

A special arrival and first day in Jerusalem

Ramah Wisconsin Tikvah grads travel to Israel

RABBI ELYSE WINICK

Ten of the 17 travelers on this year's Taglit-birthright Israel trip for young adults with Asperger's Syndrome were graduates of the **Ramah Wisconsin Tikvah Program**. This trip was organized through the cooperative efforts of **KOACH, Hillel, Taglit-birthright Israel** and Ramah Wisconsin. The following is excerpted from an email written by **Rabbi Elyse Winick**, associate director of KOACH, who accompanied the group and provided families and friends back home with daily updates about the group's travels.

We are finally here!! After multiple delays on the ground and even in the air, our group has arrived, safe, sound and cheerful. They were real troopers under circumstances which would make a seasoned traveler chafe. Arriving late on Wednesday, we checked into the Shalom Hotel, our base for the next several nights, in time for dinner and well-earned rest. In addition to **Rose Sharon**, co-director of the Ramah Wisconsin Tikvah Program, who is overseeing the program, our group is staffed by Wisconsin Tikvah staff members **Lior Baruch, Emilie Botbol, Ari Gleicher** and **Tal Michaelis**. (**Rabbi Jonathan Schnitzer** made a surprise appearance to say hello, too.) **D'ror Kidron** of Israel is serving as their very gentle and able tour educator.

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Bright and early they joined the other KOACH group for *Shaharit* at the Haas Promenade, overlooking Jerusalem. Marvelous and uplifting davening followed two parallel siddurim, *Siddur Sim Shalom* and the siddur of the Ramah Wisconsin Tikvah Program. The seamless calling of pages led to a truly inclusive davening. In the daily journal, one student wrote: "This was the best service I ever went to. No one made me feel stupid and I even got to put on tefillin for the first time." For us on the staff, these are days of smiles and tears.

Following *Shaharit*, the group descended the mountain to tour the Old City of Jerusalem, a breathtaking experience for everyone. They seem to know all the answers to the obscure historical trivia questions D'ror asks and they soak up new information with a beautiful thirst. Visiting the Kotel, two girls commented that as they touched the wall they felt a direct connection to the past.

It was a full and exhilarating day. After dinner, those who liked were able to participate in a discussion with **Dr. David Mendelsson** of Hebrew University, learning about the current political situation. The rest made an early night of it, preparing for another day's adventures tomorrow.

It is glorious here in Jerusalem, even though the air is filled with winter's chill. And we can think of nowhere better to be.



An image from Camp Yofi

Ramah Darom's inspiring program serves families with children with autism

RABBI LOREN SYKES

In Summer 2005, **Ramah Darom** established **Camp Yofi**, a five-day family camp for 20 families of Jewish children with autism. Ramah Darom's executive director, **Rabbi Loren Sykes**, was recognized by the **Covenant Foundation** for Darom's work with this innovative program.

It is Shabbat afternoon at the Mar'gam, the lake-side pavilion at Ramah Darom. A light rain falls on the lake as the geese swim along, undisturbed. Everyone watches as Zeev approaches the bimah. Zeev reads his bar mitzvah speech, written with the help of his mother, adorned in a tallit hand-woven by his mother. His father smiles broadly. Zeev's mother reads one word in Hebrew, from the *Ashrei*, and then Zeev repeats the word, leading the entire congregation. It is not silent during the service; in fact, there is a cacophony of talking, singing, shouting, sometimes in sentences, sometimes just fragments. Nobody blinks nor glares nor gives a "shush;" there is an understanding that these seemingly random voices are the voices of God on earth, to be shouted and not silenced, to be loved and not rejected. There are free flowing tears throughout the service.

A year ago, I watched a conversation between Zeev's father and another parent. They were participating in a seminar about bar mitzvah ceremonies for children with autism. One parent expressed fear that her son might never be able to have a bar mitzvah. Zeev's father looked that parent in the eye and said, "If all Zeev can do is say the one word of *Shema*, that will



be enough and that will be his bar mitzvah!" The other parent melted, sank to the couch in the Mercaz Aryeh and cried. I did not ask why. I did not have to. I just understood.

We have images of what the bar mitzvah is "supposed to be." If a child does not fit that mold, then we feel—or worse, are led to believe—that they cannot have such a ceremony, that we cannot joyously mark the level of "adulthood" that they have reached, that they are somehow inferior. The truth is that a child turns bar or bat mitzvah on a specific birthday. The ceremony, an invention, can and should therefore be

Twelve inspiring days

New England Tikvah trip to Israel

A dozen members of the **Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England** and their chaperones visited Israel from December 20, 2006 – January 3, 2007. **Howard Blas**, director of Ramah New England's Tikvah Program, expressed his feelings about this special experience.



"The trip was a dream come true. This was my third Tikvah Ramah Israel trip, and the 10th trip to Israel in the history of our Tikvah Program. We enjoyed seeing places of historical significance, davening in so many different places—the Kotel, outside of our guest houses in the Negev and Galil, and at different synagogues, purchasing souvenirs for ourselves and friends, and supporting the Israeli economy. But, most of all, we enjoyed seeing our many Israeli friends. Our group was like a magnet, and the Israelis were like iron filings — drawn to us everywhere we went. I am pleased that our campers and program alumni (age range: 17-31) felt comfortable in Israel and will return to their homes, schools and communities as great *shlichim* and *hasbara* members for Israel."

RAMAH BERKSHIRES BREIRA B'RAMAH PROGRAM

Breira B'Ramah at **Camp Ramah in the Berkshires** is a system of supports provided to campers with learning and social challenges. Breira campers are able to participate and benefit from all aspects of the Ramah experience. Each child's Breira program is unique and depends on his or her individual needs. Campers enrolled in the Breira B'Ramah program are supported by counselors and specialists in camp who receive training and supervision by a licensed psychologist. Over the years, the presence of Breira at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires has changed the camp community in its acceptance of individual differences and its awareness that we are all created *B'Tzelem Elokim* (in God's image).

what is appropriate to the child with autism, not to some ritual committee standard. But realizing that, for the parent, for the committee, for the clergy, for the community, is far from simple or obvious. If it were, there would be no need for Camp Yofi.

We return to *Aleinu*, standing in the Mar'gam, watching Zeev exceed expectations, his smile from cheek to cheek, read a *Devar Torah*, stand and be blessed. We cry with pride embracing Zeev, his radiant smile, and Zeev's family as our own. The rain, which Zeev loves, stops just long enough for all of us to walk to the *hadar ochel* for *se'udah shelishit*, the third Shabbat meal, where a bar mitzvah cake and celebration awaits.