

Environmental Education in the Ramah Camps

By Julie Berger with Adi Segal, September 2009

All Ramah camps create “havens” in nature, and enforce certain rules that help our camp communities build “a world apart” from the busy and virtual-reliant worlds of the rest of the year: no cell phones, no e-mail access, or video games, with very limited access to televisions or DVD players. While these rules, or “nos,” may make camp seem old fashioned in one light, they go hand in hand with many of our camping movement’s most resounding yeses – yes to campfires, yes to swimming and boating, yes to looking at the stars, yes to laying on blankets with friends, and yes to the observance of Shabbat. Together, these yeses and nos create a wonderful haven in which the ruling principles can be Jewish living, social interaction and cooperation, with a great emphasis on a love of nature and the outdoors.

We treasure this camp-of-olde lifestyle, cherishing the break from the buzz and business of the modern world. Yet it is this third pillar – outdoor education – that has also led us to the cutting edge of one of our nation’s most pressing issues: “going green” and finding new methods of sustainable living. Each of our Ramah camps has risen to the call of greening, remodeling old systems, refreshing outdoor spaces, and re-imagining the potential of untapped resources. This recent “going green” initiative is a natural extension of a principle that has thrived in our camps for years – the importance of “seeing green,” experiencing nature up close and wedding those encounters to our touchstone of Jewish living.

Each Ramah camp uses a variety of programming to teach *chanichim* (campers) about the connection between nature and Judaism. *Teva* (nature) activities focus on building outdoors skills while making both spiritual and textual ties. Gabe Greenberg, of Ramah Palmer, describes this bridging of the practical and the conceptual, explaining that in “fire making, we discuss the presence of fire in Jewish ritual and the Torah; and in much of our gardening curriculum we relate to Jewish agricultural practices from biblical and rabbinic eras.” To further bring their camp curricula to life, eighth graders at Ramah New England, Darom, and Berkhsires, venture out of camp to local farms to participate in community supported agriculture, enacting the lessons of caring for the land they learn in their *shiurim* (classes). Similarly, the ninth grade “Judaism and the environment” curriculum at Ramah Poconos takes shape at the top of mountains, as *chanichim*-turned-expert-backpackers look down onto valleys and lakes and *daven* (pray) *mincha* together.

At all our camps, younger *edot* (age groups) begin this process of connection to the outdoors with camp-outs in and around camp. The seeds of interest and knowledge planted in the younger *edot* bloom into application as our older *chanichim* take on greater challenges, with each camp offering an exciting array of outdoor adventures, ranging from kayaking, rock climbing, and mountain biking to white water rafting and caving. These trips provide the color inside the lines of our teaching of Jewish text-based environmentalism. Rainbows, sunsets, and storms become not only impressive sites to behold, but opportunities to say special *brachot* (blessings) on the trails. Such programs have stretched across our Ramah camping movement for years, giving *chanichim* a new appreciation for the world in which they live.

Within these already established frameworks of environmental education and interaction, each camp worked to integrate more eco-friendly efforts in the 2008 summer, with even more planned for summer 2009. Ramah Berkshires, under the leadership of Columbia University/List College student Adi Segal, in 2008 launched the Green Camp Initiative, a program of environmental awareness and ecological responsibility. The goal of the program was two-fold: to make the infrastructure of camp “greener” and to engage *chanichim* in the process. To meet the first goal of the program, Ramah Berkshires took on such changes as switching from its old lighting system to compact fluorescent light bulbs, and from disposable plastic cups to more environmentally-sound paper cone cups. In addition, a new recycling program was implemented. To match these successes with camper engagement, *tzevet* (staff) began by hanging a flyer Segal created in each bathroom stall, entitled “10 Helpful Hints to Make Your Camp Greener.” Every *edah* participated in a green-themed Shabbat, as well as a *Yom Meyuchad* (special-programming day) dedicated to green education. The greater goal of such programming within the camp framework is to influence the lifestyle choices of our *chanichim* during the year. Segal sums it up perfectly when he says that these changes are “not just an infrastructure change for camp, but a lifestyle change for everyone.”

Over the last year the National Ramah Commission took on the **Green Camp Initiative** (GCI) as a movement-wide initiative, hiring Adi Segal to discuss infrastructure changes with representatives of all Ramah camps. Current efforts include supporting camps in their efforts to institutionalize recycling programs, implement awareness campaigns, and develop educational material for use during the summer. A **National Green Team**, with representatives from each camp, has been created to further these efforts and explore future programs in the camps. Material have already been developed and are available for use in all camps.

Many of the camps have taken significant steps to become greener. The local maintenance crew at Ramah Canada rebuilt the faltering boys’ shower house using 90 percent recycled materials, and Ramah Poconos recently switched to more efficient Insta-hot water heaters in its kitchen. Both Ramah Palmer and Poconos implemented composting programs last summer, wherein *chanichim* dispose food waste in separate receptacles after meals that is later composted. Other moves to cut down on waste in the *Hadar Ochel* (dining hall) include the switching to reusable cereal containers at Ramah Poconos, donating unused bread to a local food bank at Ramah Canada, and using reusable plastic cups instead of paper cups at Ramah Wisconsin. The return on these changes has been concrete: Ramah Wisconsin saved 190,000 paper cups in summer 2008 because of its switch, as well as 50,000 plastic bowls as the result of a switch from individual-serve bowls to bulk cereal boxes. Down south, Ramah Darom enlisted its oldest *edah* to create a full recycling center in camp, and created a sustainability “major” for 10th graders, an organic farming program in which they grow vegetables to be used in the *Hadar Ochel*. In a few of the camps the environmental initiatives have also seeped into *omanut* (art class), where *chanichim* make reusable shopping bags and recycled sculpture.

Such expansive initiatives have given our *chanichim* the opportunity to literally dig their hands into the greening movement. Other moves have also been aimed at helping them gauge the impact of their own actions. Ramah Darom gave each *edah* a “green challenge,” such as timing their showers, in order to trigger water conservation. Cornerstone fellows at Ramah Canada and Teva staff at Berkshires periodically collected the food left over at the end of meals in a clear

bin, to show *chanichim* the amount of waste they produced; at the following meal, they again collected the food waste, with the goal of bringing the level of waste down.

Promising projects and initiatives aim to further the eco-friendly developments already in action. Ramah Berkshires, Darom, and Palmer, each hope to use food grown in their own gardens or nearby farms, giving *chanichim* a sensitivity to where their food comes from. Darom also hopes to provide its own eggs by building a chicken coup, which will function as part of the *teva* program. Some of our camps are having outside companies conduct energy audits of their campuses, which will lead to further recommendations. Ramah Poconos has linked to the Environmental Protection Agency, with the aim of bringing even more of the EPA's greening building initiatives into its camp, and Ramah Berkshires has received grant money from Sparkseed to further its Green Camp Initiative.

In 2006, Camp Ramah in California inaugurated its Solar Energy Project by installing panels that will produce 30-kilowatt of clean energy on the roof of the chadar ochel - the Gindi Dining Hall. The system, donated by Ramah alum and parent, Dr. David Braun, is the first of a 3-stage effort to bring solar power to Ramah. This great new addition will save the camp more than \$30K in annual energy costs, will prevent thousands of pounds of harmful gases from entering the environment and will be a teaching tool for educating thousands of Ramah campers about the Jewish imperative to take care of God's world.

Finally, as the latest addition to Ramah camping, Ramah Outdoor Adventure offers a specialized program completely dedicated to Jewish education and the Ramah mission through outdoor adventure. It's the only program in the country that focuses not only on intense outdoor adventure, but on having campers return for multiple summers to give them the full Ramah/community building experience. Moreover, with its minimal infrastructure on the site and campers and staff spending most of their time in the backcountry (with reusable equipment), Ramah Outdoors is by far the "greenest" camp.

As with all our programs at Ramah, each camp has taken on the challenge of not only adding green programs, but weaving them together with Jewish values and Jewish living. The science and technology of the secular greening movement is interpreted through the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *tikkun olam* – giving back to the world. Just as we teach our *chanichim* to bring Shabbat and *kashrut* home by living them at camp, we are now on a parallel road to teach them tools of living sustainably that they can carry with them. Yet, we are only at the beginning of this road. Our camps are all located in strikingly beautiful areas, alive with the sounds, sites, and colors of nature, and we are committed to traveling further down this road with our paintbrushes of change and innovation, adding even more green into our treasured summer homes.