



Alyssa pictured on right volunteering with another US fellow Tara Levine on the left

Name: **Alyssa Kress**

Country: **USA**

Nominating Community: **Camp Harlam**

Age: **25**

Project: **Israel Engagement at URJ Camp**

Reform Jewish Journey

I grew up in an interfaith family attending a Reform congregation since first grade. When I started attending Camp Harlam in 2002, I really started to deepen my connection to Reform Judaism. The lessons I learned at camp shaped who I became as Jew. In addition to camp, I gained leadership skills on the North American and regional boards of NFTY and working at Kutz Camp for two summers. Working at Kutz camp, I was exposed to Netzer and the progressive movement worldwide, and I realized that Progressive Judaism expanded far beyond my camp and NFTY community.

I returned to Camp Harlam a couple of years after college in my current role as Assistant Director. There is something unique about how we experience Judaism at camp, we say that we “embrace joyful Judaism.” We are starting to see that translate to the rest of the year and people are making Judaism more meaningful in their everyday lives outside of the camp community. This joyful Judaism is created primarily through an open and inclusive environment. The Reform movement’s commitment to inclusion and audacious hospitality is important for our camp community. It’s not simply tolerance, but a real acceptance that makes camp a holy community where kids can be their best selves and connect more deeply with each other and the things they are learning.

My entire family has been shaped by this joyful Judaism. My mother, who wasn’t born Jewish, converted when I was in fifth grade and just spent her 13th summer working at camp with me last summer, while my brother is being ordained as a Reform rabbi this year. We never would have had such a strong connection to Judaism without camp and NFTY.

Reform Jewish community

The Reform movement has shaped my view on the world and on social justice issues. In my role at camp this summer, I’m going to be supervising the oldest camper units and counselors-in-training. My goal for this new role is to find ways that issues of the world can connect with young people, so that they feel empowered to go out into the world and become change agents both within the Jewish community and beyond.

On being a Roswell Klal Yisrael Fellow

The most valuable part of Roswell Klal Yisrael so far has been gaining a better understanding of the world and especially global Judaism and the concept of *Klal Yisrael*. With everything going on in our country right now, it's amazing to have a global community to learn from rather than just listening to or reading the news. For example, it's been enlightening to now have a friend in Russia and to speak with her and understand what life is really like there. Additionally, this fellowship has given me a much stronger connection to Israel and an opportunity to connect to Israelis in a meaningful and engaging way that I had not experienced in the past.

Being able to connect to people on a human level and allow that connection to give me a deeper understanding of the world has been very valuable. I've realized the importance of looking beyond the surface when listening to people's stories, whether those of my fellow participants or the people we have met with during our seminars. Finding a personal connection or a way to relate someone's story to my work at camp has been extremely impactful. Finally, knowing that almost anywhere around the world, there is a progressive Jewish community that is not very different from mine, is comforting and gives me a great sense of pride.

Bringing Klal Yisrael to URJ Camp Harlam

I now have a new worldwide network of resources that is very different from my current professional networks. The leadership training we've done has also enhanced my leadership skills, particularly challenging what leadership is. Our Adaptive Leadership workshop's challenge to think about the difference between leadership and authority has been on my mind constantly and I think we need to further define what a leader is and maybe even get rid of the word leader and instead focus on how we exercise leadership.

Unexpected Impact of Klal Yisrael

I've gained a new appreciation for learning. A lot of the speakers at the seminars are not camp professionals and the connection to camp wasn't direct. I needed to actively listen and process to think about how I could apply this at home. I really enjoyed learning about everything from history to leadership, and engaging with Progressive Judaism in new and innovative ways. I also gained amazing friendships. I now have a network of people around the world who I know I can always visit and depend on, both as a professional resource and simply as friends.