

SAUL SHAPIRO

*Dr. Miriam Klein Shapiro, z"l (1938–2005)*

**M**iriam Klein Shapiro was a true pioneer at Camp Ramah; she began attending camp in 1947. By the time she retired in 1988, she had missed only one summer. She served in five different camps—as a camper, waiter, counselor, teacher, and for her last twelve years of service, she was the director of education at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires. By her count, she and her immediate family had accumulated over 250 summers at Ramah camps. Miriam influenced thousands of lives through her teaching, but many more by the way she lived her life.

Miriam was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, the daughter of Henriette and Rabbi Isaac Klein. She moved to Buffalo, New York, while in high school. Rabbi Klein was an expert in Jewish law, and his wife was an educational leader in the Conservative Movement. Miriam was born just before the start of the World War II. This was a time when American Jews worried about the fate of Jews throughout the world. So Miriam was given the middle name Hope in English and *Neḥamah* (comfort) in Hebrew.

She received undergraduate degrees from Barnard College and The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). She received a master of social work from Columbia University and earned master's and doctoral degrees in Bible from JTS.

Miriam was a master educator, a scholar, and a woman of many accomplishments. She viewed Ramah as the ultimate example of putting educational theory into practice, in and out of the classroom. She worked hard to ensure that education had its proper place of importance in camp life and spent countless hours throughout the year recruiting an excellent staff and developing curriculum and educational programs. Her dedication and skill as an educator—professionally, as well as in every other aspect of her life—made her a person from whom everyone could learn. As Edward Edelstein, the director of the Jewish Educators Assembly, said in his *hesped* (eulogy), “[A] whole generation of educators have turned to Miriam for guidance, looked up to her educational expertise, admired her convictions, and respected her scholarship. Many in Jewish education strive to acquire just one or two of those traits. Miriam attained them all.” Miriam not only taught her students, but she also touched their lives and influenced their lifestyles and life choices. Her students

respected and loved her. Former students still come up to members of her family and tell them how much of an influence she was on them. Just a couple of weeks before she died, Miriam went to Camp Ramah in the Berkshires for visiting day; many former colleagues and students stopped by to see her while she sat on the porch of the bunk she occupied for so many years and where her daughter now spends her summers.

Miriam loved studying and teaching Bible. She taught at the State University of New York at Purchase, The Jewish Theological Seminary, the Academy for Jewish Religion, and Manhattanville College, lecturing on biblical and Judaic issues.

In her professional life outside of Camp Ramah, she served in many key roles in the world of Jewish education, including Hebrew school teacher, day school principal, and board of Jewish education curriculum specialist. She worked as a teacher and an educational consultant for the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York for more than twenty years, creating and serving as director of the Board's Jewish Family Education program and its Teacher Center in Westchester, New York.

Although she lived in the United States for her entire life, Miriam's deep love of Israel was expressed in her frequent trips there, where she and her family enjoyed living in their second home in Jerusalem, and she often incorporated Israel-related themes into her work at Ramah.

Throughout her lifetime, Miriam was actively involved in Jewish communal life. She served as the first female chairperson of the Education Commission of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the second president of the Union for Traditional Judaism, the first female president of the Conservative Movement's Jewish Educators Assembly, and the president of the United States National Board of License for teachers and principals of Jewish schools. She also served on numerous boards, including those of the Westchester Hebrew High School and the United Synagogue Standards Committee. In addition, throughout her lifetime, she received numerous honors and awards.

Although each of her accomplishments is impressive, perhaps the most important of Miriam's accomplishments was her devotion to her family. This was the role that brought her the greatest satisfaction in her life. Her five children, her three children by marriage, her nine grandchildren, and our marriage of forty-seven years (a relationship of fifty years, if one counts from when we first met at Ramah) were her greatest pride and joy.

Together, we built a Jewish home, gave our children a day-school education, and took enormous pride in the fact that we transferred to the next generation the lessons that she had learned from her parents.

*Rachel Shapiro Kirzner provided the following additional reflections on her mother's relationship with Camp Ramah:*

**My first and last memories** of my mother are intertwined with Camp Ramah. I'd like to say that I remember my first days at camp with my family, but I can't because I was only two weeks old when we arrived at the newly opened Camp Ramah in the Berkshires in the summer of 1964. I do know that my mother promptly caught a severe case of poison ivy, and our sixteen-year-old babysitter, Paula Scharf Kohn, was unexpectedly the primary caregiver of my newborn self, Sara (two), and Ephraim (four). Apparently I cried so much in those early days that my parents joked, "*Kol beramah nishma . . . Rachel mevakkah,*" (a voice in Ramah is heard . . . Rachel is crying). Not exactly what was meant in Jeremiah 31, but my mother and father always loved a good biblical pun, especially one involving things that were important to them.

I always viewed Ramah as my summer home, not surprisingly because we were never anywhere else once June arrived. We couldn't be there enough, and always stayed through the Camp USY session each summer. I remember the back room at Lake Side C with five young children crammed into it after Sim and RD arrived, and also later with no children, transformed into a teachers' resource room. Both of those uses encompass what was most dear in the heart of my mother—family, education, and in particular education at Ramah. I remember accompanying my mother as she taught her classes in the early days of Ramah. One memorable but typical lesson in the old Beit Gesher consisted of "Simon Says" in Hebrew, to teach campers the parts of the body in a fun way, one where they barely felt they were learning. As the years went on, and she became *rosh h'innuch* (head of education) rather than a line teacher, she never lost her fondness for teaching the campers, but translated that dedication into training a new generation of educators. Long after her on-site tenure at Camp Ramah ended, her methods and influence still permeate the education in the camp.

My father, may he live and be well for many more years, also made his stamp on Camp Ramah. Although I later learned that he was Chair of Ramah Berkshires, and then of the National Ramah Commission, as a child I thought he had the most important job at camp: fixing the camp plumbing and washing machines. That he later added directing traffic at the golf-course parking lot each visiting day only enhanced his stature in my eyes. His modesty and enthusiasm for all facets of running a camp like Ramah were such that he never corrected my childhood misconceptions, and it was only much later that I understood his key role in the development and continuing strength of the

Ramah system. Every Shabbat afternoon when I was a camper, I would visit my parents at Lake Side C. I would walk over from A or B side, depending on the year, and my mother would be sitting on the porch waiting for me. We would sit and talk on the porch, but were often interrupted by her many fans among the campers and staff as they walked by the bunk. Her dual role as a camp parent and staffer was a balancing act but one that was cherished by her, and it was with bittersweet feelings that she finally ended her summers at Ramah. Among the many professionally engraved plaques and inscribed awards we found recently when going through my mother's belongings, one that stood out in a place of pride was a handmade wall hanging, clearly a product of the *ommanut* (arts and crafts) studio at camp, that marked her twenty-five-year anniversary in the Ramah system.

My mother treasured her involvement in Ramah, perhaps above all of her other professional commitments. I will never forget that in the last month of her life, when her strength was waning, she made sure to visit camp for one last visiting day, both to visit her children and grandchildren there, and to see her beloved camp one more time. In my mind's eye I can still see her on that day, and many others like it, surrounded by family and friends, once again holding court on the front porch of Lake Side C.

**DR. SAUL SHAPIRO**, husband of Dr. Miriam Klein Shapiro, z"l, is a former National Ramah Commission president and a past president of the board of Camp Ramah in the Berkshires. Members of the families of Saul and Miriam's children, Ephraim Shapiro, Sara Shapiro Shuter, Rachel Shapiro Kirzner, Sim Shapiro, and Rivka Shapiro, also contributed to this article. Shapiro family members have attended the following Ramah camps and programs: Berkshires, Canada, Connecticut, Israel Seminar, Maine, Nyack (both overnight and day camp), and Poconos.