

NEW ENGLAND

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I can still remember the first time I saw him. The batter stood poised at home plate, his brown hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, and the fringes of his tallit katan poking out from beneath the tie-dyed fabric of his sweaty Grateful Dead T-shirt.

I had never before seen anyone wearing tzitzit, much less anyone this cool. The guy even had an earring!

The two summers that I spent as Elliot Goldberg's camper profoundly impacted the development of my Jewish identity. The product of an involved yet unobservant family, I had never before been exposed to such institutions as kasbruth, daily prayer, and Shabbat, now an integral part of my Camp Ramah routine. I also had never before met Jews like Elliot, the rabbinical student who still went to Phish concerts, whose ability to maintain both a Jewish and a secular identity amazed me. I very much admired Elliot's passion for Judaism and his ability to transmit this passion to others. Even more, however, I was inspired by Elliot's conviction that we, too, were capable of increasing our own level of Jewish commitment.

I wrote the above paragraphs a decade ago as part of my admissions essay for the Rabbinical School at The Jewish Theological Seminary. Although there have been many important influences on my Jewish development, it is hard for me to think of another experience that caused me to grow Jewishly as much as my nine years spent at Camp Ramah in New England.

Summer camp is a magical place where days roll freer, friendships run deeper, and confidence flies higher than in the real world. Many of us know firsthand the tremendous growth that comes from being away from home for the first time, taking risks and embarking on exciting adventures, meeting new friends and role models, and growing into a more rooted sense of self. Many of us also remember the tremendous fun of sleep-away camp—whispered late-night conversations by flashlight, s'mores, scavenger hunts and heated *yom sport* competitions, dances, *etgar* (outdoor adventure programs), and the incredible calm of Shabbat following a week jam-packed with activity. As one of my former bunkmates used to say, “Home is a nice place to be while waiting for camp.”

Now a rabbi myself, I have the privilege of visiting our congregation's campers each summer—not at the New England location of my youth but rather at Ramah Poconos, where the same smells of fresh air and shampoo, sounds of Hebrew slang and pop music, tastes of *hadar ochel* food, and ice cream from the stand down the road bring me instantly back to the summer joy of my adolescent self.

Home is a nice place to be while waiting for camp, indeed.