

Camp Ramah made me the Orthodox rabbi I am today. I was a weak student at my local Orthodox day school in Chicago in the early 1960s and an even worse athlete. My parents, who wanted to inject some joy in my life—I didn't laugh a lot—made the financial sacrifice to pay for eight weeks at Ramah Wisconsin in addition to day school tuition. For me, it was worth it.

They were looking for a kosher sports camp for me, and it worked. I didn't become a star, but I learned to swim (from Mort Steinberg), to make a set shot (from [Rabbi] Mel Sirner), and even made the one star catch of my life playing (what else?) right field that won the game. My brothers Steve and David had their own great experiences.

But surprise—in many ways, camp did a lot for my Yiddishkeit. For the first time I had to define (and often defend) myself for my Orthodox practice. I came from a Jewishly and generally culturally sophisticated home, but at camp I confronted *Judaism as a Civilization* by Mordecai Kaplan and Professor Heschel's critique of "pan-halakhism." I took it all seriously and came out differently, but it all made a great impression. How could it not, when it involved debating counselors who later became rabbis, such as Zicky (Isaac) Bonder, z"l, and Elliot Dorff?

And I had the opportunity to study with some of the great professors who visited camp or served as professors-in-residence. I learned in *havruta* with Professor Avraham Goldberg, studying Mishnah and Tosefta Shabbat using a combination of classical and scientific methods that turned my head around! In those days, the camp professor would chant the last chapter of *Eichah* on Tish'ah Be'av, and I felt that camp showed real *kevod hatorah*.

But in the end, the biggest deal wasn't the learning or even *kabbalat shabbat* by the lake (where as a good Orthodox boy I stood on the side), as

impressive as they were. It was the *tzerif*. I was fortunate to be in a few really good ones and one great one. The great one was my *tzerif* during my last year as a camper when I was in the oldest bunk—then *yud-gimel*. It was a diverse group of kids who really learned to work and play well together and to love one another. We were under the tutelage of co-counselors Rickie Aron and [Rabbi] Miles Cohen. On the first night, they welcomed us to camp and to our lone cabin on the hill with a dark picture of bats and skeletons surrounding the bunk—to the horror of someone on the educational staff who thought this was a violation of the “home haven” that the bunk represented in Ramah educational theory. We, the campers, started laughing and didn’t stop for eight weeks. That was joy.

So I was rewarded. I later pursued and married the girl I met and had such serious discussions with at camp—Sheryl Robbin. And little did I know at the time that I married into a camp family—Sheryl’s parents Irv, *z”l*, and Janet Robbin ran the lay side of Ramah Wisconsin for years and built the Tikvah program. And later on, our son Isaac (now in the IDF) insisted on going to Wisconsin Ramah and even returned on staff.

At Pardes I’m surrounded by Ramah. From Wisconsin, a former *madrich*, Zvi (Denny) Wolff, and our Pardes lawyer, Rickie Aron, and from another camp, Rabbi Baruch (Bruce) Feldstern, Susan Wall, and Judy Markose. We have a steady stream of former campers as students and an even greater stream going to camp as counselors, Kollél members, and so on. They all have a healthy sense of *yir’at shamayim* and *kevod haberiyot*, and they like to laugh.