

CALIFORNIA-POCONOS

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Ramah and United Synagogue Youth (USY) have both played incredibly important roles in shaping my Jewish identity, fostering the development of lifelong friendships, and influencing the core values I cherish as a professional in the Jewish community. I was a camper at Ramah Ojai in the early 1980s and a *rosh edah* in the 1990s. Since arriving in the greater Philadelphia area in 1996 as a congregational rabbi, I have visited or spent part of each summer at Ramah in the Poconos.

My oldest friends to this day are my USY and Ramah friends. And my relationships with many of my closest adult friends were forged at camp. I love the outdoors. I love being away from the phone, cell phone, email, and TV. I love the richness of the Jewish environment. And I love the fact that I am the guy who can teach Talmud and pray enthusiastically wearing tefillin, yet still play basketball with campers and staff alike! That's why my wife Jody (a registered nurse [RN] at camp—more valuable than any rabbi) and I went to camp even before our kids were able to be in a *tzerif*. We wanted to give them the “kibbutz” experience and have it become an integral part of their identities.

My USY and Ramah experiences helped me to grow professionally. My work as a rosh edah at Ramah was probably the best hands-on training I received for my career as a congregational rabbi. I am grateful to Rabbi Ed Feinstein for encouraging me to come to camp in that role. As a rosh edah, one is responsible 24/7 for the physical, spiritual, and educational well-being of a community. I learned how to manage a staff of counselors, motivate a group of campers, resolve conflicts large and small, and work with a team of other dedicated Jewish leaders on the *hanhalah*. The skills and work values I developed at camp remain with me to this day. My USY experiences also played an important role in cultivating my program development and planning skills.

As a congregational rabbi, I have seen firsthand the positive influence of USY and Ramah experiences on the families who send their children to these identity-forming experiences. There is no doubt (as every study shows) that children who attend Jewish summer camps such as Ramah and participate in informal youth groups are more engaged, more educated, and more committed Jews. These kids and their families take on leadership roles, attend *tefillah* more regularly, and support the congregation fully. In this way, I am constantly reminded of the powerful impact that USY and Ramah has had—and continues to have—on the Jewish people.