

DAVID ACKERMAN

## *Rabbi Alexander Shapiro, z"l (1929–1992)*

**M**y first encounter with Rabbi Alexander Shapiro took place at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires. I was a second-year rabbinical student and a first-time *rosh edab*; he was the president of the Rabbinical Assembly. Alex had come to camp along with a distinguished group of Conservative rabbis to work on what would become *Emet Ve-Emunah*, the movement's ideological statement of the mid-1980s. I vividly remember his comfort and ease in the camp setting, a quality that to my eye set him apart from many of the other rabbis in attendance at that gathering. Little did I know then that Alex had spent his entire adult life engaged with Ramah, an engagement that went back to his early years as a rabbinical student.

For a young man who rarely and barely left Brooklyn until well past his bar mitzvah, the trip to Conover, Wisconsin in the summer of 1950 must have been momentous. Alex Shapiro's experience at Ramah in Wisconsin over the next four summers changed his life in deep and fundamental ways. Along with other Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) students, among them his future wife Ruth Goldenberg, Shapiro joined the 1950 Wisconsin staff as a counselor.

He and Ruth returned each summer until 1953, working closely with Louis Newman who became Ramah Wisconsin's director in 1951. By the late 1950s, Ruth and Alex Shapiro, now settled in Philadelphia, became senior staff mainstays at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, where Rabbi Shapiro ultimately served as Director in the late 1960s.

Shapiro held many specific jobs during those years in Wisconsin and the Poconos—counselor, teacher, camp rabbi, advisor—but his one true ongoing role was to live out and model for others the enduring ideal of Torah as a way of life that has stood at Ramah's center from the beginning. Louis Newman himself expressed Rabbi Shapiro's intuitive grasp of Ramah's vision and approach with a wonderfully evocative anecdote:

Some would say that Rabbi Shapiro went out of his way to find the difficult tasks to undertake. He did, and they were a special kind, and they made him dear to me. . . . The first [personal experience] took place over forty [now fifty] years ago when we worked together in Camp Ramah. I was director. He was a counselor: a lapsed engineer became a rabbinical student, very much interested in character formation. Campers and counselors were invited to offer fresh ideas to achieve the camp's educational goals, and Rabbi Shapiro's initiative was among those I valued most. He requested time and funds with which to buy cement and lumber to construct a stairway. It was a bothersome and sometimes dangerous slope from the dining room to the shower building, down which the kids would slide, run, fall, and tumble. Convinced of the worth of [A. D.] Gordon's Zionist philosophy of labor, with no one around who had any experience in such an undertaking, he directed the enterprise. He did it sensibly, energetically, with campers who volunteered: children twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. Why did he do this? He did it for *ivrit*. He was teaching Hebrew on the job, educating for values (Zionism and solidarity with the workers in Israel) and demonstrating, which he always did, that "one shouldn't delay carrying out actions that are important." From then until this day I never knew my friend Eli to recoil from a worthy initiative, no matter how novel and how difficult it seemed.

Decades later, Rabbi Shapiro put pen to paper and formulated, as part of a volume of essays in Newman's honor, his own recollection of those early summers at Ramah Wisconsin:

We were all terribly young and untried; yet we had the feeling that we were at the cutting edge of a whole new point of view, a whole new way of seeing the educational process. . . . Notions of a child's involvement in his own educational destiny came as something revolutionary. . . . We believed deeply that we were changing the lives of human beings, and through them, that we were literally changing the world. Strangely enough . . . our own belief in ourselves struck a responsive chord in the children entrusted to

our care. They, too, came to believe in themselves and in the community of which they were a part.

That sense of Ramah's revolutionary character was a theme that Rabbi Shapiro returned to frequently over the years, speaking of those summers in Wisconsin with a detectable gleam in his eye. The cohesiveness of the Ramah community, coupled with its intensity, was another point of emphasis for Shapiro.

Over the course of a very short period of time, everyone in the community, from the youngest child to the oldest member of the professional staff, considered himself to be part of the community. I remember well the meetings of the entire camp community that were called each week to talk of the problems that we shared. How well I remember the intensity of those meetings! How well I recollect the marvel of one of the youngest children in camp . . . having his questions answered seriously and patiently by the director while the exchange was heard without condescension by the child's older campmates, as well as by his counselors.

Ramah's earnest concern with the ethical responsibilities of counselors, along with the abiding sense of significance that the work of camp held for young staff members, prompted this commentary from Rabbi Shapiro:

I am hard put to remember another educational endeavor that had quite as much preoccupation with moral issues and with the moral responsibility of children. It extended into every single area of the camp community, from the cleanup of the grounds to the impassioned debates on the morality of color wars. We were then but dimly conscious of the fact that we were engaged in the kind of serious educational experiment that was ultimately to have significant impact on others. How far-reaching that influence was to be we could not possibly imagine. What we all knew was that it was far more than a summer job that drew us together. We seriously debated whether it was a moral act for us to take a day off once a week. After all, the children were put in our charge for twenty-four hours a day. Is it not irresponsible, we seriously asked, to leave even for a while? Those of us who had the temerity to take the day off came rushing back at the end of the day to discover what new development we had missed.

Not everything about Ramah Wisconsin in those years was sweetness and light. In Rabbi Shapiro's memory, the external conditions of the camp were every bit as dismal as the educational components were glorious.

What made the entire experience unique from the perspective of later educational endeavors was that the conditions under which all of us worked were totally primitive. The camp grounds were indifferently maintained, sports equipment minimal, food indifferent at best, and housing conditions terrible! Moreover, every single one of us could have earned significantly more than the pitiful salaries we were paid in any one of a number of other

institutions. Yet, all of that faded into insignificance in comparison to the enterprise of which we were a part.

Indeed, Rabbi Shapiro's brief memoir concludes by returning to the theme of Ramah's religious and educational goals:

In fact, Ramah represented the first serious attempt I had ever encountered to apply religion to life, not in the abstract but in the very concrete. . . . The possibility that its insights could be applied to the world of children and, in fact, to the world of adults, too, in the context of the daily life of a society came as a revolutionary idea in those days. The intensity of religious concern was overwhelming, particularly since it did not stimulate simply the fulfillment of mitzvah but rather the deepest possible understanding of what was behind the ethical command.

For Rabbi Alex Shapiro, the lessons learned from his summers at Ramah Wisconsin and Ramah Poconos shaped his rabbinate and his life. His commitment to and focus on the needs and concerns of each individual he encountered in his work were a direct extension of Ramah's emphasis on each unique camper. His desire to build and nurture synagogue communities that included each and every one and excluded no one was a direct extension of Ramah's success at establishing cohesive and inclusive communities. His abiding, even overwhelming sense of responsibility for the members of his congregations was a direct extension of the debates about days off that he recalled from those early summers in Wisconsin. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, his religious attitude marked by a passionate commitment both to ritual observance and ethical imperative was a direct extension of the revolution that he helped to shape nearly sixty years ago at Camp Ramah.

Alex and Ruth Shapiro bequeathed their love of Ramah and their life-long commitment to its ideals to their children and grandchildren all of whom have collectively spent dozens of summers at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. Often living in the same five-star staff bunks that Rabbi Shapiro so lovingly described, and often playing some of the same camp roles as Ruth and Alex, members of the Shapiro-Saks-Ackerman clan continue the rich tradition begun in the summer of 1950 at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Here's hoping that a fourth generation will experience the same joys.

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