

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Jewish overnight camp is a lot more than fun. Read this article by Rabbi Ramie Arian and you will understand the potential, the challenges, and the strategies needed to leverage this powerful educational experience for maximum impact. Jewish camping deserves serious attention and professional voice, and Arian delivers.

Jewish Camping and Jewish Renaissance

RABBI RAMIE ARIAN

Over Shabbat dinner, on a late August evening, the talk turned to my visits to Jewish overnight camps. Frances, our host's mother, took a sudden interest. Her eyes lit up as she described, in vivid detail, anecdotes from her own summer camp experience: Tricks the girls used to bend the dress code at Saturday evening socials, lessons taught by a legendary visiting scholar, whom she recalled by name, as he gathered the campers on a hillside overlooking the New England lake, imagining it to be the Sea of Galilee, and conjuring images of early Pioneers in Israel. Frances was 92 years old at the time of this Shabbat dinner. The camp memories she recounted had taken place more than 75 years before!

Summer camp is a powerful mechanism to build Jewish identity and commitment in our young people. Jewish overnight camp is among the most potent means at our disposal as we build towards a Jewish renaissance in North America in the 21st century.

Why “Renaissance” Now?

“Renaissance” is not merely the latest buzzword of Jewish pundits and planners. Rather, renaissance is the single most important challenge and opportunity facing the Jewish community today. As we find ourselves better accepted and more powerful than any Jewish community in the history of the world, we face a new, unprecedented challenge. Today, facing a radically open society, we need to hold our young people, who are no longer kept Jewish by the anti-Semitic forces of the outside world. Today, in a world filled with options, we need to demonstrate to our young that Jewish life is compellingly interesting. We need to show them how Jewish life can provide the two values they most urgently seek: community and meaning.

Camping and Renaissance: The Educational Power of Jewish Camping

There are 120 non-profit overnight camps associated with the Jewish community across North America. Sponsored by denominational movements, Zionist movements, JCC's,

B'nai B'rith, federations, and other agencies, they serve 50,000 children every summer, roughly 7% of the Jewish population aged eight to 16. These camps are full, with a 96% occupancy rate. Many children are turned away for lack of space.

While these sponsors have a variety of agendas, there is much that the camps share in common that bespeaks their uncommon educational power.

- They are full-time institutions, where children don't just learn, but also live, 24/7. Camp provides countless opportunities not merely to teach, but to model behavior. Jewish living is expressed not only in *shiur* and services, but also in theater and nature workshops, on the ball-field, at the waterfront, in the dining hall, and much more. Camps naturally teach to children's multiple intelligences.
- They are child-centered, community-based institutions, where the coin of the realm is not curriculum, but fun. Curriculum exists, to be sure, as a constant presence in the background.
- They provide more time with learners than nearly any other educational setting. By conservative estimates, a summer at camp provides more educational contact time than four years of supplementary school.

- They provide *better* time with learners than virtually any other educational setting. At camp, educators have access to children at times when they are uncommonly “available.” Where else but at camp do educators and learners share Shabbat together? Where else can an educator sit by a child’s side at bedtime?

The fundamental educational theory of Jewish summer camping is simple: if children associate Jewish life with sweetness – the friendship and fun which suffuse the environment of camp – what they practice and learn will remain with them for a lifetime.

An impressive array of recent research confirms what is known from a growing body of demographic studies: that childhood experience in Jewish camp is powerfully associated with increased Jewish identity, affiliation, practice, generosity, in-marriage, leadership, care about the world we live in, care about the Jewish community, and interest in Israel in adulthood.¹ While there is considerable variation from camp to camp, depending on each camp’s own definition of its educational agenda, and the intensity of its Jewish life, these findings apply across the full spectrum of Jewish camps, from Conservative to Zionist to Reform to “cultural” to Orthodox to non-denominational.

The Challenges Ahead and How to Meet Them

There are four key challenges to be overcome if camping is to contribute substantially to a renaissance of Jewish life in North America. These are awareness, capacity, staffing, and program.

Awareness

There is little awareness among community policy makers about the power of Jewish camp to motivate Jewish identity and commitment. Many key lay leaders, particularly those who did not attend Jewish non-profit camps themselves, and who don’t send their children, lack an intuitive feel for why camp is educationally powerful. They don’t understand why the Jewish community has a stake in helping families make Jewish choices as they select summer camps for their children. For them, it is somehow counter-intuitive that something that is as much fun as

camp can be so educationally valuable at the same time.

A major advocacy campaign is required to convey the message of the power of Jewish camp to motivate Jewish identity and commitment. If we are serious about renaissance, it is absurd to be satisfied with only 7% of our children attending Jewish camps.

Whenever Jewish leaders gather to talk about the future of Jewish life in North America – for example, at the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities, at the Jewish Funders Network, at the major conventions of the denominational movements and the JCCA – programmatic attention should be focused on the educational power of Jewish overnight camps, and on their need for community support. Whenever Jewish media report on initiatives to strengthen Jewish life, Jewish camps should receive attention in proportion to their importance.

Capacity

There is no possibility of expanding the powerful reach of Jewish camping without adding physical capacity to existing systems that are already stretched to their limits. To the extent feasible, resources should be added to existing camps to accommodate more campers. New camps will be needed too, particularly in geographic areas such as the Northwest and Southwest which have witnessed significant Jewish population growth in the last 30 years.

Physical capacity in camping is expensive. Camp sponsors estimate that expansion costs up to \$20,000 per bed, including not only the cost of constructing cabins but also of expanding program spaces and infrastructure (such as dining halls; swimming pools; and water, electric and septic systems). Camp expansion projects totaling more than \$175 million are presently on the drawing boards. Raising that sum is a daunting challenge. Yet in a community whose federation alone raises a billion dollars a year, it is not impossible to imagine mounting the will to accomplish what is needed over the next decade.

In order to facilitate the growth of physical camp capacity, the Jewish community needs a center which can help with

¹ These include Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe, *Limud by the Lake: Fulfilling the Educational Potential of Jewish Summer Camps*, Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, AVI CHAI Foundation, October 2002; Bethamie Horowitz, *Connections and Journeys*, UJA-Federation of Greater New York, 2000; and Gary Tobin and Meryle Weinstein, *Jewish Camping 2000*, Institute for Jewish and Community Research, 2000. Findings in these studies are buttressed by data from older Jewish community demographic studies, including those done in Atlanta (1996), Denver (1997), Delaware (1995), and Philadelphia (1997); and from Steven M. Cohen, Sylvia Barack Fishman, et al. *Expectations, Education and Experience of Jewish Professional Leaders; Report of the Wexner Foundation Research Project on Contemporary Jewish Professional Leadership, 1993*, among others.

advice and expertise in such diverse but related arenas as site selection, landscape development, engineering, construction, fund-raising, and organizational development. The Foundation for Jewish Camping is in the early stages of planning to develop such a center.

Staffing

Like every educational venue, the quality of the summer camp experience is dependent upon the quality of its staff. Jewish camps need 10,000 seasonal staff each summer. In addition, Jewish camping requires a cadre of senior leaders who are not only educators, but who also possess the business acumen required to lead enterprises with multi-million dollar budgets.

The issue of staffing in Jewish camps is complex, and provides both challenges and opportunities. In camp, the front-line educator responsible for capturing a spontaneously-emerging “teachable moment” is often a counselor who is a 19-year-old college sophomore. Camps devote significant energy to training these folks. The Foundation for Jewish Camping is focusing energy on fostering and identifying best practices in training. College students lead busy lives, and the question of when and how training in such best practices could be instituted on a large scale require further investigation. Once trained, it is efficient to retain these staff as long as possible, which is difficult given the transient nature of the college years. The Foundation for Jewish Camping is experimenting with several staff retention initiatives to address this challenge.

The difficulty of recruiting camp staff in sufficient numbers varies from year to year, moving inversely with the state of the economy. The better the economy, the more options for summer employment are open to college students, and therefore the harder it is to interest them in working at camp. An advocacy campaign is needed, particularly in times of strong economy, to market the message to college students that camp is an important, valuable, skill-building opportunity, worthy of their summers.

In a sense, camping provides entry level jobs in the Jewish community to these folks, and this is a powerful way to attract new professionals into Jewish education and Jewish life. The Jewish community could and should be doing much more to expose young camp counselors to considering the possibility of making careers in Jewish education. Investment in recruiting and training these young people should be conceptualized as an investment in the larger enterprise of Jewish education and in the renaissance of

the Jewish community. Such a recruitment campaign would need to be very carefully designed to fit with the very busy lives of staff in camp, and with the very special rhythm of the camp calendar.

Senior personnel in camping need attention, too. There is no clear career ladder leading to the position of camp director. There is no clear educational program that equips a candidate for the position. There is little professional literature about camping as a venue for informal education in the Jewish community. There are few opportunities for continuing education or for in-service training for senior camp professionals. All these challenges need to be addressed.

Program

In order to attract Jewish families in an open society, Jewish camps must offer programs every bit as rich, diverse and exciting as the best camps in the marketplace. Much of the Jewish community has the economic wherewithal to choose whatever camps will best serve the needs they perceive for their children. Unless Jewish camps approach the standards of the best camps in the business, Jewish parents will look elsewhere.

For years, the camping industry has been trending towards specialties. Children go to basketball camp, lacrosse camp, science camp, guitar camp, horseback riding camp, and many, many others. Yet in the Jewish community, *there are no specialty camps in any specialty*. New kinds of camps are needed to serve populations seeking specialty programs in such areas as the arts or sports.

In order to promote programmatic excellence in camp life, the Foundation for Jewish Camping has instituted a grant-making program, which provides camps with incentives to introduce experimental programmatic innovations. The Foundation’s grant-making, which was offered for the fourth time in 2003, has enabled cutting-edge programs in such diverse areas as Jewish education, the arts, sports, environmental education, and theater. This year’s grant-making had a sharp programmatic focus on Israel education. Incentives to help camps envision and achieve programmatic excellence in a wide range of offerings need to continue, and to be expanded.

Happily, the Foundation for Jewish Camping has had some significant success in the first five years of its existence. Early experiments, particularly in the areas of advocacy, staffing and program are beginning to bear good

fruit. Such projects have been created with generous support from funders including the Goldman Fund, AVI CHAI, the Covenant Foundation, Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, among others. This is a good beginning. Much more is needed.

As the Jewish community seeks to build a renaissance of Jewish life in North America, it makes sense to invest heavily in those institutions that have a track record of success in building Jewish identity and commitment in our young people. Jewish overnight summer camp is one of a small handful of institutions that merit such investment.

With 120 local units in successful operation, under sponsorship of movements and agencies with a wide variety of

educational agendas, with a strong track record but only limited "market penetration," Jewish camping is a wonderfully promising arena for future expansion. Camping offers the potential of partnerships among national and local agencies, and of agencies spanning the spectrum of the Jewish community. With proper community attention and the requisite resources, camping offers the promise of a major contribution to Jewish renaissance.

Rabbi Ramie Arian is Executive Director of the Foundation for Jewish Camping, an independent non-profit 501(c)(3) public foundation which serves as the central address for Jewish overnight camps in North America. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.jewishcamping.org.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Arian makes a strong statement that "If we are serious about renaissance, it is absurd to be satisfied with only 7% of our children attending Jewish camps."
 - If you agree that the capacity and number of camps should expand, which organizations or agencies should take responsibility for making that happen?
 - Is there a role your agency could play in bringing this about?
- To what extent have you seen summer camp as a luxury item or family choice rather than a communal responsibility? Which of Arian's arguments to the

contrary do you find most convincing?

- What are the questions you believe should be answered in order to inform an awareness / marketing campaign targeting Jewish communal leaders as Arian proposes?
- Arian notes that preparing camp counselors and staff is a crucial need and yet faces numerous obstacles. How would you propose addressing this dilemma?
- How would you like to see allocation of communal resources divided between expanding the capacity of "tried and true" programs such as summer camp and investing in experimental or innovative models and interventions?