

Gabe Katz

We were worn down, miserable, and frustrated. We reached the campsite at 9:15 P.M. Actually, we did not even reach the campsite. Instead, we just collapsed at a flat, rocky area. We set up camp in the dark and spent two and a half hours cooking dinner since the water took two hours to boil in the 35-degree weather. The end of the day was not enjoyable.

During my summer at the Jewish Outdoor Leadership Institute, I went on a *masa*--Hebrew for journey. The *masa* was a five-day, forty-mile backpacking trip on the Continental Divide Trail which campers planned and coordinated, with two counselors there only to supervise us. My group consisted of nine people whose fitness levels varied.

Over dinner, we previewed the next day, which would entail a long climb up a steep mountain. I volunteered to be leader. My goal was to reach the lake by lunch so we could enjoy the scenery of the lake and mountains--and rest. I thought I could succeed in making the group move faster by simply taking fewer breaks and pushing the slower hikers.

I woke the group up at 5:30 A.M. The day started with a mixture of moderate uphill and downhill. Knowing that a massive, steep climb was ahead, I urged the group to maintain a good pace. I also wanted us to stay together on the trail, in case of an injury. We moved quickly and only occasionally took brief breaks.

As the trail began getting steeper and the climb droned on, some of the slower hikers started complaining. Sarah, who wasn't in very good shape, was moving at a glacial pace. We kept encountering false peaks--points that appear to be the top of the mountain but are actually just hiding more of the climb.

Despite my repeatedly asking them to slow down, the faster hikers, led by Josh, edged ahead of the rest of the group again and again. (Josh climbed, skied, and mountain biked year-round.) It was human nature to want to keep going. It wasn't anyone's fault. The night before, I had made sarcastic comments under my breath: "Could you move any slower?"

After three hours of hiking, Sarah's requests to take a break grew increasingly frequent. Her back started to hunch forward. I hoped she would have a burst of energy as the end grew near. But as we came across another false peak, Sarah said, "I give up. I can't do this." I shouted to Josh to slow down. He stopped for a second but then charged ahead. "Josh! Slow down! We need to stay together!" He yelled, "It's not that hard! Just move faster already!" I didn't know how far we were from the lake, but I was determined to eat lunch there. Josh insisted, "The climbing is easier when you go faster! These breaks don't even help!" Sarah looked hopeless. We took a twenty-minute break.

We reached the lake ninety minutes earlier than planned. I had overestimated the difficulty of the trail. Despite my having woken everybody up an hour earlier than necessary, no one criticized my decisions as leader. I was really grateful.

Everyone enjoyed a restful time. Some people swam, and some took naps. Perched on a rock, Sarah looked blissful. Josh went swimming; he never even bothered to take a break. The lake was so beautiful, and the weather was so nice. Looking down that mountain and being able to say, “We climbed that” was amazing.

Because of *masa*, I learned more about who I am. I am not the most flexible or patient person, but the high value I place on being an empathetic, compassionate person compelled me to start being more flexible and patient. Last summer on the Continental Divide Trail, I saw the benefits of being willing to change.