselors who were ushering campers in like swarms of marching ants. It was a warm day, and the Berkshires’ pastoral scenery was beautiful. The field was surrounded by mountains, trees, and shrubbery. The air smelt like a typical summer day does, and I started to think that my stay might not be as bad as I imagined. We made our way to the check-in building, and after two hours of waiting on lines, I made it to my bunk.

At my bunk, I met up with Sam. Sam is a hockey player from Wyckoff, NJ. He is about six feet tall, and has blonde hair and a perplexed expression. Although Sam may not be the smartest person in the world, he is both happy and easygoing—a combination that made for a stabilizing companion throughout my stay at Eisner. With Sam and I’s

parents gone, we started unpacking. The “bunk cabin” was as old-fashioned and worn-down as one would reasonably expect of any sleep away camp. The dirty, stained, tacky, white cement floors were invaded by bugs in some corners, and unfinished in other corners.. The whole bunk was odorous and cramped. The hot water would cut out after about five minutes. One window would not shut and mosquitos lurked liked predators in the bunk’s darker areas. I knew that I would not spend much time in the bunk, so this was not as big of a negative for me as the people who inhabited the bunk with me.

Within about five minutes of unpacking, I was informed by a counselor that my bunkmate had arrived. That was when I met Ethan. Ethan—an awkward, hyperactive, high-pitch voiced boy from Boston introduced himself to me. Within the first 30 seconds of ever laying eyes on him, he informed me that he got the top bunk, he would keep the windows open all night, and I had to put away my cell phone. Another camper, Nathan, felt the need to elaborate on Ethan’s last demand. He explained—periodically glancing at his current game of Madden on a Nintendo DS—that cell phones were against the rules because they isolated people from their bunk. For much of the two weeks, Nathan played on his Nintendo DS and did not speak to anyone.

Another camper, Jared, organized a poker game. Upon losing all of his poker chips in a bet, he angrily declared that the whole bunk was “in collusion.” He seized the cards and poker chips and never took them out again. After leaving Jared’s poker game, I walked over to the other side of the bunk where a few campers were engaged in an intense game of Dungeons and Dragons—ferociously casting spells on each other. Thinking about the two weeks ahead, I walked back my bunk bed and talked to Sam and some of the other members of my bunk.

By around five P.M, we were doing typical ice-breaker activities, and our counselors introduced themselves. One of my counselors, Greg, seemed very lax. Greg was a sophomore at Wesleyan University. Greg enjoyed playing his guitar (which he let the bunk use) and “just relaxing.” Even better, he brought a stereo system, his iPod, and a love for my two favorite bands--Phish and the Grateful Dead. When I saw Greg for the first time, we started talking about hobbies, and I said I enjoyed playing guitar and listening to jam bands. Greg and I mutually agreed that jam bands were “where the music scene was at.” We would periodically talk about our favorite Phish shows, and debate the

meaning of the lyric, “backwards down the number line.” He was calm and laid back, the opposite of my other counselor.

My other counselor was Alon. He was an Israeli soldier who defended the borders of Israel—and was now applying his valor towards defending Bunk 6 of Camp Eisner. Alon could be found screaming about the “unorder” of the bunk or complaining that he had enough of this “sheet” and his “sheety day was just commencing.” Alon was like an Israeli air strike, exploding at 15-minute intervals. Alon was constantly asked to repeat what he had hollered, because Alon communicated primarily through mangled profanities. He spoke with an indecipherable Israeli accent and a perpetual sense of artificial urgency. Every day, Alon would insist on the bunk leaving an hour early for the five-minute walk to the dining hall.

By half past five, our bunk was getting ready to go to dinner. The whole camp met on the quad for an hour and a half prayer service. The leaders of the prayer service attempted to sing the prayers to the tunes of modern pop songs to make the service more bearable. However, the words “V’ahavta et Adonai Elohecha” do not fit well with “Sweet Caroline, good times never felt so good.” Needless to say, the pop songs-mixed-with-prayers-approach didn’t work, and the out-of-tune guitars only worsened the ordeal. The dining hall, packed with the whole camp, was ear shattering—but I could still hear Ethan.

After dinner, we retreated to the bunk where we got ready for the last activity of the day. Our bunk broke up in half to go on a scavenger hunt in the woods. By now, it was dark outside, as the sun had gone down a while ago. However, Alon was leading my group. He talked about how he would walk for miles in the military. Alon claimed he was “the master of the navigate,” so we all trusted that he could navigate us through the woods.

Roughly 30 minutes in, it was clear that we were lost. There was a split in the trail. The group pondered whether to go right or left. Both of the paths looked equally wrong to me, because they were unkempt and I spotted poison ivy on both of them with my flashlight. I thought that if the camp intended for these trails to be used by campers, the trails would not have poison ivy. One person in my bunk, Toby, was insistent on taking the right path. Alon, the self-proclaimed, “Master of the Navigate,” emphatically declared that “he knew navigate better.” Because we listened to Alon, we took the left

path; because we listened to Alon, it took us an hour more than it should have to get back to the bunk.

After the hour trek back to the tenement bunk, I asked Sam about his day. Sam’s day was not much better than mine—in part because in Sam’s hiking group, Ethan’s and Nathan’s relentless vocal chords were second only the everlasting chatter of the cicada infestation. We exchanged our disdain for the musical dystopia that is an Eisner Friday-night service. Sam also told me about Jared’s outburst over tater tots. Apparently, Jared “claimed” the tater-tots, and when the person who ate the last one was finished, Jared called collusion once again. As Jared grabbed at the shirt of the “culprit,” Sam broke up the assault. The culprit was a terrified eight-year-old boy. We then made a countdown of the number of days left before we were free. At the first sight of such a countdown, Nathan tore up the piece of paper because it “was not good for the bunk community.” Nathan, as always, went back to his Nintendo DS.

Finally, the day was over. My bunkmate, Ethan, forced the bunk to do a jumbled Buddhist meditation song that unintentionally took cultural appropriation to an unprecedented level never before seen by man. After the meditation “song,” we went to sleep. The first day was over. I laughed to myself as I was lying in bed thinking of the lyric, “What a long, strange trip it’s been.” That was just the first day.

The rest of the two weeks did not get any better. It ended up all fading into a blur. Eventually, the one service on the quad turned into three services a day in various, seemingly random locations—like near the lake, on one hill, in the middle of a baseball field, etc. My parents would send me Rolling Stone magazines, but I never seemed to get them. As I finally realized on one of the last days, Alon had been hoarding them because—apparently—he was a big Rolling Stones fan. Ethan would continually do a gun motion at Alon, and one day, Alon snapped. Alon twisted Ethan’s wrist and said, “That is how disarm insurgent.” Ethan never did a fake firing motion at Alon again. Greg started to play Phish on his stereo in the morning to wake everybody up. This quickly got replaced with Nathan’s Legend of Zelda theme song. Needless to say, on the day when my parents picked me up, I was more than relieved. I even felt better than when the grueling, Saturday-at-seven-in-the-morning service would end.

I did learn something from Camp Eisner, though—something that the camp did not teach me. It is true that there are many times when we don’t know best, but there are also many times when we *do* know best. An Israeli soldier could not find his way out of a scavenger hunt, a guidance counselor could not recommend a summer camp, and my parents could not see that I would come to loathe Camp Eisner.

After long periods of deliberation and many experiments, psychologist Stanley Milgram drew the conclusion that more crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than in the name of disobedience. Likewise, after long periods of deliberation and many prayer sessions, I have drawn the conclusion that more summers have been destroyed in the name of parents than in the name of teenagers. Of course, the world would be a terrifying place if we only listened to ourselves. But it would be just as terrifying if we only listened to others. The obvious solution is to walk a sort of middle ground while we’re all blindly stumbling to our bunks. The *middle*, however, is a very narrow region—a statistical improbability. In that case, if I’m more likely to accidentally wander into the poison ivy on the sides of both trails, I’d rather do it on *my* volition—because just the thought that *I know best* is a mental victory on its own.