

ALAN H. SILBERMAN

Ramah as a Transformative Experience: Five Key Principles

HAVING EXPERIENCED fifty-seven years of Ramah—as a camper, a staff member, a member of a camp committee, a camp president, the first former camper to become president of the National Ramah Commission, and—most importantly—as a parent and grandparent of children who have, and are, experiencing Ramah themselves, I begin to think that I have achieved some sense of perspective. (If the strength of my feelings about that perspective is increasing in the same measure as the accuracy of my memories is decreasing, I apologize.)

We speak of Ramah as a transformational experience for those who participate as campers and as staff members. We see proof of that impact in individual decisions about lifestyle, in personal priorities, in the ongoing organized connections that exist between *bogerei Ramah* (stretching in many cases over fifty years), and in participation (if not leadership) in communal institutions. The data are before us. From my own experience and perspective, the power of the data is not in their individual entries, or even in the conclusions that the data support. To me, the power—and the power of Ramah, past, present, and future—comes from understanding the principles that are the foundation of the total of individualized experience.

Any effort to create a list of principles, even core principles, is daunting. I do not claim that my list of five principles is all-inclusive. But these principles do reflect a personal sense that has emerged over my extended experience with Ramah. These principles were at work long before I perceived them. They were

ALAN H. SILBERMAN is a partner in the Chicago-based law firm *Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal, LLP*, and is the chair emeritus of the firm's national *Antitrust, Marketing Practices, Franchising, & Distribution* practice. He began attending Camp Ramah in Wisconsin as a camper shortly after the camp was established and continued his involvement as a staff member, as a member of the camp's Board of Directors, and as the president of Ramah Wisconsin. In 1992, he became the first former Ramah camper to serve as the president of the National Ramah Commission. He is currently the president of the World Council of Conservative/Masorti Synagogues and a member of the World Zionist Organization (Expanded) Executive and the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency.

not announced in the form of a catechism; just the opposite: the challenge presented to my generation of Ramah campers, and to those coming afterward as well, was to search out and identify the core principles on one's own and with one's peers and then follow through on the conclusions that we reached.

The first principle is the **significance of role models** in shaping the identity of adolescents and young adults: the scholar who hits home runs, the young man or woman at home with Hebrew text and musical theater, the staff member who was committed to Herzl and Martin Luther King, Jr. To be Ramah campers and spend time with these role models left us with a strong sense of obligation (and possibly one that set us apart from our non-Ramah peers): we were obligated to try to develop multiple talents, but we were also required to organize priorities—the first of which was the continuity and vitality of *am yisra'el*, in all of its diverse parts.

In my list of the principles of Ramah, the next is **Jewish knowledge and the recognition that transmission of Jewish knowledge *midor ledor* (from generation to generation)**, requires a significant degree of depth. In the fifties, Ramah stretched the knowledge of Jewish teenagers in ways we hardly could have dreamed of. We were thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen years old, and we were studying Genesis in conjunction with Babylonian creation epics. We read the words of Jeremiah and spoke of distinctions between the text and the philosophy of Socrates. We learned Jewish history and placed it in the context of Western civilization without reducing the Jewish experience to just another event on the world stage. And we were privileged to learn from teachers who were, or were on their way to becoming, the most highly distinguished educators of our time. Over the past five decades, I have seen my experience replicated over and over again, in young men and women who break new ground in bringing Jewish knowledge to multiple communities. In my view, this process resulted in the acceptance of a corollary principle: a goal of Ramah is to produce men and women who are educated and also see themselves as Jewish educators, regardless of their formal profession or source of income.

I elevate **Hebrew** to the position of the third principle. I recognize that within Ramah, this principle has had an uneven history. But my understanding, based on my own experience, is that Hebrew is, and should be, a value that enables us to transmit Jewish knowledge, a personal connection to Israel, and a sense of the unity of *am yisra'el*. We have made more efforts to make Hebrew co-equal in the overall camp experience and to make it the language of our official communication. Whereas early Ramah campers and staff saw the Hebrew language as a personal obligation, today, more often it is seen as an interesting option. Hebrew is the language of the Jewish people. As we go forward, we must present it in those terms.

Next in the list of core principles that inform Ramah's mission is the **significance of Jewish practice and Jewish community** in maintaining the Jewish people. It is difficult to put this as fourth; but I believe that acceptance of the first three principles—role models, Jewish knowledge and one's role as an educator, and Hebrew—leads inexorably to this next value. Jewish practice in the American setting is not uniform, but engaging with the issue and trying to make principled, informed choices is and must continue to be a constant value of the Ramah Movement. The Ramah experience has become so much more important as the existence of a true sense of Jewish community (beyond eating knishes and kishke and beyond providing financial support for Israel) became more and more precarious in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The pendulum seems to be swinging the other way today, and it is crucial that Ramah be a prime mover in that process of renewal.

Because I am identifying only five core principles out of many possibilities, it is inappropriate to refer to the fifth one as "last." In many ways, it is the most important: the sense that *am yisra'el be'eretz yisra'el* (or *bimdinat yisra'el*, if you wish), is an **existential principle for all Jews**. Perhaps because we were only a few years past the Shoah, and because we were in the period of exhilaration following the establishment of the State of Israel, the position of Israel as an existential issue for Jews was easier for us to grasp in the earlier years of Ramah. Today it is undeniably more complicated. Israel, in the early years of Ramah, was essential to Jewish survival—a place of refuge. Today it is no less essential, not to Jewish survival in the same sense, but to the survival of values that are identifiably Jewish, grounded in our history, our texts, and our sense of mission. That is a principle that must be shaped and reshaped on a regular basis, and just as we found ways to imprint it on the generations of the 1950s and 1960s, we must develop approaches that will impact on the camp populations of today and tomorrow.

In my own experience, all five of these core principles, and all of their subsets, are wrapped together in Ramah through an overarching super principle: the duty of an individual to grapple with the core issues of Jewish life and Jewish responsibility and the duty of every person to make choices based on knowledge and on faith. Study. Think. Choose. Understand what it means to believe in something. Understand that you are not living alone, that you are part of a total community.

Ramah was intended to have impact. It will continue to have impact. And its greatest strength has been that it has continued to create and recreate the means by which that impact can be realized. We take Jewish education, and the Jewish future, very seriously. That is the legacy that we have received from Lou Newman, z"l, Seymour Fox, z"l, and others that followed them. And

we know that success calls for more than mere repetition of old models, even as it calls for retention of core principles. One need only read the outstanding work of Dr. Simcha Leibovich, reviewing the evolution of educational efforts at Ramah Wisconsin,¹ to see that Ramah continues to think long and hard about education and to understand that effective education demands evolution.

I had wonderful experiences at Ramah as a camper, as a staff member, and beyond. My wife Margaret did as well. But we know that our experience of the 1950s and early 1960s was not the experience of our children in the 1980s or of our grandchildren today. We, and Ramah, are products of the Conservative Movement: we struggle with ideas and conflicts, we confront change, and we try to understand how tension can be resolved without undermining principles. If that struggle informs the work of Ramah over the next sixty years, we will have succeeded beyond measure.

Note

¹Simcha Leibovich, *Camp Ramah in Wisconsin: 60 Years of Educational Excellence*, English version with Carl Schrag (New York: National Ramah Commission, 2008).