

In 1947, all Chicago area summer camps began on Monday, June 30, because in those days, the Chicago public schools finished on the last Friday in June. The old Chicago and Northwestern Railway station seemed in utter confusion that morning. Several camp participants, all destined for the Eagle River area, were leaving on the same train. My parents and I pushed through the crowds, anxiously searching for the sign “Camp Ramah.” After several minutes, we located the banner and as we approached, we were greeted with a hearty “Shalom.” I said my good-byes and at that moment, I began a journey that would not only separate me from my parents for eight weeks, but would become a dominant factor in molding the rest of my life. I had no hint then that June 30, 1947, would become a defining moment in my life.

It all began with a notice from Hebrew school that the Conservative Movement was opening a Hebrew-speaking overnight summer camp in Wisconsin. The announcement made absolutely no impression on me, but I did bring it home, unlike some of my classmates who turned the notices into paper airplanes.

Things then began to happen at a rather hectic pace. My parents became quite excited about the idea of Ramah, an educational camp with Hebrew as the spoken language. They had started me in Hebrew school at the age of seven, in 1944, during the height of World War II, when every day, thousands of Jewish children my age were being murdered by the Nazis. This is a vision that has remained with me all of my life.

I was interviewed at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, and after replying more or less correctly to a series of questions in Hebrew, I was accepted. My parents were concerned about the tuition — \$375 — an astronomical figure for a working-class family in 1947. Our synagogue, B'nai Zion in Rogers Park,

offered a \$100 scholarship, which helped, and my parents put off buying a new car until 1953. I was then officially registered as one of ninety-seven youngsters who could later claim the distinction of being a first camper at the first Ramah.

About that first summer: my counselor was Kass Abelson, a senior in rabbinical school, who was not atypical of the staff that first summer. Many were World War II veterans and in college on the GI Bill. The *edot* were given “creative” names: Edah Aleph, Edah Bet, Edah Gimel. We were, however, one camp; the basic difference was that members of Edah Aleph went to bed a few minutes earlier than Bet or Gimel. We davened together, we ate together, we swam together, and we played together. We knew everyone in camp, and the older campers were our everyday heroes and mentors.

We were asked to memorize Camp Massad’s Hebrew dictionary. Hebrew was the language of camp. English was not tolerated and if you wanted to eat, you learned! The site was beautiful, but primitive. Electricity was distributed through a not-always-dependable generator on the camp grounds. A seaplane brought movies weekly, and every light bulb—there was only one in each cabin—had to be shut off while the movie was shown.

Jenson was the first chef, and he was a tuna fish specialist every day for the first week until the kosher meat finally arrived. His helper was known as “Messy Bessy.” We survived, and the food actually improved as the summer went on. Two milk machines outside of the *badar ochel* dispensed the richest, best-tasting white and chocolate milk from America’s dairy land. No butterfat worries back in 1947! Herman Luttkes, the maintenance man who would work at camp for more than twenty years, was there from the beginning.

There seemed to be a military thread running throughout the camp, or maybe it was Boy Scout style. There was a formal flag-raising ceremony (the old version of “Hatikvah” was sung) and a rigid inspection of the cabin every day except Shabbat. Hospital corners and army surplus blankets were the order of the day! A loudspeaker system (the *ramkol*) played bugle calls for every part of the day, from wake-up to taps, followed by Hebrew messages always beginning with a loud *hakshivu, hakshivu!* Our neighbors around the lake put an end to this tradition with several complaints. They seemed very uneasy about these “strange people who spoke a foreign language and practiced a non-Christian religion.”

The list of things to bring to camp included a tennis racquet (the list was copied from Massad), so my uncle and aunt bought me a brand new racquet, which I schlepped up to camp, only to find out like everyone else that there were no tennis courts. Actually, aside from the waterfront, there wasn’t much

in the way of sports facilities, but we cleared out a pretty decent baseball field and had some great games. Every week we rowed or hiked the three miles to Bauer's Resort where we bought ice cream. Once a summer, there was a trip to Eagle River for those who earned a *resh-mem-beh* by speaking only Hebrew for seven consecutive days for at least three out of six weeks.

Indoor plumbing in each cabin was unknown. Boys and girls, counselors and specialists, all shared two bathrooms, one for males, the other for females. Hot water was unheard of for showers, and toilets were at a premium.

Shabbat eve was special with all of us wearing white. *Tefillot* at the lake were inspirational; the folk dancing after dinner was a time for everyone to participate. Shabbat day was a continuation of Friday night, with services, study, and informal recreation. *Havdalah* was a moving closing ceremony to the twenty-five-hour period that served as the high point of the week.

Tish'ah Be'av was virtually unknown to me before Ramah. I was in awe over the burning of the letters *alef, yud, kaf, hei* on the waterfront and the torches leading to the *beit am*. I recall a camper who was a Holocaust survivor, sitting in sackcloth with ashes on his head and weeping while reciting *Eichah*. Pretty powerful stuff.

It was a fabulous summer for a ten-year-old boy from Chicago. I met incredible people: rabbis who could teach Torah, swimming, and baseball; World War II veterans; and counselors preparing to go to Palestine and fight for the establishment of Eretz Yisra'el. This living laboratory of Judaism hooked me, and I returned as a camper for six consecutive summers, with each summer bringing new challenges and achievements.

The final banquet that first summer was a special moment because Camp Ramah in Wisconsin had survived its birth pangs, and we all vowed to return for the next season. Traditions were created in 1947 that survive to the present day. That evening, professor-to-be Moshe Greenberg spoke his first words of English during the entire eight weeks, as he crooned "Minnie the Moocher."

The next day, I was back in Chicago with my parents, sister, and family, but to this day a part of me always will be at Camp Ramah in Conover, Wisconsin.