

## **"Jumping fences and bridging barriers"**

By: Arielle Sperling

When I close my eyes, I can see us together again, 400 children of all ages, speaking twelve different languages as if we are at the Tower of Babel, yet all with the same fire of life shining in our eyes. I am holding hands with a Hungarian and an Indian, who are grasping the hands of Latvians and Russians. We hardly know each other, for we only met just a few days ago, yet we already share an unbreakable bond. It was another lunchtime sing-along at international Jewish summer camp in the small farm town of Szarvas, Hungary. On a blisteringly hot day during the summer of 2008 I fully realized, for the first time in my life, the power of religion and music to unite individuals who would not otherwise share a connection. I had sung these Hebrew words, "*Od yavo shalom aleuni ve al kulam*" (*Peace will come unto us and unto the whole world*) too many times to count, but I had not comprehended what it meant to be connected to brothers and sisters all around the world through that common dream until that day.

Camp Szarvas was originally founded in order to bring Judaism back to Eastern European communities ravaged by the Holocaust, but it has since opened its doors to Jewish youth from all over the world. For many of the children who come to Szarvas, summer is the only time of year they are free not only to learn about Judaism, but also to live without the fear of anti-Semitism. Szarvas has shown me how lucky I am to live in a country where I am free to embrace my religion publicly, instead of behind closed doors. Being a part of this international experience, of something so much greater than myself, was humbling in the way that lying beneath the stars on a clear night can be. I had struggled for the first few days of camp to bridge the language barriers between myself and the other campers. However, as we all stood as one people, none of that mattered anymore.

Diversity is what makes this world such an interesting yet complicated place. Seeing the variety even within my own religion taught me that while our differences are something to value, it is more important to look past what sets us apart from each other and to rejoice in what we share in common. I have the power to jump over fences set up by the limitations that language and distance so often and quite cruelly create.

Having spent my last two summers at Szarvas, I am lucky enough to be friends with individuals from all over the world who remind me of this lesson every day. Modern technology has made it possible for me to have daily contact with my friends in Hungary, India, Israel, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and about a dozen other countries. As a Jew, I am part of a nation of people who have thrived despite the seemingly impossible obstacles placed in our way. I am proud to have this distinct attribute at the core of my identity, to be part of a people whose rich history and culture I deeply respect. We come from all over the world, from different walks of life and cultures, and somehow in the face of these distinguishing traits, we stay as one people. I am excited to go to college, where I will meet individuals from whom I can learn so much simply based on their unique backgrounds and life experiences. I have learned that even if at first glance I appear to have little in common with another person, there is always something deeper with which to help forge a connection. Barriers are only as high as one places them, and I intend to tear down barriers instead of building them.