

As someone who did not grow up spending summers at Camp Ramah in California, it took me a while to understand the deep connection that former campers and staff members feel for this remarkable place. In my generation, we still speak of the “old” Ramah and the “new” one. Of course, at this point, the “new” camp is well over thirty years old. But it was the “old” Ramah that I encountered as a young Hebrew school teacher accompanying his class on a weekend outing. Frankly, I was not too impressed with what I saw at the time. The “old” camp was quite run down, and I was not aware that plans were already in the works to build an entirely new facility.

Soon I was off to New York and three years more of rabbinical school at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), where I learned about the existence of a Ramah movement. I soon came to understand that this confederation of camps was arguably the greatest success of the Conservative Movement

and the most powerful and influential camping phenomenon in the country. I started hearing about Ramah venues with exotic names like the Poconos; the Berkshires; Nyack, New York; and Conover, Wisconsin. Many of my fellow JTS students had made the decision to enter rabbinical school or become teachers of Judaica because of experiences at their own Camp Ramah.

When I returned to the University of Judaism (UJ), now the American Jewish University (AJU), in 1977, I became aware of AJU's longstanding connection with Ramah of California. I heard about how the camp came to be founded by the leaders of our university and of the deep emotional connection felt by my colleagues to this special Jewish world in Ojai. During my very first year at UJ, I was sent on a week-long whirlwind tour of four Ramah camps to recruit students for the UJ. With my own eyes, I saw the fabled Ramah camps in the Poconos, in New England, in Canada, and in Wisconsin. These were very lively places with long traditions associated with spending a summer at Camp Ramah.

As our own children grew, they began to spend time at Ramah California whenever I was invited there as a speaker. Our three oldest children all had Ramah experiences of varying types, but it was our youngest, Daniella, who became what I like to call a Ramah "lifer." A Ramah "lifer" is a boy or girl whose entire childhood and connection with Judaism are shaped by Camp Ramah; who considers school just something one does to pass the time between summers at Camp Ramah. With each passing year at Ramah, Daniella's group of Ramah friends grew larger and larger—and so did our telephone bills. But we were thrilled that our daughter was beginning to expand her friendship group to include girls (and the occasional boy) from outside the Los Angeles area. Then came Ramah Seminar in Israel, and the friendship network became truly national in scope.

Since we are in Israel every summer, we saw Daniella a few times while she was on Seminar. We could not have been more impressed by the remarkable planning that goes into this experience. Every activity, every detail of each day, is carefully constructed for maximum impact on the participants. This was, by no means, Daniella's first trip to Israel, but it was certainly the first trip to Israel when "she got it." Thanks to Ramah, she began to comprehend the importance of her connection to the Jewish homeland.

Admittedly, Ramah may not be for everyone. Camp Ramah continues to be serious about its dedication to Jewish ritual, to Jewish culture, and to Jewish education. And precisely for this reason, we may rely on Ramah to continue providing the synagogue community, the Jewish Federations, and a host of other American Jewish organizations with its future leaders and activists. Camp Ramah at sixty remains one of the single most impressive examples

of the successful transmission of Jewish values and a commitment to Jewish tradition.