

PETER A. GEFFEN

*Manifest Destiny:
Camp Ramah Extends the Borders*

WHEN ONE TRAVELS the Jewish world as I have had the privilege of doing in recent years, one is struck by the commonality (across geographic borders) and continuity (across centuries) of Jewish life. This is complimented by the (virtually) limitless ability of Jewish life to incorporate and integrate into itself an expansive array of localisms. Costume, architecture/music/art for synagogues, cuisine (to the borders of kashrut), dance, hand movements in prayer, shoes on, shoes off, calligraphy, and philosophy all lend color and flavor to Jewish life as lived from Alibaug and Cochin in India to Taroudant in Morocco and all points in between.

America, being so young and possessing no such range of native culture to engage its huge twentieth-century Jewish population, has given us something else. We have internalized the most critical aspect of the American experience, the geographic-expansionist character known in American history as Manifest Destiny—that we were made to make it from sea to sea. When one observes the American Jewish scene, one sees and feels the limitless horizons of what is and can be Jewish, drawn not only from the past but through creatively experiencing the present and anticipating the future. Throughout North America, the Jew looks very similar in costume and color from one city to the next, but American Jews have felt a “manifest destiny” to expand what it is that we do as Jews beyond the bounds of costume and cuisine. We feel empowered to develop new forms of ritual; use music in synagogues at times where before it was taboo; include Eastern meditation and Western poetry in our prayers; and create art, music, drama, and dance that we call Jewish yet

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draws its inspiration from new sources, as well as old. We create new cultural forms rather than simply place old wine in new bottles.

What empowered us to take such bold steps into new territory—creating alternative synagogue forms (e.g., *havurot*); radically alternative schools; and new forms and rituals of marriage, bar and bat mitzvah, life cycle moments, and so on? I think that it was in no small measure the universe of Camp Ramah that generated a unique and powerful influence, imbuing its campers with a spirit of freedom, independence, and opportunity that fueled these Jewish communal developments of the past half century. No accounting of the creative expansion of modern American Judaism can miss the autobiographical commonality of so many of our contemporary leaders who often shared only one common training ground: Camp Ramah.

For me, Ramah taught openness and inclusiveness. When as a seven-year-old in the 1950s, I began attending Camp Ramah in Connecticut for a full two months, Ramah, like the rest of America, was insular and had a limited (although some might say, focused) agenda. Not only was the outside world virtually invisible in camp, even the broader Jewish world had a very limited serious exposure; Israel and Zionism, for example, were symbolic at best. The annual Israeli *mishlahat* (emissary staff) that we take for granted today had not yet been conceived. Issues of the outside world such as the raging cold war and the nuclear threat rarely were discussed. In Ramah in the Poconos, where each morning we raised the American flag (and recited the Pledge of Allegiance) and raised the Israeli flag (and sang *Im eshkahech yerushalayim* “If I Forget Thee O Jerusalem”), we never discussed why we did so or what was taking place in either of our two countries.

But following John Kennedy’s election to the presidency and the opening of the 1960s, Ramah quickly became a center for discussion (and ultimately activism) of the issues of race, war, and peace; Israel and the Arab nations; poverty in America; and certainly drugs, sex, and rock and roll. This transition was neither an accident nor an imposition from the outside, but emerged as a natural outgrowth of the seeds sown in the first decade of the experiential programming at Ramah.

Ramah had prepared us to take in conflicting and diverse points of view; to understand that a big world of ideas and thought awaited us outside our narrow and self-limited universe. I could become a civil rights worker in June and return to camp in July and August; I could serve as a civilian volunteer during the Six-Day War in Israel and return to camp to advocate “land for peace” and the internationalization of Jerusalem, and I could even show the highly controversial anti-Vietnam War film *Inside North Vietnam* by Felix Greene in

camp and still (albeit barely) remain within the consensus of Ramah life and leadership. I successfully had been taught that the borders were there for testing and not for restricting, however challenging this would become for the camps' senior leadership. I always was made to feel that my growing political activism made (at least some of) the Ramah directors (e.g., Don Adelman, z"l, and Ray Arzt) proud.

I was given my freedom at Camp Ramah. Oh, I know this may sound grandiose, but it is true. In 1953, it was commonplace for city kids to spend as much time away from "summer in the city" as possible. For a child as young as seven to spend such a large proportion of his or her life living "independently" and communally made a powerful and lasting impression on all of us. Some of us were hooked for life; others never returned, but all were deeply affected. The fact that this experience took place within a creative Jewish context was a subtle, maybe even subconscious factor that should not be minimized. In many ways, it was the subtle, certainly the informal, that produced more results than any formal instruction or learning (of which there was a quite a bit).

I grew up in Ramah. I transferred from Ramah in Connecticut to Ramah in the Poconos from ages ten to thirteen. I moved to Ramah in Canada the summer it opened (1960) when I was fourteen and fifteen and continued on there (and in Glen Spey) as waiter, water skiing instructor, bunk counselor, and *rosh edah* (division head) through the 1960s, finishing my Ramah employment in Israel through the 1970s and early 1980s. There is no experience, educational institution, or person that can come close to the influence that Ramah had on me. Many of my closest friends, teachers, and mentors come from those years as well. I would not be who I am without Ramah, and I could not possibly have accomplished my life's work without it.

What does that mean exactly, you might ask? I will start with the community of children that is Ramah. There are, of course, adults throughout the camps. But they are overwhelmingly outnumbered by children under the age of sixteen. When you watch campers walking toward the *badar ochel* (dining hall) at sunset on any summer day, you can feel the power of that multitude. It is a child's world. And for most of its history, certainly since the 1960s, most of the adults in camp were once children in camp. Whereas parents may attempt to remember what it was like to be a child, counselors are too close in age to have forgotten. Hence, a unique environment of child-centeredness is created. It was in camp that I first felt the power of youth to act consequentially, exerting influence and power. In my mid-teens I became United Synagogue Youth (USY) national president because of what I had internalized at Ramah. I knew and understood what a kid could do. I learned how to listen, and I learned how to lead.

For the development of Judaism and its practice, Ramah changed the rules of the encounter. Rabbis and teachers did not lead; children led. It was not only that I learned the *nusah* of davening at camp; I learned the *nusah* of prayer settings, prayerfulness, prayer leadership, prayer participation, and prayer power. To this day, when I serve as a volunteer hazzan for high holiday services at my synagogue (Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan) or when I conduct a bar or bat mitzvah service for family or friends, I rely upon the little boy at Camp Ramah in the Poconos who first stood before his peers and chanted a morning service. Although I learned much when sitting in the pews of my childhood synagogue, it is camp that fuels my memory of the building of competence and skill and courage to stand before my people and “. . . sing a new song to Adonai” as the psalmist says.

Camp, of course, took prayer into the woods, encountering nature in ways that the urban and even suburban synagogue could not possibly do. In this way Ramah taught that prayer could take place anywhere; led by anyone (even though girls were denied these roles in my youth, the inevitable logic of their inclusion was manifest in our experience); and be open to the inclusion of creative expressions in word, music, art, thought, and meditation that characterize much of the prayer experience of our Jewish world today.

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 to ultimately choose it as my life's work. Ramah conveyed the subtle yet powerful 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. Because of my work in Camp Ramah, I was hired at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City at the age of twenty-one and given the freedom and support to build a post-bar/bat mitzvah program that would keep its teenagers involved. I conceived the establishment of an alternative day school model in the creation of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York City because my own Ramah education had empowered me to think creatively, boldly, and independently. Did my genes play a role? My family, my father, my grandfather? Yes, of course they did. But it was Ramah that fueled me; that nurtured and nourished me; and gave me direction, conviction, and resources for what I was feeling inside.

Camp was not all theology or seriousness. It was also where I learned to have fun, to play pranks, and get myself into trouble (a very good thing for a rabbi's son). It was the site of my first girlfriend and first kiss: where I learned about sex. I threw my first successful out; hit my first double, and learned to imitate Duke Snyder at the plate. Ramah taught me to swim, to row, to paddle,

to sail, to water ski, to hike, to pitch a tent, to make a fire, to make a bed, to fold a towel, and to clean a toilet. Ramah taught me to share my food, my treats, my dreams. Ramah taught me to watch my mouth and restrain my fists.

At sixty, Ramah must be recognized and recognize in itself the greatness of its work and accomplishment. To the founders, Seymour and Sylvia, and to the multitudes of directors, counselors, colleagues, and peers who were the gifts that Ramah gave to me—I wish to say thank you. Words cannot express my gratitude. And I am joined by thousands whose lives were molded and changed for the good through your legacy.