



National Ramah Commission, Inc.

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משרד המנהל

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To: Ramah Leadership
From: Rabbi Mitch Cohen
Date: January 9, 2004/15 Tevet 5764
Re: Weinstein Institute/NAA Conference

Overview

I have just returned from a wonderfully inspiring Ramah experience in Orlando, Florida. For the Weinstein Institute, our annual National Ramah-sponsored training program for counselors from each of the Ramah camps, we brought together 60 counselors representing all seven overnight camps and the Nyack Day Camp. These counselors, some of the best young people in the Ramah movement, were treated to a free trip to a resort hotel in sunny Orlando for four intensive days of learning, training, program sharing, and some relaxation.

We decided to run the Weinstein Institute in Orlando this year to coincide with the annual conference of the NAA (The North American Alliance of Jewish Youth), the eight-year-old international umbrella organization for all institutions of informal Jewish education. This conference has grown each year since its inception in 1996, and this year's conference included 350 informal Jewish educators, including leaders from the world of Jewish camping, Jewish youth groups, Israel experiences, and officials from the Jewish Agency.

Running the Weinstein Institute at the same time and venue of the NAA conference had many advantages:

1. The majority of Ramah directors and assistant directors were together, spending some time training the Ramah counselors and beginning important summer planning, and some time interacting and sharing ideas with other members of the Jewish camping field. With so much on the calendar, it is rare that many Ramah leaders are able to participate in the NAA conference.
2. Our counselors were able to join a few NAA sessions, and this gave these university students both a window into the growing field of informal Jewish education as a potential rewarding career path, as well as access to some dynamic teachers of informal education.
3. Our tefilot attracted the participation of various NAA conference participants from the Conservative Movement, including Jules Gutin, National Director of USY and other youth leaders.
4. Since we "piggy-backed" on the NAA's logistical arrangements, we were able to get a nice resort hotel and very high quality kosher catering for reasonable prices.
5. This year we nominated Rabbi Sheldon Dorph to receive the NAA's annual Lifetime Achievement Award, and it was impressive indeed to award this to Shelly not only in the presence of 350 colleagues from other educational settings, but with most of the Ramah Directorate and 60 young Ramah staff members cheering enthusiastically and honoring Shelly for his 14 years of leadership of Ramah.

At the final session of the Weinstein Institute, the participants evaluated the program, and in general were very appreciative of this experience, and expressed the feeling that they were uplifted Jewishly and ready to attend camp with more ideas and renewed enthusiasm. They emphasized, in particular, how wonderful it was to spend quality time with their own camp directors, outside of the intense environment of camp. Equally important, the Ramah directors and assistant directors shared invaluable time together further developing individual relationships and increasing a sense of common purpose among us all.

Educational Content of the Weinstein Institute

Each group of counselors met by camp, with their director(s), for a number of sessions throughout the Institute. During these meeting times directors began summer planning, used their groups as think tanks for important camp issues, and continued the training on the themes discussed in general sessions. Some directors also used this time for individual conversations with each staff member.

In addition to spending time in camp groups, movement-wide counselor training sessions were designed to inspire the participants Jewishly and to further train them as counselors for the upcoming summer. To enable the directors to participate in NAA sessions, we brought three excellent young Ramah educators to lead most of these breakout discussion groups – Debbie Cohen, former Rosh Edah and Program Director at Canada Ramah, now teaching Jewish Studies at a day school in Toronto; Michael Schwab, a JTS rabbinical student and Davidson School of Education student, and veteran of many years as rosh edah from Poconos Ramah; and Dani Gray, Davidson School student, Ramah Darom rosh edah and program director, and currently working in our NRC office. All three were terrific. There were three specific areas for group discussion: analyzing the Zionist mission of Ramah; reviewing Ramah movement-wide standards for counselor behavior throughout a camp day; and sharing program ideas among the camps.

The Zionist mission of Ramah – In five sessions, counselors first analyzed the aspects of Ramah that connect us with Israel, and discussed the conceptual connections and interdependencies among Hebrew usage, shlichim in camp, Israel programming in camp, and the Ramah Israel Seminar. Next they worked on drafting a mission statement about Zionism at Ramah, all agreeing that Ramah must be identified as a Zionist camp and we should market this more to the public. I then spoke to the counselors about their experiences on university campus, sharing Natan Sharansky’s fears about the growing wave of anti-Israel and anti-semitic sentiment on campus, and charging them with the responsibility of becoming more educated and vocal themselves. I handed out Israel advocacy materials which could help in this process, and we agreed to continue an on-line conversation where Ramah could help support efforts on campus to support the legitimacy of Israel’s existence and her decades-long quest for peace.

Counselor’s Daily Routine – Looking at a 1960’s vintage document written by former Ramah leader Rabbi David Mogilner entitled “The Counselor’s Daily Routine,” the counselors in small groups worked on updating these standards, which in some cases simply requires 21st century language, and in some cases the standards themselves were analyzed and debated. Consensus was sought for the most basic of activities such as how best to wake up campers at Ramah, how counselors should act at meals, and the role of the bunk counselor during the Ramah program day. (One fascinating debate took place over the statement by Mogilner that “each counselor

must ensure that all campers have food before eating themselves.” While some agreed, many admitted to not following this, and some even argued that this was outdated and no longer realistic or necessary.) Interesting similar discussions took place over other aspects of the counselor’s role.

Program Sharing – Counselors, in three groups based upon the age of the campers they worked with in 2003, explained some of the outstanding programs that took place at camp, and wrote up details for inclusion in the ever-growing National Ramah On-Line Program Bank. Counselors exchanged programmatic ideas for peulot erev, Shabbat programming, bunk programs and tefilah.

Learning from the Directors

Each Director and Assistant Director had the opportunity to teach the entire group, enabling everyone to be exposed to the high level of educational leadership throughout the movement. Each director found a unique and creative way to teach about leadership and/or Zionism, and the counselors clearly gained a great deal from these sessions. Rabbi David Soloff (Wisconsin) spent some time explaining aspects of the history of Ramah, emphasizing the importance of strong lay-professional relationships, and giving credit to many of the great visionaries that gave educational guidance and financial support to the creation of Ramah in Wisconsin in 1947. He pointed out that many of these leaders had the foresight to understand that rather than create a number of individual camps called Ramah, we would be stronger as a national movement coordinated by the National Ramah Commission. He singled out Bert Weinstein and Louis Winer for praise in this regard, as their vision and funding led to the creation of this Weinstein Institute as well as the Winer Institute for rosh edah training, which takes place each May.

Other directors taught as follows:

-Michael Wolf (Canada) – mishnaic and hasidic texts teaching about the power of excellent leadership. By creatively using traditional texts to make critical points relevant to the role of counselor, Michael was able to demonstrate the relevance and meaning of Ramah.

-Sally Rosenfield (New England) – a beautiful story about leadership and the power to create change. Many counselors asked to get a copy of this story, as they were moved by its message and applicability to Ramah.

-Rabbi Paul Resnick (Berkshires) – taught a poem by Yehuda Amichai set in the Old City during Yom Kippur 1967, evoking many creative and emotional responses from counselors.

-Amy Cooper (Nyack) – quoting Rabbi Avi Weiss, spoke about the need for all us to be passionately involved in Israel activism. She also introduced a fascinating short film documenting the lives of a group of young Israeli high school graduates participating in an experimental pre-army program integrating left and right wing, religious and secular Israeli youth, all of whom are faced with the new reality of increased terrorism in Israel.

-Rabbi Daniel Greyber (California) – taught a beautiful song to the group, encouraging all to use this for putting campers to bed, highlighting the importance of making our campers feel safe and cared for as the key to excellent counseling. Also taught a Talmudic text on the student-teacher relationship.

-Rabbi Todd Zeff (Poconos) – Before birkat hamazon at one meal, handed out a new pocket-sized sheet of brachot produced in partnership between Ramah Poconos and the Philadelphia Region of USY. Spoke to the counselors about the obligation and beauty of blessing God for our gifts in life.

Geoff Menkowitz (Darom) - At tefilot, taught a moving song with the lyrics from our Amida asking God to return to Jerusalem, emphasizing the longing for Zion among Jews for 2000 years. Rabbi Josh Cohen (Wisconsin) – Through a d’var tefilah explained the prayer we say each morning thanking God for the proper functioning of our bodies, pointing out the Ramah educational principle that every moment of the day can be used for teaching. Rabbi Amy Roth (Berkshires) – presented a text from the Zionist thinker Ahad Ha’am demonstrating that Israel is truly the center of world Jewry. This set the stage for our later discussions about the centrality of Israel in our lives.

In addition to the Ramah directors, we also asked Dr. Shelly Dorph to lead a session, and he presented a wonderful analysis of ten specific situations in camp which demonstrate excellent counseling.

Joint Session with the NAA

For the Monday morning session, the NAA hired Michael Brandwein, a nationally-known speaker on informal education and building self esteem. For this session, all the Ramah directors and counselors joined the 350 NAA participants. For three hours Mr. Brandwein taught us new techniques in leading and teaching, all geared toward creating deeper and more meaningful relationships with young people, and especially emphasizing how to make a positive difference in others’ lives. The counselors reacted positively to this session, and we all firmly believe that the key to excellent counseling at Ramah begins with creating caring relationships with all our campers.

The counselors at the Weinstein Institute also joined together with the NAA for the awards dinner (mentioned above) on Tuesday night. In addition to the Lifetime Achievement Award given to Shelly Dorph, two younger educators (one from the Reform Movement, and one working with Brandies University’s Department of Informal Jewish Education) also received awards, and made powerful acceptance speeches emphasizing their extraordinary satisfaction with careers in informal education.

At the conclusion of this awards dinner, the Ramah counselors joined with the NAA for an evening of singing and dancing, featuring the music of Rick Recht and Dan Nichols. While it became clear that the songs sung at BBYO camps or Reform camps or Young Judea camps all differ considerably from the repertoire of Ramah songs, it became equally clear that the ruach and the intensity of emotion shared by all Jewish camps is one of our most powerful tools for inspiring the next generation.

The “Industry” of Jewish Camping

While the Ramah counselors were going through much of their training sessions, the directors had the opportunity to attend sessions of the NAA. Many of these sessions focused on the emerging field of Informal Jewish Education, and we had the opportunity to hear from Dr. Joe Reimer, the leader of Brandies University’s Center for Informal Jewish Education, as well as from others in the field.

The staff of the Foundation for Jewish Camping was at the conference, and with their help we continue to grow and develop the “industry” of Jewish camping. At one session for all professionals involved in the leadership of Jewish camps, Rabbi Ramie Arian, outgoing Executive Director of the Foundation for Jewish Camping, presented a cogent argument for the

need for more scientific research which will prove what we all know: that intensive Jewish camping is one of the most important experiences in North America for fostering increased Jewish commitment among young people.

Dr. Amy Sales, one of the researchers in this field from Brandeis' Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, presented some of the findings from her recent book, "How Goodly are Thy Tents" - Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences, which she co-authored with Leonard Saxe. Dr. Sales was involved in the analysis of data from the 2000 National Jewish Population Study, and presented to us some data on the effects of Jewish camping, which led to a lively discussion.

Jewish Agency for Israel

Many of the key leaders from the Jewish Agency came to this conference, including personnel from the Division of Summer Shlichim and from their Department of Education, which funds various initiatives for Ramah and other organizations. Elan Ezrahi, Deputy Director of this Department, presented to the conference the recent initiative of the Israeli government to set aside millions of dollars to bring more North American young adults to Israel for long term programs, semester-length or a full year program.

I participated on a panel discussing the current state of Israel programs, as there is a current trend for much greater enrollment in many of the organizations, including Ramah. We analyzed why this is occurring, how critical Israel experiences are for Jewish education in North America, and what we need to do to increase the numbers, notwithstanding the continued terrorism.

Summary

If anyone doubts the commitment of our young staff members to Ramah, to Israel, or to Judaism, one needs only to attend a Weinstein Institute to gain great inspiration.

-It was inspiring to be at tefilot each day with 60 counselors and the directors, a large majority of whom were singing loudly, davening with kavannah, and participating actively.

-It was inspiring to see both a thirst for new programmatic and counseling ideas among these counselors, as well as a willingness to share excellent ideas from throughout the movement.

-It was inspiring to see such high levels of Ramah commitment from university students from throughout North America, representing so many different communities and different camps, all united under the banner of Ramah.

All the counselors filled out evaluation forms at the end of the Weinstein Institute. In the words of one of the counselors, "I had an awesome time meeting people from other Ramah camps, learning lots of new ideas for peulot at camp, and especially being able to spend great time with my camp director. I only wish camp was sooner!"

I look forward to many more similar opportunities in the coming years.