

# CONTACT

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**THE POWER AND POTENTIAL  
OF JEWISH RETREATS**



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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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## THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF JEWISH RETREATS

Recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of programs designed to intensify Diaspora Jewish life. Although each has met with varying degrees of success, it has become clear that one of the most significant determinants of a program's effectiveness is the retreat component.

From camping to birthright Israel, retreats form the basis of some of the most salient programs of education and identity enrichment. Few methods compare with the intensity and authenticity provided by total immersion experiences.

The power of retreats is all the more compelling given the extreme distractions of modern society. A retreat — literally a withdrawal — allows the body, mind and soul to replenish its energies away from the often exhausting routine of daily life. A retreat with spiritual and cultural resonance can potentially bring even greater impact, as it connects the participants to more profound dimensions of living and to a reinforced sense of peoplehood.

What are the elements of retreat experiences that make them successful in fostering connections to Jewish life? How can these elements be enhanced so that retreats are more effective and reach even greater numbers of participants? The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the successes and challenges of the variety of Jewish retreats currently available in the Jewish community.

There is added value in organizing retreats that bring together Jews at all levels of the affiliation spectrum. For the less engaged, such retreats have the potential to demystify many aspects of the more affiliated world, including its “insider” culture. Likewise, by interacting with the less affiliated, the affiliated Jewish world might begin to understand what's missing from traditional offerings that could engage larger segments of the community. Together, both the affiliated and unaffiliated would better appreciate the continuing diversification of American Jewish life.

Eli Valley



## ON CREATING Jewish HONEYMOON Retreats

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

**A**fter suffering the community's doubts and criticisms when first envisioned, birthright israel has become an almost universally recognized success in modern Jewish life. But this is no time to pat ourselves on our communal back. After all, birthright israel is only a drop in the bucket. It reaches only half the people who apply — and the total number of applicants constitutes only one-third of the cohort. I will not be satisfied with birthright israel until it is a rite of passage for everyone who applies and, ideally, most of the cohort of young Jews. Perhaps more important, we need to create a follow-up program that is as engaging and as wide-reaching as birthright, in order to overcome the sterility of the communities to which most birthright alumni return.

That being said, I feel it is time to suggest another program that, like birthright israel, may reach those currently outside the community's orbit. I am looking for a program that takes advantage of birthright israel's most salient characteristics:

- It will attract the non-affiliated as well as the affiliated.
- It will transmit a powerful and meaningful experience that reinforces Jewish identity and identification with the Jewish people.
- It can be scaled to large numbers of participants.

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I continue to believe that a source of birthright israel's revolutionary appeal is its gift, which transformed the enterprise into a genuinely noble event. Instead of the standard Jewish practice of asking for money, or giving something wholesale rather than retail, the gift is an expression of a family's love and a testament to the potential unity of the Jewish people.

If we are seeking an equivalent experience that builds on birthright's successes, one option is a four-day retreat for young couples. Why couples? It is no secret that I am deeply concerned about Jewish demography. Thus, I relish the union of two individuals who produce progeny on the level of the Orthodox. But more important, newlyweds are entering a period in which they are more reflective about life and are more open to spiritual and communal connections to a larger people. It is a period in which values are sought and refined. It is an excellent opportunity to present a new gift, that of a meaningful retreat.

Our culture developed the honeymoon as a retreat so that couples could experience one another away from jobs and workaday demands. Why have we not yet created a uniquely Jewish Honeymoon, one in which the grandest aspects of a retreat — seclusion, rest, inspiration — are fused with Jewish concepts and ideals, not to mention a sense of Jewish peoplehood and destiny? Of course, such a retreat would not replace the standard honeymoon. Instead, it would be provided as an additional honeymoon — a uniquely Jewish experience offered as a gift

to each new couple. If these retreats present the highest emotional and intellectual levels of Judaism, they have the potential to open up a lifetime of Jewish identification.

Like birthright israel experiences, Jewish Honeymoon Retreats would not be uniform for all participants. Some retreats would be geared towards those familiar with Jewish life; others would be geared towards the unaffiliated and/or the intermarried. Some would focus on values such as nature and environmentalism; others might focus on Jewish holidays. The destinations would be various, but they would all be Jewish destinations.

A Jewish retreat experience for a young couple would transmit a vital communication of Common Jewish values. It would also serve as a short training course — without the distractions of everyday life — on how to incorporate and practice Judaism in the context of a household. This would be especially meaningful for young couples who never had tangible experiences of Judaism in their own families growing up. Finally, like birthright israel, the retreat would carry the nobility of a loving gift that reaches people unconditionally simply because of their ties to the Jewish people and their connections to our community.

If we are successful, such retreats will create the seeds of lifelong commitment to Judaism and a transmission of Jewish passion to future generations. However, I hesitate to estimate the cost of such an enterprise, because it is, by present Jewish community standards, staggering. But who says dreams can't be big? 🌸



# The Retreat As Spa, Education Center, & Camp for Grown-ups

by AMY L. SALES

Three metaphors — the spa, the education center and camp for grown-ups — elucidate the purpose and power of retreats and the challenges they face in realizing these.

## THE RETREAT AS SPA

Retreats are like spas that refresh and renew. In our fast-paced, media-saturated lives of unending to-do lists and deadlines, we need a break to replenish ourselves. Most people, of course, do take breaks — an hour at the gym, an evening out, a weekend away, a family vacation. But for the most part, these are not total breaks, as the connection to back home remains via the ever-present cell phone, blackberry and laptop.

The need for the total break was understood by our ancestors from earliest times. It was so important that it was deemed to be commanded by God and built into creation itself. The problem is that for most American Jews, the environment does not support complete rest on Shabbat. Thus is born the need for the contemporary retreat.

The purpose of retreats is literally to remove oneself from the everyday and to live, for a brief time, in a clear and free environment. The power of retreats lies precisely in this disconnection from home. In an isolated location, there is a sense of being in a world apart. There is little awareness of the outside world, and, therefore, the focus of attention is necessarily on the inner world — the immediate self, group and community. Such a setting forces participants to live in the here-and-now. Without the cues of everyday life, time plays like an accordion. The days of the retreat stretch out endlessly but then seem to pass in a moment.

Effective retreats thus create what is called a “total environment.” They work hard to avoid seepage of the outside world into the retreat center. When participants feel free to drive their cars into town or to use the computer in the lounge to check email, the bubble is punctured and the power of the retreat is diminished.

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## THE RETREAT AS EDUCATION CENTER

Retreats can be educational settings that attempt to change behaviors and attitudes. Kurt Lewin, the father of modern social psychology, posited that our social and physical environments serve as scaffolding that keeps us acting and thinking in essentially the same way, day after day. In order for us to change, this scaffolding needs to be removed. Without the environmental presses holding them in place, old behaviors and attitudes can be set aside while we try on new ones. The more isolated the retreat and the stronger its culture, Lewin wrote, the more it will minimize participants’ resistance to change (Kurt Lewin, “Frontiers in group dynamics,” *Human Relations*, 1, 1947).

Effective retreats thus create what Lewin referred to as a “cultural island,” a total environment with an intentional and strong culture. They know how to establish unique language, norms, values, customs and symbols for the retreat experience. They are thoughtful about community and group building. They are savvy about interpersonal relations and group dynamics and use individual and group work to provide new experiences, feedback and support for change. They foster an environment that encourages personal risk-taking, exploration, and discovery.

## THE RETREAT AS CAMP FOR GROWN-UPS

Consideration of retreats as spas and as education centers is based on studies we have done at Brandeis University on how summer camps work to socialize youth into Jewish life and community (Amy Sales and Len Saxe, “*How goodly are thy tents*”: *Summer camps as Jewish socializing experiences*). Although instructive parallels exist between youth camps and adult retreats, challenges to retreats arise where the two diverge.

The first challenge is the difficulty of getting adults to attend a retreat. Youth camping is normative. Many American Jewish children go to a summer camp of one type or another (whether day camp or residential, whether Jewish or non-Jewish). When a child says, “I went to camp this summer,” no one is surprised. Retreats are not normative for adults but rather seem to be the activity of a fringe minority. When an adult



says, “I went to a retreat this weekend,” arched eyebrows may be part of the response.

Children have the summer off and there is a need to fill the time. Adults face the opposite problem of never having enough time. It has long been recognized by meditation centers that those who most need it are the ones who are least likely to find the time for it.

Moreover, camps are able to think longitudoinally; retreats generally cannot. It is not unusual for a child to attend camp for five or even ten years. As a result, camp is part of that child’s experience through childhood, into the teenage years, and sometimes into young adulthood, annually influencing each stage of development. High return rates not only extend the potential of camp to influence a child’s Jewishness but also simplify the task of recruitment. If done well, the upper bunks are filled with returning campers, and the camp’s effort can be focused on bringing in the youngest groups who, it is hoped, will grow up at camp.

Most adult retreats do not work this way. They are often one-shot affairs or annual events that lapse after a few years. In cases where they have managed to continue over a number of years, their participants do not move along through stages or age out as campers do. Rather, these retreats have had difficulty attracting new people as the founding generation comes to be seen as an impenetrable clique of “groupies.”

The final challenge concerns impact. The research literature is clear that retreats have a powerful immediate effect on participants, but there is little evidence that the effect is lasting. Because personal change is dependent on the environmental scaffolding and because retreats are short-lived and do not have the year-after-year opportunity of summer camp, new behaviors are not maintained after participants leave the cultural island and return back home.

The solution to this challenge may be found in a medical metaphor: Change requires a powerful inoculation, followed by periodic booster shots. If retreats are to have an enduring effect on how people live their lives back home, they must be conceived of not as single events but as ongoing programs. Such a model is our best chance for gaining the benefit of the retreat as spa, education center and, yes, as summer camp for grown-ups. 🌸

Open your eyes and you will see a Jewish “Big Bang” — the genesis of new, historic Jewish institutions. Why this new creation? Jewish institutions reflect Jewish history and they change as Jewish history changes. Every core institution reflects three key factors: the historical condition of the Jewish people, their primary religious/theological worldview and their type of leadership. While these factors are ever-changing, only a few times in Jewish history have they changed

# NEW INSTITUTIONS FOR A NEW ERA OF JEWISH HISTORY

by YITZ GREENBERG

so drastically that old institutions were no longer adequate and new institutions were born. We are living in such a time.

In the Biblical period, Jewish peoplehood was organized around a religious vision and mission commanded by God. God led the Israelites from Egyptian slavery to freedom in the Promised Land and intervened in their history constantly. The way to reach the Deity was through sacrifices (hence priests supplied religious leadership) and/or through prophets (who brought instructions and channeled a direct word from God). When individual tribes in Israel could no longer adequately defend against invaders, a central monarchy emerged to replace the tribal chieftains. As the Israelites settled down, a permanent Holy Temple became the centralized point for sacrifice and for communication/advice-seeking from God (as experienced in the High Priest’s *Urim V’Tumim* Oracles). The cosmic Lord was so manifest in the Temple that there could hardly be any other efficacious place to serve or address God. In the Sixth Century BCE, the Babylonian Exile temporarily led to the creation of local synagogues for study and community observance. But within a century the Israelites returned and rebuilt a central Temple; the synagogue remained a minor institution.

The Destruction of the Second Temple and exile led to a fundamental change in the Jewish condition and brought with it new religious understanding. With the loss of sovereignty, Kingship disappeared. Without a Temple, the priests’ role shriveled. The rabbinic understanding was that God had self-limited and “allowed” the destruction in order to call humans to greater responsibility in the covenant. God would no longer intervene visibly, and humans would need to uncover God’s word. Prophecy disappeared as direct mes-

sages from God lost their credibility. The more hidden God — no longer “visible” or concentrated in Jerusalem — could be approached all over the world, although through prayer, not sacrifices. Thus synagogues spread. The people had to be educated; only in this way could they internalize Jewish values and live them even as a minority in a foreign land. Shabbat and Talmud Torah became central to Jewish life. Over a period of centuries, the Rabbis became the new leadership; synagogues

(which were prayer, study and assembly centers) and academies emerged as the core institutions. The liturgy and many new rituals told the story of exile and destruction alongside the narratives of Creation, Exodus and future redemption. In the medieval period, lay communal leadership allied with the Rabbis. These institutions proved adequate to carry the Jewish people through two millennia.

Modernity initiated drastic changes in the Jewish condition. As modern secular culture spread among Jews, lay leadership and secular institutions (such as community centers and federations) emerged. The Holocaust and the creation of Israel supplied the decisive transformational thrust to Jewish life. God again self-limited (not intervening to stop the attempted total genocide), calling humans to a higher level of responsibility in the covenant. This development was expressed in the secular leadership — generals, pioneers, politicians — who led in the creation of the Jewish state.

In this secular age of divine hiddenness, for many secularized Jews, the Rabbis come across as speaking on a frequency to which they are no longer tuned. The synagogue space is too “visibly sacred” for them. Similarly, Jews totally integrated in contemporary cultures often experience existing Jewish leadership and institutions as too parochial, and as telling stories too distant from their own experiences. New institutions, secular and universal, yet with a much higher level of Jewish content and experience, are needed to win loyalty in the free marketplace of ideas and identities. One such institution has already come into existence: the Holocaust Memorial Center. Given the tremendous emotional impact and the challenging intellectual/spiritual/ethical force of the Shoah, established institutions alone could not communicate the event adequately. The Holocaust Memorial Center (such as Yad Vashem) emerged as a total environ-

ment in which the story could be told intellectually and experientially as one. The concept is so powerful that it works even in the form of a universal, secular, American institution — the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum — which becomes a “Jewish” institution. The Holocaust Memorial Center is barely six decades old, but it has spread to just about every major Jewish community.

The Retreat Center is the next new central institution struggling to be born. Retreat Center programs transform people’s lives. The power of the retreat is the outgrowth of the same characteristics which make day schools, camps and Israel travel and study so impactful. The Retreat Center provides a total Jewish environment. This distinctive world makes the Jewish message central and natural, rather than marginal and abnormal, as it is in the majority society setting. The program brings together charismatic Jewish role models and inspiring peers with whom one bonds and forms a living community. Research in various fields has shown that when people are in community and in a total environment, they absorb messages much more intensely and deeply. When good, life-enriching Jewish substance is communicated through intellectual and experiential learning, the effect is electrifying. People are open to changing their life directions and priorities.

The Center does not have the inherited aura of sacredness that the synagogue does. Therefore, secular and/or distanced Jews can more easily come there and be more open to hearing messages of instruction. The well-done retreat experience has the power to create community for such people as well; the experience often raises the priority of one’s Jewish identity dramatically. Retreats can be tailored to address specific audiences (ranging from highly knowledgeable and observant to the least educated and involved), offering them unique experiences. Since the Center is a trans-denominational (or post-denominational) setting and not any one group’s turf, all types of Jews can meet there on an equal basis, which opens them up to bonding and mutual influence. Paradoxically, since the Center is not associated with inherited religious messages, it can communicate the presence of the hidden God and transmit a more universal Jewish vision with less resistance from secularized Jews.

Historically, the Jewish people successfully created the institutions it needed to transmit its values and continue its historical mission. While there are probably less than twenty dedicated Jewish retreat centers in the world, I would wager that within the century, there will be one in every major Jewish community. This generation has a once-in-a-millennia opportunity to create the new infrastructure of Jewish life, starting with the National Jewish Retreat Center. ✿

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# Judaism in Immersion: The Key to Peoplehood

by LAURIE HAHN TAPPER and JOHANNA KARASIK

The emotion connected to paving a new path transforms into a compulsion to volunteer and give of one's self, personally and financially, to the Jewish community at large.

Techno music booms through the air as a group of young adults dance around, wild and free. It seems like any typical Friday night for the average college student, but there is nothing typical about this gathering. The music is Israeli techno, and a couple of weeks ago most of them had never heard the song “*Rak b’Yisrael*.” Now, still dressed in their Shabbat clothes, they belt out the lyrics and dance together on a cement outdoor plaza under a star-filled sky. Yards away, there is a candle-lit room overflowing with Shabbat songs and Hassidic stories. While the two scenes may seem contradictory, people wander back and forth between the Shabbat celebrations so naturally that it seems like this is how they spend every Friday night. However, this is clearly

no ordinary late-night Shabbat. This is BCI: Brandeis Collegiate Institute, an impactful experience that is found nowhere else in the Jewish world.

Sixty-six years ago, Shlomo Bardin and Justice Louis D. Brandeis had a vision to “create a laboratory for living Judaism” that would “stop the flight of young American Jews from their people, their heritage, their culture and themselves” and that would make “the great ethical heritage of Judaism meaningful and relevant to them.” Inspired by the educational methods and philosophical underpinnings of the Israeli Kibbutz movement, the immersive and cultural Danish Folk High School of the Nineteenth Century, and the American summer camp, Bardin founded what was then called the Brandeis Camp Institute (BCI). The original BCI program utilized the power of experiential communal learning and living, encouraged wrestling with the dialectical tension of the

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particulars of Judaism and the universalism of America and advocated for the cultivation of self-worth and communal responsibility through the physical labor of the kibbutz. The goal was nothing short of the teleological Jewish messianic dream for the perfection of the world.

Today, BCIs are immersed in an educational environment found nowhere else in the Jewish community. Throughout their 12- or 26-day session, they experience an integrated variety of transformational activities. In *Avodah* (service, work), they learn hands-on about the essential Jewish values of belonging and giving to the community as well as building for the future. For example, BCIs construct wooden benches for an outdoor prayer space or sculpt cement and rocks for small discussion areas that utilize the serene nature of the campus. They harvest fresh corn and zucchini to be consumed at their dinner tables and make fresh-picked, fresh-squeezed orange juice for breakfast. On Friday afternoons, they rearrange the dining center, pick flowers and create special spaces to honor the importance of community preparation for Shabbat. These activities instill in the young adults their obligation to invest in the Jewish future. The emotion connected to paving a new path transforms into a compulsion to volunteer and give of one's self, personally and financially, to the Jewish community at large. Through the physical act of creating a space for someone else to pray, they learn that their actions make a difference for the Jewish people and that they belong to a collective past, present and future.

In daily *Beit Midrash* sessions, BCIs explore issues of identity, relationships, connection and community with prominent rabbis and scholars from various denominations and affiliations. In a given week, participants may grapple with such ideas as God, who is a Jew, Israel, suffering, social justice and responsibility. Through early morning spiri-

tual options like yoga, nature walks, traditional *Shachrit*, meditation, exploration of ritual objects, wake-up writing and conversations, BCIs are given the opportunity to explore Jewish spirituality uncommon in their everyday lives. In environments that encourage open yet respectful expression and interaction, they ask questions of the teachers, each other and themselves that real life does not often allow. Through all this, they are instilled with the value of cultivating their inner-selves, of becoming lifelong learners and of the necessity of adding their own voices to the chain of tradition. The unique interactive, trans-denominational learning environment exhorts them to implicitly absorb the need to connect and belong to the diversity of *clal Yisrael*.

Through the fine arts, BCIs delve deep into themselves to find reflection and expression. Prominent artists from across the globe facilitate art workshops and skillfully enable the participants to take risks and access their creativity. The residential nature of BCI allows the arts workshops to be a forum in which to integrate all that the BCIs experience. Through art, Jewish learning is approached from a different angle. This process not only produces stunning creations, but it also encourages new understandings of self and Judaism that are otherwise inaccessible.

While the days are fully packed and structured, the immersive retreat experience allows for casual conversations and relaxation. This lends itself to one-on-one and small group discussions that flow easily from silly and light, to processing the day's events, to serious and existential questions. Through sports, hiking, friendly chatter over meals, swimming or relaxing, BCI free time — while still in an enclosed, Jewishly-immersed community — allows for natural, real-world conversations that further develop the bonds of friendship and clarify a sense of self. It is often these

moments, such as taking a late night walk and discussing God as coyotes howl in the distance, that BCIs remember most.

In order to influence identity formation, a program must be immersive; it must take people away from their usual routines. That simple transition in itself can be a change for anyone, creating an essential yet safe vulnerability that allows one to be more open to the experience. Through other immersion elements, such as providing basic needs like food and shelter and constant accessibility to genuine personal interaction, participants begin to trust each other and the program. This provides the essential ingredients of personal identity growth: (further) vulnerability, validation and challenging of personal sense of self.

The BCI model is transferable: We have successfully adapted and modified the very best of the BCI model to a variety of the Brandeis-Bardin Institute (BBI) programs. Highly successful examples include Camp Alonim, a residential summer camp for children, and retreat programs for specific target populations such as newly married couples, families and young adults. All BBI weekends include activities and sessions that encompass our core values in order to allow people the time and space to connect and re-explore their Jewish selves, their families and their community. Thus, participants leave each experience with re-affirmed identities and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people — or peoplehood.

It is precisely through the strengthening of individual identities that BCIs — as well as all participants at BBI programs — come to better understand their purpose in the collective. As Justice Brandeis said, "To be good Americans we must be better Jews." Today, perhaps we could say that to be good Jewish people, we must be better Jewish individuals, and to be good global citizens, we must be a better Jewish people. 🌸







# Retreats & Jewish Spiritual Growth

by **RACHEL B. COWAN**

Jewish Retreats give overwhelmed, multi-tasking, distracted Jews the space, time and supportive community to step back from the clutch of their knotted lives and take in new ideas and practices with a more open mind and heart. Retreats give them time to sense what it means to lead a deeper, more meaningful Jewish life, and time to understand our individual lives and stories as part of a community, of history, of a wisdom tradition and of Creation.

When my late husband Paul z"l and I first began our exploration of Judaism, retreats were enormously formative experiences. Joining the New York Havurah community on retreat, we learned what it is to live on Jewish time for a full Shabbat, a *chag*, or — with the National Havurah Institute — a week at a time to blend davening, study, singing, eating and walking in nature. On our Havurah School retreats, our children felt they were in a paradise that included rituals, learning and games in a rich, multi-generational community. They saw their parents relaxed and spontaneous. Being Jewish was eating, having fun, singing, dramatizing Bible stories and experiencing mystery. More than anything, those retreats helped me understand that Judaism was about living, not just about going to services or classes.

Paul and I gave hundreds of talks around the country after the publication of his book, *An Orphan in History*. We would always say that one of the most important things the Jewish community could do to make Jewish life inviting to those at its edges — as well as to those who live its daily rhythms — was to create retreat centers. We described the irony of taking our family on retreat, where the first thing we did was take down the crosses in the bedroom. We said we felt like refugees, going from one Christian center to another, never feeling that we were coming home, never returning to a familiar and beloved Jewish place.

Later, *Elat Chayyim* became such a place in my life. I went on so many meditation training retreats, as well as congregational retreats, that it became familiar. For me as for thousands of others, it was a beloved spiritual home. I always felt sad that nobody was willing to invest in making it physically more attractive, functional and safe. I welcome its move to Isabella Friedman, and look forward to that becoming a home for my spiritual growth as well. I still cannot understand why every community does not choose to invest in one or two retreat centers.

At this stage in my career, it is a wonderful blessing to be able to work professionally in the creation of Jewish spiritual retreat experiences. I am now the Executive Director of The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which puts the retreat experience at its core. We run extended programs for rabbis, cantors, educators and lay folks to support them in deepening their inner life, and lead from a place of deeper connection with God and with the Jewish

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PHOTOGRAPH BY SHIR-YAKOV FEINSTEIN-FEIT

wisdom tradition. We have seen that the program has a major impact on most participants and enables them to infuse their Jewish practices with spiritual insight and energy, leading to greater compassion, truthfulness, hopefulness, generosity and joy.

We have two physical homes — the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in southern California and the Trinity Conference Center in Connecticut. Retreats provide the space and the contemplative context from which insight and learning can emerge. Spiritual growth is a slow process. It does not come from a two-hour class at the end of the day. It requires time, space, guiding teachers and an atmosphere of trust in which participants feel safe to explore new ideas. It needs to happen repeatedly — as part of ongoing life and not as a one-time event.

For IJS, retreat is a practice that leads to cultivation of the inner life and a deepened sense of meaning in Jewish life. Contemplative retreats are inspiring and renewing to many kinds of Jewish groups because they provide the time, the pace and the context to explore personal and social issues that we constantly overlook in the rush of our lives.

The context itself — the setting, the structure, the staffing — is critical to the experience because:

- Retreats include traveling with a group (through time and space) with a shared spiritual intention.
- Retreat participants let go of work obligations, normal life routines, habits, time, relationships, money, certain comforts, control of one's schedule, usual stimulation and ways of relating — as well as speech, during certain periods of silence.
- The Institute creates a structure that allows the mystery to unfold for each person, in a unique way, within the context of a sacred community.
- The teachers on retreat play the role of guides to new territory. Teachers can be

guides because they are also practitioners engaged in a sacred journey. They teach from a place of knowing the territory from inside.

The retreat structure facilitates deep Jewish experiences:

- It offers the possibility of a total Shabbat — prayer, reflection, listening, walking in nature, singing *niggunim*. Outside the constrictions of work, shopping and housework, people have the chance to let what matters most deeply to them emerge, as does their “*Neshamah yetirah*,” their Shabbat soul.
- It offers the chance to explore and integrate the spiritual themes of the *haggim*: before the High Holidays, reflection that allows *teshuvah* to help us turn towards our deepest values and desires; before Pesach, an understanding of what is the Egypt of our life, what is the narrow place that constricts our energy, our hopes, our sense of authenticity; over Shavuot, reflection that asks what is our relationship with God like, and how might we work on it; over Sukkot, a real chance to experience the abundance of nature's harvest, and to sleep in a frail structure that helps us experience our fragility and express our gratitude for the true blessings we have.
- It enables us to do the work of healing — from illness, grief, disappointment, pain — in an atmosphere of tender listening, a community of support and comfort, a connection with the Transcendent that links our story to those of countless others.
- It offers us a chance to sit in silence for days, with instruction from a teacher whose Jewish knowledge gives shape, text and language to the understandings of impermanence and of suffering, a teacher who understands how to work with fear, anger and judgment.
- It provides an opportunity for deep Jewish

learning that is not only text-based and intellectual, but that also recognizes the power of the heart and the ability of the body to express our spirituality if we let it.

There is a relationship between letting go and one's intention. One lets go in order to see more clearly, come closer to God, find new meaning in Jewish life, renew one's spiritual life, find allies and soul-friends, gain new perspectives, have a revelation, enter into spiritual community, establish or revive spiritual practice, or learn how to do things differently.

Retreat is not a stand-alone practice. It needs to be connected to one's ongoing personal and professional life, to one's daily and weekly practices, to one's community and to a greater social context. Judaism demands engagement. Contemplative practice helps us to engage wisely and responsively to the situations in our lives, in our community and in the world.

In these days, when Jews are frightened, confused and exhausted from work — worrying about Israel, climate change, job security, the identity of the next generation — we need places where we can build community, faith and courage. We need to support creative thinking and visionary leaders. Retreat centers can offer tremendous opportunities for this kind of spiritual growth. They need to be accessible and simple, yet aesthetically appealing. They need to be staffed by thoughtful, creative people who can graciously welcome a diversity of programs and groups and support their work with good, healthful food and attention to service and detail. They need to have space where some people can be in silence for periods of time. They need to be located in attractive natural environments. Brandeis Bardin and Isabella Freedman are two examples. Retreat centers are expensive to build and maintain, but they will yield fruit that is priceless. 🌸

At camps across North America each year, tens of thousands of Jewish children, teens and young adults have fun with each other while being exposed to Jewish religion, culture, literacy and practices that they may not receive elsewhere. But the camping experience is so powerful that it need not be limited to particular age groups. Individual adults as well as entire families can benefit from intensive, fully immersive Jewish experiences. Recognizing this, camps are increasingly combining the models of traditional overnight summer camps for children and retreats for adults to deliver a similar experience for the whole family.

The Foundation for Jewish Camping was begun in 1998 to advocate for Jewish overnight summer camping, working to provide camps with leadership, expertise and financial resources. With the help of the Foundation's many initiatives, camps are able to maintain the classic recreational aspects of non-profit summer camping but leverage the financial might and best practices of the private sector. They can better raise awareness, increase enrollment, and maximize experiential educational opportunities for children (and adults) that profoundly shape Jewish identity.

Differences in geography set every camp apart, and each has its own culture, history and traditions. A camp's programs also underscore its religious focus, whether serving Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist or unaffiliated populations or taking a transdenominational or secular approach. What makes camps similar is their mission to enable children and, in some cases, adults to both "play and pray" in a Jewish setting.

Many camps generate revenue by renting out their facilities to individual groups such as congregations, day schools, youth organizations and even non-Jewish groups. The camps provide the facilities and services to accommodate these groups during their stay. Camps also create their own retreats as a way to expand their individual respective missions.

Camp Yavneh, associated with Hebrew College in Boston, is one such camp. Located in West Nottingham, New Hampshire, Yavneh offers a camp environment devoted to the idea of *clal Yisrael* — that all Jews, regardless of affiliation, are one.

Last year, Yavneh introduced family camp as an opportunity to promote the camp's ideals and offer a pluralistic Jewish environment in which all Jews can be comfortable in a single setting. Camp Yavneh's leadership reports that the experience solidifies the bond of family members to each other as well as to Judaism. It's also an inexpensive way to have a family vacation. In fact, demand for family camp at Yavneh has been so great that there is

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**Jerry Silverman** is President of the Foundation for Jewish Camping ([www.jewishcamping.org](http://www.jewishcamping.org)).

# NOT JUST FOR KIDS

## Adopting Aspects of Summer Camp for Adults

by JERRY SILVERMAN

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**What makes camps similar is their mission to enable children and, in some cases, adults to both "play and pray" in a Jewish setting.**

already a waiting list. Summer camps that haven't already added family camps to their programming should consider the possibilities of family camp.

Camp Tawonga, a Jewish Community Center camp located in San Francisco, California, takes a more liberal approach, catering to a wide range of age groups and populations. Camp Tawonga sees itself as an entrance point into the Jewish community, regardless of one's level of involvement. Already successfully reaching traditional nuclear families, Tawonga is expanding its reach by holding specialized retreats for typically underserved segments of the Jewish population, including single parents and families that identify as multi-racial, interfaith and lesbian and gay.

Like Camp Tawonga, Camp Ramah Darom, based in Georgia and principally serving the southeastern U.S., is affiliated with the Ramah movement, the camping arm of the Conservative movement. The camp is mission-driven, but makes its facilities available to a range of denominations and organizations for conferences, board retreats, Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and other gatherings.

Camp Ramah Darom sees the retreat program as an extension of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, or hospitality. Rabbi Loren Sykes, Executive Director of Ramah Darom, told me that retreats can create countless opportunities for additional connections and programs to involve children and adults in all aspects of Jewish life. Camp Ramah Darom also holds relaxed, Ramah-style Passover and fall retreats in which families can engage in communal, do-it-yourself experiences that provide fun and a sense of community. Rabbi Sykes explains his goal as providing Jewish experiential programming for a wide range of ages and stages across the year. Ultimately, he would like to see Ramah Darom as a destination for top-notch Jewish learning for the southeast.

Capital Camps and Retreat Center, located in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania and closely tied to both the Baltimore and Northern Virginia Jewish communities, operates summer camp for children and retreat opportunities for adults. David Phillips, Executive Vice President of Capital Camps, explained that having "two products to sell" makes

Capital Camps more viable as an agency.

Capital Camps recently completed the second year of its family camp program. According to Phillips, the people who come to camp for the first time tend to return. In its first year of retreat operations, more than 5,000 people came through the door. In three to five years, Phillips predicts that figure will double, and that in just ten years, 100,000 people will have been touched by the camp and retreat experience.

As a model of Jewish identity building, the summer camp experience presents the most potential to affect children at a time when they are developing a sense of their Jewishness. Concurrently, adults can use their retreat time to listen to their hearts and get better acquainted with what makes them Jewish.

Whether religiously oriented or secular, camps and retreats enable us to encounter Judaism through formal and informal study, enjoyable activities in the woods and religious observance. Everyone learns teamwork, builds confidence, discovers new behaviors, makes lasting friendships and, above all, has fun.

As the only North American organization focused exclusively on the overnight camping experience, the Foundation for Jewish Camping encourages nonprofit Jewish camps to look at the various innovative ways they can leverage their facilities and reach a larger audience. Retreat programs increase the number of people exposed to a camp's philosophy, extend the use of the facilities and generate revenue. Whether for adults or families, retreats are effective recruiting tools for both the camp and the Jewish community. Jewish camps are beginning to partner with day and supplementary schools as well as early childhood programs to engage with students and their families in an environment that is proven to build Jewish connection and community.

The Foundation for Jewish Camping works with more than 130 nonprofit Jewish overnight camps with the goal of doubling the number of children attending these camps. Modeled after the most successful experiential educational program available to the Jewish community, retreat programs at summer camps are an untapped resource with the potential to add tremendous value to camps and to the greater Jewish community. 🌸



PHOTOGRAPH BY SHIR-YAAKOV FEINSTEIN-FEIT

# The Power of Retreat: Limmud, Hazon, Isabella Freedman... and the French Revolution

BY NIGEL SAVAGE

Until the French Revolution, Jews in Europe lived in self-contained communities. They had a sense of physical separation from the world around them; they shared a sense of Jewish time; gossip traveled by word-of-mouth; communities were multi-generational; and arts and culture arose within the community from a mix of amateurs and semi-professionals.

All of these characteristics — and others — were true of Jewish life for centuries. The French Revolution and the encounter with modernity shattered them. And Jewish retreats — of a variety of sorts — are now recreating them. Jewish retreats recreate, in temporary, post-modern contexts, many of the conditions

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of pre-modern Jewish life. This phenomenon — that of 360-degree Jewish living — accounts for their phenomenal and underutilized power in renewing contemporary Jewish life.

Two quite traditional Jewish experiences — summer camp for kids, and Israel trips for teens — are in fact particular examples of this in a more general situation. They're both immersion experiences, they both involve a sense of Jewish time and Jewish space, they both include direct leadership and gossip and arts and culture within the group. Seeing them as uni-generational retreats helps us to understand that their demonstrable impact can and should be applied more broadly.

My own work on this grew out of a Ph.D. I began with Steven Cohen, looking at Limmud in England. This institution remains the preeminent example of

a multi-generational retreat in the Jewish world today. Limmud in Britain has directly transformed the lives of several thousand participants. It has spawned a leadership group that has gone on to play a significant role in the Jewish community, and it shows signs of shifting the trajectory of Anglo-Jewry overall.

The example of Limmud in the UK underpinned not only Limmud New York, now about to enter its fourth year, but also Hazon's Jewish Environmental Bike Rides, which were also based on Limmud. At both Hazon and Limmud NY we see transformative Jewish impact. In both cases, volunteer leadership has spawned year-round community. (At both institutions, for the record, people have met, dated and even gotten married — for those who see that as an expected or desirable goal of Jewish retreats.)

The fullest example of the power of Jewish retreats can be seen at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, in Falls Village, CT. Since Adam Berman arrived as Executive Director in December 2002, the number of person nights has more than doubled to over 22,000, the budget has increased from \$950,000 to \$2.1 million; work has begun on a Teen Village; and new faculty housing is being built. Freedman has gone from serving mainly children and seniors to being a home for families and people of all ages; it has gone from being closed on Jewish holidays to hosting a full set of holiday retreats. And it has become the home of Adamah, a new program that enables Jewish twentysomethings to live at Freedman for three-month periods, while learning about intentional community, Jewish life and organic farming.

When people talk about the impact of retreats, they use strong language:

From a participant in Hazon's New York Ride, four months after the event: "You should know not only that it was the highlight of my year, but that I think about it every day."

From a Limmud volunteer: "The Limmud NY conference is just four days long, but the experience is much more — ten months of planning every year, enduring questions left from inspiring sessions, and wonderful friendships."

From Sabrina Malach, a Hazon staffer who was an Adamah Fellow at Freedman in 2005: "Adamah has changed my life. Before coming here I thought my Jewish journey was over. Now I feel that it has just begun."

Note that relationship to land is itself part of the significance of Freedman. At the Pesach retreat, two twelve-year-old boys from New Jersey were present for the birth of two goat kids. For the next few days they tended to the young goats, gathered eggs from the chickens and brought food waste from the dining hall for the animals. As Dr. Shamu

Sadeh, the director of Adamah, puts it: "Watching the full moon rise over the mountains and shine into the sukkah, hearing Hebrew chants to the beat of drums, dancing around the campfire, smelling the mint and basil in our havdalah spice garden, tasting fresh watermelon on our farm — you can't do this in New York City."

And note that retreats impact the rest of people's lives. Leah Katz, a 2004 Adamah Fellow, summed this up well: "Adamah roots me in Jewish community. The ruach I experience in this place is a catalyst for energizing my community in the Bay Area, California."

The power of retreats is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Each of the elements of Limmud NY exists elsewhere in the community. But nowhere else possesses all of these characteristics: multi-day, multi-denominational, multi-generational and volunteer-led.

The measure of a retreat experience is its intensity, which we often undervalue in Jewish education. There are innumerable opportunities for Jewish engagement and learning in Manhattan. But how many of them can predictably be described as being life-transforming? Far too few. Urban Jewish education is brief and (usually) necessarily lacking in intensity. Going away for three days isn't slightly different than going to an event of three hours; it's an entirely different experience.

Two last thoughts: First, market demand is one of the key indicators of the power of the retreat experience. People have an amazing time and they come back. Word-of-mouth draws friends and family members. At a time when overall Jewish participation rates are stagnant or falling, the growth of participant numbers at multi-generational, multi-day retreat experiences should send a powerful signal for why retreats have dramatic impact. And they should challenge the broader community to put resources in place on a far larger scale than has been the case thus far.

Second, with proper resources behind it, Isabella Freedman is capable of spawning full-scale, intentional Jewish community. People who live and work at Freedman year-round become role models and teachers for those who visit.

Modernity privatized Jewish life. It separated us from organic community, detached us from Jewish relationship to land (outside of Israel) and privatized the experience of Jewish time. Putting significant resources behind the strengthening of Jewish retreat centers reverses all of these things. Doing so not only transforms the lives of people who attend retreats; it also bears the possibility of beginning a unique new chapter in the future of the American Jewish community. 🌸

# RETREATS FOR JEWISH PROFESSIONALS

by DAVID ACKERMAN

The power of retreat experiences lies in their ability to trigger powerful emotions and to create indelible memories. This is because retreats, unlike schools or offices, involve all the functions of daily life (waking up, prayer times, meal times, free time and bedtime). In addition, retreats typically reorder the relationship between participants, replacing the hierarchical office structure focused on productivity with an egalitarian ethos of teamwork focused on process. Finally, individual growth (Jewish or otherwise) is usually an overt item on the retreat agenda (again, something not typically addressed in the workplace).

Retreats serve as "safe havens" for Jewish professionals, and this function expresses itself in multiple ways. First, retreats provide professionals with a sanctioned withdrawal from the constant pressures of their jobs, including the ongoing scrutiny of lay leaders. (Jewish communal work is rewarding, but it can also be wearing.) Retreats permit professionals to "let their hair down" with like-minded colleagues and complain about their work to someone who actually understands.

Retreats also let professionals evaluate their institutions not only from a distance, but also through a Jewish lens. Sadly, Jewish institutions don't always behave in Jewish ways in terms of how they show respect for the individuality and dignity of their constituents. This can alienate professionals not only from their work, but also from Judaism. Retreats provide a vehicle for addressing that alienation and for recommitting the organization to a Jewish way of doing business.

Finally, retreats give professionals a chance to practice being Jewish. Professionals may be unwilling to acknowledge gaps in their Jewish knowledge or to openly discuss their struggle with Jewish belief or practice back home in their highly visible positions. They may feel that they will be judged (and found lacking) if their Jewish expertise doesn't match their professional competence. The retreat is a sheltered environment that supports questioning, challenging and experimenting with Jewish behavior, ritual or otherwise. Ultimately, this translates into a stronger Jewish identity that will enhance not only the individual's enthusiasm for communal work but also his or her effectiveness as a role model when back on the job.

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*Dr. David Ackerman is Director of Educational Services at the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles.*

# REFLECTIONS ON RETREATS: A Conversation between a Father and Son

by DAVID NELSON and LEV NELSON

WE ASKED RABBI DAVID NELSON AND HIS SON, LEV NELSON, TO SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON RETREATS AND HOW THEY MIGHT IMPACT THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY.

## DAVID:

After well over 25 years as a rabbi, I feel somewhat qualified to pronounce a diagnosis of the American Jewish condition. American Jewry suffers from a dangerous syndrome, characterized by these symptoms:

- a disturbing lack of passion in most of our Jewish activities;
- a depressing lack of any real, deep sense of community, where “community” connotes a group of individuals who care deeply about one another as individuals, and about the group’s common purposes;
- a deep distaste for engagement or participation, which leads to a complete willingness to let professionals do our Judaism for us;
- a near total lack of interest in Jewish ideals, ideas or values, especially when they compete for our attention with ideas of the society-at-large.

I do not know for sure if this disease is terminal in the short run, but I do know that our chances for long-term health are slim if we do not address it. In most (though certainly not all) cases, synagogue life is not equipped to provide the needed therapy. Instead, I have come to believe over the years that the disorder can only be addressed by taking Jews out of their home environments for extended periods of time. Such therapeutic retreats from our normal environments are crucial to our changing who we are and how we live. Abraham could not have become the father of a “great and mighty nation” if he had stayed in his father’s house. He had to go to a new place: *lekh lekha me’artz’kha*. Jacob could not stop being a heel in his mother’s tent — he had to leave, to wrestle with his identity in the wilderness. And neither Moses as an individual nor the Israelites as a group were capable of encountering God while in the relative comfort of Egypt. They had to wander in the desert in

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order to do so.

What are the keys to the retreat setting, and why are they so effective? Rather than theorizing, I will let my son Lev, an active member of a retreat-based community, describe the reality as he sees it.

## LEV:

As the sun set over the hills of Accord, NY, close to 100 Jews packed into Elat Chayyim’s “barn” to daven a modified *Kabbalat Shabbat/Hallel* service for *Shabbat Chol Hamo’ed Sukkot*. With two *mechitzot* delineating men’s, women’s, and non-gender-specific spaces, this community — comprising Jewish neo-pagans and yeshiva students, college freshmen and young 30-something professionals, and every conceivable combination in between — welcomed the Sabbath Bride as she has rarely been welcomed before. *Kabbalat Shabbat* alone took nearly an hour and a half — a time filled with ecstatic hand-clapping, foot-stamping, dancing, and davening to the melodies of Shlomo Carlebach, Jeff Klepper and Pete Seeger. And that was just the beginning of Jews in the Woods (JitW) in the Fall of 2005.

The Jews of JitW are an incredibly diverse group, but one of the common threads linking us is a willingness to ease up on socially imposed inhibitions. Why must Jews in the Woods take place “in the woods,” away from our homes and our cities, in a place surrounded by nature? Because by leaving our everyday surroundings, we create a place where people can seek refuge from the expectations American society places on us. We sing spontaneously in public, unabashed. Davening can go on for hours if we want it to, because there is nobody at home waiting for us to eat dinner. Touch is much more prevalent — hugs from old friends (and new friends who feel like old friends), light shoulder pats that communicate “Shabbat Shalom” or “we’re part of the same community,” and conversations that occur not in neat circles but sprawled cozily on the floor.

In fact, our increased comfort with touch is a large part of what makes JitW work. Touch builds trust, establishes connections and enables people to let down their guards more than they might otherwise be comfortable with. This makes the community a safe space — safe enough, in fact, to allow a

series of long, bitter/loving arguments over how to negotiate touch in a pluralistic community where some members are *shomrei negiyah* (do not touch people of the opposite sex). Out of these talks has come a new concept: *zocher negiyah*, remembering/mindfulness of touch and its power, both to heal and to hurt. This was, for me, a paradigmatic example of the wonderfully creative, often-times inefficient, nonetheless ideal-laden process by which JitW’s community values are expressed and refined.

Another element at the core of JitW is its embrace of the experiential. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that Shabbat is a time for being, whereas the six workdays are for doing. Jews in the Woods is a living example of that belief. In the weeks before the Shabbaton, debate flies fast and furious over the listserv, but when Shabbat arrives, peace has been made; no person seeks to out-argue the other or to prove a point for the sake of the proof. Instead, we join in singing together, praying together and in simply *being* together in a way that levels the playing field between young and old, rookie and veteran, limelight-lover and wallflower. When Shabbat is over, we will go back to saving the world in a myriad of ways, but for now, it is Shabbat, and all of us have come home.

## DAVID:

I am deeply moved by Lev’s last line: “all of us have come home.” Perhaps this is the crux of the American Jewish Disease — we do not feel at home in our Jewish skins. We feel uncomfortable, ill at ease. It is a powerful irony, and a startling truth, that we have to leave the place where we were born, grew up and live our daily lives, leave it for a place in the wilderness or the woods, to find ourselves at home. But considering the experience of Abraham, perhaps it’s not so strange at all.

## LEV:

People do indeed come to feel at home in their Jewish skins at JitW, but the most beautiful thing about it is how we bring that back to our actual homes. Before a Shabbaton, the listserv bustles with logistical and philosophical discussion, but afterwards it is used to reconnect, share resources and ask questions. When I moved to Manhattan, Woodsy Jews were my first friends and guides to the Jewish community. New *chavurot* at Brown, Brandeis and Columbia take sustenance from JitW. Our community, which gathers physically only a few times a year, extends non-geographically through cyberspace. And while that is a uniquely 21st Century concept, the idea that Jews have a bond with each other wherever they are is as old as Sinai. JitW has simply taken that old bond of peoplehood and put a new spin on it. 🌸



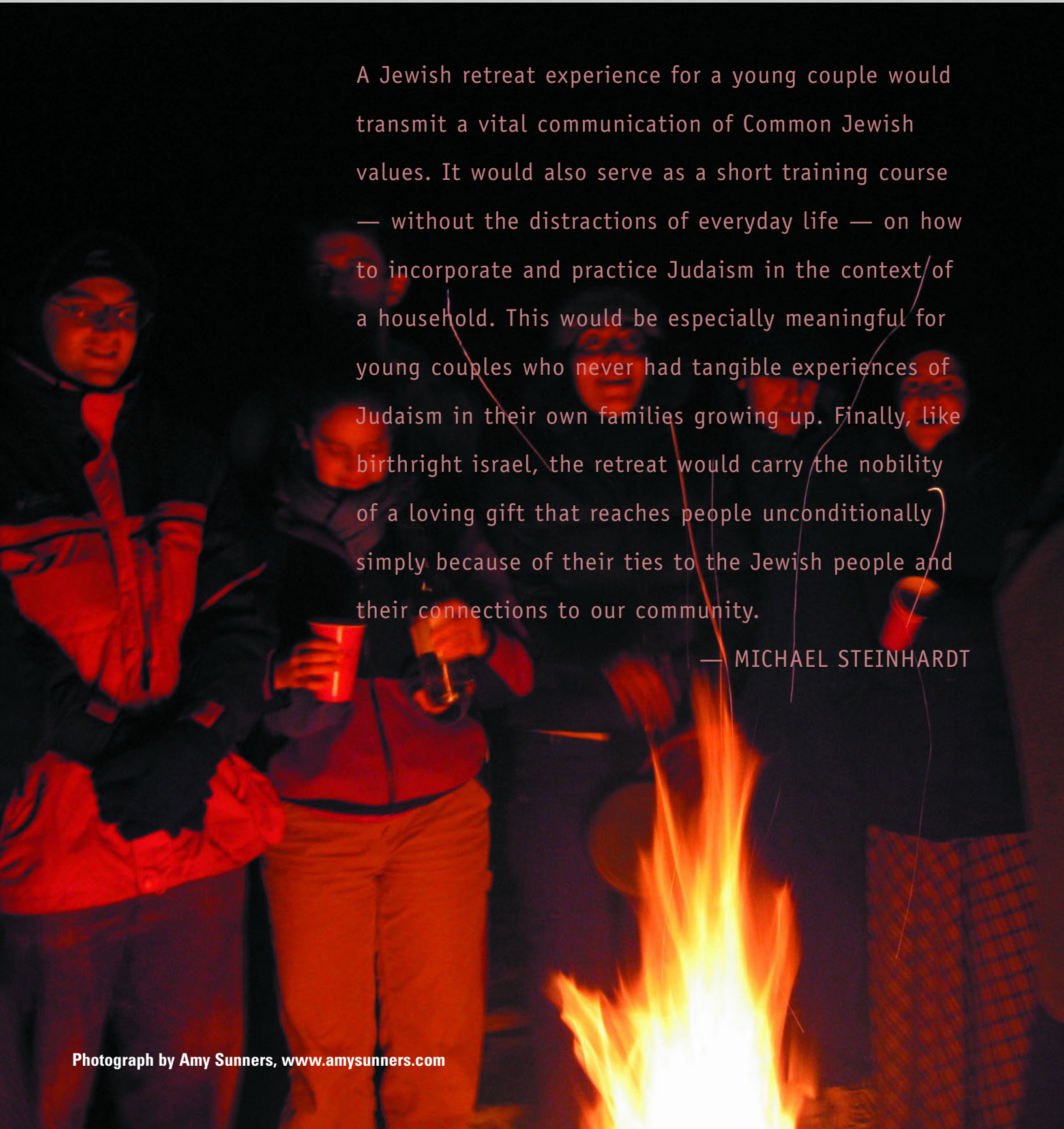


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A Jewish retreat experience for a young couple would transmit a vital communication of Common Jewish values. It would also serve as a short training course — without the distractions of everyday life — on how to incorporate and practice Judaism in the context of a household. This would be especially meaningful for young couples who never had tangible experiences of Judaism in their own families growing up. Finally, like birthright israel, the retreat would carry the nobility of a loving gift that reaches people unconditionally simply because of their ties to the Jewish people and their connections to our community.

— MICHAEL STEINHARDT