

LEONARD KAPLAN AND MAYER “BUBBA” MITCHELL, z”l

Founders and benefactors, Camp Ramah Darom

[Interview conducted by Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, National Ramah Director, April 2007.]

On a beautiful spring afternoon at Ramah Darom in Georgia in April 2007, I attended the camp’s tenth anniversary celebration and Shabbaton for founders, funders, and key camp leaders. While sitting in the dining room with Mayer “Bubba” Mitchell, z”l, and Leonard Kaplan, the two key founders and financial supporters of this newest Ramah camp, and their wives, Arlene Mitchell and Tobee Kaplan, I was treated to a delightful hour of warm reminiscences and inspiration. They spoke to me about the reasons they became involved with Ramah and about their efforts to convince others of what Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of The Jewish Theological Seminary had convinced them of: that building a Ramah camp for the South “was just about the most important thing they could possibly do for their children and grandchildren and for the Jewish people.”

A Deep and Enduring Friendship. Over and over, the conversation returned to a common theme: the deep and enduring friendship that developed between Bubba and Leonard because of their efforts to build Ramah Darom. “I had known Leonard as an acquaintance through our work with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC),” Bubba commented, “but we really became brothers through our work to create this camp.” According to Leonard, “By far the most satisfying part of my work for Darom was the friendship I developed with Bubba Mitchell. He got me involved and kept me involved, and I owe him a great deal for all that I have gotten out of this

incredible venture.” As Tobee Kaplan phrased it, “A love affair was created between these two men which made anything possible.”

As I continued to talk with the Kaplans and the Mitchells, we were joined by Bubba’s brother and business partner, Abe Mitchell, who also became a major contributor to Ramah Darom and serves the camp in various leadership capacities. Abe made it clear that he wanted the camp to act responsibly, from construction decisions to business practices, as “we must make every dollar count and count efficiently.” Abe, too, spoke about the great satisfaction of seeing Ramah Darom continuing to thrive ten years after its first summer in 1997. “We still have work to do,” he commented, “but it sure helps to see all the smiling faces of the kids and staff as they enjoy their time at Ramah.”

Why Ramah? I asked them all to reflect on their commitment to Ramah, with so many Jewish causes competing for their contributions.

Bubba explained:

I raised four children in Mobile, a small southern town, and luckily they all married Jews. But with the intermarriage rate at over 50%, I was concerned for my eight grandchildren and Jewish children all over America. Chancellor Schorsch taught me that camping is the most important building block, more important than anything else, because kids have fun being Jewish at Ramah.

Leonard added:

I had been giving to a wide array of Jewish causes, and I really wanted to make a difference for the Jewish future. It became clear to me that Ramah would have the biggest impact of all for two reasons: first, because of its positive influence on youngsters, and second, because of the impact on future leadership. Ramah is clearly a breeding ground for future rabbis and educators. My own rabbi, Rabbi Eli Havivi (of Greensboro, North Carolina, who grew up at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires and later served as the director of Ramah in the Poconos) helped convince me of these truths, and I have absolutely no regrets.

As our conversation continued, I asked the Mitchells and Kaplans for their advice as we begin to seek support for the building of yet another new Ramah camp, Ramah in the Rockies. “You need to find your Moshe Rabbeinu,” as Leonard jokingly calls Bubba. As Leonard expressed it:

Our relationship created all the momentum and satisfaction, and you need others in Texas, Colorado, and other places to start working together like we did. We’ll tell them our story and tell them why we gave and still give. But you have to find your leaders and not be shy about asking.

As we came to the end of our discussion, Bubba summed up things this way:

Jewish children need Camp Ramah—they need to be in a Jewish majority, and they need to have fun with each other being Jewish. That’s the key to our future, and I’m indebted to Rabbi Schorsch for getting me involved and for Leonard’s friendship over all these years.

When we got up from our table and left the room, hundreds of celebrants greeted Bubba and Leonard, Ramah Darom “heroes” and best friends.

[Sadly, Bubba Mitchell passed away after a long illness less than six months after Ramah Darom’s tenth anniversary celebration, on September 26, 2007. — RABBI MITCHELL COHEN]