

## PANEL DISCUSSION

### *Investing in Ramah: Our Extraordinary Past and Dreams for the Future*

*“Ramah: Onward from 60” Conference and Celebration  
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*Excerpted and edited by Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, National Ramah Director*

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Peter Geffen, *Founder, The Abraham Joshua Heschel School; Founder and Director,  
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Harold Grinspoon, *Founder, Harold Grinspoon Foundation*

Julie Beren Platt, *Board Chair, Camp Ramah in California*

John Ruskay, *Executive Vice President and CEO, UJA-Federation of New York*

Jerry Silverman, *President, Foundation for Jewish Camping*

**AMY COOPER:** [Introductory remarks in Hebrew] Panelists, this is an audience of passionate Ramah supporters steeped in our rich history and deeply committed to our future. We’ve asked each of you to respond from your own perspective, reflecting upon your own Ramah experience as a parent, camper, funder, or some combination of these roles. What would you say is the strongest case that Ramah can make to encourage others, including foundations and Federations, to invest in Ramah?

**MITCH COHEN:** Julie Beren Platt, our first speaker, is the president of Camp Ramah in California. Julie lives in Los Angeles, and she’s been chairing the board of directors for the last couple of years, having previously served as their development chair. She’s a member of the board of directors of the Ziegler

School of Rabbinic Studies, the executive committee of the Federation of Greater Los Angeles, and the executive committee of Sinai Temple. It has been a pleasure working with Julie, whose passion for Ramah comes both from her own upbringing, as well as her role as a Ramah parent.

**JULIE BEREN PLATT:** As Mitch just mentioned, I come to this with a perspective of the past, and I work every day for the future of Camp Ramah. I want to respond to today's topic in two ways, one on an emotional and philosophical level and one on a much more practical level. For me personally, a Jewish girl from Wichita, Kansas, the only Jewish girl in my senior high school class of 700 and one of just seven members of my Hebrew school class—thankfully for me the other six were boys—Camp Ramah was transformative. It inspired me to a life of observance and of communal service. Equally and interestingly, my five day-school-educated Jewish children from Los Angeles have had the same experience at Camp Ramah. It is for them the most positive Jewish experience of their lives.

My great aspirations for Camp Ramah in California are driven by my own family's Ramah experiences and by my passions, shared completely by every member of my board, to strive for a better and better and better experience for our campers. Steven Cohen, research professor of Jewish social policy at HUC-JIR, and Keysar and Kosmin's "*Eight Up*" study confirm that Jewish camps have proven to exert lasting long-term influence on young adult Jewish identities, influencing our young adults to grow and to make good adult choices and, by extension, we grow Jewish leaders, both lay and professional.

Now, for the practical side. Since it is clear what a Ramah camper must experience, where it will hopefully lead in their personal choices and hopefully in their community involvement, we have to work to not only make access as easy as possible, but as well be as competitive as possible. Steven Cohen's study of the L.A. camping community led us to two very significant findings. Jewish camping is more cost-sensitive, and we are clearly competing with the secular camps. The great news is that the word is out. The success of Jewish camping is a nationally recognized imperative. Our L.A. Federation has joined with all the area Jewish camps and provided significant incentive funding. But frankly, it would never have organized or capitalized so quickly were it not for the leadership and partnership of Jerry Silverman and the Foundation for Jewish Camping. In addition, we have to respond to the competition of secular camps, both specialized and not. We have to raise significant endowment and capital funds to build the best facilities and to provide the best programming. We have to offer high-level sports, drama, arts, music, outdoor experiences, as well as—and even more importantly—impactful *tefillot* and Jewish educational

experiences. The challenge is great but not unattainable. We have to be the best we can be at everything—a very tall order. The results have and will continue to follow.

**AMY COOPER:** Jerry Silverman is the current president of the Foundation for Jewish Camping. Under his leadership and with the enormous support and vision of its founders, Robert and Elisa Bildner and current chair, our very own Skip Vichness, we extend our enormous gratitude for the work you are doing on our behalf: advocacy, leadership training, and helping to raise millions of dollars for camper scholarships. Jerry is a Ramahnik. He is the former president of Camp Ramah in New England. His wife, Erica, works for Ramah New England, and they also have five children who have all attended Ramah camps and programs. In Jerry's own words, "Our kids have had all the best Jewish experiences, but Ramah is the program that created their deepest love for Shabbat, for *ivrit*, for Jewish identity, and the most wonderful lifetime friendships." We are honored that Jerry is with us today.

**JERRY SILVERMAN:** Thank you, Amy, and thank you, Julie, very much for your kind words. As a parent, a former lay chair of Ramah New England and now as president of the Foundation for Jewish Camping, I would present the case like this: it's about passion, and it's about having the ability to bring the story of camp and paint a picture to the community and to funders. Let me give you an example at the risk of alienating my daughter. As a parent, I have a memory of dropping off my daughter Alison at Camp Ramah Palmer, leaving her there not knowing a soul as we had just moved from California to New England, and I was feeling absolutely sick to my stomach as I was never a camper, and I dropped her off at this place where we had no clue what it was really about. Four weeks later, picking her up and driving to her bunk and seeing her literally glued in a massive hug with twelve girls, crying, not wanting to leave and listening to them talking about writing, visiting, and coming back in eleven months, it was literally almost impossible to peel her away. The drive home was incredible. My name changed, by the way, that summer. When she left for camp I was Daddy. In the car, I was Abba. And that has stuck from that point on. Camp leaders must always ask what are the big bold initiatives that you want funders to invest in that will really make a difference in realizing the vision of the camp. Investors today will invest significantly in projects that will have the opportunity to create significant outcomes. The Grinspoon Institute and their foundation have proven this with their program. It's about thinking big and bold and having a vision.

This past Shabbat we were at the University of Maryland for parents' weekend. We went to Hillel to the KOACH service, the Conservative service.

A rabbinical student from JTS was there, who was a *rosh edah* at Wisconsin this summer and refers to David Soloff of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin as the *mashiah*. The president of KOACH is a woman from Ramah Ojai. The vice president of the Jewish student union is from Ramah Palmer. One of the Israel advocacy organization leaders is from Darom. Ramah graduates are leaders on college campuses today. Frame the discussion using and painting real life scenarios. The strongest case is the type of community that we're all graduating, and how they are energizing the community around them. But we have to give it context in how it falls into the future of the next sixty years of Ramah. Thank you.

**AMY COOPER:** Harold Grinspoon is a great friend of Ramah, Jewish camps, and Jewish educational institutions. The Grinspoon Institute of Jewish Philanthropy has enhanced the vibrancy of Jewish life in western Massachusetts and beyond and has provided mentoring and training for Jewish camps, day schools, retreat centers, and other institutions to help them become more effective organizations. Harold's genius is that with his investment of \$5 million to Jewish camping over the last few years and the establishment of various incentive-matching programs, he has been able to leverage over \$25 million for Jewish camps. With deep gratitude, it is my pleasure to introduce Harold Grinspoon.

**HAROLD GRINSPOON:** My journey, as Jerry Silverman said a few minutes ago, all started with Camp Ramah. My visit to Camp Ramah this summer was an amazing, beautiful experience. As you probably know, the buzzword today in the Jewish world is "camping." And it's so exciting to be out here in that world. It's amazing—but maybe I'm jumping ahead of my story. So, a number of years ago I went to Camp Ramah, and I saw a nice camp that wanted a few dollars. I gave them a few dollars, and I walked away. And then through persistence on Jerry's part, who invited me back over and over again, and finally one day it dawned on me as an entrepreneur: I'm proud of where I invest my money, and Jewish camping was a place to put some money.

What do wealthy people do with their money? We Jews have a high rate of assimilation, so I figured maybe we should help Jewish camps, so we started this Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy. We have sixty-five non-paying clients—all the Ramah camps and others that we help with board development, to help them feel really good about themselves and about asking other people to support Jewish camping, since Jewish camping is essential.

**MITCH COHEN:** Thank you, Harold. Ab Flatt has served on the Camp Ramah in Canada committee for decades and in 1990 when I became director of Camp

Ramah in Canada, he took over as president and served in that role for seven years. Ab's leadership was absolutely fantastic. He was my mentor, my friend, and my colleague, and I am so happy that my friendship with Ab and his wife, Phyllis, continues to be strong. Anyone who knows Ab knows that Ramah is his passion. He brings that passion everywhere he goes, and together with Phyllis and her brother Harold Wolfe, they continue to give generously to Camp Ramah. Ab, it is my pleasure now to introduce you to everybody here today.

**AB FLATT:** Why did we decide to send our four children to Camp Ramah in the summer? Attending day school, practicing the wonderful traditions of our religion in our home, as well as feeling part of a community, all played a role in this decision. At Camp Ramah you live being Jewish twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. "Camp is different!" It has a *ruah*—a spirit—a feeling that is so very hard to explain unless one experiences it firsthand. One of our sons expressed it this way, "I can walk into a synagogue anywhere in the world and feel comfortable because of my experience and summers spent at Camp Ramah." We have been blessed with fourteen grandchildren, and so far everyone of camp age has gone and is now going to Camp Ramah in Canada. I am so delighted that their parents, former Ramahniks, have made this choice for their children. Visitors Day is a highlight for all of us each summer and has been for over thirty-five years. We look forward to many more years in the future as the little ones come of age to enjoy and benefit from what this program has to offer.

**AMY COOPER:** Dr. John Ruskay is the executive vice president and CEO of the UJA Federation of New York. In this post, he serves as the senior professional of the largest Federation in North America and the largest local philanthropy in the world. Among his many Jewish leadership positions, he served as vice chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary for eight years.

Of significant note today, I'd like to point out that John spent many of his formative years at Ramah Nyack, Poconos, and the Berkshires. In fact, in an article he wrote this summer about his childhood at Camp Ramah, he wrote: "If I had not attended Jewish summer camp in my early teens, where I was introduced to the power and intense beauty of Jewish life, Shabbat, and Jewish community, it is quite likely that I would never have been highly identified Jewishly and not likely have chosen to devote my professional career to strengthening Jewish life." We are delighted to welcome you.

**JOHN RUSKAY:** Thank you. It's a great pleasure to be here at this event, which has the feel of a camp reunion. And I'm honored to be on this panel with people who have done so much and continue to do so much for Jewish camping.

Ramah changed my life. I think the core of Ramah is that it provides the opportunity for people to be introduced to a total living Jewish community. For those not raised in a committed family, not raised in a committed community, it can be—as it was for me—a life-changing and transformational experience. Said differently, until you experience a Shabbat, why learn what so many educators want to teach? I think when people claim that the sole answer to the challenge of Jewish renewal is Jewish education, particularly formal, they're failing to understand that for people not raised in a committed environment and never having been exposed to the beauty and power of Jewish life, there's little motivation to learn. That's why so many of us have tried to move the community to focus on Jewish summer camps, Israel trips, and youth groups to strengthen Jewish identity.

I also want to acknowledge, certainly for me as an adolescent and then a young man in my twenties, the import of experiencing the Jewish professionals who led Ramah and demonstrated that we could create environments that could change Jewish lives. I want to acknowledge Jerry Abrams sitting right in front of me. He was the director of the camp that I first attended in 1961, Camp Ramah in Nyack. I was with you the first year it opened. And in 1964 at Berkshires. These summers changed my life. Neither camp was about facilities! As one who later served on the sports staff at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, camp was not about the sports facilities. I actually sometimes think that there is a notion that we're going to compete on facilities, we're going to compete in sports, in computer equipment; yes, we should do all of them well. But the essence of Ramah is that it introduces people to live in an inspired community, a sacred community, a society of *kedushah*. I think we can get diverted on other points. I love sports. And I love all the other specialized activities. But Ramah must primarily be about Jewish life. It's about Jewish community. It's about connecting people with purpose and meaning.

I want to urge us to keep our focus here. And in this spirit, I want to acknowledge the people who took the lead in creating Ramah, which was a gift to us because it provided entrée into a world that I would never have been exposed to; one that shaped my life both personally and professionally, and connected me with a people and a tradition that I may never have been connected to.

This is a great moment. In my view, the North American Jewish community is increasingly focused on this broad issue. In small steps, we're reaching more and more young people we may not have reached otherwise. In New York, we have created Campership, a new camper initiative to provide an incentive for 300 new campers who never had attended Jewish summer camp to do so. I want to acknowledge my colleague, Dr. Alisa Kurshan, an

incredibly gifted professional, who facilitated the creation of this program. Next year, we'll provide the scholarship incentives to send 600 new campers to experience Jewish summer camp.

I think we can cascade this; let people understand that with additional investments, we can increase the numbers who have the experience that so many of us did. But let us make certain that we keep our eyes on the prize and remain focused on the core; this is about making certain that when children attend Ramah and other Jewish summer camps, the camps are inspired settings for Jewish living and learning. We want to make certain that when they go to camp, that's what they experience. Thank you.

**MITCH COHEN:** Thank you, John. We have something else in common now and that is that both of us had Jerry Abrams as our first camp director. Peter Geffen is currently the director of Kivunim—The Institute of Experiential Learning for Israel and World Jewish Communities Studies, a program for students graduating high school to spend a year in Israel and throughout the world. Peter is also well known as the founder of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York City and as a visionary in the world of Jewish education.

I met Peter when he sent his daughter, Nessa, to Camp Ramah in Canada and agreed to come and spend time teaching our staff and inspiring all of us involved in the camp's leadership. Peter, an alumnus of Ramah in Connecticut, Glen Spey, Canada, Poconos, and Israel, has been a friend and teacher, and it's my pleasure to ask him to share his thoughts with us today.

**PETER GEFFEN:** Ramah taught me to be an educator, first, in the informal setting of camp itself and then within the classroom. More than this seemingly practical skill-building, however, Ramah taught me to value the field of education and ultimately to choose it as my life's work. Ramah conveyed the subtle yet commanding message that education was a center of power and influence. We never discussed Wall Street or business. Ours was a universe of ideas, some eternal and others brand new. There is little question about the Jewish part of Camp Ramah. You've heard all the evidence for it today. The broader piece may not be spoken of as much, yet I am sure that it fuels every one of us in this room. Let us go out of this conference and really turn our relationship to Ramah into something far more dynamic so as to build upon what we were given toward the creation of a future far greater than what we've experienced and what we've seen ourselves. Thank you very much.

**MITCH COHEN:** Thank you Peter, and many thanks to all of our panelists.