

BERKSHIRES · NYACK · POCONOS

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I spent most of my summers during that wonderful decade, the 1960s, at Camp Ramah — or better, Camps Ramah: the Poconos, Nyack, Israel Seminar, back to Poconos for Mador, and then three summers at Ramah in the Berkshires, where I ended my Ramah career as *segan rosh machon*. As for so many others, Ramah was a life-shaping experience for me. Most important, I met my wife there. *Dayyenu*. But all the other clichés were true as well: Ramah sustained me during high school when few of my fellow students shared my interests and concerns. I was fortunate to live in the New York metropolitan area, where I could see my Ramah friends fairly regularly at regional Hebrew high school, Leaders Training Fellowship (LTF), at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and by hopping the train down to Philly. My Jewish knowledge and skills received a huge boost. And, as I moved from camper to staff member, I had some of my first experiences as a “Jewish educator” — and learned to take that role seriously (thank you, Schwab, Havighurst, et al.).

I left Ramah when I began graduate school and rabbinical school at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (why not at JTS is another story), but I’ve always felt pride in having been part of what I consider to be one of the singular successes of American Jewish education. I display my framed bunk picture from 1961 in my office. And, even though neither of my children really clicked with Ramah, I would recommend it without hesitation to any family that wants to deepen and enrich its Jewish life in manifold ways.

As I look back on my years at Ramah, I do so with more than nostalgia because the longer I have been involved in Jewish education, the more I have come to appreciate what I learned at Ramah about what good Jewish education can and should be. In many ways, just as the people I met at Ramah became a central part of my life, so too the Jewish education that I encountered at Ramah has become a source of inspiration for my professional thinking. As a camper,

counselor, and assistant division head, I learned three key lessons that I've carried with me over the course of now nearly forty years of work as an educator.

First, doing is an incredibly powerful way of learning. At Camp Ramah, we had formal classes. Yet, the most important learning took place in the bunks and on the ball fields, celebrating Shabbat, and singing our voices hoarse. Everyone today knows that the power of Jewish camping is due in a large measure to its ability to create a total living environment. Camp is a place brimming with activity. No one can be a spectator at camp. We learn what we live and what we do.

Second, we need to educate the whole person, not just the Jewish part. I remember the late Chaim Potok, my division head one summer, pressing us as we assigned campers to various activity groups to think about what each camper needed in order to develop as an individual and as a member of the camp community. I've come to appreciate his insistence that such decisions were central to our mission and that we not take them lightly. Jewish education is more than mastering texts. It is about all the things that camps teach, the things that make us accomplished, confident, caring, responsible persons.

Third, relationships matter most—relationships with dynamic teachers and with peers. The bottom line is that people are inspired by other people to change and grow. I was privileged to have some great counselors, teachers, and mentors at Ramah—individuals who opened my eyes to understand Jewish tradition, the world, and myself in new, more complex, more challenging ways. They literally helped me grow from a child to an adult.

I have no doubt that my life was changed by my years at Camp Ramah. Ramah is one of the great achievements of successive generations of leaders and of North American Jewry as a whole. May it stay vigorous and continue to grow. *Yom huledet sameah.* Till a hundred and twenty (at least).