

# CONTACT

SUMMER 2002/AV 5762 VOLUME 4, NUMBER 4

THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE NETWORK / חברים כל ישראל



## Jewish Summer Camps: Our Precious Resource



**Eli Valley**

Editor

**Erica Coleman**

Copy Editor

**Edith Fenyvesi**

Photo Coordinator

**David Winter**

Administration

**Janet Mann**

Administration

**Yakov Wisniewski**

Design Director

## JEWISH LIFE NETWORK

**Michael H. Steinhardt**

Chairman

**Rabbi Irving Greenberg**

President

**Jonathan J. Greenberg**

Executive Director

CONTACT is produced and distributed by Jewish Life Network, a Judy and Michael Steinhardt Foundation, 6 East 39th Street, 10th floor, New York, NY 10016.

**Phone:** (212) 279-2288**Fax:** (212) 279-1155**Email:** info@jewishlife.org

Copyright © 2002 by Jewish Life Network.



Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Most of the photographs in this issue appear courtesy of the Foundation for Jewish Camping and Art Today.

## Jewish Summer Camps: Our Precious Resource

Jewish summer camp is a uniquely American phenomenon. Although today we often associate camp with leisure activities — softball, Israeli dance, lines at the canteen — camps have always served an indispensable purpose in the community. Originally, Jewish camps were created to ameliorate the grim conditions of city life. At the turn of the 20th century, at the height of an unprecedented influx of European immigrants, settlement houses and social welfare agencies established retreats to give Jewish children a respite from the teeming urban slums. Some of these camps were designed to acculturate new immigrants into American society. In the 1930s and 1940s, their mission was more critical: they served to protect urban children from polio epidemics.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as the Jewish community expanded and migrated to the suburbs, the function of camps shifted to reflect the community's prosperity. Camps that were initially created as social service organizations began to focus their services on Jewish educational programming. Over the years, camps became phenomenally successful. They evolved into an annual rite of passage, unique in the Diaspora, that combined Jewish identity building with athletics, arts & crafts, nature experiences and general fun.

Camping is so enjoyable, in fact, that we often overlook its record in inculcating Jewish identity. Particularly for non-Orthodox Jews, the total immersion experience of summer camp is often the greatest single variable leading to lifelong Jewish commitment. The effects of camping on Jewish identity are profound and well-documented. *Jewish Camping 2000*, by Gary Tobin and Meryle Weinstein, cites an Atlanta Federation study that showed that adults who attended Jewish camp as children are more than 50 percent more likely to belong to a synagogue than those who did not attend camp. *The Camping Experience 1995 – 1999*, a study of Ramah camps published in 2001 by Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin, points out that teenagers who attend Jewish camp are 50 percent more likely to be interested in studying in Israel during their Junior Year in college than are those who do not attend camp. The articles in this issue of CONTACT reveal the enormous power of camp to heighten Jewish identity not only among campers, but among counselors and staff as well.

The success of Jewish camping has created the unfortunate situation that camp is often taken for granted in the Jewish community. The pervasive rationale seems to be, why invest in something that seems to be doing fine by itself? But as the articles in this issue of CONTACT will show, there is much that can be done to strengthen the infrastructure of American Jewish camping, from building new camps to modernizing others, from increasing staff salaries to subsidizing camper tuition. It is vital that the community shows its commitment to the continued success of camps. Indeed, it is in the community's interest to ensure that camps operate at the highest possible levels, and that the benefits of camp are available to the widest spectrum of Jews. After all, without successful camps, there would be far fewer Jews committed to making Jewish life flourish in America.

At transitional periods of American Jewish history, camps evolved to meet the community's most pressing needs. Today, as the community struggles to raise a new generation of committed Jews, camps are one of our most precious resources for Jewish education, experience and identity. It is time to elevate camps to the profile they deserve.

Eli Valley



# SUMMER CAMPS: Jewish Joy, Jewish Identity

by RAMIE ARIAN



***Why a camp? Because even the best school operates only part of the day. We wanted to create a real and total society that would respond to the whole person, twenty-four hours a day, even though we could maintain that society for no more than eight weeks at a time. The founders could have invested their energy in a cluster of day schools. Ultimately they chose camping, because the issues that they believed needed to be addressed could not be addressed by a school, not even a day school.***

**S**O WROTE master educator Seymour Fox, in a 1997 essay about the founding of the Conservative movement's Ramah camps. Those who founded Jewish overnight camps, not only Ramah but the many other "brands" of Jewish camps as well, were right. Repeatedly and consistently, researchers have demonstrated that experience in the quality, non-profit overnight camps of the Jewish community is among the strongest means to build Jewish identity and commitment in young people.

Why is it that camp — generally associated more with fun than with serious learning — is so powerful as an educational format? Operating on a 24/7 basis, camp offers not only substantial formal contact with learners (campers), but also a myriad of informal "teachable moments" when learners are uniquely accessible, and contexts make learning uniquely memorable. Possibilities for informal education are seemingly endless:

A dispute along the first-base line in a softball game may offer the opportunity for an unforgettable, impromptu lesson on *lashon ha-ra*, the transgression of evil talk.

A swim lesson may provoke an impromptu discussion of Lenny Krazelburg, the U.S. Olympic backstroke champion, whose training schedule was influenced by his Jewish sensitivities — leading to an enhanced sense of pride in the camper's Jewish identity.

A bedtime review of the day may prompt a camper's question about theology, or belief in God, and may give a counselor an extraordinary opportunity for

spontaneous religious dialogue, leading to growth for learner and teacher alike.

There are currently 120 non-profit Jewish overnight camps throughout North America. They serve a total of 50,000 children each summer, less than 7 percent of the estimated 750,000 Jewish children of camp age (8-16) in the United States and Canada. They are sponsored by Jewish religious denominations, by JCCs, by at least four Zionist movements, by B'nai B'rith and by various independent agencies.

Nearly all of these camps are full to capacity, many with long waiting lists.

There is broad agreement in the Jewish community about the power and importance of summer camp as a transformational educational experience for our young people. With space for so few of our children, the key question is: how can we greatly increase the reach of existing Jewish camps, and how can we build the additional camps we will need to accommodate many additional children?

Doubling the number of children attending Jewish camp each summer would require about 30,000 new beds in Jewish overnight camps (both in expanded existing camps and in new camps). Applying existing rules of thumb to camp construction, this would require a minimum of \$325 – \$400 million in capital funding. Of this amount, projects totaling more than \$175 million are already on the drawing board.

Until the creation of the Foundation for Jewish Camping in 1998, there was no agency in the Jewish community that kept a list of all the community's camps. Today, the Foundation has become the chief advocate and source of resources for Jewish camps.

We need to create many more camps

in the Jewish community, to accommodate the many children who want to attend but are closed out. But more than additional space, we need to upgrade our camps to match or exceed the state of the art in the secular camp world. Many of our camps suffer from years of "deferred maintenance," and need significant upgrades to their buildings and grounds. We would not tolerate substandard facilities in our children's schools. We should not be willing to tolerate it in some of their camps.

We need to ensure that our camps offer programming that is excellent not only in terms of Jewish identity building, but excellent in every way. Sports programming, arts programming and environmental education need to sparkle with creative energy. This is already the case in many of our camps. We need to ensure it is true in all of them.

Our camps need to attract our best and brightest college students to serve as staff. In order to accomplish this, we need to increase salaries to a level that is competitive with the urban marketplace. We need to mount a major campaign to market the message to Jewish college students that working at camp is a great way to build career skills. Simultaneously, we need to inform employers that job candidates with experience as camp counselors are especially valuable employees.

We need our federations in each community to ensure that sufficient scholarships exist so that children are not turned away due to financial need, and that those scholarships are applicable to the full spectrum of camps serving area children. Federations and community leaders should create incentive programs to encourage families to choose Jewish camps for their children.

Statistical and anecdotal evidence overwhelmingly shows that Jewish camps change Jewish lives. In an era such as ours, when the wealthiest, most powerful Jewish community in history anguishes over its own vitality, Jewish camps provide an important force for renaissance in Jewish life. Jewish camps are a precious but underappreciated resource, a resource which the community should cherish and grow. ✨

---

**Rabbi Ramie Arian** serves as Executive Director of the Foundation for Jewish Camping.



# Why I Support Jewish Camping

by ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER

**The sad and ridiculous irony is that non-profit Jewish overnight camps, one of our community's most effective resources for transmitting Jewish identity and combating assimilation, are among our least supported.**

**S**UMMER, 1939. A thirteen-year-old boy from Summit, New Jersey heads off to a non-profit, Jewish overnight camp sponsored by the JCC. That summer, unable to read Hebrew, he learns the Torah blessings and his Haftorah in transliteration; his counselor, a Texas rabbi, officiates at his bar mitzvah in camp. That summer, he also experiences his first Shabbat — and something else. “I found I liked girls better than baseball, especially Jewish girls,” he told me. The boy stayed at camp an additional four years, became a counselor and married a Jewish woman (no, not the girl from the summer of ’39). He later translated the leadership skills he acquired as a camp counselor into growing a business, and he became a leader in the Jewish community. That man is my father-in-law, Allen.

Summer, 2001. Allen’s eight-year-old grandson, Rafi Spungen Bildner, heads off to a non-profit Jewish overnight camp — Camp Ramah in New England, sponsored by the Conservative movement. Returning home, Rafi immediately tacks two new pictures to the wall above his bed, next to a photo of his adopted Florida manatee. One is a photo of his bunkmates, the other a small yellow posterboard with the words of the Hebrew prayer, *Modeh Ani Lifanecha* (“I gratefully thank you”), embellished with red and silver glitter and Magic Marker

images of sunrise and a boy in bed. “I made it in art at camp,” Rafi proudly told me, “and I say *Modeh Ani* every morning because I need to thank God for restoring me every day.”

### ***An American Jewish Institution***

For Allen, Rafi and the rest of our family, camp is, as Rafi says, “having fun while doing Judaism.” At approximately 120 non-profit Jewish overnight camps, campers still do what campers everywhere do: go rock climbing, make crafts, participate in color war. But at a Jewish camp, when Rafi and his bunkmates cheer on their color war team, “*anu lavan, yesh lanu ruach*,” (“we are the white team, we have spirit”), the spirit they are referring to is a very Jewish one that somehow gets carried home in their duffel bags and continues to infuse their lives.

Jewish camping is so successful in transmitting a love of Judaism that even those outside the Jewish community are in awe. Under the heading “Imitation is the Best Form of Flattery,” an article in the *New York Times* reported that American Sikhs are busy creating overnight camps on the Jewish model. A recent *Wall Street Journal* feature also touted the success of religious camps, including, of course, the Jewish ones.

The sad and ridiculous irony is that non-profit Jewish overnight camps, one of our community’s most effective resources for transmitting Jewish identity and combating assimilation, are among our least supported.

### ***Recognizing the Need***

For several years, I held positions on the

boards of numerous Jewish organizations together with my husband, Rob Bildner. In all of our community activities, we analyzed cutting-edge programs that would promote, to use the old buzzword, continuity. But we neither heard about nor witnessed any pervasive groundswell to bolster Jewish camping. I remember several meetings in our living room and in the offices of Jewish movers and shakers, assessing the prospects of starting a North American foundation that would raise money to improve upon and expand summer camping. What we found was truly perplexing: clearly, Jewish camping produced committed Jews — the anecdotal and quantitative research is indisputable. But we also found that Jewish camping across all denominations and movements is disastrously underfunded and receives a disproportionately meager share of community resources.

The need is clear. Many camps date from the 1950s. The buildings, from bunks to dining halls, need major repair. Counselor and staff salaries need to be raised so that camps can attract Jewish young adults who are otherwise lured by high-paying summer jobs. Many camps require programmatic overhauls so that they will be able to provide modern amenities while maintaining high levels of Jewish content. Camp tuition needs to be subsidized. For many parents, the cost of summer camp — an average of \$2400 per child per month — is prohibitive, particularly when combined with the costs of Jewish day school. Camp directors say that if they could triple the amount of scholarship funding and

---

*Elisa Spungen Bildner* is co-president, with Rob Bildner, of the Foundation for Jewish Camping. She can be reached at [elisa@jewishcamping.org](mailto:elisa@jewishcamping.org).





triple the bed space, they could fill their camps with people who otherwise wouldn't be able to attend. Inexplicably, no national initiative existed to ameliorate this situation.

A little over three years ago, Rob and I decided that the community needed a central address to promote Jewish camping. With this in mind, we started the Foundation for Jewish Camping, a 501(c)(3) public foundation that seeks to expand the capacity of the Jewish camping system, enhance the facilities and programs of existing camps, recruit quality staff in sufficient numbers and promote the importance of Jewish camping to children, parents and the Jewish institutions that serve them.

#### ***A Call To Action***

We have mostly succeeded. In the three years since its founding, the Foundation for Jewish Camping has become the address for advocacy and information about Jewish camping in North America, and a welcome grant-maker to Jewish camps.

But there is much more work to do, and we cannot do it alone. The Foundation's budget is \$1 million a year, while the capital budgets of the 120 non-profit camps we serve total \$177 million.

So this is a clarion (shofar) call. In order to realize our mission and strengthen Jewish camps across North America, the Foundation needs additional philanthropic leaders. Rob and I consider the Foundation a communal initiative, not our private philanthropy. This is why the Foundation has a generic-sounding name instead of an

individual donor's name. We invite partners to join this community-focused organization on the ground floor and lend their imprimatur. Both money and leadership are daunting challenges for us, and success is not guaranteed. Nevertheless, our passion for camping and

our conviction that it is essential both to Jewish identity building and to the future of our community continues to motivate us. Together, we can build a bunk of leaders committed to making North American Jewish camps the best they can be. ✿

## THE FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH CAMPING

**T**he Foundation for Jewish Camping is the central voice for non-profit Jewish overnight camps in North America. The Foundation provides a clearinghouse for information about Jewish camping, advocates for camp in the Jewish community, and provides financial and programmatic resources for camps without regard to denomination or sponsorship.

During the summer of 2002, the Foundation placed Spielberg Fellows — talented specialists who combine theater expertise with Jewish skills — and Nathan Cummings Fellows — experienced Judaic environmental educators — in 33 Jewish camps. Another 27 camps received Foundation grants to enable innovative programmatic initiatives. Recipients include Reform, Orthodox, JCC, Conservative, Zionist and unaffiliated camps.

The Foundation for Jewish Camping, a publicly supported, independent, non-



profit agency, represents the Jewish camp world in the leadership counsels of the Jewish community, and is a conduit for information about Jewish camps for the press. For further information or to receive the Foundation's newsletter, please contact:

**Foundation for Jewish Camping, Inc.**  
**6 East 39th Street, 10th Floor**  
**New York NY 10016**  
**tel. 212.792.6222 fax 212.792.6242**  
**info@jewishcamping.org**  
**www.jewishcamping.org**

# The Future of Jewish Camping

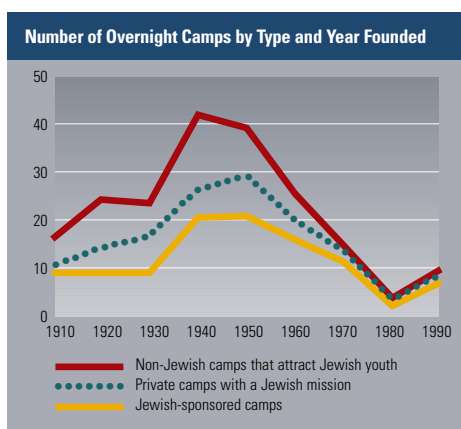
by DR. GARY A. TOBIN

**A** QUALITY Jewish overnight camping experience is a powerful force for building Jewish community involvement.

Summer camps provide a fun learning environment for Jewish youth that is often an ideal setting for instilling Jewish values and positive feelings about being Jewish. Expanding and strengthening the Jewish camping experience for Jewish youth should be a priority for the community.

Jewish camping faces five major challenges.

The first is the magnitude of the need for capital funds for camp expansion. The majority of Jewish-sponsored and privately owned Jewish overnight camps are already well established. There have been only a few camps established in the past twenty years. Increasing the number of beds has not been a priority, even though there are waiting lists, especially at camps under denominational auspices.



A few new camps are currently being planned by Jewish communal organizations. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) has a mandate to double its number of beds. It has acquired two new facilities and negotiations are under way to acquire another site. Ramah has recently opened a new camp in the South and has plans to open another in Colorado. Habonim Dror is

*Dr. Gary A. Tobin is President of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research in San Francisco.*

also planning new camps.

The second challenge is personnel. Attracting qualified Jewish staff, especially men, senior staff, and specialists is a key challenge for most camps. Competition in attracting staff comes from summer jobs or internships that are perceived as having “resume value.” Many potential staff members are reluctant to work at camps, which they perceive as having low status and market value. The rundown condition of many of the camps and the lack of adult housing may also deter many qualified people from working in senior positions at camps.

The third issue is the need for scholarships to cover the high costs of sending children to overnight camp. These costs are especially high when compounded by the costs of day school, Hebrew school and other costs of Jewish affiliation. Camp directors indicate that the need for scholarship aid has been increasing, and most believe it will continue to do so. Some believe that an increase in scholarship funds would lower the cost barrier and make camping more accessible to families who cannot afford the full cost.

The fourth issue is quality among Jewish overnight camps, which varies a great deal. Many good Jewish camps are no longer in existence because of the difficulty in competing with non-Jewish camps that have better and/or more modern facilities and programming.

According to one former camp director whose camp is no longer in existence, “Much had to do with the fact that the physical facility of the camp became rundown, and the competition was more attractive. The directors were not interested in putting resources into capital improvements, a serious error on their part.”

Jewish camps also compete with other summer activities in attracting campers. These include specialty camps, travel programs, Israel travel programs and family vacations.

Fifth, sometimes ideology inhibits the growth of camps and who attends.



There is little consensus as to what constitutes “Jewish” camping. It may include camps that have a full gamut of religious practice and study, that have a Jewish educational mission, those under the auspices of Jewish denominational or communal institutions, or simply those that have a significant number of Jewish children.

There is considerable debate among Jewish camping professionals about who should be the primary focus of Jewish camping. Many camp directors express the desire to raise the quality of Jewish programming, but have concerns about whom to target, as Jewish life becomes more complex and different levels of Jewish programming appeal to different families.

On one end of the spectrum, some believe that the Jewish camping experience should be focused on marginally affiliated families that need Jewish identity building the most. This group believes that it is unrealistic and unproductive for camps to create an atmosphere that is so intensively Jewish that it will frighten off potential campers who are less observant. They feel that camps should attract campers from marginally affiliated families and motivate them to want to continue participation in Jewish life.



At the other end, some believe that the place of Jewish camping is not to provide outreach to the marginally affiliated, but to provide rich and powerful Jewish identity building for those they consider most involved in Jewish life. The purpose of camp for this group is not to accumulate factual Jewish information, but to provide Jewish motivation. The special power of overnight camping resides in its ability to control the atmosphere twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and to make every moment of every day a Jewish moment. One director insists that to offer camping with less than total Jewish intensity is to squander the power of camp.

These diverse opinions are not mutually exclusive. The broader the spectrum of camp options, the greater their ability to attract diverse constituencies.

It is important to note that a vehicle to champion the Jewish camping experience was established in 1998. The New York-based Foundation for Jewish Camping serves as the advocate for Jewish camping throughout the Jewish community, and as a clearinghouse for information about Jewish camps. The Foundation serves as the advocate for investment in Jewish camping. It is unfortunate that investment in camping is not on the radar screen of most Jewish philanthropists. It should be. 🌸

# G R O W I N G Z I O N I S T S

**T**he 120 non-profit Jewish overnight camps in North America represent each of the denominations as well as Jewish Community Centers, B'nai B'rith and independent movements. Some camps were established specifically to promote and nurture a love for Israel. We asked Doron Krakow, National Director of Young Judaea, to explain the focus and evolution of Zionist camps.

For the better part of a century, Zionist camps in North America have been preparing our young people for a life of commitment to Israel and the Jewish people. Born of a determination to prepare young people to assist the burgeoning national Jewish homeland in British mandated Palestine, Zionist camps have provided much more than just a summer of fun and learning in the great outdoors. In their early years, these programs, run by Betar, Bnei Akiva, Hashomer Hatzair, Habonim and others, taught ideology, paramilitary skills, farming and, of course, Hebrew and basic Jewish literacy.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel, the core focus of these programs began to shift. The last fifty years have witnessed an evolving commitment on the part of these camps to fostering a love of Israeli culture, language and people, as well as an understanding of Israel's struggle for both peace and freedom.

At Young Judaea camps, campers view the world through the lens of Israel. Movement graduates, who have played key leadership roles in the Zionist movement both here and in Israel, are joined by highly specialized Israeli *shlichim* (educational emissaries) in facilitating the creation of an atmosphere that resonates with the sights and sounds of Israel and Jewish life.

Zionist education, like Zionist ideology, is based upon the conviction that national liberation is the foundation stone of Jewish life. Our camps utilize this extraordinary environment for informal education to re-enact history, celebrate the Jewish life cycle, inspire our campers with stories of Jewish heroes and explore the geography of Israel. When a camp lake can be transformed into the Red Sea or the sports field can become an open air Jerusalem market, our work at camp is limited only by the boundaries of our imaginations.

— DORON KRAKOW





# Camp for Counselors

by AMY L. SALES and LEONARD SAXE

EACH OF US has probably witnessed (or experienced) the tears of a child when she is dropped off at camp, and then, several weeks later, the tears of the same child when it is time to say goodbye. The emotional connection a child makes to camp is nothing short of extraordinary. No wonder camps have been promoted as an effective socializing agent for the next generation of American Jews. The association of the sweetness of the camp experience with Judaism can firmly cement a child's Jewish identity.

Although camp is designed for children, most summer camps also influence the young adults who serve as camp staff. Counselors, who live with the children twenty-four hours a day, are often only a few years older than their campers. Typically, counselors are *vatikim* (veterans) of the camp. What they take from their summer as staff may be as important as what they give.

Using data from a multi-year study of Jewish summer camping, we looked at the role of counselors at camp and the impact of the summer experience on their own development. The study includes a census of nearly 200 Jewish-identified camps (including those run by the religious and Zionist movements, community agencies, foundations and private owners); field observations at 20 camps across the country; and a survey of more than 1,000 Jewish counselors. Our conclusions are simple: the success of camp as a Jewish experience for campers resides almost exclusively with staff. Staff, in turn, experience camp as their "Jewish home away from home" and appear to derive the same benefits from a summer at camp as do the children in their charge.

## Who?

More than 18,000 Jewish young adults and professionals work at a Jewish camp during the summer. More than half of these, or approximately 10,000, are bunk counselors or activity specialists who live with campers in the bunks, lead activities, and generally fulfill the role of big brother/sister, teacher, friend and role model. The vast majority of these are American college-age students, 18 to 22 years old.

Many counselors bring Jewish skills with them to camp. The majority have been active in youth groups and have traveled to Israel. Many of the counselors have pursued Jewish education beyond the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony and beyond high school. About half have recently taken courses in Hebrew or Jewish studies (an increasing phenomenon on college campuses).

By and large, these counselors are not religiously observant. Asked what is important to their Jewishness, they most often cite

---

*Amy L. Sales* is a social psychologist and Senior Research Associate at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University. *Leonard Saxe* is Professor of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University and director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.





# The success of camp as a Jewish experience for campers resides almost exclusively with staff. Staff, in turn, experience camp as their “Jewish home away from home” and appear to derive the same benefits from a summer at camp as do the children in their charge.

leading an ethical life, making a Jewish home, caring about Israel and remembering the Holocaust. These aspects of Jewish life far outweigh holiday celebrations, spirituality, Shabbat observance and synagogue attendance.

## Why?

Jewish young adults accept positions at camp because—like the campers—they have an emotional connection to camp. People with no prior camp experience rarely end up in staff positions at summer camp.

In making their decision to work at a Jewish camp, counselors are drawn primarily to the opportunity to have fun and to work with youth. Opportunities for Jewish experiences and Jewish learning are but secondary contributing factors. Salary and other compensation (which are low compared to other summer job options) have the least bearing on the decision. Counselors, it appears, come to camp for basically the same reasons that campers do.

Their goals for the summer are more personal and less tied to Jewish education or Jewish experiences. At the top of the list are fun, friends, leadership skills and self-exploration. Jewish experiences and Jewish/Zionist education are at the bottom of the list. This pattern persists across camps, whether they are sponsored by religious movements, Zionist organizations, agencies, foundations or private owners.

## What Impact?

Repeatedly, counselors told us how the exigencies of camp impelled their own personal and Judaic growth. When the father of a camper in her bunk died, one counselor faced a distressed cabin of girls. The decision was made for the entire group to attend the family's *shiva*. The counselor quickly had to learn not only about grief counseling but also about Jewish mourning practices and appropriate communal responses.

For the vast majority of counselors,

camp provides a more observant Jewish lifestyle than they would have otherwise. Camp may be the one time that counselors, like many campers, fully experience Shabbat. We often heard that counselors refuse to take Saturday off—even when it is their assigned day—because they do not want to miss a single Shabbat at camp.

The movement camps try to assure a strong educational experience for counselors. They conduct learning sessions for counselors during the camp day and on Shabbat, sometimes in parallel with the campers' study sessions and sometimes as a quiet time away from camper responsibilities. They hire senior staff to serve as Jewish educators, mentors and role models for counselors during the summer.

Other camps—where the largest numbers of staff are employed—do little intentionally to influence the Jewish lives of the young adults who work there. Although many camps are aware of the abundant opportunities for friendship and personal growth among counselors, fewer camps seem to be aware of the opportunity to make camp a special Jewish experience for staff.

## Why Focus on Counselors?

From the age of eighteen to twenty-five is a time of exploration and profound change. Exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people during these years than it will be at any other period of their lives. Most identity explorations and the formation of personal and religious beliefs take place at this time, and not during adolescence.

Camp is an environment designed for trying out new behaviors and exploring questions of personal identity and values. Although camps intended this environment to serve campers' developmental needs, they unintentionally created the ideal environment for the young adult counselors who—perhaps even more so than the campers—are in the process of

exploring options and setting the pathway for their future.

Counselors need to be viewed as a target audience in their own right—a group for whom camp offers a potent Jewish experience. Such re-framing might affect how camps think about counselor education, support, community building and Jewish experiences. College students may come to camp to have fun, but once there, the camp has the possibility to guide them toward Jewish adulthood. 🌟

This article includes material from a comprehensive study of summer camping by Amy Sales and Len Saxe. More complete results of the study will be presented in two upcoming publications:

**Coming in Fall 2002:** *Limud by the Lake: Fulfilling the Educational Potential of Jewish Summer Camps*. A publication presenting the key conclusions from Brandeis University's research on summer camping, suggesting possible areas to change, and making recommendations for increasing the impact of camps as agents of Jewish socialization. (Brandeis University and the AVI CHAI Foundation)

**Coming in Spring 2003:** *“How Goodly Are Thy Tents”: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* (working title). The first full-length work to explain how Jewish camps transmit values and strengthen Jewish identity. (University Press of New England)

Research for these studies was sponsored by the AVI CHAI Foundation and conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. For more information, please contact [cmjs@brandeis.edu](mailto:cmjs@brandeis.edu).

# The Leadership Principle

by RABBI ABRAHAM WAHRHAFTIG

CAMP IS THAT wonderful place between fantasy and reality. It is the lab of life wherein we experiment as to who we are and what we will become. In what is the quintessential informal educational experience, young people develop confidence, poise, social skills and make many lifetime friends. When this happens in a supportive Jewish educational and religious environment, it produces future Jewish leaders with a solid commitment to Jewish sensitivity, learning, practice and continuity.

I have often been asked why a nineteen- or twenty-year-old would work in

Orthodox summer camp under the highly professional direction of Zvi Reich. One component to our mission is to inspire young Jewish children as well as young staff members to live proudly as committed Jews, sensitive to the needs of others.

Part of the job description of all our staff members is that they serve as role models for our campers. The *midot* (values) of our staff are a key component to their being hired. Counselor creativity and diligence is another key factor we look for. Their creativity marks the success of the camping environment. When young people feel empowered and have a say in program-

ming, their sense of leadership is heightened. Over the years, our staff has been encouraged to develop educational themes, topics for color war and other programs. One of our most exciting and meaningful experiences is our thirty-year joint program with the non-denominational B'nai B'rith Youth Organization. The day's event is jointly planned by a representative group from our Machon Counselor in Training program, together with members of the



camp when they can be working at a “real” job earning “real” money and adding a notch to their professional resume. My answer, which is usually not accepted by parents or potential staff, is that the camp experience will help them to be better partners in a relationship, help them to understand the needs of children, and help them to become productive members of society. Staff members develop skills in conflict resolution. They learn how to engage in difficult conversations, to give constructive criticism and to encourage and reinforce positive behavior. These activities strengthen their confidence and enhance their communication skills.

Morasha opened in 1964 as a Modern

Leadership Training Callah of BBYO. We run themes dealing with Jewish life skills, ethical dilemmas, issues facing Israel and Jewish concerns throughout the world. This program strongly reinforces the common commitment and dedication both groups have to Judaism. It has helped BBYO youngsters discover that, despite their differences, Modern Orthodox kids are very much in sync with their perception of Jewish life. I recently spent time with a Morasha Alumnus who recollected his experience on BBYO/Morasha Day. When the BBYO buses pulled up to camp, he was wearing a Cat Stevens t-shirt. The BBYO kids could not get over the fact that an Orthodox Jewish kid knew who Cat Stevens was, let alone would wear such a shirt. Needless to say, that broke down all barriers of communication from the get-go.

During orientations, staff training serves to foster leadership and initiative development. It invariably helps to raise the level of responsibility each staff member feels towards his or her campers. Counselors are encouraged to be kind and caring, and to focus patiently on camper needs. They are cautioned against inappropriate behavior, especially when they become overwhelmed or sleep-deprived. Professional sensitivities are extremely important in light of parental and administrative concerns for child abuse. We stress camper respect as a true goal in staff education. I have always suggested to our staff that when talking to a child one should add twenty years to their age. For instance, when talking to a twelve-year old, show the same respect you would have for a thirty-two year-old. When they reach adulthood, children often remember how they were treated by key people in their lives.

Many of our staff have gone on to major leadership positions in both the Jewish and secular worlds. They are committed to their Jewish identity and community. Six former staff members are principals in major Jewish Day Schools in the New York metropolitan area. Two alumni have become camp directors. Many alumni — too numerous to count — have gone on to become pulpit rabbis and teachers in day schools around the country. Hundreds have become psychologists, therapists and communal social workers. Two staff alumni currently direct the Wiesenthal Centers in LA and Jerusalem. Many have become the proverbial Doctors and Lawyers as well as corporate executives who are active on their synagogue and school boards. Many of our former staff have made Aliyah and have become professors and chairs of departments at Bar Ilan, Hebrew University, Be'er Sheva University and many other Israeli institutions. Needless to say, we are proud and gratified by the involvement of our alumni in the Jewish community. We were always able to see the seeds of this leadership in their performance at camp. The most significant and gratifying experience of all is that over the years, many members of our supervisory and senior staff have come from former staff who grew up in camp and went on to become our best staff members. More amazing still is that eleven out of twenty-four current members of Morasha's board of directors once served on our camp staff. Remember what I wrote earlier about being careful what you say and how you say it to campers and staff members alike? This is crucial, for one day they will be members of your board. 🌸

*Rabbi Abraham Wahrhaftig is Director of Camp Morasha in Pennsylvania.*





# The First Reconstructionist Camp

by RABBI JEFFREY EISENSTAT

**F**OR THE LAST seventy-five years, Reconstructionists have been informally involved in the camping world. Hundreds of campers were disciples of Mordechai Kaplan and Ira and Judith Eisenstein at some of North America's oldest Jewish camps. But the time has finally come for this growing and vibrant movement of North America to set up its own camp.

The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation includes over 100 congregations and Havurot teams, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. Now more than ever, we need to add a summer camp to our institutional roster in order to forge a dynamic connection with the next generation of Reconstructionists.

How exciting it is to embark as "Halutzim" and create the finest blend of camping experiences with Reconstruc-

tionism. Imagine the principles of "Living in Two Civilizations" as we offer the very best of summer camp activities: swimming, boating, sailing, tennis, softball, soccer, mountain biking, skateboarding, rope courses, coupled with the arts, ritual art, music, drama, dance, theater, literature, along with the great outdoor experiences of nature and being partners with the environment.

"Camp JRF" (Jewish Reconstructionist Federation) will approach Judaism holistically. Campers will experience Judaism both in body and in spirit as we embrace the values of spiritual peoplehood. For the last two decades, Dr. Jeffrey Schein and other Reconstructionist educators have been developing a unique style of education that views Judaism through the lens of spiritual peoplehood.

Our campers will learn what it means to live as an organic community as they study texts stressing inclusiveness; work creatively in the arts; search liturgy and

stimulate spirituality; utilize a working Hebrew vocabulary; recognize their relationship to the land and the people of Israel; explore the paths through which the children of Sarah and Hagar can live in peace; mend their portion of the world; and strive to be mensches.

Reconstructionism is a progressive approach to Jewish life which integrates a deep respect for traditional Judaism with the insights of today. Our campers will come from all parts of North America to Camp Henry Horner in Ingleside, Illinois, where Camp JRF will be based. Our summer camp will be a joyful, creative and inclusive Reconstructionist community. We are also blessed with an energetic rabbinic staff, professional educators, college students and an emerging high school youth program, "Noar Hadash." Finally, we have a commitment from lay and rabbinic leadership to create the culture of a vibrant, creative and caring community that defines Reconstructionism. 🌸

---

*Rabbi Jeffrey Eisenstat is Director of Youth and Camping at the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.*



# Conveying<sup>the</sup> Power of Jewish Camps

by ANITA DIAMANT and EMILIA DIAMANT

## ANITA DIAMANT:

**I** GREW UP within a rich ethnic soup of Yiddishkeit. Yiddish language, Jewish culture and liberal/prophetic politics formed me as a Jew. However, when I became a parent, I knew that I would have to be far more conscious and active about providing my daughter with a solid education and positive, joyful Jewish experiences.

When Emilia was a baby, my husband Jim and I had a pivotal conversation about Jewish child-rearing with our friends, Billy and Amy Mencow. Billy said that in his opinion, camp was even more instrumental than Jewish day school in providing children with a strong, independent Jewish identity. His summers at Camp Ramah and Camp Yavneh were the most important extra-familial elements in shaping his commitment to Jewish life. Billy Mencow is now director of Camp Ramah of New England.

I do not mean to set up an either/or choice here. It's not about Jewish day school OR Jewish camp. However, day school is bound to remain a minority decision for the vast majority of Jewish families. For my family, it was out of the question both financially and philosophically. And yet, there is a crucial need for a

---

*Anita Diamant is the author of several books, including *Living a Jewish Life*, *The New Jewish Wedding*, *The Red Tent* and the recently published novel *Good Harbor*. She is also a founder and president of *Mayyim Hayyim: Living Waters Community Mikveh and Education Center*.*

*Emilia Diamant will be entering her senior year of high school this fall. She is an active member of NFTY-Northeast, serving as Social Action Vice President of the Regional Executive Board for 2002-2003. She is also involved in the theater program at Newton North High School.*

positive Jewish experience that belongs entirely to the individual young person.

Last summer, Emilia attended the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) leadership program at the Kutz Camp in Warwick, NY (run by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations). She went to Kutz soon after returning from four months in Jerusalem, where she was a student in the Eisendrath International Exchange (EIE), the Reform movement's high school program. After that life-transforming experience, her expectations for camp were pretty modest. Her comments show how Kutz far exceeded her expectations, expanding the parameters of her Jewish vision and her Jewish soul.

Jewish camping has been a formative, joy-filled part of Emilia's Jewish education, which, to date, includes twelve years of supplementary Hebrew school, Hebrew school retreats, three summers of Jewish summer camp, junior youth group, our temple youth group, an Israel experience, and regional and national NFTY participation.

Camp expanded my daughter's Jewish community to include friends, teachers and role models from around the country and from around the world. Camp is where she first developed conversational Hebrew and met her first Israeli peers. Camp is where she argued Talmud with young teachers. I don't know all the names of all the people who changed my daughter's life at camp. But that's beside the point. Those are Emilia's memories. They belong to her, forever.

***...when I became a parent, I knew that I would have to be far more conscious and active about providing my daughter with a solid education and positive, joyful Jewish experiences.***



**For author Anita Diamant and her daughter Emilia, Jewish summer camp is an integral tile in the mosaic of Jewish life. In the following pieces, they explain why.**

**EMILIA DIAMANT:**

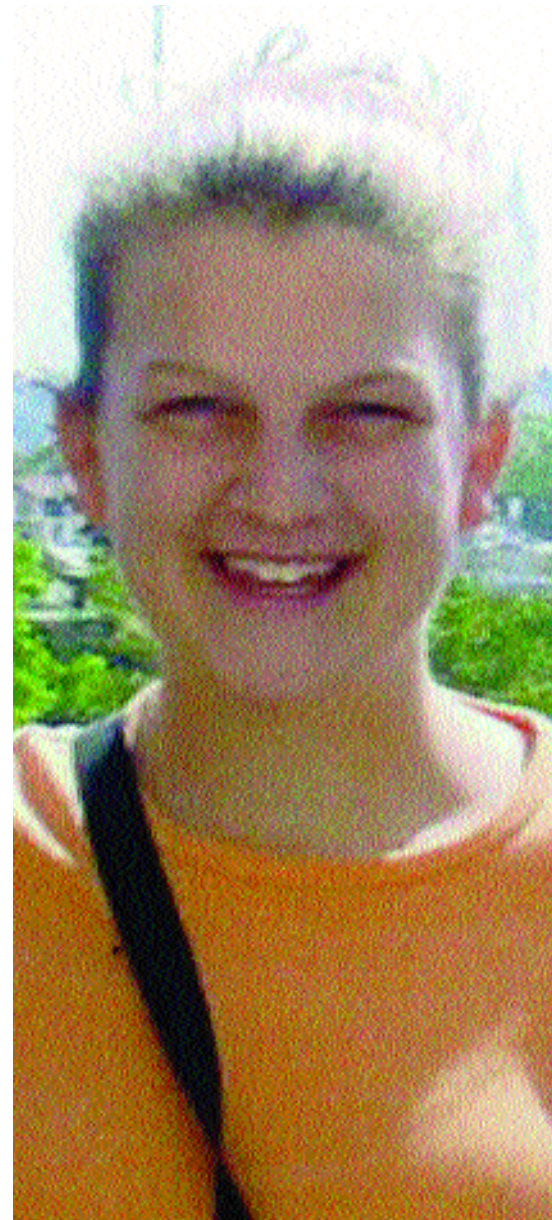
**I** SUPPOSE THAT finding Jewish communities became important to me once I entered high school. In high school, you find yourself lost in a sea of faces—teachers and administrators, not to mention the other students. Because of the stresses of grades and schoolwork, it is difficult to find a group of peers with whom you can connect. I found it hard to keep the stress of school separate from my school friendships. Because I had been brought up with a strong Jewish background, I was offered the option of joining a youth group for high schoolers at my synagogue, and I took it. The youth group opened up a whole new world—Jewish communities, Jewish friends, and an opportunity to create my own Jewish identity.

One of the outlets that the Reform movement offers to help teens find their own Jewish communities is Jewish summer camp. Last summer, I attended a leadership session at UAHC's Kutz Camp in New York, which is dedicated to creating leaders in the movement. Though I had been to Jewish overnight camp before, Kutz was totally different. Everybody there, from campers to counselors to faculty, was committed to their religion. Kutz provided programming, prayer, study and social situations in which we were allowed to discover our own Judaism. We were removed from our homes, families and synagogues to form our own Jewish community. When people talk about the youth of today starting a revolution, the community I was part of at Kutz is part of such a revolution. Every

weekday, I sat beneath willows next to my friend Aaron from Florida, and our group of eight studied and argued Talmud with a rabbi-in-training. Our daily conversations included Israel, Judaism, NFTY, being a teenager and what we like to eat. No dinnertime passed without a new joke passed around the dining hall.

Day in and day out, Kutz was just plain fun. There was plenty of free time and plenty of people, which made it easy to create great friendships fast. In study sessions where we chose what we wanted to learn, our friendships progressed from somewhat superficial to substantial. We learned about our religion and, even more important, we learned about each other. Although he lives halfway across the country, I met my best friend at Kutz this past summer. We connected as musicians, teenagers, Jews and people. He touched me with his music and his words in ways I cannot even begin to explain, and despite the distance between us he will be in my heart forever. I strongly believe that every person left Kutz that summer having been touched by what we learned from each other.

Jewish camp gives kids an opportunity to separate themselves from the stress of high school and to put themselves in a place where they are encouraged to be open, to be creative and to have a good time. I am so fortunate to have parents who gently pointed the way towards an informal Jewish education at a Jewish summer camp. The Reform movement offers camps that can expand one's mind and one's soul in ways that are impossible to imagine. 🌸



***Kutz provided programming, prayer, study and social situations in which we were allowed to discover our own Judaism. We were removed from our homes, families and synagogues to form our own Jewish community.***

# Growing Jewishly At Surprise Lake Camp

by JORDAN DALE

Jewish rock concerts. Is there Jewish content? Absolutely. But it is not what drives these programs. What counts is whether the kids have fun, for if they do, then their Jewish identities have been strengthened.

## **Reaching Kids Where They Are**

The problem with many Jewish programs conceived by adults is that they are guided by adult sensibilities. They design brilliant programs, and if children had adult personalities, the programs would work beautifully. But kids function on a different level. In considering what will be fun for kids, we try to think like kids. Whether something makes sense isn't as important to kids as whether something tickles their senses. Things that adults find remarkable, kids find boring. They like things that are fun and silly, or that engage their imagination, or that are cool.

## **Developing A Circle of Jewish Friends**

Because of the twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week camp environment, a friendship formed over a week at sleep-away camp is often closer and more enduring than one formed over many months at school. The importance of this in Jewish identity formation should not be under-estimated. When kids form circles of camp friends, they often stay close for life. This means attending one another's bar/bat mitzvahs, weddings, and other *simchas*. It ties them into the Jewish life cycle, and the positive emotions they have for their friends become associated with Judaism. This may be the main reason why there is a positive correlation between Jewish camp and Jewish affiliation.

The bond is especially powerful



**T**HIS YEAR, Surprise Lake Camp, one of the oldest Jewish camps in North America, is celebrating its 100th Anniversary. Among the many legends from its storied history is the following:

A little girl asked the Nature Specialist, "What's the difference between a frog and a toad?" The Specialist grinned and responded: "If you kiss a frog, it turns into a prince. If you kiss a toad, you get warts." The little girl giggled in delight. A little while later, a counselor pulled the Specialist aside and asked, "How is she supposed to learn about nature if the Nature Specialist doesn't give accurate answers to her questions?" The response: "At her age, it's not important that she knows the answers. What's important is that she learns to love nature. Then when she grows up, she'll be interested, and she'll learn a lot more than I can teach her now."

This story has a lot to do with growing up Jewishly at Surprise Lake Camp. Like the Nature Specialist, we believe it's not the information that inspires kids, it's the emotional connection. Kids who become emotionally invested in their Jewish identities will stay Jewish whether they learn lots of facts or not.

Conversely, there are many kids who have learned a lot about Judaism, but lose interest because they are bored or disenchanted.

As a UJA-Federation/Jewish Community Center Association camp, we are decidedly in the Jewish identity business. We are non-denominational, and we think the best way to reach our campers, many of whom come with limited Jewish backgrounds, is to build emotional connections. We do this in several ways.

## **Being Jewish Is Fun**

The camp's Jewish Mission Statement, developed by its staff and Board, has a core principle: Jewish programming must be fun. The key is to turn kids on to being Jewish. This doesn't happen for kids because of what they *learn*, it happens because of how they *feel*. If Jewish activities are fun, positive associations will develop and kids will want more.

Some examples? There's Holy-Book Squares, in which counselors dress as biblical figures and teams compete in a hilarious question and answer format. There's Oneg Bowl, another quiz show which emphasizes spirit and creativity, so it's possible to win without knowing lots of answers. There are scavenger hunts, treasure hunts, art projects and

*Jordan Dale* is Executive Director of Surprise Lake Camp in Cold Spring, New York ([www.surpriselake.org](http://www.surpriselake.org)).



when kids become teens or young staff and start their romantic exploration at camp. If intermarriage is the problem, one solution is giving young people the chance to become romantically connected to other Jews. At Surprise Lake, several members of the administrative team, including yours truly, met their spouses at camp, and there is an album in the camp museum with photos of the many SLC marriages over the years.

### **Cool Jewish Role Models**

The single biggest key to a kid's enjoyment of camp is his/her counselor. A camp can have the best facilities and program, but if a kid has a lousy counselor it will be a bad experience. Conversely, even if virtually everything else about the camp is lacking, a kid with a fun, caring, creative counselor can have the time of his/her life.

The same is true of Jewish educators. Jewish educators who are perceived as cool often inspire kids even if the curriculum is weak, and Jewish educators who are stiff often fail even if the curriculum is strong. It is therefore important in hiring to look for charisma first and educational background second. It follows that philanthropists who want to help camps build Jewish identities might focus more on attracting and training gifted staff than on educational initiatives.

### **Bar and Bat Mitzvahs At Camp**

The typical modern Bar/Bat Mitzvah has become quite a production. At its core, however, a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a very simple thing. We offer campers and staff who have not had a Bar/Bat Mitzvah the opportunity to prepare for and have one while at camp. The pure ceremony that results is remarkably moving. When someone declares his/her lifetime commitment to Judaism before the entire camp, you can hear a pin drop. Rabbis and staff, not to mention camp directors, can frequently be seen with tears in their eyes. These events not only deepen the Jewish identities of the candidates and their families, but they also fill the entire camp population with joy and pride.

### **Total Jewish Immersion**

We do a lot more to build emotional connections to Judaism. We have Israeli staff, and kids form powerful bonds with them. We pay bonuses to counselors who par-

ticipate in a Jewish Program Committee that runs imaginative activities for campers. We have Mitzvah Day, yielding the deep satisfaction that comes from helping others. We have a renowned Teva program, which teaches kids that it is a Jewish value to love and protect nature. And of course, there's Shabbat, the most joyous day of the week!

I am one of the thousands of kids who grew up Jewishly at Surprise Lake Camp, having started as a camper at age

12. Hebrew school, synagogue and even my Bar Mitzvah had left me cold. Camp touched me, perhaps because it didn't try to teach me.

I am still no expert on the minor holidays, and I sometimes confuse little-known Biblical characters. And perhaps that girl never did learn the difference between a frog and a toad. But really, who cares, because she did grow up to love nature, and I did grow up to love being Jewish. Isn't that what really counts? ✨

## A BUNK OF MACHERS



**John Ruskey, CEO of UJA-Federation of New York, keeps this 1960s photograph of his Camp Ramah bunkmates framed on his desk. Of the fourteen campers in this picture, no fewer than five are now serving in senior professional positions in the Jewish community.**

- **Jonathan Woocher, President of Jewish Education Service of North America.**
- **John Ruskey, Executive Vice President and CEO, UJA.**
- **Rabbi Carl Wolkin of Chicago's Congregation Beth Shalom.**
- **Bruce Greenfield, Executive Director of the New York Metropolitan Region of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.**
- **Cantor Henry Rosenblum, Dean of the H. L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music at the Jewish Theological Seminary.**

**This bunk is not unique. Hundreds of Jewish professionals cite their camp experience as central to their decision to serve as leaders in the Jewish community.**



חברים כל ישראל  
Jewish Life Network  
6 East 39th Street  
10th floor  
New York, NY 10016

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**Paid**  
Rockville, MD  
Permit No. 800

*Why is it that camp, generally associated more with fun than with serious learning, is so powerful as an educational format? Operating on a 24/7 basis, camp offers not only substantial formal contact with learners (campers), but also a myriad of informal “teachable moments” when learners are uniquely accessible, and contexts make learning uniquely memorable. Possibilities for informal education are seemingly endless...*

—RAMIE ARIAN