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I grew up in a typical “second-generation” Jewish home in Milwaukee. The vast majority of my contemporaries dropped out of Jewish education after their bar or bat mitzvah, and they generally remember the experience of religious school as meaningless and boring.

My own case was very different because my parents sent me to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. I was twelve years old during my first summer at Camp Ramah, and I am convinced that had I not been there then, I would have dropped out of Jewish religious life after my bar mitzvah ceremony the following June, following the example of virtually all of my friends. It was not that I had some kind of religious revelation at Ramah; at the beginning it was simply a nice camping experience. Even at age twelve, however, I was impressed by the fact that Judaism was truly a way of life for the people at camp. It was not restricted to prayer and study, although we did more of those than I had ever done before; Judaism affected every aspect of life at camp, from discussions with friends to the evening activities to the sports field. I loved the singing and the dancing; the Hebrew that I was learning to speak in classes, at the waterfront, and on the baseball diamond; and the beauty of the traditional Sabbath observances. It was all so natural and unselfconscious. For the first time in my life, Judaism was a source of guidance and joy and not simply a burden that I carried as a member of a minority in a Christian culture.

Through my summers at Ramah as a camper and counselor, and through my Jewish studies during the academic years that intervened, I came to recognize the factors that were involving me more and more in religious life. I liked the depth of the relationships the Jewish environment created. We were certainly not saints in any sense of the term, but at Ramah we had a heightened awareness of moral norms and of the need to be sensitive to other people's needs. We were not embarrassed by talking about behavior and helping people with their problems; it was simply part of what was expected of every one of us.

The intellectual stimulation grew by leaps and bounds as I became older. Indeed, the most exciting and mind-stretching conversations I had took place at camp. Ironically, in this religious environment, rather than anywhere else, I felt more able to raise any questions that occurred to me. The leaders of the camp, in fact, prodded us to confront our problems with religious commitment. We were encouraged to ask questions we had never dared to discuss publicly, and the leaders themselves raised issues none of us had ever thought of. This exciting intellectual ferment was coupled with a sense of structure, of rootedness, and of purpose to life that was missing in the lives of all of my non-religious friends. Consequently, when I decided to become a rabbi, my chief aim was to reproduce the experiences Ramah had given me—to share the spoils, as it were.