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The Scroll

A NOSTALGIC VISIT TO PHILADELPHIA'S AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY MUSEUM

I experienced a poignant, personal moment when one exhibit made mention of my New Jersey summer camp

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Over the weekend, I visited Philadelphia's [National Museum of American Jewish History](#) for the first time, lured by the institution's "Free February" promotion and the promise of seeing artifacts once owned by Jewish luminaries, such as Irving Berlin's piano and Albert Einstein's pipe. While I expected that the visit would be educational, I didn't anticipate how much its exhibits would resonate with my experiences as an American Jew.

My companions for the day—my roommate and two of our friends from college who were visiting—are Episcopalian and Catholic, respectively. But their differing religious faiths didn't matter, as we all quickly became immersed in the well-organized information and universal themes the museum presented. We spent the most time perusing a gallery called "Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945 to Today," which explores topics such as the post-WWII proliferation of Jewish suburbs, Jewish civil rights activism (there was a booklet of Jewish freedom riders' mugshots), and the

incorporation of Judaism into America's pop culture landscape (think *Seinfeld*, ads for Levy's Rye Bread, and [Rebecca](#), the first Jewish American Girl Doll).

What interested my friends the most was the section on civil rights. They snapped pictures of an image from a 1970s women's march, noting the diversity of the women in the photograph and how it predated the concept of intersectionality. For me, the most compelling aspects of the gallery were a wall listing Jewish suburban communities—including, to my delight, my hometown—and a tablet where visitors could scroll through a directory of Jewish summer camps. The database contained only one photo of [Cedar Lake](#), the NJY camp in the Poconos of Pennsylvania I attended for two years in middle school, but the photo filled me with nachas nonetheless. Cedar Lake was where I practiced for my bat mitzvah, studying with the camp rabbi and listening to a tape recording my rabbi in South Jersey had made for me. It was where I celebrated Shabbat each week by dressing in white and praying and singing with hundreds of fellow campers by the eponymous lake (yes, if you're wondering, "Wonderwall" was in heavy rotation).

Although my camp experience was not without the usual cattiness endemic to teenage girls, the ritualistic components are among my most treasured summer memories. I don't just mean Jewish rituals, either. I appreciated the routine of writing and receiving snail-mail (and, more rarely, composing emails in the camp computer lab) and preparing for weekly bunk inspection by keeping my cubby tidy and my bed immaculate (division heads offered the promise of ice cream socials and other rewards for tip-top living spaces). Nostalgic by nature, I'm often preoccupied by recollections of days past. Yet my museum visit provoked in me something more valuable, more poignant, than a trip down memory lane: It gave me renewed pride in my heritage. If you pay a visit to NMAJH, you, too, might discover unexpected meaning in the threads of cultural fiber on display.