

WISCONSIN

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My fifty-year association with Ramah began in the months preceding the summer of 1957. I was nineteen years of age and in my second year as a pre-dental student at Akron University when my philosophy professor in my only non-science class asked me to write a paper describing my understanding of God. My relationship with God during the first nineteen years of my life was remote at best. I was shaken by this assignment. A search of the philosophy section of the library led me to a chance encounter with Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God in*

Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism. Surprised that God was in search of me, I knew that to complete my assignment I needed to discover God.

I received an “A” on the paper, and the exercise of writing it became the impetus for my search for faith and the clarification of my Jewish identity. When I told some of my observant friends about my growing interests, they encouraged me to join them that summer at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin.

The camp needed waiters and did not require applicants to be Hebrew speakers. I agreed to abide by camp policy that I keep kosher while on staff and signed on for the summer. On the night before I left for camp, I decided to have one last supper of non-kosher food. I took a date to a favorite restaurant and ordered two dinners, one from the surf and the other from the turf menu. As I enjoyed every bite, I was certain that my kosher commitment would end with the final day of camp.

The next morning, I began my journey, not anticipating the transformative influence Ramah would have on my entire life. While waiting to transfer trains in Chicago, I ate my first “kosher” meal. Tuna fish was never my favorite, but as I ate the sandwich, I questioned the purpose of what I had just done and suddenly found myself energized by my inner encounter with God. Choosing to eat according to God’s direction seemed to affirm God’s existence.

After dark that evening, I finally arrived at the Conover railroad station and boarded the camp bus with other staff members. Every visitor to Ramah Wisconsin knows that Buckatabon Road, the narrow, winding, tree-lined passage that travels the circumference of the lake by the same name, is the final piece of the journey to camp. The only source of light at night is the flickering lamps in scattered homes along the way. I was nearly asleep when a spectacular array of light beams that stretched from the dark skies above directly down to the ground startled me into a state of alertness. I briefly imagined that moment as a revelatory experience in which I was the only one aware of those lights. I sensed God’s immediate accessibility. It was shattering to overhear others on the bus explain that we were witnessing the wonders of the Northern Lights.

I hesitated before going to sleep that night, afraid that I could never recapture the inspiration of that day. At *shaharit* the next morning, a friend helped me put on tefillin. As I found myself joining with others in the davening, I made perhaps the most important discovery of that first Ramah morning. It became clear to me that religious searching happens most effectively in *havruta* and community.

At the end of the first month of camp, Burt Cohen, then a *rosh edah*, asked me to become a junior counselor. Moshe Tutnauer, my senior counselor, proved to be a wonderful mentor. He has remained a lifelong friend and rabbinic role model.

I began my new assignment in time to experience the power of Tish'ah Be'av at Ramah. I learned of the significance of the day at the same time I challenged my teenagers to ask their own questions of God and Jewish observance. In the evening, we gathered at the lake to listen to the chanting of *Eichab*, the Book of Lamentations. Out on the water, Hebrew letters spelling *eichab* had been affixed to a floating platform. Late in the reading of the *Eichab* text, the visual message of our people's vulnerability transfixed us as fire engulfed the Hebrew letters. By the end of that evening, I realized that religious faith must include doubt, which challenges us to question God's role in history, as well as the excitement of inspirational moments.

Before that summer, I had already made the decision to broaden my college experience by transferring to New York University. By the end of camp, my real enthusiasm for my move to New York was the thought of studying Jewish texts at The Jewish Theological Seminary. My Ramah experience propelled me on a trajectory so strong that it would lead to a lifetime of traditional Jewish observance and Jewish service through the rabbinate.

I returned to Conover in the summer of 1959 as head waiter. By that summer, I had decided to become a rabbi. I was also very much in love with Beverly Aronson, the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. I encouraged her to come to camp as a counselor. Ramah was an indispensable part of our decision to marry. It has continued to influence the Jewish life of the family we have created. Nothing captures my gratitude for my Ramah connection more than the joy Bev and I have known watching our five children in their own Ramah experiences.

Together with all of those associated with Ramah, I celebrate the courage and determination of those who first dreamed of Ramah as a way of helping to assure our Jewish future. I thank all who provided the resources for expanding the original vision to include many new camps and innovative programs that have increased commitment to Jewish life. Best of all, Ramah at sixty is a dynamic work still in progress.