

Valparaíso is an artistic paradise: calm and peaceful, dense but not threatening, sprawled across a valley between the coastal mountain range and the Pacific Ocean. The views are spectacular, and the buildings are covered with murals.

For much of my life, I have thought about what it means for something to be beautiful. What does something have to have or look like for us to call it beautiful? When we decide it is beautiful, how does that change or expand the way we treat or use it? These questions all came back to me in Valparaíso, a city that I decided right away was quite beautiful. At my Jewish summer camp, beautiful spaces are always made to feel more holy: we would pray by the beach, or by candlelight, and we would have Jewish learning classes in the middle of the woods. Is Valparaíso also holy just because it is beautiful? Perhaps it is, if the religion in question is art itself.

Pablo Neruda felt the power of the beauty of Valparaíso in his poetry. When we visited the museum that used to be his home today, we learned about how the view from his house on a Valparaíso hilltop overlooking the valley and the bay inspired his work. The connection between beauty and art is more obvious in this context, but can that connection extend to religion? I have always found that connection strange; why are beautiful spaces more holy? If God is everywhere, why is God more present in a beautiful space?

This brings to mind a Jewish folktale, which I believe answers this question and ties the whole idea of beauty and religion together. (Like any good folktale, I'm probably going to tell it completely differently than how it was told to me, but in a way that still gets the point across.) A father sees his son come home long after sunset and asks where he has been. The son replies, "I went out into the woods to find God." The father reprimands his son, "But God is the same everywhere! Why would you risk your safety by going out into the woods at night to find God when the same God is here in your bedroom?" "I know God is the same everywhere," answered the son, "but I am not."

In the same way, when my camp friends and I went to the beach or the field or the woods to pray, it was not because those spaces were more holy; it was because we could find the peace of mind to make ourselves more holy, and that is how we came closer to God. Religion is filled with cognitive dissonance for me, and the best way I have found to ease that dissonance is to think about tangible things I can do to bring myself closer to God, since there is very little I can reasonably expect God to do that is tangible. I never understood why God was more present on

the beach than in my bunk; therefore, it is my responsibility to make myself more present. Although the context was not necessarily religious today, I felt that again to some extent in Valparaíso.

I want to conclude this reflection with a couple thoughts that are not necessarily related to the beauty of Valparaíso but that I want to include here so I can remember them:

1. Our eight-song set in Plaza Victoria of Valparaíso was my last Pizmon concert. That was probably the last time I will ever sing *Hineh Ba HaShalom*, or *HaGalshan*, or *Zachiti LeEhov*. That was a pretty surreal realization for me, but this week has provided me with some incredible closure not only with Pizmon the group/entity but also with Pizmon the members. The good will and intellectual conversations I have had with everyone in the group throughout this trip are unparalleled, and it feels like the perfect way to end my four years of indescribably enriching, challenging, empowering adventures with Pizmon.
2. A group of six of us went to Amadeus for dinner tonight, and a mother and son who were sitting at a table of six saw us come in, and they got up and moved to a smaller table for us. They weren't even half done with their meal, and they picked up and moved for six strangers! Could you imagine that happening in New York? This was yet another example of the Chilean people's kindness and easy-going nature that just blow me away.