

BURTON COHEN

Louis Newman, z"l (1918–2007)

Histories of the Ramah Camping Movement show that Louis Newman served the Ramah camps formally in three capacities: director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin (1951–53), director of Camp Ramah in Connecticut (1955), and director of the Mador (National Ramah Counselor Training Program, located at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, 1963–64). His achievements in these important positions within the movement would certainly suffice to establish his role as an important figure in the development of Ramah camping. However, his influence extended far beyond the acts of administrative and educational leadership that he performed at these three locations.

Newman's influence upon the development of Ramah camping is best grasped when perceived in the framework of his total career. Ramah was only one of the areas in which Newman made a significant contribution to American Jewish education. His tenure at Ramah Wisconsin was preceded by and paralleled his work as founding director of the Akiba Hebrew Academy in Philadelphia. It was Newman's design for Akiba that provided the model for the new Jewish community day high schools that have proliferated from coast to coast in the last decade. From directing Akiba, Newman went on to become the first director of the Melton Center for Research in Jewish Education at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), which led to his long tenure as head of the Boston Bureau of Jewish Education. So, whereas the Ramah community can take pride in Newman's work in Wisconsin, Connecticut, and Mador, we ought not forget that it was only one aspect of a long, multifaceted, and distinguished career in Jewish education.

One other aspect of Newman's work at Ramah should be recalled: he was a part-time director. When he undertook to lead Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, his "day" job was serving as principal of the Akiba Hebrew Academy High School. Ramah was what he did in the winter months on Sundays and in the months of July and August, which should have been his vacation period. (There was nothing unusual about this arrangement; until recently, most camp directors were part-time workers. One of my own goals during the early years that I served as National Ramah Director was to convert all of the Ramah directorships to full-time positions.)

When Lou Newman came to Wisconsin, Camp Ramah had already functioned for four successful seasons under directors Henry Goldberg and Hillel Silverman. JTS administrators, Sylvia Ettenberg and Moshe Davis, had done a yeoman's job of creating a Conservative camping movement. They had established that there was a place in the Conservative Movement for an eight-week summer camp for Hebrew school students, which along with all of the other regular camp activities, was conducted in Hebrew and included morning services and Hebrew and Judaica classes in its daily schedule, as well as halachic observance of Shabbat, kashrut, and the other *mitzvot*.

What did Lou Newman bring to Ramah? Lou Newman was an experienced Jewish educator who also was well experienced in Jewish educational camping. He had no reluctance to offer activities of Jewish content in the camp setting. (He had already served on the staffs of similar camps in the East and was a great Hasid for teaching modern Hebrew.) Newman's chief contribution was that he saw the Jewish educational camp setting as providing the opportunity for offering a much richer educational program than usually envisioned for such camps. He was an intrepid student of modern educational philosophy

and educational psychology. His studies convinced him that camp must offer more than a veneer of Jewish study and practice, layered over the normal camp program. He aimed to create a curriculum in which the campers would be challenged to assume a large degree of responsibility for the creation of their own activities. He aimed to create an atmosphere in which cooperation, not competition, was the keynote of the program. He aimed to create an environment in which staff was sensitive and responsive to the needs and problems of every individual camper. (It was Newman who hired the first psychologist to work at Ramah.) At Ramah Wisconsin, he introduced challenging and stimulating recreational equipment for the camp, such as aluminum canoes and woodworking machines. He made these innovations and many others, always with the greatest integrity, sensitivity, and determination.

The late Rabbi Alexander Shapiro, then a JTS rabbinical student who served as a counselor during Newman's first summers in Wisconsin, wrote a memoir in which he looked back on Newman's approach and impact in those early summers.

Lou's admonition to be receptive to the life of the child and his needs was remote from a call for permissiveness. Quite to the contrary, I am hard put to remember another educational endeavor that had as much preoccupation with moral issues and with moral responsibility of children. It extended into every single area of the camp community, from the cleanup of the grounds to the impassioned debate on the morality of color wars. We were then but dimly conscious of the fact we were engaged in the kind of serious educational experiment that was ultimately to have a serious impact upon others. We seriously debated whether it was a moral act for us to take a day off once a week. . . . Lou's approach was entirely that of stimulating within the individual group worker [i.e., counselor] his own overwhelming sense of responsibility for what transpired in camp, one that tended to be much more far-reaching than any set of demands put forward by any [previous Ramah] camp administrator. (Shapiro and Cohen 1984, ix)*

Lou Newman had great skill in selecting staff and in inspiring those whom he chose to be successful implementers of the ideas that he so fervently espoused. Before his first summer as director of Ramah Wisconsin, Newman wrote about the kind of staff members that he hoped to hire for his staff:

A person may challenge me and say, "You supply me with the goals which concern you and I will achieve them." If a person said this to me before the camp season opened, I would immediately answer, "You are honest, diligent and have many fine qualities. Find yourself a job elsewhere." I would then put a few dollars in the JNF [Jewish National Fund] box in gratitude for having discovered early this value-less person. It is impossible for one person to successfully educate another to be a particular kind of human being,

without a consciously and personally formulated philosophy. (Shapiro and Cohen 1984, 195)*

The four directors who followed Newman in Wisconsin (Seymour Fox, Jerry Abrams, David Mogilner, and I) all served *with* him in Wisconsin in various capacities during his three summers there. Two of them, Abrams and Mogilner, went forth from Wisconsin to direct east coast Ramah camps, spreading Lou's educational approach throughout the Ramah Camping Movement. They taught Lou's broad approach to Jewish educational camping to their staff members, some of whom went on to be Ramah directors themselves. The centralized character of the Ramah Camping Movement, with its hub at JTS, facilitated the spread of Newman's ideas among the camps and their staffs.

In a true sense it could be said, *ki miwiskonsin tetzei torat Lou Newman*.

*Quotations that appear in this tribute are taken from Alexander M. Shapiro and Burton I. Cohen, *Studies in Jewish Education and Judaica in Honor of Louis Newman* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1984). That book contains a number of important studies describing Newman's work in Jewish education at Ramah and in other settings, as well as some short extracts from his writings.

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Excerpts from condolences sent to the Newman family

[F]or those of us who attended Akiba Hebrew Academy in Philadelphia between 1951 and 1963 when Lou Newman was the principal, or Ramah in Wisconsin in the years when he was the director, Lou was the institution. . . . [H]is influence on us was powerful and lasting. He taught us to think, to analyze, and to be critical. . . . I am eternally thankful to Lou, and immensely proud of my friendship with him.

*Rabbi Marim Charry
Great Neck, New York*

[I]t was Lou, of course, [who helped me] determine that my professional career would be with Ramah, for which I am eternally grateful. . . . We all also recalled what an exemplary human being he was: ethical, a man of integrity, caring. I always considered Lou the best listener I ever related to.

*Rabbi Jerome Abrams
Director Emeritus, Camp Ramah in the Berkshires*

I was fortunate to sit in on some of [Lou's] training sessions for educators at Ramah in the Berkshires when my dad attended as an educator and I

schlepped along as a sidekick. Finally, it was a privilege to have been Lou's student at the Seminary College. I may not have always agreed with how Lou read the texts that we studied in class, but I came away with a profound appreciation for how he applied the inquiry method even if our conclusions differed. The world of Jewish education has grown tremendously because of Lou's contributions.

Edwin R. Frankel

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