

BERKSHIRES · CANADA NEW ENGLAND · POCONOS

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I was sixteen when I first attended a Ramah camp. It was an eye-opening experience for me. It was the beginning of more than twenty summers in which I thrived at four Ramah camps, not to mention an occasional Shabbat at Nyack as a Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) student.

It was amazing. I was living among Jews who were serious about their Judaism, Jews who had not grown up as *shomerei mitzvot* or breaking their teeth on Hebrew or leading *tefillot*.

I grew up with *shul* as home away from home. I spoke Hebrew from the time I started school. To me, Hebrew was not a foreign language but a second language. To me, participating in shul life is like breathing; I could not go on without it. Still, Ramah was wild. Printing and reading daily *hoda'ot* in Hebrew, hearing Hebrew announcements in the *hadar ochel*, or just chatting in Hebrew with fellow staff, particularly *mishlahat* members, were all experiences I could not have expected. Nowhere except in Israel had I lived in an atmosphere that was so fully dedicated to using Hebrew as a natural part of life.

I believed then, as I do still today, in the Ramah of my earliest youth. I was a devotee of Ramah long before I first got there. Campers who came to United Synagogue Youth (USY) *kinnusim* with songs and ideas they learned at Ramah motivated me. I was amazed by the Ramahniks' devotion to Hebrew. I was captivated by the high standards required to be invited to attend Ramah. Heck, back then, I even remember synagogue members who were turned down by Ramah for insufficient Hebrew skills. Ramah valued Hebrew, and that impressed me no end.

Ramah's devotion to Hebrew diminished a bit over the years. I never heard English spoken publicly during my first years at Ramah, but by my last summer at camp there were camp leaders who struggled to express themselves in Hebrew. Yet, even their struggle to use Hebrew was motivating. I hope I did my part to encourage Hebrew usage. I know it was a major aspect of my work in radio where I forbade broadcasters to use English on the air. (Remember the big Beatles hit "*Hi ohevot otecha*"?)

My experience at Ramah helped shape my professional career. I still consider myself a Jewish educator. At Ramah I recognized the impact that Jewish education can have on students and their families, particularly when conducted outside the classroom. At Ramah, I was able to live a dream where the process of learning was more important than the content. At Ramah, I

could create programs in which there was room for *tanach* and *torah shebe'al peh*, but also for *rikkud* and *serigah*.

What is the biggest impact? I am several years past fifty, and if I had the means and opportunity, I would bring my bride of three years to camp and do it all again. Perhaps with the right push, I could even get my own kids (now grown) to join us on staff.