

I first came to Camp Ramah in the summer of 1956 after having spent eleven summers in a conventional summer camp in Canada. By conventional, I mean a camp that featured a robust sports program, a color war, dances every Saturday night, and a culture that encouraged competition, hazing, and socializing with the girls at a camp located across the lake. As I grew older, I discovered that the lake was eminently bridgeable. I have very few fond memories of those eleven summers.

I entered the Rabbinical School at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in the fall of 1954 with almost no prior knowledge of the institutions of the Conservative Movement. During my second year there, my classmates urged me to accompany them to Ramah, and there seemed to be no question that by Ramah, they meant Wisconsin.

After overcoming my memories of my earlier camp experiences, I applied to join the Wisconsin staff. I discovered that I had to undergo an interview with the camp *hanbalah*. Seated around the table was an imposing group of Ramah veterans—Jerry Abrams (then the director of Ramah Wisconsin), Burt Cohen and the late David Mogilner (the *rashei edah*), Jack Bloom, Bezalel “Buzzy” Porten, and others. I knew nothing about how to be a counselor, and nothing about education. The interview was grueling, as grueling as my admissions interview to the Rabbinical School, and I’m sure I made a fool of myself. But I was accepted and assigned a Machon bunk.

To my amazement, the camp staff began to meet in mid-winter for two hours on Sunday nights in a JTS classroom. Every piece of counseling—not

only the Jewish education issues—was discussed, including how to wake up the kids, how to put them to sleep (we called it *hashkavah* in those days), how to handle the first night, the first meal, the table experience (*hashulhan beramah*) in camp, how to deal with scapegoats, and the rest. What I learned then, and what has remained with me to this day, was that every single encounter with every camper is potentially an educational opportunity; and there is a Jewish way of structuring each of these moments. Jewish education took place every moment of every day, not only in the classroom—not even mainly in the classroom.

The first clash between my old camp culture and the Ramah experience occurred in the first few days of camp when my bunk played basketball against a neighboring bunk. Using my color war experience, I urged my campers to be more physical and to use their elbows under the baskets. David Mogilner took me aside and murmured, “That’s not the way we play basketball in Ramah.” “No?” I responded, “In other words, in Ramah, the point of the game is to lose!” “Right on,” he smiled. So there was a Jewish way of playing basketball, of eating, of speaking to your campers, and so forth.

I spent the summers of 1956, 1957, and 1958 in camp. We were bunk counselors, we taught classes, and we planned our campers’ evening and Shabbat programs. I was naive, but we were made to feel that the overall goal of the camp experience was to change the world. Transform enough Ramah campers, and we will transform the American Jewish community; transform the American Jewish community, and we will transform America; transform America, and we will transform the world. It was as simple as that. It was this impulse that made it possible to endure the cold and the exhaustion; that, and the sense of collegiality that united an extraordinarily talented staff. I particularly remember Morty and Margie Tutnauer’s wedding, which was held by the lake on the last night of camp in 1957, and was preceded by a week of classes on weddings, marriage, love, and sex in Judaism. The wedding was held under a *huppah* created by their campers, followed by a wedding *se’udah* with *sheva berachot* and the whole shebang.

The campers and the staff members from those summers included other men and women who became prominent Jewish educators, rabbis, academicians, and community leaders: Lee Shulman, the late Dan Elazar, Jack Bloom, Jeff Tigay, Leon (Label) Waldman, Joe Young (later to join the staff of the National Institutes of Health [NIH]), and many others.

In my second summer in Wisconsin, I met the woman who was to become my wife. We were married in late 1958, and our Ramah career was interrupted for a number of years until we had young children. My wife then returned to Ramah Berkshires for a number of years as a *yo’etzet* in the Mador.

Our children later attended Ramah Berkshires, and I subsequently lectured in all of the Ramah camps. So the chain continues.

