

# Camp Ramah in the Poconos Starts Program for Children with Special Needs

---

**JE** [jewishexponent.com/2016/08/03/camp-ramah-in-the-poconos-starts-program-for-children-with-special-needs/](http://jewishexponent.com/2016/08/03/camp-ramah-in-the-poconos-starts-program-for-children-with-special-needs/)

8/3/2016

The new Tikvah Residential Program creates a more inclusive camp experience for children with special needs as well as their neurotypical siblings.

When kids in the new Tikvah program at Camp Ramah in the Poconos perform in a talent show, it's not just singing and dancing — though there's plenty of that. They also showcase some pretty singular skills and abilities.

Take Gavi, one of the members of the program, which started this summer and serves campers with disabilities between ages 12 and 18. Gavi can tell you the day of the week you were born just by learning your birthdate.

Then there's Natan, who can dismantle and reassemble a fluorescent light bulb.

They both performed in the talent show a couple weeks ago. Campers quizzed Gavi about their birthdays, and Natan did his bit with the fluorescent light. When he plugged it in and it lit up, he threw his hands in the air and the other campers clapped and cheered.

"All that was beautiful," said Rabbi Joel Seltzer, the camp's executive director. But that wasn't the night's best moment. That came when one of the 15-year-old campers without a disability went onstage to sing.

"He's this really talented musician who's got his albums up on YouTube and stuff like that," Seltzer explained. "And he gets up and begins to sing an original song."

At which point Max, one of the Tikvah program campers, got up onstage with the budding singer-songwriter. "He can't help himself, he goes up and starts singing and dancing alongside this kid as he was singing his original song."

It could have been a disaster. The YouTube star could have been angry that his talent segment was being interrupted. It could have been Kanye West and Taylor Swift, Jewish camp version.

Instead, said Seltzer, "It was seamless. He put his arm around him, they were singing, they were dancing. It was all of a sudden, the two of them together. And I had this moment, like, that's the difference we're making in the lives of the typical camper."

When Seltzer says “typical” camper, he means “neurotypical,” the word commonly used to describe those who are not on the autism spectrum.

Most of the campers in the new Tikvah Residential Program are on the autism spectrum, though there is a camper with cerebral palsy, one with Down syndrome and others with different cognitive disabilities. Though Ramah has long hosted a Tikvah Family Camp program, which brings families who have children with special needs — as well as their neurotypical siblings — to camp for five nights, Seltzer wanted something more inclusive.

“It was a dream of mine when I came on as executive director four years ago that we would build this program here at the residential camp within five years,” Seltzer recalled.

Just 10 days into the program’s first summer, Seltzer already felt it was a success. “We keep discovering every day these new, beautiful moments,” he said, like the night of the talent show, which he felt did so much good for the typical campers. “[It’s] to help them think outside the box of the self, and be aware not just of those with different abilities around them, but to be aware that there is always something bigger than ourselves going on in the world and in our Jewish world.”

Tikvah program director Orlee Krass agreed: “It’s been going great, better than I could have hoped,” she said. “What I’ve noticed is that it’s been pretty easy for them to be integrated with the other campers. The other campers are open-arms, ready to have them be a part of things.”

The typical campers, along with camp alumni and others in the Ramah community, were polled before the program started, and asked what name should be given to the group of special needs campers. The winner? “*Yedidim*,” which means friends.

“You hear a lot about the negative connotations that older people have about millennials,” Seltzer said. “One area where this generation is light-years ahead of all of us is in the concept of inclusion and tolerance.”

In their inclusive embrace, the Ramah typical campers are also demonstrating Jewish values.

“There’s a lot of material in the Jewish world in recent years about the imperative of inclusion,” Seltzer said. “The Orthodox as well as Conservative and Reform movements [are really trying] to create inclusive Jewish communities.”

Such efforts may include being open to unconventional communication styles, he said.

He points to the Tikvah campers as evidence.

“There are a couple kids in the program right now who are not very verbal, and yet we have very much come to understand them and they have come to understand us and we have also learned how brilliant they are,” he said. “Communication is only one metric that measures cognition.”

Older Tikvah campers are also getting the opportunity to be integrated in the community around camp, like those who will work at a local pizza shop folding boxes. Such vocational and educational opportunities are a long-term goal of the Tikvah program.

“We still need a lot of support in the special needs community in building programs for young adults and group living adults,” Seltzer said. “That’s something we see in the five-year plan — that vocational educational track.”

Contact: [ispikol@jewishexponent.com](mailto:ispikol@jewishexponent.com); 215-832-0747