

POCONOS

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The day after I graduated from Temple University in May 1978, I got on an El Al airplane and made aliyah to Israel. There were four major influences on my decision to move “home” to Israel. The first was the Jewish-Zionist education I received at home from my wonderful parents, Irv and Miriam Katz, of blessed memory. The second influence was my Hebrew school teacher, Rebbetzin Ruth Chinitz, of blessed memory, in class *heb* at Temple Beth Ami in northeast Philadelphia. The third major influence on me was my Jewish youth group, United Synagogue Youth (USY), which inculcated in me so many important Jewish values such as Zionism, Shabbat, and *tikkun olam*.

Last, but certainly not least, among the Jewish-Zionist influences on my life was Camp Ramah in the Poconos, where I spent more than fifteen years as a camper, waiter, Madornik, *madrish*, and *rosh edab*. Camp Ramah taught me that Judaism was not just a religion that I needed to celebrate on Friday nights and Saturdays but was an all-encompassing identity. Ramah showed me that I belonged to a people that had a religion and a language and a culture and a history and a land. At Ramah I spoke Hebrew not only during *tefillah* but also during sports and meals and while socializing with friends. I already knew how to be a Jew on Shabbat; Ramah taught me how to be a Jew all week long, twenty-four hours a day! As I grew older, I wanted to live in a Jewish world just like Camp Ramah, and I came to understand that I could do that only in a Jewish country—in Israel.

I attended Camp Ramah in the Poconos for the first time in 1968. It was just after the 1967 Six-Day War, and I will never forget the first time I met the Israelis on the *mishlahat*. I was in Tze’irim and went to *shaharit* in the *mercaz* on the first morning. Sitting next to me was Yitzhak Hochman, a tall, handsome, muscular *mishlahat* member. Everyone called him “Hochla.” Hochla, the first religious Israeli to make the Israeli National Basketball Team, was in camp as a sports instructor. Before services I was mesmerized as he spun a basketball on his finger like a Harlem Globetrotter. But what really amazed me was when he sat down next to me and helped me put on my tefillin. He wore his tefillin on his muscular arm and davened with *kavanah* and passion. For the first time in my life I saw a person who was both an accomplished athlete and a proud and strong Jew. Later, Hochla and his fellow *mishlahat* members came to my bunk for *hashkavah* (bedtime stories) and told us about fighting in the Six-Day War. I was so excited to learn about and meet real Jewish heroes.

Camp Ramah taught me that a Jew could play sports and have muscles and also put on tefillin every morning and daven. I have not missed a day of

putting on tefillin or davening shaharit in the past forty years and much of that, like my decision to eventually make aliyah, is due to Hochla and Camp Ramah. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Hochla served in an elite commando unit of *Tzahal* and fell heroically in battle in the Sinai Desert. I will never forget his heroism and sacrifice, but most of all I will always remember how he lived his life Jewishly with commitment and devotion.

After making aliyah to Israel, I won the Israeli National Boxing Championship, served in an elite reconnaissance unit of *Tzahal*, and for the past twenty-seven years have worked as a Jewish educator at the Alexander Muss High School in Israel (AMHSI) in Hod Hasharon. In 2001 I had a student named Michael Levin from Philadelphia in my class at AMHSI.

On his first day, Michael noticed that I was wearing a hat from Camp Ramah in the Poconos and asked me if I had been a camper there. When I replied in the affirmative, Michael told me that he, too, had grown up at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. Quickly, I learned that Michael and I shared many bonds. We both came from Philadelphia and had been active in Hagesher Region USY. Michael and I immediately became great friends and spent long nights talking about Ramah, USY, Tastykakes, Breyers ice cream, soft pretzels, mustard . . . and most of all about Israel! Michael was an A+ student, an amazing human being, and a committed Jew. Camp Ramah was a great influence on him as well, and in 2003 Michael made aliyah to Israel and joined the Israeli paratroops.

In the summer of 2006, Michael received a month leave to visit his family in Philadelphia. While in the United States, he drove up to Camp Ramah in the Poconos to see his many camp friends. On July 12, 2006, he learned that the Hizbullah had attacked Israel and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. Michael rushed back to Israel to join his comrades in arms. On August 1, 2006, Michael Levin fell heroically in battle in Aita el Shaab in Lebanon. He was buried on Tish'ah Be'av in the national military cemetery on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Two of the greatest heroes I have known in my life, Yitzhak "Hochla" Hochman and Michael Levin, both attended Camp Ramah in the Poconos. They both personified the type of Jew that we need to build our people's future. They were living examples of Ramah values—loving Torah, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel. Michael and Hochla, like Camp Ramah, will forever serve as a light and an inspiration. Ramah means "heights," and the Jewish-Zionist education I received at Camp Ramah in the Poconos helped lead me to the heights of a fulfilling Jewish life in Israel.