

At the time of this interview, David Baum was a fourth-year rabbinical student at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and was spending his ninth summer at Camp Ramah Darom. As a freshman at the University of Florida in the late 1990s, never in his wildest dreams did he think that he would pursue a career as a Jewish professional, much less as a rabbi! Yet that is exactly his current career path and way of life, inspired mostly by his years of experiential learning and leadership at Camp Ramah and by the impact of his mentor and friend, Rabbi Loren Sykes.

During the summer of 2007, Dave served as the *rosh tefillah*, helping with *tefillah* education for all the campers and staff as part of Ramah's overall efforts to teach prayer skills and to instill a deepened sense of spirituality. Over the years, Dave has also served as a counselor, a *rosh edah*, director of staff learning, a *yo'etz* (parent liaison and staff trainer), and a Judaica teacher.

During the inaugural summer of Ramah Darom, Dave's childhood friend, Karen Eliav from his home town of Plantation, Florida, attended camp as a counselor. She said that it was an "amazing experience," and she convinced a number of her friends, including Dave, to come and work at camp the following summer. Dave recalled:

The summer of 1998 was incredible. I loved being at Camp Ramah as a counselor. Then I really got hooked on Ramah when I was chosen to

represent Ramah Darom at the Weinstein Institute for Counselor Training when we got together in the winter with counselors from all the other Ramah camps. This really made me realize that being at Ramah was helping me to become part of something much bigger, affecting young people all over North America.

After that experience, Dave considered going to Ramah Canada because he had met some wonderful people who attended that camp in Utterson, Ontario. “But Rabbi Sykes asked me to come back as a counselor for Gesher, the oldest edah, and I couldn’t turn him down. Eventually, he asked me to be a rosh edah, an experience that completely solidified my desire to pursue a career in Jewish leadership.”

Motivated to become a Jewish educator, Dave, who had been planning a career in the business world, knew he would be disappointing his father by coming back to camp year after year. In 2002, after a “difficult” telephone conversation with his dad, he wrote his dad a passionate letter explaining his reasons for returning to camp and taking on a leadership role:

Dear Dad:

You didn’t seem too happy with the conversation we just had. I gave more thought to why I want to return to camp and therefore postpone my college graduation. In essence, becoming a rosh edah at camp is about making a difference in children’s lives. I’m going to help give many children a sense of Judaism that some have never gotten, and I’m going to help my staff develop leadership skills, and hopefully instill inspiration. I want to bring happiness and Yiddishkeit to these kids because that is what you and mom have taught me throughout my life. Although this is going to be hard work and long hours, and although I’m going to be one of the youngest division heads ever, I am doing this gladly. Some of my friends have parent role models who have instilled in them greed and selfishness, and they don’t treat others with respect. Yet you have taught me better values, and that is why I want to share these values with others. So I guess you can look at this as a blessing or a curse. If delaying my graduation makes school a little bit harder for me, but in the process I get to bring happiness and values to children at camp, then I will gladly take on that responsibility. So thank you for instilling within me true Yiddishkeit and wonderful values. I hope that in the future, I can give this gift to my own children, just the same way you have instilled it within Sandy, Richie and me.

Your son,
David

Dave reflected back on this letter as a key moment in his life, when he was willing to take what he thought was the right path, and try to convince his parents to support this decision. Five years later, Dave is one of the most senior

leaders and educators at Ramah Darom and soon will be ordained by JTS as a rabbi.

The other key Ramah moment in Dave's life occurred when his grandfather, Frank Baum, came to visit him at Ramah. Dave became quite emotional as he recalled the time:

My grandfather was a survivor of the Holocaust, but he never ever, in all my life, spoke about his experiences during the war. After spending Shabbat at camp with me and my younger sister, Sandy, who was a camper, my grandfather stunned us by saying that he wanted to talk about his experiences in the Holocaust to the children at camp. The word "camp" had deep associations for him, and the stark contrast between the "death camp" he had experienced and "this camp of unbelievably vibrant Jewish life" moved him to speak for the first time about his experiences during the war.

The Ramah experience worked its magic on Dave Baum. The tension between choosing a career with the greatest possible financial rewards and a career in a helping profession works itself out differently for every young person. Simply being aware of this tension and making young people aware of their potential for spiritual, educational, or other types of leadership is one of the true signs of success for any Ramah educator. Thanks to the nurturing mentorship of Rabbi Loren Sykes and the powerful experiences at Ramah Darom, Dave Baum will be helping and educating others for many years.