

CALIFORNIA

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In the movies, when the hero or heroine has the defining, life-changing moment, the camera dramatically swoops in, the music swells to a crescendo, and the rain suddenly stops as birds begin to sing.

When I had my epiphany, there was no music, no singing birds, and no rain. In fact, there was a bus ride from the Los Angeles airport, a bunch of strangers, and an army tent with fifteen beds.

My family moved from Israel to Southern California when I was fifteen. Southern California is a sprawling suburbia rather than cohesive cities. The physical disconnect of the area is mirrored in its social structure. Sealed-off groups and cliques float in a sea of anomie. As a result, I felt alone.

When it came time to go to Camp Ramah in California, I expected more of the same. I could not have been more wrong. In the time it took to drive to Ojai, I met people who would become lifelong friends. Though at the time I could not articulate it, I found something that so far had eluded me in Southern California: I found people with whom I connected.

What others called arguing, we called talking. What they called pushy, we called opinion. What they called interruption, we called jazz. Conversations at Camp Ramah would often go all night, the words and ideas and possibilities so exciting that we didn't bother with something as trivial as sleep.

What I discovered at Camp Ramah was the feeling of Connection: connection to people, to ideas, to text, to culture, to activities, to history. I made it my mission to imbue the campers of Tent-10 with this power of connection. I attended Camp Ramah for ten years.

Jews are a passionate people. We may be passionate about different things, ideas, and activities, but we are passionate. Our culture gives us a shared-values base that lays a groundwork for us to connect with each other in exciting, diverse, and amazing ways.

This discovery of the power of connection and of bringing people to Judaism through their passions and interests shaped my career: from my first job as USY advisor, to Hebrew school teacher, to Director of Formal and Informal Education at Adat Ari El in Valley Village, to my current position at the American Jewish University (formerly University of Judaism and Brandeis Bardin Institute).

Based on my experience at Camp Ramah, I knew that once people experienced connection to Jewish culture through an interest or a passion, they would continue to explore and connect to other aspects of Jewish culture and community. It is my goal to help others to connect to Jewish culture and community, much as I did at Camp Ramah.