

CALIFORNIA · NYACK POCONOS · WISCONSIN

RABBI RONALD LEVINE, PH.D.

Clinical psychologist, Van Nuys, California

It was Friday night, June 29, 1956—the first Shabbat of the first full summer of Camp Ramah in California. One hundred and fifty of us, probably dressed in white, sat nervously on benches in Kikkar Tziyyon, as that area of camp had been named, waiting for the *kabbalat shabbat* service to begin. The candles were lit. As we held orange-colored Shiloh siddurim in our hands, the service began. At some point during the service, a regal man strode to the small wooden lectern. I can see his face as if it were yesterday. He was Simon Greenberg, *zecher tzaddik livrachah*, then the vice chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). Pointing to the Ojai Valley to his left, he intoned, “This is the first time these hills and valleys have ever heard the sound of Jewish prayer.” At that moment

I didn't have a clue as to the significance of his statement. I do now. That was the first of the sixteen consecutive summers I spent in Ramah camps, including California, Poconos, Wisconsin, Nyack, and Ramah Israel Seminar.

I was a camper in the Machon that first summer in 1956. It was the people that I remember the best. The impressions they made on me, even at the young age of fourteen, remain with me until this day. My *rosh mahaneh* was David Lieber, z"l, president emeritus of the University of Judaism. The assistant director was Rabbi Yosef Miller. In our eyes, the staff that first summer was awesome. Indeed, many of them became legends in the Conservative Movement. The head counselor was Tzvili Yardeni, z"l. He instilled a spirit of Eretz Yisra'el that nurtures me to this day. It was not only the Hebrew that he spoke 24/7, forcing us to learn to understand; it was his presence. My counselor was Ethan Signer, who went on to become a distinguished professor at M.I.T. My *rosh machon* was Danny Greenberg, the younger son of Simon Greenberg, z"l. His wife, Hannah, was a teacher. The music counselor was Efry Spectre, z"l. The drama counselor was a Hebraist named Avrum Doryon.

Can you imagine the intensity of the Jewish experience we had? By the end of the summer, we had all but memorized the songs in the *shiron* with the green cover. I have 8 mm film, transferred first to VHS and now on DVD, of the dances we danced on the *mirpeset* in front of the *ulam* and the plays we put on in Hebrew. Many of my fellow campers that summer went on to become pioneering leaders in the Los Angeles Jewish community: Drs. David and Daniel Farkas; Dr. Steven Spiegel; Mark, Nachum, and Luis Lainer; Rabbi Joel Rembaum; Rabbi Moshe Rothblum; Milt Hyman; Marion Shapiro Schwartz; Benita Dubinsky Getzkin; Phyllis Brunner Baim; and Rena Rosenman Snyder.

I grew up in your standard "three-day-a-year" Jewish home, which was common in that generation. We belonged to Temple Beth Am, Los Angeles, California. We weren't observant. I came home from that first summer and requested that we keep a kosher home. Fortunately, my parents agreed. All of this was because that first summer at Camp Ramah in California transformed my life.

The next summer (1957), if anything, was more invigorating than the first. We were housed in a ramshackle, wooden structure nicknamed the "Beehive" because of the bees that had taken up residence prior to us. They declined to be evicted. That summer brought other luminaries to our staff. The assistant director was Chaim Potok, z"l. The *rosh machon* was Rabbi Alex Shapiro, z"l. Can you imagine the intensity of the Jewish experience we had?

In the summer of 1958, Chaim created the *bug limmud*, a six-hour-a-day study program. I was a member of that program. That summer, our instructors

were Israel Francus and Shalom Paul. I was sixteen years old and was being taught biblical and rabbinic texts by Shalom Paul and Israel Francus. Words are inadequate to describe the depth of that experience.

Summer 1959 brought yet another pioneering experience. Rabbi David Lieber, ז"ל, became the founding director of the national Mador program at Ramah in the Poconos. Eleven campers from California attended. Fellow Madorniks from other camps included Stu Kelman, Vicki Koltun Kelman, and Gail Zaiman Dorph. Shelly Dorph, a future director of National Ramah, was a junior counselor. Our teachers included Uriel Simon, ז"ל, Shmuel Leiter, ז"ל, and Deborah, ז"ל, and Bezalel "Buzzy" Porten. The level of scholarship was unparalleled. And, of course, Rabbi David Mogilner, ז"ל, was rosh maḥaneh. These are the men and women who created and nurtured my Jewish soul.

In 1960 a new director and his wife were brought to California. They would transform both my fellow campers and me and Ramah California. For the next ten years, Walter "Ackie" Ackerman and Frannie, *zichronam livrachab*, created the programs and institutions that would become unique to Camp Ramah in California. Dr. Emile Jacoby was the educational director. He installed the formal educational structure and curriculum that would last for the next thirty years. Local congregational rabbis with their wives, including Rabbi Moshe Tutnauer and Margie, Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman and Bella, Rabbi Paul Dubin and Esther, Rabbi Marvin Bornstein and Dina, were brought in to teach the staff. Scholars from the University of Judaism became frequent presenters. In the summer of 1961, the first special needs camper came to our camp, a blind camper that we all knew by his nickname, "Sparky." A special Shabbat welcoming ceremony in which the Machon lined up and sang Shabbat *zemiroth* as the younger *edot* filed into Kikkar Tziyyon for kabbalat shabbat was instituted. By the time Ackie and Frannie left at the end of summer 1969, all of the programs and institutions that characterized Camp Ramah in California were in place. And, of course, the plans for the "new camp" were just on the horizon.

During my years at JTS, Seymour Fox, ז"ל, brought together a group of young men who would become the Ramah directors of the next generation, including Daniel Margolis, Shelly Dorph, Robert Abramson, and myself. This was a remarkable period in which we studied with the Ramah directors of that era: Ray Artz, David Mogilner, ז"ל, Jerry Abrams, Donny Adelman, ז"ל, and, of course, Walter Ackerman, ז"ל. Those meetings produced the educational philosophy that would guide all the Ramah camps for a generation to come. I spent my junior year in college studying in Israel. All of my courses, including a masters class in Talmud with Rabbi Abraham Goldberg, ז"ל, were in Hebrew. I learned that Hebrew at Camp Ramah in California. I am indebted

to my counselors and teachers during that era for this invaluable gift that they gave me.

In 1970 I became the director of Ramah California. I left that position after one summer as I discovered that the higher up you go in Jewish education, the less you educate. Fundraising, a major focus and responsibility for most Ramah directors, was not what I had bargained for. I became a teacher at Los Angeles Hebrew High School under Shelly Dorph.

In 1971, I spent one more summer at Ramah, at the camp in Wisconsin, as assistant educational director to Moshe Davidson, z"l. That turned out to be the best decision I ever made in my life. I met Joyce Feinberg, from Opelika, Alabama. By the end of the summer we were engaged, and the following year we were married. It's good to go to Camp Ramah. Both of our children, Aviva and Natania, spent their childhood summers at camp and are currently on staff.

As we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, I express my heartfelt gratitude to the vision and purpose of the men and women who made Camps Ramah possible. I believe that their efforts literally saved a generation of Conservative Jews. I honor their presence and their memories.