

REUVEN ROHN AND RUTH ROHN

Aryeh Rohn, z"l (1919–2003)

A **bald, stocky, yet diminutive** middle-aged man grasps the pulley and zooms down the cable suspended among the trees. There goes Aryeh Rohn checking out the safety of the main attraction of *yom yarid* (Carnival Day) at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. The line supports his weight, and the ride is

smooth and exhilarating. Smiling, he jumps down and calls back up the line, “*Hakol beseder!*” Part of his job description? Not exactly. But any job that has to do with ensuring the safety of the campers and staff is too important for Aryeh to delegate to others. Besides, this particular task involves the physical exertion and fun that he loves. But how did this Viennese-accented, Hebrew-speaking, *yeke khevreman* come to be in this setting?

Aryeh grew up in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s, in a home imbued with Zionist ideals. Active in the Zionist youth movement and scouts, he displayed maturity and talent for leadership and became a *madrich* while still a young teen. This experience would serve to prepare him well for his life’s work in Jewish education, especially at Camp Ramah.

In 1938, he made aliyah and joined a *kevutzah* of other Austrian and German *olim*, intending to become a vintner. In the evenings, after a long day’s work, Aryeh and a few others entertained their *hevreh* with songs, jokes, and stories well into the night. Some nights, the strong swimmers, Aryeh among them, would help illegal Jewish immigrants (*ma’pilim*) swim to shore under the cover of darkness, eluding the British. Could he have possibly imagined at those moments that these skills would eventually earn him his first job at Camp Ramah?

Rahel, a *kevutzah* member also from Vienna, was charmed by Aryeh’s sense of humor and fun. They fell in love, they married, and after a few years, moved to Pardes Hanna where their son Reuven was born, and where work in education beckoned. Aryeh started teaching in the local elementary school. He loved guiding and educating his students and enjoyed using his creativity and musical abilities to create plays and holiday ceremonies for the school. Here, Aryeh made two enduring resolutions: to Hebraicize the family name to Rohn and to devote his life to education.

Aryeh’s family in Austria had survived the Shoah by fleeing to the United States. When Aryeh received word that his father was ailing, he and Rachel faced a difficult choice. Leaving Israel was wrenching, but they agreed that obligations to immediate family came first. Yet the love affair with Israel that began in their youth continued throughout their lives. They would return frequently under the auspices of the Ramah Communities Program, often leading groups of American youth.

In the United States, Aryeh taught at both day and afternoon schools while studying and earning a doctorate in education. He threw himself into his work and brought his vitality, knowledge, and love of Judaism, Israel, and the Hebrew language to all the students he taught. He eventually became Educational Director at East Midwood Jewish Center in Brooklyn. One of

his teaching colleagues told him about Camp Ramah. This was to be a life-changing piece of information!

In 1954, with his skill and strength as a swimmer, Aryeh easily earned Red Cross certification as a lifeguard and swimming instructor, qualifying him to be *rosh agam* at Ramah Connecticut. Peter Geffen still remembers Aryeh teaching him how to swim during that summer. Aryeh, Rachel, nine-year-old Reuven, and three-year-old Ruthie experienced their first taste of Ramah and were hooked. This would mark the beginning of a long association with Ramah, one that continues to this day, for the family of Aryeh and Rachel Rohn.

In 1955, Aryeh became *rosh madrichim* in Ramah Poconos. There he began to work hand-in-hand with *rosh maḥaneh* Levi Soshuk. Aryeh found in Levi a kindred spirit, and the two men became close friends. They shared a love of Hebrew and the same passion for Jewish education. Their personalities and styles complemented one another and their work together, first in the Poconos and then in Ramah Canada, became legendary.

Aryeh firmly believed in the motto, "*Maḥaneh Ramah: maḥaneh dati, ivri, ḥinnuchi.*" He believed in Ramah's mission as a religious, Hebrew, and educational milieu. As a full-time Jewish educator in formal school settings, he believed in what Ramah uniquely could provide: an all-encompassing Jewish and Hebrew-speaking environment in which Jewish youth could live, learn, and have fun together. He resonated so strongly with the goals of Ramah that he brought hundreds of his own students from East Midwood Jewish Center to the Poconos, to Canada, and to the Berkshires to benefit from all that Ramah could offer.

In the context of his work at Ramah, Aryeh was able to draw upon his youth movement and scout experiences—teaching informally and using outdoor activities and games—to create meaningful learning that was always punctuated by fun. Ramahniks, both *ḥanichim* and madrichim, clamored to be in his classes.

Aryeh's fun-loving inventiveness is mythic. As but one example of many, one summer he created the *va'ad hageshem*, (the Rain Committee) whose function was to oversee the weather whenever an important outdoor activity was scheduled. On a particular yom yarid, which happened to coincide with Visitors Day, the forecast was for rain. However, Aryeh announced over the *ramkol* (public address system) that the *va'ad hageshem* had met and declared that it would not rain until the carnival was over. A camp full of witnesses will vouch for the fact that the day was gorgeous until just after the carnival ended; then it proceeded to pour for half an hour. From then on, whenever Aryeh

announced a *va'ad hageshem* prediction, everyone believed him. The ability to cultivate an image of omniscience was yet another of Aryeh's legendary skills.

A beloved feature of camp life in those years was the *kuntz*. One of the first and biggest *kuntzim* that Aryeh helped organize took place in 1955. One morning, a large bulletin board in the *hadar ochel* announced *be'od 15 yom mikreh gadol*. Each and every day thereafter a countdown took place in Hebrew. Everyone was trying to guess what this event could possibly be. Early on the morning of the appointed day, a flying saucer suddenly appeared floating in the *agam*. Now, everyone was even more curious as to what was going on. After *tefillot*, at breakfast in the *hadar ochel*, the room fell quiet as part of the ceiling opened up and three men in their space suits descended, claiming to come from Mars. They brought a singularly important message for the whole camp: "*Ivri, dabber ivrit!*" It was a great *kuntz* that helped solidify the central place of *ivrit* at camp and fostered a *ruah ivrit* for everyone all summer.

As a Jewish educator, Aryeh's actions reflected his commitment to serving as a *dugmah*, a role model. Jimmy Stark (*hanich* Poconos) and Elliot Judd (*hanich* Poconos and Canada, *tzevet* Berkshires), *z"l*, each recall an example of this. On two separate *shabbatot*, each suffered a freak accident with severe injuries. In each case, the camp doctor determined that a visit to the hospital was necessary. Driving each of them the twenty miles to the nearest hospital was another responsibility Aryeh insisted upon performing himself, acting as a concerned parent would, while teaching by example the important Jewish principle: *pikkuah nefesh doheh shabbat*. The obligation to save a human life in jeopardy overrides other mitzvot, even Shabbat observance.

Aryeh strongly believed in the concept of *in loco parentis*. He took very seriously the responsibility to provide a safe and orderly environment for the *hanichim* as well as the *tzevet*, and he ran a tight ship. As a good father would, he also believed that camp should be fun. Somehow he managed to balance these goals. The stories told about him by former campers and colleagues at camp reflect this delicate balance.

Aryeh had unique skills in handling people, whether in groups or as individuals. When controlling the crowd in the *hadar ochel* or anywhere there was a large gathering, he almost never raised his voice. Sometimes, he would quietly begin to make up a story: *pa'am ahat bema'haneh aher*, once upon a time in another camp. . . . Within thirty seconds the room would fall silent as everyone tried to hear the story. At other times an *edah* or *tzerif* might inappropriately start a cheer while Aryeh's arm was raised to signal silence. He would chime in and sing-song along with their cheer and within seconds, they would fall silent, realizing their rudeness. On rare occasions he would call, "Mordechai Kestenbaum, *nah lehafsik!*" *Hanichim* got the message even as

they wondered who this Mordechai was, and why he was being singled out. In fact, Mordechai was Aryeh's fictitious foil. Without subjecting anyone to public embarrassment, Aryeh would scold Mordechai Kestenbaum, and order was restored.

Bill Davidovitz, a former Ramah Canada *hanich* and member of the *tzevet* recounts:

One *erev shabbat* I came to *miskad*, to our flag-raising ceremony, wearing a colored shirt, rather than the required white shirt. Aryeh approached me and asked, "*Lamah attah lo lavush kullecha belavan?*" He wanted to know why I wasn't dressed in white. Trying to defend myself, I pointed out that he himself was wearing khaki pants. 'Ah yes,' he replied, 'but I don't have a figure like yours.' His little self-deprecating remark left me open to receiving his message and made this incident so memorable. Aryeh would make his point without hitting you over the head. He took the edge off, by calling you on your mistake while preserving your dignity.

Aryeh's sensitivity also contributed to his admirable skill as a mentor. One summer, Aryeh served as supervising director at Ramah Berkshires when Rabbi Shelly Dorph became camp director. Shelly described feeling frustrated and overwhelmed at times. He was thankful that Aryeh made himself available for advice at all times, yet kept a low profile in the camp at large. Aryeh's staying well in the background allowed Shelly to learn from his own mistakes, as well as take credit for all the successes. Shelly credits his success as a new director and the mastery he achieved in this role to the sensitive and skillful mentoring he received from Aryeh.

Aryeh Rohn was proud to be involved with Camp Ramah. His greatest pleasure was watching *hanichim* grow to become knowledgeable, committed Jewish adults who in turn would contribute to the enrichment of Jewish life in North America. Many of the students he brought to Ramah, first from Newark and later from East Midwood, have become leaders in the Ramah world (e.g., Roger Fine, Hugh Pollack, and others) or leading Jewish scholars and educators (e.g., Rabbi Art Green, Lawrence Fine, Robert Goldenberg, Daniel Grossberg, Vicky Kelman, and others).

Peter Geffen remembers Aryeh as the moral conscience of Ramah. "He had a wonderful spirit and brought maturity and dignity to camp life." Jane Paznik-Bondarin (*hanichat* Poconos and Canada, and *tzevet* Canada) recalls:

Aryeh was so omnipresent and coincident with my whole Ramah experience, and it felt to me as if he were part of the very fabric of Ramah, certainly my Ramah. He embodied everything I thought of as Ramah, as authentic Jewish life. In my mind he was always striding, even when he was standing still. He was leading . . . leading us all in activity, in thought. He

was the moral conscience of the camp. I am fairly certain more people than just I, figured he knew what we were thinking, whenever we were thinking about shirking an obligation or doing something for which we did not have permission. The standards he taught us by example, the way we learned to be with one another under his watch, these have all stayed with me and guided my professional and personal life.

Aryeh, with a touch of pride and a twinkle in his eye might quip in response, in Hebrew, of course: “I see that Mordechai Kestenbaum finally shaped up. Hakol beseder!”

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RUTH ROHN, daughter of Aryeh Rohn, z"l, is a Jewish educator and consultant in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and has spent seventeen years in various capacities at Ramah. Her children have all attended Ramah camps as well.