

**M**y friends' stories about life at summer camps with Indian-sounding names hardly prepared me for my first summer at Ramah in the Berkshires. I had expected that like my friends from home, I, too, would learn survival skills and improve my performance on the ball field. Although Ramah offered sports and swimming, camping and hiking, and we put on lots of Broadway musicals, that was not what Ramah was all about.

Ramah was about building and shaping community—the ideal Jewish community. That is what was at the heart of my Ramah experiences between 1966 (my first summer as a Ramah camper) and 2004 (my most recent summer as a staff member).

I originally went to camp to make my parents proud—especially my father. My father spent many summers at Camp Kindervelt, a Yiddish-speaking camp with a labor Zionist orientation that had a profound impact on his Jewish outlook. Perhaps because we did not speak Yiddish at home, my parents did not send me to Kindervelt.

I grew up in a very different Jewish world than my father. To my grandfather's great dismay, my parents chose to send me to Hebrew school instead of *folk schule*. I attended junior congregation weekly and learned to read Torah at the same age that my father learned to read Sholem Aleichem. According to family legend, after my grandfather heard that I had been registered to begin Hebrew school at the synagogue, he called from Florida to berate my parents and angrily shouted at them, "You want he should become a rabbi!?"

No thought was further from their minds at the time when they proudly informed me that Rabbi Sam Schafner, *z"l*, our rabbi at Temple Gates of Prayer in Flushing, had called and wanted me to go to Ramah. My parents understood that this was a very prestigious honor. And, in my father's mind, Ramah would be my Kindervelt.

Ramah became the laboratory in which I prepared for my “real life.” The stories which my counselors told about their experiences in Israel on Ramah Seminar gave birth to my Zionist yearnings. The *shelihim* who arrived in camp following the Six-Day War further stoked those flames. My dreams of actually living in Israel were given shape by talks delivered by both our head sports counselor, Rabbi Alex Kaplan, and my swimming teachers, Rabbi Phil and Barbara Spectre, who spoke about Israel and their aliyah with great passion.

I had my first inkling that Ramah was different and special during my first Shabbat baseball game at Ramah. When we arrived at the field, we were informed by our counselors that we would not be keeping score. Being eleven years old, that did not make sense to me. But sports on Shabbat was not about competition—it was about playing ball just for the fun of playing ball.

That lesson was driven home later that day at the weekly Shabbat staff game. The counselors, who also did not keep score, made sure that every (male) staff member who wanted to play was given a chance no matter how skilled or unskilled he was at baseball. Until that day, baseball had always been about athletic prowess. That was the day that I learned that doing the right thing was more important than doing things right.

This was a new world for me. The staff played ball for fun. And these were the same staff members who read Torah, taught Hebrew, and delivered *divrei tefillah* at our morning services. This was the Ramah philosophy at its best—well-rounded, multi-talented individuals, who were skilled athletes and expert daveners, were walking the talk.

During my first summer as a staff member, I took part in the Mador counselor training program run by Rabbi David Mogilner, z”l. I learned that what made Ramah special was that it was about making a difference. Mogilner defined education as the process of effecting behavioral changes meaningfully and purposefully. He taught us to think like educators by identifying our goals. At our first group meeting he asked, “What should be my first question?” We were stymied until he taught us the obvious and said, “It depends on my purpose.”

More than anyone else that summer, my advisor Rabbi Steven Brown, now head of school at the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy in Philadelphia, facilitated my growth and shaped the way I approached every aspect of camp routine. Nothing prepared me more for my years as a teacher and even more so as a parent than spending that summer with Steve Brown. Perhaps the most important publication issued by Ramah was the counselor’s manual edited by Steve in which he incorporated many of the lessons used to turn *madornikim* into *madrichim*.

I had the great fortune that summer to be assigned to work with an experienced senior counselor, Paul Kurland, now the rabbi of the Nanuet Hebrew Center. Paul was the role model who showed me up close how to rise to each challenge posed by camp life during the many summers we worked together. And for the last thirty-five years, he has been my dearest friend and sounding board for the subsequent challenges we have tackled together and separately as rabbis and educators.

Whether establishing *bikkur holim* groups or forming *nihum aveilim* committees in my community, I always think back to the visions of two other mentors and friends, Rabbi David Zisenwine, director of several Ramah camps in the 1970s and 1980s, and David August, z"l, Berkshires director from 1972 to 1976. Both were visionaries who believed that the essence of Ramah was the focus on "community." Zisenwine had dreamt of giving campers in the oldest *edab* (division) a summer of autonomous living, with all the responsibilities inherent in such an arrangement on the shoulders of the campers. It was a bold idea. August treated us all like family. We were not just campers or staff members—we were his children. He would take long walks with us and listen as we pondered our futures. Having made the transition from head schoolmaster in Montreal to family therapist, August taught me the importance of always looking for new challenges. I have missed his warm and knowing smile for far too many years.

Throughout my years in the rabbinate I have forced myself to identify my goals and make sure that my methods were in alignment with those goals. I continually return to the tools gifted to me by my teachers, mentors, and dear friends from Ramah. And I have endeavored to find ways to replicate Ramah's approach to life and learning in my congregations, schools, and communities.

My Ramah mentors had one thing in common: They were shaping the future of Conservative Judaism by teaching us how to live as committed Conservative Jews. They were contributing to the spiritual life of the State of Israel by shaping the values of so many educated Jews who chose to make aliyah or who came from Israel to work in Ramah camps. They helped to give direction to American Jewry by designing the laboratories in which future lay leaders and professional rabbis experimented while still novices in their fields of dreams.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav is famous for saying, *lechol makom she'elav ani holech, ani holech le'ereetz yisra'el*. ("Everywhere I go, I go to the Land of Israel.") In my case, I say, "Everywhere I go, I call upon my Ramah training."