

# BERKSHIRES

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**R**amah didn't just "change my life" in the colloquial sense. It *really* changed my life in virtually every sense and every way.

My first exposure to Camp Ramah (Berkshires was and is my camp) came in 1971. I had been a very happy camper and staff member at Camp Massad Bet, having grown up in the Orthodox world before it moved so precipitously to the right. As I approached my junior year at Yeshiva University, I was dedicated to the cause of spending my junior year in Israel at the Hebrew University but needed to convince my parents that they could afford it.

My sister, who also had spent years at Massad, had left it for Ramah the year before. She told me about a program that Ramah sponsored in conjunction with the Mercaz Le'hinnuch Yehudi Batefutzot (The Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora) at the Hebrew University, headed by Dr. Michael Rozenak. If I served as a counselor at Ramah the summers before and after my junior year in Israel and took a few education courses in the Mercaz program, Ramah would pay half my tuition to Hebrew U. (at that time, half my tuition was \$500!) and a \$300 bonus to my salary when I returned from Israel.

Money was short, and I just wanted to get to Israel. My sister kept telling me what a wonderful place Ramah was so I made the move and signed onto the program.

On my first day at camp, there was a small group session for male counselors only (it was thirty-six years ago!) to discuss davening at camp. The

session was led by Dr. Saul Wachs. As if it were yesterday, I can close my eyes and remember the very first words out of his mouth: Who here has ever missed a day of putting on tefillin?

“Oh, my God,” I thought to myself. “What is he saying?” In the world that I had grown up in and was still living in, no one—and I mean *no one*—would ever ask that question. It was just assumed that you conformed to the rules and norms of the religious and ritually scrupulous life. No one talked about doubt, or ambivalence, or *keva* and *kavanah*, and the tension between them—not out loud, anyway. I knew he was talking to me. Slowly, inevitably, like a marionette, I felt my hand going up. The first sentence of the first meeting I went to at Ramah hooked me.

The rest is history. All that summer, I developed friendships with Jews the likes of whom I never knew existed—Jews who took their Judaism seriously and struggled with how to integrate it into their lives. They weren’t scared to talk about their struggle. Some observed more, some less, but all became my friends. I wound up spending that year in Israel along with many other staff members from Ramah in the Berkshires, and we all returned to camp the following summer, in love with Israel, anxious to spread the feeling, and powerfully bonded to each other.

With us that year in Israel from camp were Rabbi Eliezer Havivi, a future Ramah director, now serving a congregation in Greensboro, North Carolina; Rhonda Kahn, the director of communications for the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism; Dr. Barbara Paris, who served as camp doctor at Berkshires for many years; and there were more of us! These people are among my oldest and dearest friends. Many of us, myself included, married men and women with powerful Ramah connections themselves. My wife Robin counts her years as a camper in Palmer in the sixties as among the most important in her life, and she returned with me to work at Berkshires.

Because of Ramah’s powerful influence on my life, I couldn’t imagine not trying to “spread the magic.” When I came to The Forest Hills Jewish Center in 1981, there were two or three Ramah campers from our shul. One of the achievements of my rabbinate that I am most proud of is that for the past few years, ours consistently has been one of the two or three largest feeder congregations to Ramah in the Berkshires. New campers (and staff members, too!) from Forest Hills are discovering Ramah each and every year.

How did Ramah change my life? It’s a long and complicated story, but the simple answer is—completely—and very much for the better.