Prompt: What parts of the camp experience can be extended beyond the bounds of the summer and lake?

Writer: Rabbi Mitchell Cohen

One of the most important overarching goals for Jewish education is to inspire within our learners a lifelong commitment to Jewish living and learning. While the particular practices and values may vary according to a number of personal or denominational beliefs, most educational experiences are designed to help our students develop Jewish community and social networks, understand and engage in various ritual practices, establish a relationship with Israel, and to accept their responsibility to care for the world. These goals transcend the different settings of education, and include both Jewish summer camps and congregational schools.

I am fortunate to work with the Ramah system of Jewish summer camps affiliated with the Conservative movement. At Ramah, we have cultivated a wealth of research and anecdotal evidence which demonstrates a close link between the camp experience and the passion for Jewish living and learning that we see in our campers and staff members. This is manifested in many ways, including an increased desire to marry a Jewish spouse, greater participation in synagogue life, increased positive identification with Jewish philanthropic causes, better knowledge of Hebrew language and Jewish rituals, and much stronger positive feelings toward Israel than found in the general North American Jewish population. Perhaps most significantly, Ramah alumni tend to maintain strong networks of camp friends throughout their lives, a crucial factor in maintaining strong Jewish identification.

The transformational power of Jewish summer camp is undeniable. Greatness can be achieved when you combine summer vacation, supportive peer group living away from the pressures and restrictions of home life, young role models and challenging, nurturing activities. Children and teens grow in innumerable ways, developing greater self esteem, deeper friendships, and depending upon the camp program, significantly strengthened Jewish identity.
These achievements need not be limited to the summer camp setting. Summer camps have huge advantages over synagogue, JCC and school settings, but experiential, identity-building educational methodology can thrive outside of summer camp, perhaps in different ways. Obviously, camps have a number of distinct advantages that cannot be replicated during the school year. Length of time away from home, freedom from the pressures of school peer groups and academic responsibilities, and certain aspects of the natural setting of summer camp (beautiful lakes, extensive forests, star-filled skies) all combine to make camp unique.

Nevertheless, four key aspects that make summer camp effective can indeed be replicated in year-round settings: accessible staff role modeling, nature and the outdoors, creative artistic emotion-filled Judaic expression, and laughter. It is up to the imagination of year-round educators and the resources of the institutions to extract these aspects from the camp environment and apply them to their settings.

1. Accessible staff role modeling – Children and teens respond best to the influence of older teens and young adults in their early-mid 20’s. While this age cohort tends to be less trained than older teachers, they are crucial to the formation of closer bonds with students in supplemental settings, whether as teacher’s aids, madrichim, or some other important role. At camp, the relationships that form between campers and staff are a key ingredient in Jewish identity building, as children want to be just like their counselors! Throughout the year, in alternative settings, young people need to be hired to fill important roles, need to be empowered to develop meaningful relationships with the students, and need the opportunity to express themselves and their Judaism as individuals, not just teach a curriculum that is handed to them. More than any other factor, these relationships help children grow up with a desire to emulate their role models and are a very powerful influence in Jewish growth.

2. Nature and the Outdoors – Obviously an urban or suburban setting cannot match the rural nature of camp. But even in a city, so many programs can be run outdoors, where fresh air, no walls, open skies and trees can combine to provide a much more meaningful educational experience for students than in the confines of a classroom. Games in the fields, hikes in the woods, star gazing, standing near a body of water, and numerous other ways of using nature and the outdoors can radically impact the nature of education, making a student’s experience much more “camp-like” all throughout the years.

3. Creative artistic emotion-filled Judaic expression – So much of the power of camp relates to the sensations associated with beautiful song, theater and dance. Tefilah, Hebrew language, and Jewish values and customs can be taught so much more effectively when the spirituality of artistic expression is combined with the substance of a text. Schools have effectively run zimriyot, rikudiot, camp-like theater performances, and other simple programs which combine many of the sensations of artistic expression with Jewish knowledge.
Since these programs tend also to be associated with so much more fun that schooling in general, it has a huge advantage over the basic classroom setting.

4. Laughter – It may sound simplistic to emphasize laughter in Jewish education, but I firmly believe that laughter is a key ingredient in camp for effective Jewish growth. The science of laughter confirms its importance in (1) social and emotional development, (2) the deepening of interpersonal relationships, and (3) in the building of self-esteem. When Judaism is associated with these three elements, there can be life-long impact. Teachers need to consider the importance of simple humor, games, and fun in every lesson plan, as simply getting their students laughing together can greatly increase the power of the educational experience.

All four of these elements – young role modeling, nature, arts and laughter – are normally associated with camp activities. The more they are emphasized in a school setting, and year-round, the greater the possibility for camp-style growth and development, and the solidifying of Jewish commitment.

The National Ramah Commission has piloted the Ramah Service Corps, which takes young educators in supplemental school settings and trains them to emphasize these four elements throughout the year. This initiative aims to bring the best of summer camp to children and teens year-round. We are convinced that while camp is by far the best venue for deepening Jewish commitment, we also recognize that so much of what is accomplished at camp can be transferred to school settings.

One obvious way for year-round settings to accomplish these goals is through student or family retreats. Shabbatonim, week-long retreats at a local Jewish camp or retreat center, or even a day long outing can have an outsized impact and should become an integral part of any year-round educational program. Stronger experiential learning taking place throughout the year incorporating the four points enumerated above, combined with a month or longer of intensive Jewish camping in the summer is a great model for inspiring our children to become active, proud, practicing Jews, with strong Jewish friendship networks and a desire to take leadership roles as they develop into emerging adults.

*Rabbi Mitchell Cohen is the Director of the National Ramah Commission. He has been in that position since 2003, having served previously for eleven years as the Director of Camp Ramah in Canada. He was the founding principal of the Solomon Schechter High School in Westchester County, New York, and was a corporate litigator before receiving his rabbinic ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary.*