

CONTACT

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**JEWISH CAMPING:
NEW DIRECTIONS**



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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life 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.

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JEWISH CAMPING: NEW DIRECTIONS

As Jewish camping has achieved almost universal recognition as a top-notch arena of informal education, the camping movement is increasingly focusing on ways it can maximize camping's potential and broaden its appeal.

One area currently being explored is how Jewish camps can utilize the best practice methodologies of non-sectarian, private camps. These methodologies will not only optimize offerings at Jewish camps, but also help them compete with the best private camps. Many parents, particularly those on the fringes of affiliated Jewish life, are more likely to consider the quality of basketball courts over the caliber of Hebrew prayer books when weighing various options for their children.

To capture greater market share from non-sectarian, for-profit camps, Jewish camps must operate by the same principles of excellence and accountability used by the private sector. These include customer service, financial and strategic planning, infrastructure improvement, and professional development throughout the ranks of camp. The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore proven practices as well as new directions in Jewish camping that can enable the movement to attract greater numbers of American Jews. We understand that camping works. This issue of CONTACT asks how we can make it work better.

Eli Valley
Eli Valley



JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS: **THE Next Stage**

BY MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

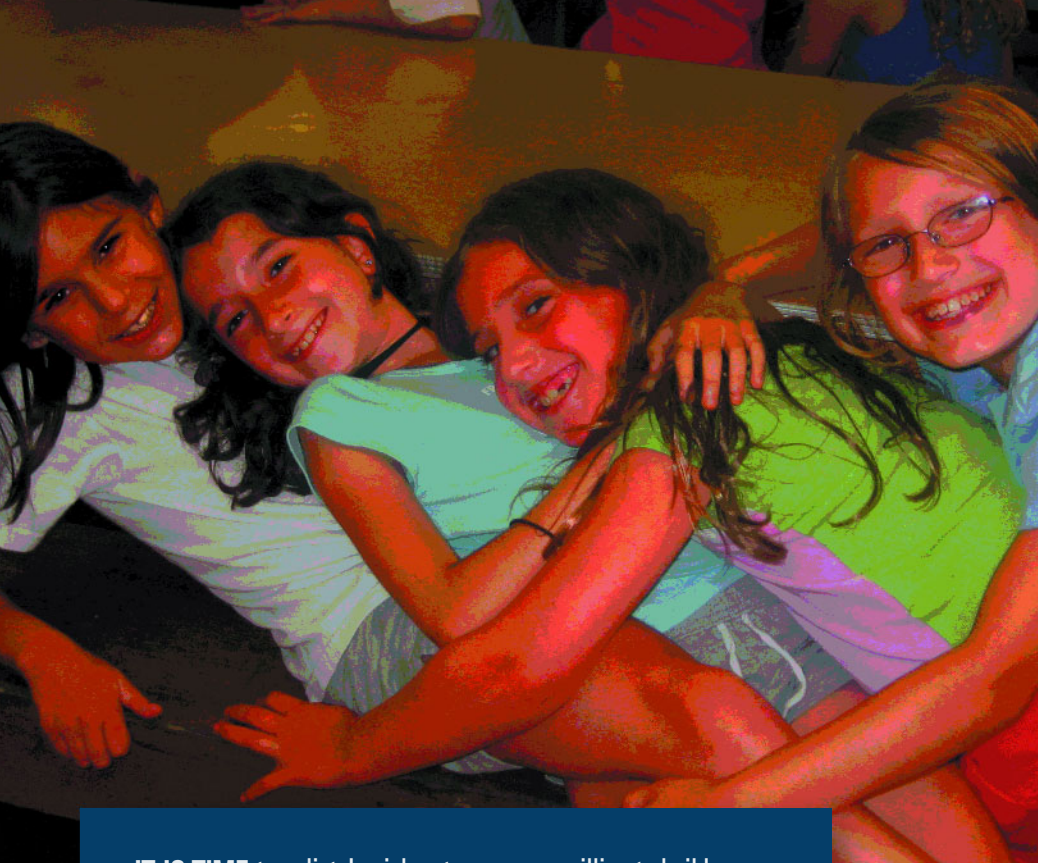
Those of us concerned about the Jewish community's present offerings — the outmoded educational outlets, ossified religious services, inert approaches to outreach — can take heart in one of the community's few areas of potential achievement: Summer camps.

Camps instill Jewish identity, and the reasons for this are instructive for all of our programs: Camping creates a total Jewish retreat environment away from daily distractions; it emphasizes Jewish joy, celebration and fun; it provides countless Jewish educational opportunities between staff and campers and among the campers themselves. Finally, after prolonged neglect, the word is out: camping works.

But before we pat ourselves on the back, let's look at the facts. Our accomplishments thus far are limited. There are currently 70,000 kids who attend Jewish summer camps. The Steinhardt Social Research Institute's publication of recent population statistics shows that there is now good reason to believe there are 90,000 children in each annual cohort between the ages of 9 and 16. This means that there are a total of 720,000 potential campers. If we are reaching just 70,000 of these, that's 9.7 percent — a paltry number. If we are serious about building a vibrant Jewish future, and if summer camps are one of our most valuable resources, we need to increase the number of campers tremendously. I am pleased to hear that the Foundation for Jewish Camping is working to double the enrollment in Jewish camps. But the goal should be

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PHOTO COURTESY OF URJ HENRY S. JACOBS CAMP, UTICA, MS



IT IS TIME to enlist Jewish entrepreneurs willing to build competitive Jewish private camps that feature such rich content that they compete with the best secular camps.

not only to double enrollment, but to do so within the next five years. And five years from now, if we've reached 13 percent, it will be time to double it again, because we will not be serious about Jewish camping until it attracts at least one-third of the available cohort.

There is another major problem in terms of camp attendance, and that concerns who the camps are attracting. Although there haven't been scientific studies, we can surmise from anecdotal evidence that the 70,000 children currently attending Jewish camps are coming mostly from affiliated and committed homes. In other words, these are the kids who are least at risk of being lost to our people. It is the usual cycle — without experiences such as camping, one's Jewish identity is more likely to become attenuated. As a result, one is less likely to prioritize experiences such as Jewish camps for one's own children. So the challenge is not only to double the numbers, but to figure out ways of reaching families that camps have not succeeded in reaching up to now. Admittedly, this is a much more difficult proposition. We must not only articulate the benefits of

summer camp, but also express the relevance and worthiness of living Jewishly in general. And yet, despite the challenge, it is a necessary goal.

Historically, Jews in the United States have taken great vicarious pleasure in their association with Israel and its role models, one of which is the rugged, outdoor pioneer. Although Zionist oriented camps such as those sponsored by Hashomer Hatzair and Young Judaea exist, we need to enhance them and create additional camps that are infused with the Israel experience in all aspects of camp life, from wilderness hikes to Israeli dance to Krav Maga.

I also believe the weakest area of accomplishment thus far has been the creation of Jewish summer camps for the socio-economic elite. The joke is that if you ask where the real Jewish camps are, the answer is any camp with a Native American name. These non-Jewish camps are overwhelmingly Jewish in attendance, but they offer zero Jewish content. The seeming paradox is that these camps charge much more than Jewish camps, and yet they attract more Jewish campers than Jewish camps. This is a damning

admission that Jewish content at present does not have sufficient value to parents.

We are missing an enormous opportunity here. I see two ways of meeting it. On the one hand, we should find ways of creating Jewish content at these camps by working with the camps themselves, even if they are not expressly Jewishly run. At the same time, we have to build new camps that will appeal to these potential campers — first, through secular Jewish camps that will appeal to the majority of non-religious American Jews, and second, through top-notch specialized camps that focus on specific activities in an increasingly niche-oriented industry. Camps devoted to specialized sports, arts and music have high social cache that is important to these families.

In addition, is it possible to create camps that welcome both Jewish and non-Jewish campers but that feature a strong Jewish component? Such a project has not yet been attempted, but I feel it is a worthy goal if we are serious about increasing the appeal of Jewish camping. The question has yet to be answered: Can a uniquely Jewish philosophy compete in the presence of non-Jews? This would require developing a camping philosophy that embraces the activities and interests of campers who are not attracted to parochially Jewish content. If we succeed, we will have created high-quality camps that are dynamic enough to compete in the open market. As a result, enrollment will rise. It is time to enlist Jewish entrepreneurs willing to build competitive Jewish private camps that feature such rich content that they compete with the best secular camps.

Understanding that camps are Jewish enrichment centers not only for campers but also for counselors, we need to push for new recruitment among college students, perhaps among birthright Israel alumni, and convince them that camp service is part of a greater Jewish mission. After all, to become role models to the next generation can only serve to enhance the identities of birthright alumni.

In a larger sense, we must continue to work to increase the quality of all of our existing camps. If camps are retreats of the highest physical beauty, and if they contain the best facilities and accouterments, they will be competitive with the best private sector camps, and they will begin to attract the majority of eligible Jewish campers. 🌸



PHOTO COURTESY OF BERKSHIRE HILLS – EMANUEL CAMPS, COPAKE, NY



JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS HAVE DEMONSTRATED IMPACT ON THEIR PARTICIPANTS, GENERATING AMONG CAMP ALUMNI A FIERCE PASSION AND LOYALTY OVER A LIFETIME TO THE MAGICAL PLACE THEY SPENT THEIR SUMMERS.

There's No Place Like **SUMMER CAMP**

by **MAGGIE BAR-TURA**

As Jewish communities and families continue to confront the challenges that come along with the blessings of participation in an open, accepting American society, there is growing recognition of the success of overnight Jewish summer camp in developing and nurturing Jewish identity and commitment. Jewish summer camps have demonstrated impact on their participants, generating among camp alumni a fierce passion and loyalty over a lifetime to the magical place they spent their summers.

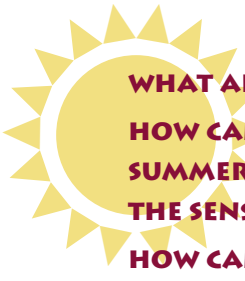
We Jews are a people of place. We became a people, partners in a covenant, during our journey toward a particular, promised place. We marry the concept of time to the concept of space to create sacred places like *tchoom Shabbat*, the spatial boundaries within which one may carry objects on the Sabbath day. The integration of time and space into

place creates the possibility of meaning and, paradoxically, of transcendence. Perhaps this is why one of the names of God is Place, *Makom*, and we describe our relationship with God as *beyn adam lamakom*, between man and Place.

But it is increasingly hard to find a sense of place, that intersection of time and space in which we feel grounded and where things seem to be as they should. In a world of cyberspace and global telecommunications, where we can have a conversation with a friend on the other side of the globe who has just awakened to the day that is ending for us, we feel increasingly displaced.

The transformative power of summer camp is its ability to provide us with a sense of place. Ironically, by taking us out of our regular rhythms of time and removing us from our mundane spaces, summer camp offers us a compelling experience of place. These frequently remote settings, where the clock is often reset to “camp time,” adjust the axis

Maggie Bar-Tura is Chief Operating Officer of the Foundation for Jewish Camping.



**WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO GREATER PARTICIPATION?
 HOW CAN WE HELP JEWISH FAMILIES CHOOSE JEWISH
 SUMMER CAMP FOR THEIR CHILDREN AND RECAPTURE
 THE SENSE OF PLACE THAT IS CENTRAL TO JUDAISM?
 HOW CAN WE ENHANCE THE ROLE OF JEWISH SUMMER
 CAMP IN BUILDING COMMUNITY?**

upon which our world turns, changing our daily experience of fragmentation and dispersion to one of integration and community. When summer camp “speaks” Judaism, giving campers and counselors alike a language of Jewishness by which to construct and express meaning, the result is a profound sense of identity, grounded in a context that transcends time and space, around the world and across generations. This apparent paradox between place and transcendence models the creative tension of Jewish experience: individuals grounded in local community built around communal institutions, shared culture and mutual responsibility and members of a covenantal people connected through a shared history and a common destiny.

Follow-up studies of graduates of Jewish summer camp movements, from Ramah to NYFTY and Habonim Dror, indicate a strong correlation between a Jewish summer camp experience and subsequent decisions to engage in leadership positions in the Jewish community, to choose Jewish communal service and/or the rabbinate as a profession, to join local Jewish communal institutions such as synagogues and Jewish community centers and to raise one’s children as Jews. Nonetheless, current surveys estimate that barely one Jewish child in ten attends an overnight Jewish summer camp.

What are the obstacles to greater participation? How can we help Jewish families choose Jewish summer camp for their children and recapture the sense of place that is central to Judaism? How can we enhance the role of Jewish summer camp in building community? The Foundation for Jewish Camping, established in 1998 by its visionary founders, Robert and Elisa Spungen Bildner, works to address the challenges and seize the opportunities to advance Jewish summer camp.

The Foundation thinks globally and acts locally. It is working with local Jewish communities and philanthropists around the country to provide a financial

incentive to encourage Jewish families to choose non-profit Jewish summer camp for their children. The Campership Incentive Program was made possible by a groundbreaking gift of \$15 million that will be matched by participating communities and other philanthropists to create an unprecedented pool of \$30 million of new resources to engage additional children in Jewish summer camp. Campership Incentive Programs are already up and running in six communities for Summer 2007, and additional communities are organizing to join the program for Summer 2008. Furthermore, the Foundation for Jewish Camping has launched a joint venture with the Jewish Funders Network to establish a multi-million dollar matching grants initiative that will seed additional Campership Incentive Programs for Summer 2008.

Financial incentives have been proven to encourage consumers to try new products, but the quality of the experience is what will draw campers back for a second summer. FJC therefore works with non-profit camps across the Jewish spectrum to help them to succeed in an increasingly competitive market. The Foundation works to strengthen the field of Jewish camping with new perspectives on professional development for staff, management and leadership and with the delivery of new tools to improve customer relations and camper retention. Work is currently underway to develop fresh approaches to specialty offerings in sports, the performing arts, hands-on science, environmental studies and other program options that can keep children and youth engaged in camp for more summers.

Furthermore, to meet the anticipated increase in demand by new and returning campers, the Foundation for Jewish Camping is working with a variety of partners to establish new summer camps in regions of Jewish demographic growth. At the same time, the Foundation is at the forefront of developing new models of Jewish summer camp in non-traditional settings. By utiliz-

ing existing facilities such as college campuses and residential schools, such initiatives will provide creative solutions that enhance program offerings while preserving the core values and impact of the Jewish summer camp experience.

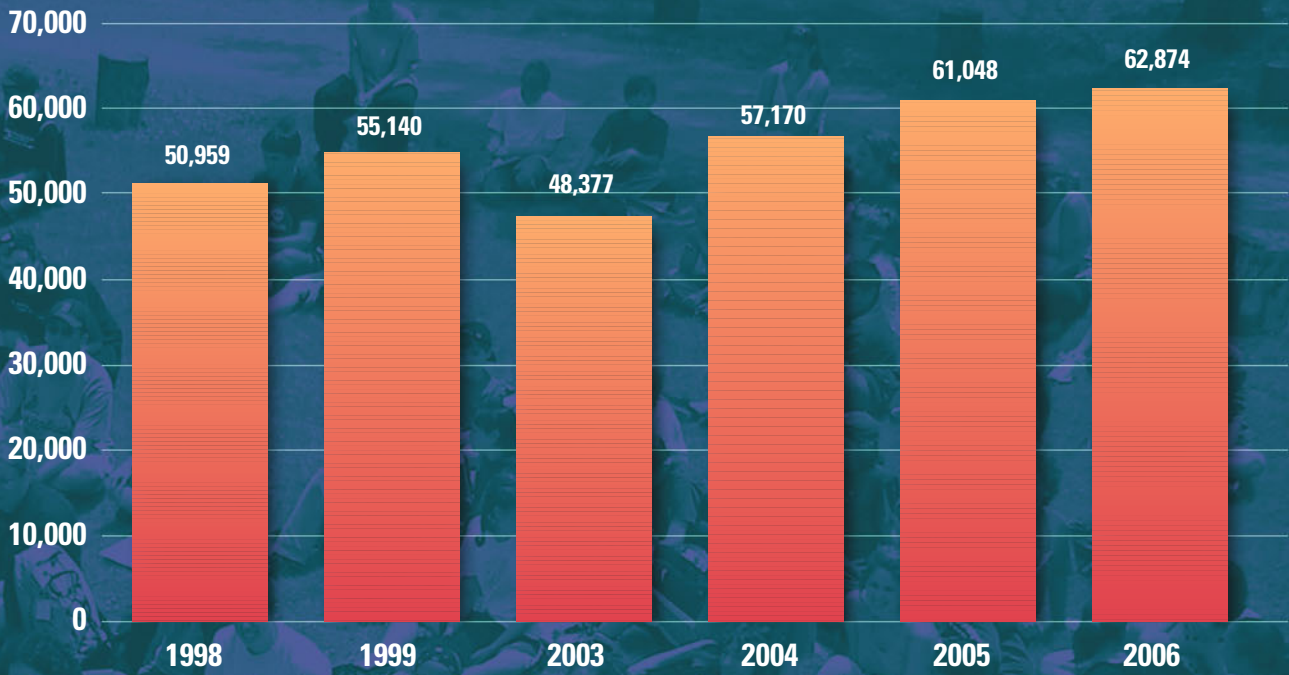
Using private sector concepts, the Foundation for Jewish Camping helps non-profit Jewish summer camps compete successfully with the wide variety of summer entertainment choices available today. Non-profit Jewish summer camps are increasingly successful at deepening their penetration of “home” markets, and the FJC annual camp survey shows steady growth over the last three years. Opening new and untapped markets is the next great opportunity for Jewish summer camp.

Conservative estimates put at more than one million the combined number of Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and Israel living in the United States. Depending on which Jewish population census one adopts, this immigrant population comprises between one-fifth and one-quarter of the American Jewish community. With some significant exceptions, most of this population is unaffiliated with American Jewish communal life. Many of these parents, young, highly educated and professionally successful, feel personally ill-equipped to give their American-born children a Jewish education at home. The educational approach of many Jewish summer camps — experiential, non-coercive, with an emphasis on Israel and the cultural and ethical aspects of Judaism — can be attractive and appropriate to their needs.

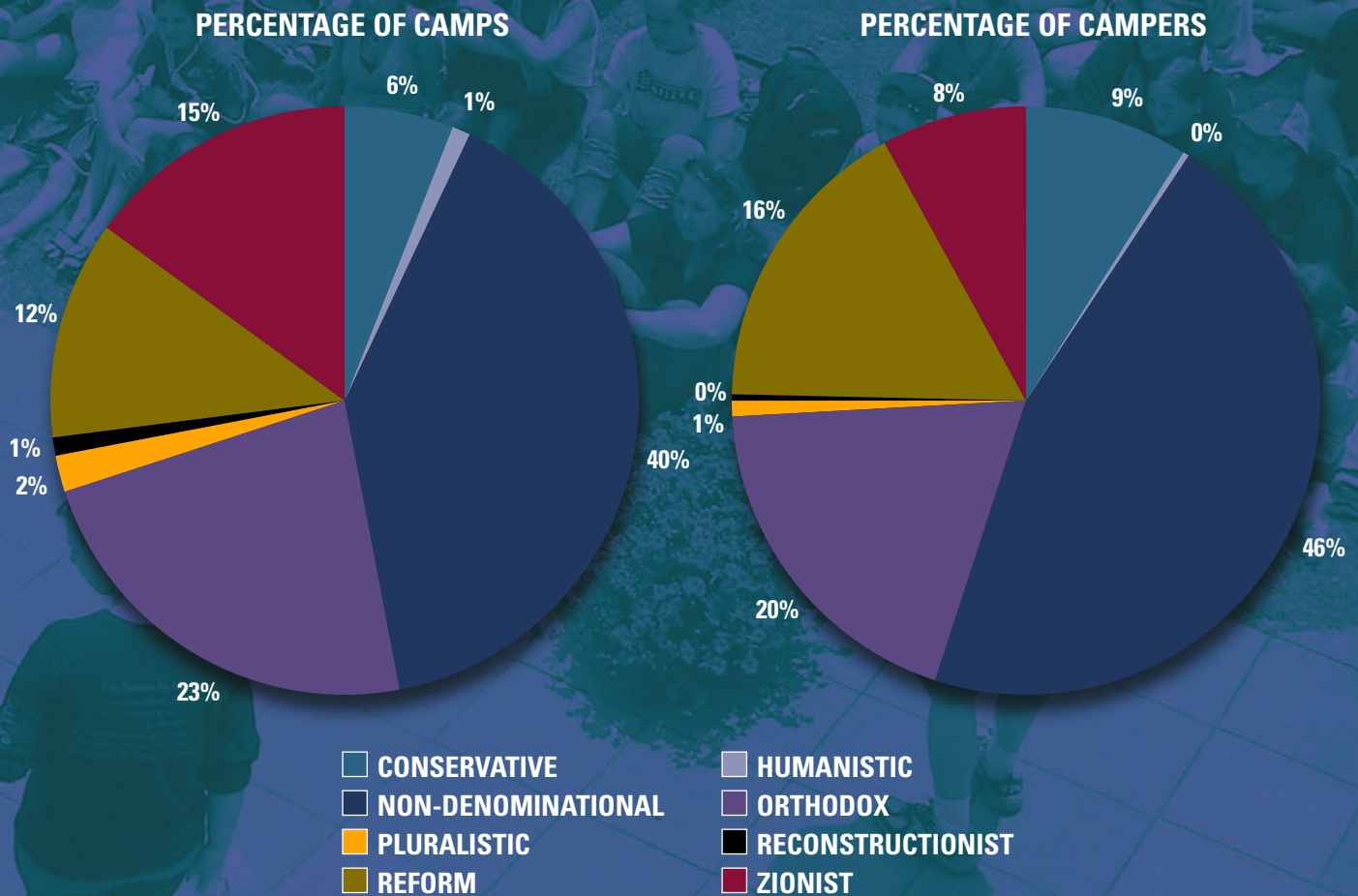
Recognizing the potential of this untapped, largely unengaged market, the Foundation for Jewish Camping has begun to build partnerships with local community organizations, foundations and Jewish camps to reach out to these culturally rich and diverse immigrant Jewish communities.

Success in this endeavor will yield important lessons for all American Jews. These vibrant immigrant communities embody the Jewish tension of place: even as they struggle to ground themselves and create cultural communities in their new land, they remain part of a larger people with bonds to a distant homeland. By inviting them to take their places at the Jewish table, we may learn from them about identity and identification and we will all be enriched. 🌸

Total Campers Served



Percentage of Camps and Campers by Denomination



Marketing JEWISH Camping to the JEWISHLY Engaged

by STEVEN M. COHEN

The educational impact of Jewish summer camps is widely recognized. By and large, these camps make significant contributions to enduring Jewish friendships and to the Jewish identities of campers and staff. While educational challenges remain, a more critical challenge lies elsewhere: If Jewish camps are going to expand their impact, they need to enroll expanded numbers of Jewish youngsters. The policy question is how.

How can these camps draw greater numbers of campers? What draws campers to Jewish camps, and what can draw even more to these camps? What obstructs attracting the majority of Jewish youngsters who have never attended Jewish camps? And why do many campers decline to return to Jewish camps, after they have attended for one or two summers?

To address these tough questions, in the spring of 2006, I was privileged to conduct a study of Jewish parents in the Southern California area. The study, sponsored by the Foundation for Jewish Camping and underwritten in part by the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles, was the first to systematically explore who attends — or doesn't attend — Jewish camps and why.

At the heart of the study was a survey sample of 411 Jewish parents with children six to seventeen, drawn from lists of previously screened respondents maintained by EasyMail, Inc., a data list management firm. Research Success Technologies of Jerusalem fielded the web-based study. As far as we could tell, this sample comprised a reasonably representative sample of Jewish parents in the Southern California region. In particular, from a scientific viewpoint, we were gratified to learn that many of

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PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMP RAMAH DAROM, CLAYTON, GA



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOWARD BLAS



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAPITAL CAMPS, WAYNESBORO, PA

them report hardly any connections with conventional Jewish life, allowing us to learn why some attend camps and many more do not.

In this sample, about 15 percent of the children attended Jewish summer camp the previous summer, 2005. In fact, consistent with several Jewish population surveys, about twice as many (30 percent) had attended a Jewish summer camp at some point in their lives.

With that said, the rates of attendance of Jewish children at non-sectarian (“non-Jewish”) camps are much higher — about twice as high as at Jewish camps. Almost twice as many had been to non-sectarian camps the previous summer, and almost twice as many had ever been to a non-sectarian camp as had been to a Jewish camp. Accordingly, Jewish summer camps own just one-third of the camping market. The challenge for Jewish camps lies not in getting parents and youngsters to consider camping. Rather, it is to get camping families to consider Jewish camping.

Cost is the major barrier to getting potential Jewish camp families to even consider Jewish camps. Cost is a bigger barrier for Jewish than for non-sectarian camps, and it looms larger as a barrier to the less affluent and to the less Jewishly engaged. Apparently, efforts to reduce costs, especially for first-time campers, hold great potential to expanding participation in Jewish camps, particularly among families who might not otherwise consider such camps.

One of the more surprising findings to many was that most youngsters who attended Jewish camp last summer also attended a non-Jewish camp the same summer. Most of these, in turn, were “specialty” camps, rather than all-around overnight camps. Typically, a camper might spend two weeks at a Jewish camp, and then head out for two more weeks at a non-sectarian camp. And they went elsewhere for a good reason. Parents of campers who attended both Jewish and non-Jewish camps were among those most dissatisfied with key recreational and other aspects of the Jewish camp experience.

Jewish camp-related families differ markedly from non-Jewish-camp families. Simply put, Jewish camp families are much, much more Jewishly engaged. And therein lies one of the most important lessons in our finding.

As compared with non-Jewish-camp families, the Jewish camp-related families are far more in-married, more ritually observant, more congregationally affiliated, and more committed to giving their children a Jewish education. To illustrate, in-married families sent their children to Jewish camps the prior summer almost four times as often as intermarried families. The ratio is the same for synagogue-affiliated versus non-affiliated families. Youngsters engaged in more intensive forms of Jewish schooling (day schools and, in particular, three-day-a-week supplementary schools) attend Jewish camps far more than those in less intensive settings,

or those receiving no Jewish schooling whatsoever.

Not only do the Jewishly engaged and the unengaged differ widely in their readiness to attend Jewish camps. The appeal of such camps differs widely as well. For the Jewishly engaged, Jewish camps exert appeal as instruments of Jewish education. For the less engaged, the Jewish educational value of Jewish camping hardly matters. Rather, they are looking for camps that promise “fun” or that would help “your child grow and mature.” This finding suggests that camps need to send a balanced message embracing both Jewish educational impact (which people generally assume) and more universal value (about which people, especially the less engaged, are more skeptical).

In addition, the less Jewishly engaged express a fear of ghettoization. When presented with objections to Jewish camping, these parents found especially persuasive the argument, “My child should be exposed to all kinds of kids, not just Jewish kids.”

The very factors which make Jewish camping so attractive to communal leaders — their educational value and their ability to create life-long friendships among Jewish youngsters — are those that serve to turn off many unengaged Jewish families. Simply put, non-Jewish-camp families are not particularly motivated by Jewish educational concerns. Rather, they will need to be sold on the basis of camps as places where their children can have fun and mature as independent youngsters.

The widespread utilization of non-Jewish camps, even by those also attending Jewish camps, point to the need for Jewish camps to broaden their appeal. Perhaps they can devise ways for their campers to spend time with non-Jews. They may well need to improve their facilities to meet the competition offered by for-profit non-sectarian camps. In addition, they need to develop alternative camps or specialized tracks that focus on specific activities, such as certain sports or the arts. They will need to better attend to their current campers, to improve retention rates and meet the burgeoning competition posed by their non-sectarian counterparts. And not least, they — with the help of the philanthropically minded — will need to find ways to reduce costs, targeting non-Jewish-camp families with limited income and limited engagement in Jewish life. 🌸

THEY WILL NEED TO BE SOLD ON THE BASIS OF CAMPS AS PLACES WHERE THEIR CHILDREN CAN HAVE FUN AND MATURE AS INDEPENDENT YOUNGSTERS.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMP KINDER RING, HOPEWELL JUNCTION, NY



The Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy

by SUSAN KLINE

“I love the feeling of well-being around a campfire at a Jewish camp, knowing that along with swimming and hiking, these campers are learning about Jewish values, rituals and traditions.” This sentiment of philanthropist Harold Grinspoon inspired the creation of the Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy, which seeks to improve Jewish overnight camps by helping them to develop high-performing boards, plan strategically and increase the number of donors. The burgeoning three-year-old program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation currently works with 49 camps throughout North America, adding about 20 camps each year.

Harold Grinspoon and the Foundation have long been concerned about how the Jewish world will nurture the resources to sustain itself. He became particularly concerned about Jewish camps after visiting several in his region of

Western Massachusetts. From those visits, he drew several conclusions: First, nonprofit Jewish summer camps are one of the most precious resources to foster Jewish identity and ultimately ensure Jewish continuity. Second, the facilities — bunks and communal buildings as well as fields and other open spaces — are generally inadequate. Third, camps are grossly underfunded. The camps are providing affordable, informal Jewish education, but they are doing so under the radar of the broad Jewish philanthropic community. Grinspoon decided to create the Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy with a primary goal of giving camp professional and lay leaders the fundraising skills and tools to change the picture.

Innovative in its approach, the Grinspoon Institute set out to provide camps with one-to-one assistance from expert consultants in the fields of organizational development (board development, governance, planning) and fundraising. Within a short period, the Grinspoon Institute hired a roster of talented consultants from

around the country who were attracted by the opportunity to impact Jewish life, and simultaneously brought in its first cohort of Jewish camps eager to take on the challenge of self-improvement. Today there is a staff of eight in the home office, four of whom have consulting roles. There are also seven independent consultants who work for the Institute. These consultants serve as mentors and work hand-in-hand with the camps' lay and professional leaders to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals.

The astonishing growth of the program, particularly in the area of fundraising, has exceeded even Harold Grinspoon's expectations. In December 2005, the Grinspoon Institute launched Meet Your Match, its first matching challenge grant aimed at motivating camps to do serious fundraising. Within six months, 26 camps had raised over \$8 million in new gifts ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000+, mostly from first-time donors at those levels. Added to a 1:2 match from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, there was an infusion of over \$11 million new dollars into

Susan Kline is the Director of The Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy.

the camping world, specifically to fund capital improvements.

Camps participating in Meet Your Match used the new funds to improve their playing fields, renovate dining halls, build and upgrade cabins — and thus increased their ability to attract and recruit campers. Kathy Jonas, Executive Director of JCC Maccabi Camp Kingswood in Maine, said, “We have a strong sense of the kind of camp we are striving to become and the financial support we need to make the capital improvements to meet our goals. The Grinspoon Institute has challenged us to be our best.”

Determined to help those same camps sustain fundraising energy, the Grinspoon Institute launched Create Your Match, a fundraising challenge that raised the bar by requiring camps first to find commitments from donors for over \$25,000 before identifying other donors. With about \$4 million pledged to date, the total raised before the program ends in September will likely exceed \$8 million. This means that the camps will have collectively raised \$20 million in twenty months. For the cohort of camps that became affiliated after January 2006, the Institute has created another challenge grant program called Meet Your Match II, which will extend into 2008.

There’s no doubt that, in addition to the challenge grants, the key to fundraising success lies in the intensive one-to-one assistance from dedicated consultants. In their roles as mentors and coaches, they motivate camp leaders to accomplish their goals. Camp Bauercrest Executive Director Rob Brockman says of his mentor, “We’ll be eternally grateful to Alex Sagan for his loyalty and persistence in getting Bauercrest to create a strategic plan and work to implement it.” Other goals identified by camps include cultivating and developing board members, organizing and revitalizing committees, focusing marketing strategies, strengthening alumni relations, and implementing a customized donor management software package from Donor Perfect Online.

In addition, lay and professional leaders have come together for five Grinspoon Institute-sponsored conferences, which provide valuable occasions to network and learn. The most recent gathering last December in Springfield, Massachusetts, drew nearly 200 participants from all over North America. Initial planning for a 2007-08 conference is

underway with a number of topics under consideration. Whatever the theme, the camp leaders who attend will have a wide range of experience and expertise. To make sure the conference is relevant and exciting for all participants, sessions will be tailored to provide a lot of practical advice and specifically meet their needs.

The Grinspoon Institute is serving as a catalyst to put Jewish overnight camping at the center of the Jewish stage. Philanthropic interest in camping, which is beginning to grow and take many forms, no doubt has contributed to the overall 31 percent increase in the number of campers since 2003 — from 48,000 to 63,000, according to recent information gathered from 130 camps associated with the Foundation for Jewish Camping.

At the Jewish Funders Network conference in Atlanta in March, Harold

Grinspoon was thrilled when Mark Charendoff, the JFN’s Executive Director, and Jerry Silverman, Executive Director of the Foundation for Jewish Camping, announced a broad matching grants initiative to dramatically increase the number of children attending Jewish camps. Since 1995, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation has offered financial incentives for children in Western Massachusetts who attend Jewish camps. Camp enrollment among families in that area has quadrupled in the years since.

The dream of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation? To fill every bed in every session and continue to increase the number of campers growing Jewishly in a warm and fun-filled environment. Fulfillment of that dream will be an important contribution toward the vibrant future of Jewish life and culture in North America. 🌸

RAMAH IN THE ROCKIES

by RABBI MITCHELL COHEN

Camp Ramah in the Rockies and the National Ramah Commission are in the midst of an extraordinary process of creating a new Ramah camp. “Ramah in the Rockies” is likely to open in the summer of 2010. While these efforts have been ongoing for many years, a major breakthrough took place last year, when Ramah lay leaders in Denver joined with the lay leadership of the Jewish Community Center camp in Denver and decided to work together to build two camps on one incredible site in Deckers, Colorado, about 90 minutes southwest of Denver.

The local community in Denver raised the funds necessary to purchase the land and begin site planning. Ramah is now working to build excitement for Ramah in the Rockies not only in Colorado, but throughout the region of Texas, the Southwest, Mexico and the Rocky Mountain region of Canada.

The leadership team of Ramah in the Rockies, together with the leaders at the JCC, have formed an organization called the “Flying J Ranch,” which is working with both Ramah and the JCC to raise the funds, plan the site, and ultimately oversee both camps’ operations on the single site. The Foundation for Jewish Camping has been an important partner.

All plans point to the building of something extraordinary on this site, utilizing the natural beauty and geological richness of the Rockies, together with outstanding programs and facilities for horseback riding, mountain climbing and biking, rafting, and a full array of sports, swimming, arts, dance and music. Of course, as with all Ramah camps, great emphasis will be placed on creating a joyful Conservative religious environment filled with the best methods of informal Jewish education.

In developing this camp, Ramah will reach out to its Conservative Movement partners throughout the region. With support from the Jewish Theological Seminary, local synagogues, United Synagogue Youth groups, and Women’s League and Men’s Club chapters, this new Ramah camp will galvanize greater support for Conservative Movement growth.

For many years, Ramah camps in California, Wisconsin, Georgia and in other settings in the US and Canada have accommodated children and staff from the Rockies, yet the number has been limited for many reasons. It is anticipated that by building a southwestern-style camp in the Rockies, Conservative Jews in this region will see Ramah in the Rockies as their local Ramah camp and that many more families will become affiliated.

As with all Ramah camps, Camp Ramah in the Rockies looks forward to inspiring new generations to love Jewish life and learning, to be more connected with Israel and to contribute to a dynamic and vibrant North American Jewish experience. 🌸

Rabbi Mitchell Cohen is Director of the National Ramah Commission, Inc. He can be reached at Mcohen@jtsa.edu.



JEWISH CAMPING IN GOD'S IMAGE: Opening the (Camp) Gates for All Campers

by HOWARD BLAS

As they enter the gates of Camp Ramah in New England (CRNE), visitors are greeted by a sign proclaiming “welcome” in Hebrew and a guard asking for identification. The security guard may direct the visitor to the front office, the guest house or to a group tour of the picturesque Palmer, Massachusetts facility. What a casual visitor may not know is that the guard, the office worker, the guest house worker and the tour guide all have one thing in common — they are all graduates of Camp Ramah’s Tikvah Program for campers with special needs.

For 38 years, the Tikvah Program at CRNE has been offering overnight camping, job training and employment opportunities to campers with a variety of developmental disabilities, including mental retardation, autism, and neurological impairments. Tikvah, meaning “hope,” was founded in 1970 by special educators Herb and Barbara Greenberg, who believed that the program was “a moral responsibility toward those with special needs.”

The Tikvah program, an eight-week overnight camping program for 13 to 18 year olds with special needs, takes place

within the confines of Camp Ramah, overseen by the National Ramah Commission of the Conservative Movement. Tikvah has its own director and specially trained staff, but makes full use of camp facilities and resources, and it functions as a part of the larger camp community.

Campers in the CRNE Tikvah Program have a variety of developmental disabilities. Many have mild to moderate mental retardation. Several campers have mobility impairments due to conditions such as cerebral palsy or spina bifida. Language processing and articulation difficulties are common. Some campers function at a high cognitive level and have no overtly visible disabilities, but have autism spectrum disorders which require specific attention. Some have genetic disorders such as Down Syndrome, and there are also campers with rare syndromes such as Smith-Magenis and Prader-Willi Syndromes — conditions requiring unique expertise and individualized support systems.

Prospective Tikvah campers are carefully screened through an extensive application process. In addition to a detailed description of the child’s behavior and specific conditions, parents are asked to submit neuropsychological evaluations, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and evaluations from spe-

cialists. An in-person interview with the Tikvah director is mandatory.

Throughout the day, Tikvah campers participate in the same activities as typical Ramah campers. Campers begin each day with morning prayers, which are participatory and musical. Following services, campers attend breakfast with the rest of the camp, followed by bunk clean-up. Tikvah counselors accompany the campers to activities such as Hebrew singing, Israeli dancing, sports, swimming, boating and woodworking. Tikvah campers also participate in overnight camping trips and other outings.

To help campers keep track of their activities, the daily schedule, in words and pictures, is prominently displayed in the bunk. Tikvah bunks are fully handicapped-accessible and have a large amount of floor space. They contain single beds only — not bunk beds as found in typical bunks. The bunks also have high-quality lighting, air conditioning and specially designed bathrooms. The camper to counselor ratio is about 2.5 to 1, with seven or eight campers and two or three counselors living in each bunk.

Tikvah campers benefit from a highly structured, predictable program. Where possible, changes are anticipated and announced in advance. Tikvah campers often have receptive and expressive lan-

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guage issues and require patient, simplified directions. Many Tikvah campers have medical issues such as seizure disorders. In addition, many do not communicate illness or discomfort in the same way typical campers do. Tikvah counselors must therefore carefully observe campers for behavioral changes or other possible indicators of illness. Most Tikvah campers take medication daily — some as often as five times a day. This requires ongoing vigilance and close collaboration with the camp medical staff.

Since its inception, the Tikvah Program CRNE has expanded to include a vocational training program for select 18 to 22 year olds. Members of this program work at job sites throughout camp, including the guest house, mail room, infirmary and canteen. Vocational trainees live semi-independently in a house which simulates a group home environment. With the help of advisors, they participate in cooking, cleaning and other household chores. Graduates of the vocational training program are often hired as full staff members in subsequent summers.

Three years ago, CRNE initiated an inclusion program where campers with special needs are more fully integrated into the camp life. Inclusion campers may have developmental disabilities similar to Tikvah campers, or they may have a range of other, often milder impairments, including social skills deficits and language issues. This summer, two bunks were redesigned to accommodate campers with mobility impairments. Selected inclusion campers live in typical bunks

and spend their days participating in activities with typical campers. Trained staff provide additional support to the inclusion campers and their bunk mates.

The success of the Tikvah program is largely dependent on the opportunity for interaction with the larger camp community. Tikvah campers participate in camp-wide activities such as plays, dance festivals and Kabbalat Shabbat prayer services. Typical and Tikvah campers are often seen walking together, playing board games on a Shabbat afternoon, or watching the staff softball game side-by-side. This past summer, a twelve year old camper initiated a bat mitzvah service project where she assisted Tikvah campers with letter writing. There are also numerous formal opportunities for interaction: fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds may volunteer for “buddy” and “helper” programs, where they work one-on-one with Tikvah campers, while sixteen-year-old campers serve as counselors-in-training.

A select group of veteran Tikvah campers and alumni participate in a specially designed, multi-sensory Israel experience each December, accompanied by the Tikvah director and several Tikvah counselors.

Several Ramah camps other than CRNE, including those in Wisconsin, California and Canada, offer services for campers with special needs. Camp Ramah in the Berkshires established the Breira Program, a full-inclusion program

for younger campers with social skills deficits. Ramah Darom in Georgia sponsors an annual week-long family camp for families with autistic children.

There is clearly a need for additional special needs programs in Jewish camps. In order to succeed, camps must first define the range of campers they intend to support. For example, while campers with mobility impairments may require physical modifications to buildings, deaf campers may necessitate the hiring of specialists to

THERE IS CLEARLY A NEED for additional special needs programs in Jewish camps.

assist in communication. Once a target population is identified, it is important for directors, key personnel and the board of directors to fully engage in the program and promote it within the camp community. Good communication with staff, families and campers is necessary to overcome potential discomfort with the special needs population. Resources must be devoted to the formal training of staff. Experts in the fields of special education and the helping professions should educate staff in cognitive and behavioral issues, physical impairment and socialization. In addition, ongoing support and mentoring of staff must take place throughout the summer.

Campers with special needs deserve an opportunity to experience Jewish communal life in a camp setting. The Tikvah program is a living reminder to the camp community that we are all created *B'tzelem Elokim*, in God's Image. 🌸



Hadag Nachash and Cucumber Salads:

Creating an Israeli Bubble

by RAMIE ARIAN

Jared was awakened from a sound sleep by the rhythmic beat of Hadag Nachash, Israel's leading hip-hop band, playing on the camp ram-kol (loudspeaker). He rolled over and closed his eyes, but his hope of falling back to sleep was shattered when he felt Ori, his Israeli madrich (counselor) gently shaking his shoulder. "Boker tov (good morning) Jared," said Ori. "Time to get up. We don't want to be late to mifkad (morning all-camp gathering at the flagpole). Together with his bunkmates, and under the watchful eyes of Ori and his American co-madrich, Jared dressed hastily, and shuffled out of the tzrif (cabin) towards the flagpole.

The rosh machaneh (head counselor), Ellen, presided over mifkad. As soon as the bunk groups had arranged themselves around the flagpole, she called on each to identify itself: "Tzrif alef — kulanu po (Bunk One, we're all here)." Ellen then introduced Ido and Efrat, the two tsofim (Israeli scouts), who led the camp in a spirited Hebrew cheer. Efrat, with Ido's support, then taught the chanichim (campers) how to pronounce melafefon (cucumber) which, she announced, was the "Hebrew word of the day." Ellen invited tzrif gimmel (Bunk Three), who had won yesterday's nikayon (bunk clean-up) competition, to take the honor of raising the flags. The madrichim from tzrif gimmel helped their chanichim raise the American and then the Israeli flag, as the entire camp sang "The Star Spangled Banner," followed by "Hatikvah."

Following mifkad, each edah (unit) went to its own area, where the chanichim from one of the tzrifim led a brief but spirited tefillah (prayer service). In Jared's edah, today's tefillah emphasized the centrality of Jerusalem in Jewish tradition.

Following tefillah, the entire machaneh (camp) gathered in the chadar ochel (dining hall) for aruchat boker (breakfast). First, the rosh machaneh led the singing of Hamotzi (the blessing before the meal). Then breakfast was served, today featuring an Israeli salad, rich in melafefonim. The meal concluded with Birkat Hamazon (the blessing after the meal).

Jared, Ori, Ellen, Efrat and Ido are fictional characters, but the activities described above represent an absolutely typical morning at any of the six camps of Young Judaea (www.youngjudaea.org), the Zionist youth movement of Hadassah.

The mission of Young Judaea is to build Jewish identity and Zionist commitment in young American Jews. Zionist summer camps, like all

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overnight camps, are powerful educational tools, allowing their sponsors to control the entire atmosphere that their campers experience, 24/7. Creating an educational “bubble,” removed from the otherwise powerful influences of television, internet, commerce, peer group and even parents, Zionist camps have the ability to create an all-encompassing atmosphere which expresses their ideals, and — for the brief period that campers participate — makes them utterly normative in daily life. Children who have experienced the values expressed in this bubble are drawn to them with powerfully lasting impact.

The fictional camp morning described above is illustrative. The camper Jared — who might be an eleven-year-old pre-adolescent who attends public school and whose family is Jewishly affiliated but not active — is expected to have mastered a basic vocabulary of some two dozen Hebrew words and phrases, simply in order to function competently in his daily environment. And in the actual camp setting, he successfully does so by the second or third day. More important, he does so without resistance, nearly without effort; indeed, almost without noticing that he is doing anything at all. This is accomplished simply because this is what everyone is doing — this is what is expected and normative, and there is no one (not friends, not parents, not commercials on TV) to tell him otherwise.

Not only will Jared effortlessly master a rudimentary Hebrew vocabulary, but equally effortlessly, he will accept and embody half a dozen important Jewish principles. These include the habit of daily prayer, the importance of marking gratitude for what we have (signaled by blessings before and after breakfast), the centrality of Jerusalem (the theme of the morning prayer service), the significance of the Hebrew language and the importance of Israel.

The part of Jared’s morning which is most illustrative of Zionist camps (as distinct from other Jewish overnight camps) is the extent to which a natural, powerful, joyous engagement with Israel is woven seamlessly and (seemingly) effortlessly through the camp program and atmosphere. The following are among the key elements:

- **ISRAELI STAFF.** In Young Judaea camps, it is typical for Israelis to constitute upwards of 25 percent of the program staff. Therefore, it is fairly normative that one of Jared’s counselors is Israeli. Young Judaea places such a high priority on selecting Israelis who are engaging, wholesome and attractive role models that we send our camp directors to Israel twice each year: once to participate personally in their

screening and selection and a second time to take part in their training. In addition, Young Judaea has a strong, deep partnership with the *Tsofim* (Israeli scouts) that goes back more than 50 years. Like the regular Israeli counselors, they are carefully selected for their ability to serve as attractive, positive role models.

- **ISRAELI CULTURE.** Playing *Hadag Nachash* as the wake-up loudspeaker music is not a casual choice. In Young Judaea, we connect campers with what is current in Israeli culture. We seek to engage campers not with an idealized picture of Israel filtered through the lens of our ancestors’ dreams, but rather with a picture of the real Israel, as it is actually experienced by Israelis. Serving a cucumber-laden Israeli salad for breakfast is another example of a cultural expression that becomes a natural part of camp life (though in typical American life, this would be a very unusual menu choice).
- **ISRAELI THEMES.** The choice to focus the morning prayer service on “Jerusalem” is not casual, but is driven by the camp’s Zionist ideology.
- **ISRAELI SYMBOLS.** In Zionist camps, it is natural to raise the Israeli flag alongside the American flag, and to sing “Hatikvah” alongside “The Star Spangled Banner.”
- **ISRAELI LANGUAGE.** Using Hebrew is an important Zionist value, and the choice to refer to a great many camp people, places and activities by their Hebrew names is an expression of this value.

Jared’s morning is typical for a Young Judaea camp. Like that of its sponsoring movement, Hadassah, Young Judaea’s Zionism is religiously pluralistic, and without political affiliation. It is natural that the core values of each of the Zionist move-

ments which sponsor summer camps are expressed in the daily program of those camps. Thus, Bnei Akiva (www.bneiakiva.org), which sponsors three summer camps across North America, features a vigorous modern Orthodox program that expresses its national religious ideology. Canadian Young Judaea (www.youngjudaea.ca), which sponsors six summer camps across Canada, is pluralist and apolitical, like its namesake south of the border. Habonim Dror (www.habonimdror.org), the labor Zionist movement, which sponsors seven camps across North America, and Hashomer Hatzair (www.hashomerhatzair.org), the progressive Zionist movement, which sponsors two, focus their program offerings on a progressive, secular Zionism that reflects their distinct movements.

In the sample morning described above, in the space of about 90 minutes, our camper Jared learns, understands and utilizes a rudimentary Hebrew vocabulary; he accepts and embodies a number of key Jewish religious values; and he is repeatedly exposed to Israeli culture, Israeli language and engaging, attractive Israeli role models. He feels both the joy and the comfort of engaging in Jewish activity in community with other Jews. All of this takes place in the context of typical daily life in a way that Jared experiences as effortless and totally normal. And all of this happens before he has even finished his breakfast! Imagine the power that this has when it is repeated and reinforced 24/7, every day for a month.


Jewish overnight camp is one of the most powerful means at the disposal of the Jewish community to build strong, lasting Jewish identity. Zionist overnight camp is among the most potent ways to connect young people with Israel, and it is a highly effective means to build in them the desire to visit Israel and to experience it firsthand for themselves. ✿





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The challenge is not only to double the numbers, but to figure out ways of reaching families that camps have not succeeded in reaching up to now. Admittedly, this is a much more difficult proposition. We must not only articulate the benefits of summer camp, but also express the relevance and worthiness of living Jewishly in general. And yet, despite the challenge, it is a necessary goal.

— MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT