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The Education of Ramah Counselors: Madrichim as Educators and Learners

AS CAMPERS, SAMANTHA PLATT and Michael Auerbach were full of energy, soaking up everything Camp Ramah offered. Michael was from Denver and loved singing and sports; Samantha, from Los Angeles, enjoyed theater and art. They both valued their friends and Shabbat. When the year arrived for them to join the staff, they applied to participate in the Ramah counselor leadership training program. In their first year as counselors, they were placed in a unit that I supervised, and I watched with pride as they developed valuable skills in problem solving, promoting Jewish education, public speaking, team work, and program design and assessment. In that summer, Samantha and Michael exceeded my expectations, impacting the lives of their campers, building positive relationships with fellow staff members, and asserting themselves as leaders.

Six years later I was a guest at Samantha and Michael's wedding, their relationship having been kindled at Camp Ramah. We all remain committed to the Jewish community where we serve as leaders. We all have grown, too. Samantha served two summers as a *rosh edah*, earned her Master's in education, and now teaches general studies at a Jewish day school. Michael stayed involved with Jewish life as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania and is now in law school. After assuming my position as the assistant director at Camp Ramah in California, I continued to support and guide Samantha and Michael while settling into my career as a Jewish educator. Samantha and Michael could sense their growth during their summers as counselors, but were unaware that the same skills acquired then would be put to use in graduate school and as they began their family.

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During the summer, teenagers and young adults like Samantha and Michael are presented with a plethora of options—summer school, jobs in the retail industry, internships, travel programs, and more. The decision to work as a counselor at Camp Ramah is a choice that yields compelling benefits to the individual and also strengthens the Jewish community and its leadership.

From their first day of training, Ramah counselors face the daunting responsibility of providing a summer experience for children that must be safe, fun, educational, and transformative. Parents send their children to Camp Ramah with the hope that they will grow in positive ways. Sometimes parents have a hard time letting go, whereas other times, children have a hard time being let go. After the children arrive at camp, a staff of counselors, specialty instructors, and administrators work hard to engage campers in a program that will be life altering.

In the Ramah environment, a great deal of responsibility is placed in the hands of counselors, often as young as eighteen, who serve *in loco parentis*, and who must draw on the same types of skills possessed by highly experienced parents, social workers, nurses, rabbis, cantors, and teachers so that campers return to their families and communities transformed into stronger individuals than they were before the start of the summer. The counselors themselves are another target population for Ramah administrators interested not only in the needs of the paying campers, but also in growing Jewishly literate young adults committed to the values of Conservative Judaism and prepared to impart those values to the next generation. Literature, research, and anecdotal evidence point to two goals that Ramah camps strive for, as well as the methods to ensure their attainment. The first goal is to train staff to serve as Jewish role models, caregivers, and educators for their campers. The second goal is to prepare these teenagers and young adults for a lifelong commitment to the development of Jewish youth, to education, and to continuity as a professional, volunteer, and/or parent.

Camp Ramah as an Agency of Jewish Education

Jewish residential camps serve as laboratories where young people live according to Jewish values independent from their parents' direct influence. According to ethnographic research, most Jewish camps have a focused mission rooted in Jewish education and fall short of success when the main focus of the program is on secular values and activities (Sales and Saxe 2004). Jewish camps are part of a framework of education known as "informal Jewish education" (Chazan 2002, 7). Often juxtaposed against the formal education that takes place in schools, Chazan defines informal Jewish education in the following manner:

Informal Jewish education is aimed at the personal growth of Jews of all ages. It happens through the individual's actively experiencing a diversity of Jewish moments and values that are regarded as worthwhile. It works by creating venues, by developing a total educational culture, and by co-opting the social context. It is based on a curriculum of Jewish values and experiences that is presented in a dynamic and flexible manner. As an activity, it does not call for any one venue but may happen in a variety of settings. It evokes pleasurable feelings and memories. (15)

As an agent of informal Jewish education, Camp Ramah has a responsibility toward socialization and education. Reimer explains that the socializing experiences of informal Jewish education should aim “to have participants identify as Jews and enjoy the presence of other Jews . . .” (Reimer 2007, 5). This single goal is important but only half of the equation. Agencies also must focus on education, which Cremin defines as “the deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills or sensibilities as well as any outcomes of that effort” (Cremin 1977, viii). Educationally, then, the goals of Sabbath observance at Ramah are not restricted to campers enjoying a nice communal experience, but also that they understand the ritual practices of the weekly holiday and commit themselves to future observance.

Camp Ramah is classified as an institution of informal Jewish education because of its commitment to inspire Jewish devotion in its constituents. Sales and Saxe explain, “The education theory of summer camping is . . . if children come to associate Jewish life with sweetness—the smell of pine trees, the closeness of friends, laughter in the bunk—what they practice and learn at camp will remain with them for a lifetime” (2004, 55). Therefore, camp educators take campers on a hike that emphasizes the Jewish value of *bal tashhit* (not destroying natural resources) with the hope that their love for camp and communal living will transfer to a sense of obligation and interest in nature as Jewish environmentalists.

At Camp Ramah, counselors are expected to educate and socialize campers with a focus on the core values of Conservative Judaism. In the field of Jewish camping, Ramah camps are in fact distinguished by their serious commitment to informal Jewish education (Keysar and Kosmin 2004; Sales and Saxe 2002, 2004). The mission statement of Ramah declares its aim to

create educating communities in which people learn to live committed Jewish lives, embodying the ideals of Conservative Judaism. Out of such communities, Ramah continues to “raise up” committed volunteer and professional leadership for the Conservative Movement and contemporary Jewry. (Dorph 2000, 336)

The mission then outlines specific Jewish values and practices including Jewish text and laws, prayer, Hebrew literacy, ritual observance, Zionism, and *tikkun olam* (social justice).

Ramah educators labor over the construction of objectives and the use of methods to infuse a knowledge of these values and practices into daily activities. Each camp differs slightly in the exact structure of the day, but all allot time for focused learning of the Hebrew language, various Jewish topics, and elements of Zionism with specialty instructors. Lessons are conducted with the same serious intent held by a classroom instructor, yet the room itself is without walls and next to a tree or lake (Sales and Saxe 2004). Throughout the day, counselors also are expected to use skills as Jewish educators when they approach *tefillot*, bunk activities, evening programming, and various other programs throughout the summer. Creativity and focus are vital attributes as camp professionals work hard to blend the natural resources and recreational activities with Jewish content so that learning is engaging and fun.

Research conducted by Dr. Ariela Keysar and Dr. Barry Kosmin between 1999 and 2004 demonstrates that Ramah camps successfully impart values through staff members to campers. Starting in the late 1990s, Drs. Keysar and Kosmin selected a cohort of 1,400 students about to become bar/bat mitzvah from various Conservative synagogues in North America, whose development into Jewish adulthood would be tracked. A follow-up study was conducted with these students in 2001 and 2004. Findings in 2001 indicated that individuals who attend Camp Ramah were “. . . more observant of Jewish ritual, more positive about Jewish and Zionist identity, more inclined to date and marry Jews, and more active in Jewish life on [college] campus” (Cohen 2004, 6; and this volume). By 2004, some of these individuals had spent at least one year as a camp counselor, and the findings on their commitment to Jewish values were even more encouraging. Indeed, placing Jewish young adults in the role of caregiver and educator for a younger generation not only strengthens the Jewish identity of the campers, but of the staff as well.

The Counselor: A Job Description

“A good counselor is one who can show campers the meaning of their actions, choices, and mistakes, and who can relate them as a group, and as individuals, to the total camp happenings.” (Ott 1946, 15)

At the core of the successful operation of Camp Ramah and entrusted with the health, safety, and growth of children, stands a young adult, usually between the ages of seventeen and twenty. Each summer, scores of counselors are hired to work with campers to ensure a safe, fun experience. In his study of college-age

staff at Camp Ramah, Jeffrey Kress (2005 and this volume) identifies a variety of factors that are considered when a young adult decides to work at Camp Ramah, including the opportunity to be part of a Jewish community, spend time with friends, gain skills and/or experience, give back to Ramah, and so forth. When asked to identify the factors that are very important, 87 percent responded “it is an enjoyable experience,” making it the most common motivating factor, whereas 73 percent responded “to be part of a Jewish community,” and 56 percent “to gain skills and/or experience.” Although camp directors adhere to a mission of training their counselors to be Jewish educators and role models, the counselors themselves do not always enter the working environment with the primary focus on these same goals.

At its most basic level, the job description for a counselor requires him or her to facilitate wake-up and bedtime procedures, monitor for proper hygiene, create and organize age-appropriate activities, and ensure camper safety, well-being, and happiness while at camp. To succeed, counselors must develop sharp skills in listening, observation, and problem solving (LaFave and Loughran 2001; Sales and Saxe 2004). Balancing their desire to be “a friend” and the expectation that they assume a more adult role like a parent or a teacher, counselors exert tremendous influence and often can transform a camper’s summer into a positive and memorable experience or into an unfortunate emotional scab on the knee of childhood. Why are they so impactful? Simply stated, campers put their counselors on a pedestal that no “real adult” could ever reach.

The camp counselor with a magnetic personality stands at the heart of the camp experience. Campers look up to, and often idolize, their counselors. Counselors have ‘high status,’ and their influence comes from both their words and their actions. They help shape the camp environment, create the social atmosphere that embraces campers, and provide examples of what campers can become in a few short years. What is so powerful about counselors’ influence is that it is not limited to any single area or sphere of activity. Counselors provide guidance and modeling on questions as diverse as relationships, sports, . . . and how to dance. (Zeldin 2006, 89)

Being a counselor requires young adults to blend skills in parenting, teaching, and cheerleading. Counselors learn these skills quickly, contributing much to the summer program, and gaining from their experience on staff.

At Camp Ramah, the bunk counselor also is expected to educate and model according to the core values of Conservative Judaism. At Jewish residential summer camps, young adults not only check for brushed teeth, comfort the homesick, and cheer campers on during basketball games, but also might

be called on to model Jewish values, use Hebrew vocabulary, lead prayers, and incorporate Jewish themes into their activities. To succeed, counselors must see themselves as Jewish educators and role models, committed to raising active, engaged Jews (Zeldin 2006). Therefore, these counselors themselves must be Jewishly literate with skills as educators that emphasize being active and participatory (Chazan 2002). This is a tremendous expectation. A Jewish exclamation states *dayyenu* (it would have been enough). To ask a young adult to care for their own needs—*dayyenu!* To ask a young adult to care for the needs of younger children—*dayyenu!* Ramah pushes further and requires young adults to care for the daily needs of younger children *and* to provide them with a Jewish education.

Educating Counselors: Developmental Issues

To fully understand the importance of the seventeen- to twenty-year-old cabin counselor population in the mission of Jewish summer camps, it is important to account for their developmental characteristics. Young adults in this age bracket often are referred to as “emerging adults.” They use work as a genuine means to explore their identities, seeking to clarify their own values and career trajectory (Arnett 2004). Camp administrators must become familiar with their characteristics and commit to building on them in order to design a strong training program that supports their personal and professional development.

In their handbook, *Camp is for the Camper* (2000), Coutellier and Henchey apply well-known psychological milestones to advice for camp administrators regarding camp staff. Specifically, they explain that the seventeen- to twenty-year-old age range coincides with a shift in young adults, who reach a stage in their lives when they are ready to reach outside of themselves to lead and care for others in the world. Physically, they are sexually mature, focused on body image, and desirous of the adrenaline rush that comes from a feeling of accomplishment. Socially, they are prepared for independence beyond their immediate family and friends, searching for adult leadership roles, and ready to make and keep commitments. Emotionally, young adults seek respect, multiple involvements, and opportunities to make a positive impact on the world. Intellectually, they want to make occupational choices, express their opinions, develop marketable skills, solve problems, and expand their experiences. These characteristics make them ideal candidates for training in leadership and in the arts of caring for and educating others. However, because they are accepting this responsibility for the first time, room must be provided for trial and error, and scaffolding must be built to provide plenty of support. When properly supported, their characteristics also lead to their own identity formation as future leaders in the Jewish community.

Counselors: Educators for Campers

When Ramah directors and unit heads approach counselor training, they teach how to provide a fun, safe, Jewish educational experience for campers. Most professionals enter their field after a period of academic or technical training and with some work experience already under their belts. This is typically not the case for Ramah counselors entering their first summer as practitioners in youth education and development. Great responsibility is put on the counselors' shoulders, yet they have not obtained an academic degree nor have they attended a vocational school in preparation for their work. Therefore, the task of training counselors falls on the directors and unit heads of each camp in order to ensure campers are the recipients of outstanding care and a sound Jewish education during the summer. Proper training not only provides counselors with the tools they require if they want to succeed, but also motivates them to want to succeed. Fortunately, the American Camp Association, a community of camp professionals who have joined together to share knowledge and experience and to ensure the quality of camp programs, requires accredited camps to provide training to their staff members and holds each camp accountable to fill this requirement. The following are a few key types of training, supported by literature, which Ramah camps have adopted to ensure excellent staff:

Counselor-in-Training (C.I.T.) Programs. The most thorough form of staff training is a counselor-in-training program, such as the Mador Young Leadership Program at Camp Ramah in California. This opportunity provides first-year counselors interested in transitioning from camper to staff member with a period of training of eight weeks in length, ten hours a week. Participants attend workshops in leadership, communication, program design and evaluation, discipline, youth development, and Judaica. Experienced professionals also mentor them. This type of C.I.T. program has been found to elevate young people from camper to counselor and provide skills in activity areas, as well as in group living and successful personality development. Specifically, one researcher found that counselors who participated in a C.I.T. program were evaluated more highly in their: (1) attitude and understanding of camp philosophy, (2) possession and utilization of outdoor skills, (3) ability to adjust to situations in a resourceful manner, (4) ability to organize and plan camp programs, and (5) initiative and dependability in conducting programs and carrying out job responsibilities (House 1976, 29).

Staff Training Week. The American Camp Association (*Accreditation standards for camp programs and services* 1998) requires a minimum six-day training program for staff at accredited residential camps. In general, Ramah camps use the staff training week to acclimate the counselor to the Ramah setting,

introduce them to summer colleagues, provide skills in youth development, discuss camp policy, facilitate some quantity of program planning, and provide instruction in Jewish content and education (Sales and Saxe 2004).

Parallel Training Workshops. Ramah camps continue to provide staff development while camp is in session so that counselors can evaluate and improve their skill set in action. Some camps require staff to participate in a *beit midrash* program, learning skills in Jewish text and liturgy. Others create workshops for counselors to advance their skills in youth development, leadership, Judaic studies, Hebrew language, and a variety of other areas.

Camp administrators hope that these opportunities, when utilized, enable them to produce young adults prepared to embrace their duties as educators.

To succeed, counselors who are seventeen to twenty years in age must be taught a mixture of pedagogic skills in experiential education, as well as the content they are charged to cover, while also inspired to try hard and work toward the Ramah mission. Based on his study of thirty-seven camps and ninety-seven outdoor education programs, Dr. Randall Grayson (2001), a psychologist who specializes in applying social, developmental, and organizational psychology to help camps better serve campers and staff, advises that good counselor training addresses knowledge, attitude, and behavior. In this context, *knowledge* is the actual content; a good counselor understands the skills or values he or she is trying to instill in his or her campers. A positive *attitude* indicates that the counselor's heart is appropriately focused and that he or she values the content to be imparted. *Behavior* encompasses the steps counselors must take to execute the skills or model the values of the camp in an educational manner. Pedagogic behavioral techniques might include games, races, simulations, art projects, acting, or any number of other recreational activities that can be used to teach skills. Here we think back to the characteristics of seventeen- to twenty-year-olds and are reminded that they are interested both in leadership roles and expressing their opinions. If they perceive a conflict between their own agenda and that of the camp, they will quickly lose focus. If there is alignment between their agenda and that of the camp, then successful education is quite conceivable.

Solid counselor education also leaves room for the staff member to experiment with trial and error. In a theoretical article on the training of C.I.T.s, Virginia Thompson (2000) underlines the importance of giving the young counselor opportunities to "1) *Do*: Lead the activity; 2) *Reflect*: Think about the results. What went right and what could be improved? 3) *Apply*: Lead the activity again applying what was learned the first time." Providing counselors

with this opportunity to practice their skills, immediately learn from their mistakes, and adjust their techniques keeps them motivated to succeed.

In Jewish residential camping, the biggest challenge facing staff trainers does not lie in providing pedagogical techniques, but in preparing a team of counselors who are themselves Jewishly literate. Michael Zeldin, a leader in the field of Jewish education and faculty member at Hebrew Union College, advocates for Jewish learning on the staff level for counselors “to have an impact on their Jewish development, and from the fact that they are the primary Jewish educators of the campers. The depth and breadth of campers’ Jewish learning is a function of how well educated counselors are” (2006, 105). Ramah camps often benefit from counselors who were once Ramah campers and who come armed with a Jewish education from day school or supplemental school and the college campus. Still, not all counselors are prepared or willing to lead prayers, use Hebrew language, and incorporate biblical and rabbinic texts into activities. When the counselors are at camp for the week of staff training, most camp administrators feel pressured to address basic safety and policy concerns, often at the expense of strengthening Jewish literacy in staff. Judaica—the content of the Jewish educational program—is often placed lower on the to-do list during staff training (Sales and Saxe 2004). An eye (and ear) toward camper safety is key to Ramah remaining open, but the Jewish mission falls to the side if the counselors are unable to provide content through the activities they lead.

The optimists in the field align with Grayson (2001) and argue that instilling a positive attitude in a counselor to “pull out all the stops” and reach toward the Ramah mission will motivate counselors to acquire the content knowledge and pedagogic skills they need to succeed. Zeldin (2006), recognizing the teenage/young adult’s desire to succeed, explains that a powerful motivator for adults is the challenge of accomplishing a task. Therefore, if Jewish learning is a necessary step to the educational work expected of them, they will approach their work with a strong motivation to learn. Building on counselors’ desires to succeed, coupled with their often undying loyalty to Ramah, directors and unit heads have a solid chance of engaging counselors in education workshops and eliciting a strong effort from them.

Fortunately, camp administrators need not carry the weight by themselves of providing their staff with the Jewish education required to educate campers. Ramah counselors have attended either a private Jewish day school that offers a secular and Jewish education or a supplemental program that meets in the afternoon, evening, or weekend. Furthermore, once in college, counselors have access to academic courses in Jewish studies and Hebrew language. According

to Kress (2005), two-thirds of Ramah counselors attended a supplemental Jewish school post-bar mitzvah or a Jewish day school in the elementary years, and one-third attended during the high school years. Once in college, half take courses in Hebrew language (or place out entirely), half take courses in Jewish studies, and 90 percent are involved in some manner with Hillel or a Jewish student union. Furthermore, once in college, half of counselors intend to study abroad in Israel for at least one semester, and roughly 90 percent have visited Israel at least once. Urging, or even requiring, counselors to take advantage of the off-season Jewish educational experiences will relieve camp administrators of the lonely task of educating counselors in Jewish content.

Counselors: Educators as Learners

At the same time that teenagers and young adults are being trained to counsel and educate their campers, their own skills and values are being formed. Quite simply, in the Ramah environment, the counselor is a camper in the eyes of the administrators who are invested in growing future professionals, parents, and lay leaders for the Jewish community. Once they have passed through the ranks as campers into staff positions, counselors continue to describe camp as their Jewish home. They can identify ways that Ramah continues to help them grow as young adults. One counselor shares: "Being a first-year counselor changed me. I took all my energy and channeled it into the right places. I felt so happy with the work I was doing and the impact I made on kids, whether through planning a program or leading a cheer." Another counselor stated, "I really felt like I matured through the training program. This summer was a real growth experience for me. I faced many challenges and acquired new skills." Indeed, some counselors are consciously aware of their continued development once on staff and recognize the ways in which their future direction is impacted through their work.

From a secular standpoint, research has shown that counselors can identify many positive outcomes of their employment at camp. In a study conducted by a team of researchers for the Association of Independent Camps to understand counselors' perceptions about the camp staff experience as expressed in their own words, a group of counselors revealed several positive personal and professional outcomes from their summer work: relationship-building with other staff members and campers, appreciation of diversity, interpersonal skills, leadership and responsibility, role modeling/mentoring, development of technical skills, personal growth, administrative skills, and skills in teamwork (Bialeschki, Henderson, and Dahowski 1998). Although a small percentage of counselors will enter into professional careers in the Jewish community, many will not. Fortunately, the benefits of work at Camp Ramah will serve these

young adults as they navigate their course through life and settle into a variety of communities as professional or lay leaders.

Beyond general skills in youth development and teamwork, Jewish camps are committed to imparting Jewish skills and values to their staff members that stay with them past the summer experience. Keysar and Kosmin (2004) and Kress (2005) uncover a higher percentage of commitment to Jewish values in young adults who work at Camp Ramah than in those who either only attended as campers or never attended at all. This is seen in the way these counselors lead their adult lives during the off-season, as reviewed in other chapters in this volume. Although it is not fully clear from the statistical data whether Jewish camps attract counselors who come to the job with these values already, or whether Jewish camps ingrain these values in their counselors, many testimonials from counselors demonstrate that camp motivates the counselor to connect with Conservative Jewish values.

Fostering Counselor Growth

To ensure that counselors are growing throughout their summer experience, Ramah directors must provide a thoughtful structure of supervision and support. Healthy organizations implement a system for employee supervision that ensures productivity and holds the management team accountable for success. Jewish camps should be no different. In fact, the emerging counselor-educator is particularly in need of close and trusting supervision in this first job with high stakes. Supervision must ensure that campers receive proper care *and* that counselors are growing on both personal and professional levels. Thompson explains, “Directors of successful programs remember that counselors-in-training are teens, not adults; they are still practicing many skills. Providing a safe environment for teens to practice and receive feedback supports their growth” (Thompson 2000). In Ramah camps, counselors work in a unit by grade level and report directly to a unit head. These unit heads must be sure to observe the counselors in action and provide positive and constructive feedback from which the counselors can learn and grow on a regular basis. Unit heads must also conduct regular staff meetings, perhaps daily, during which a variety of issues are addressed ranging from the needs of certain individual campers to the plan of action for the evening activity. Facilitating this good communication enables staff to be well informed, set up to succeed, and reminds the unit head that young counselors are new to professional work as Jewish educators and role models and that they need close supervision.

Ramah camps will benefit greatly from taking the positive business approach of employee empowerment. In their book *Reframing Organizations*, professors Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2003) speak to the importance of

attending to the needs of an organization's human resources. Three of their teachings particularly stand out as applicable for counselor supervision and support. The first is their discussion of Douglas McGregor's "Theory X and Theory Y" view of employee attitudes. Whereas Theory X presupposes that employees are lazy, lack ambition, and are resistant to change, Theory Y suggests that a strong management team will manipulate the working environment so that employee goals can be realized through contributions to the organization. In the case of camp, supervisors must be careful to avoid adopting the negative attitude that counselors are lazy teenagers who are in camp just to relax and have fun with their friends. Instead, they must realize the interests of their counselors and incorporate them in the job. If counselors are interested in athletics, for example, supervisors should urge them to teach teamwork, physical fitness, and Hebrew language through a cabin relay race with Hebrew terms.

Camp administrators must treat their counselors as an investment worthy of constant care and attention, which is a second recommendation supported by Bolman and Deal who state, "The human resource-oriented organization also recognizes that learning must occur on the job as well as in the classroom" (142). As noted, many camps try hard to provide much of the staff training during the week before the campers arrive; however, they also must ensure that learning occurs throughout the summer season so that counselors can constantly evaluate and enhance their skills. An alternate model was developed by the directors of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin who designed a community internship program, allowing counselors work experience in a variety of non-camp related fields, as well as on staff at Ramah. Counselors participate as interns in various fields (e.g., law, medicine, business) while engaging in Jewish learning and then move to camp for the second part of the summer. This is a great example of investing in staff, and Ramah directors should continue to think creatively. (Similar programs exist at other Ramah camps.)

The third lesson for camp supervisors from Bolman and Deal focuses on the importance of empowering employees. Camp administrators who are truly committed to raising counselors invested in Jewish camps and the larger Jewish community must empower them to take initiative and adopt leadership roles within the organization. To do this includes "making information available . . . encouraging autonomy and participation, redesigning work, fostering teams, promoting egalitarianism, and giving work meaning" (143). Most seventeen- to twenty-year-old counselors who take on work as summer camp counselors come armed with enthusiasm and ideas about how to create an awesome summer experience. Supervisors must empower these counselors to be effective by taking into account Bolman and Deal's suggestions. Giving

counselors space to bring forward their own ideas as educators enables them to feel proud of their own work. For example, the Ramah camps in Nyack, Wisconsin, and California run a grant program aimed at funding original, Jewish programming ideas of their summer staff. Involving them in managing the community also will prepare them for future leadership roles in the Jewish community as adults. This, too, is seen at Camp Ramah in California, where counselors can sit on “pre-summer committees,” examining an area of camp in need of improvement and designing solutions.

Camp administrators also must focus on retention so that Ramah counselors return from one summer to the next while still in college. Based on their findings, Keysar and Kosmin (2004) conclude that staff retention during the college years is key to a counselor’s identity formation. “It creates an alternative membership peer culture to that found on the campus. It provides a second and sometimes primary reference group that offers alternative values and social standards to which they can aspire as Jews” (38). To retain their staff during the college years, Ramah directors must develop methods of communication to stay in touch with their staff in the off season, package camp employment opportunities in a manner competitive to other summer employment opportunities (internships, money makers, etc.), provide new challenges for the staff during the summer experience, and in general, make the staff feel invested in the community. When retention is successfully accomplished, Jewish summer camps will be able to affect the Jewish identity of their counselors for the benefit of the Jewish community.

The Chicken or the Egg

The research on Camp Ramah and the broader field of Jewish camping indicates that the impact of the counselor on the camper and the camp on the counselor are positive, but requires more support. The views expressed by experts in the industry outline a number of important factors for Ramah directors to take into account, but must be formally tested. This helps to determine the precise areas of counselor training that require the most attention, as well as the methods for trainers to employ. The findings from the two main studies referenced certainly demonstrate that individuals who work as counselors at Camp Ramah have stronger connections to Jewish values and skills than those who do not. However, it is still unclear as to the exact degree to which the summer camp shapes this identity. Although there are individual testimonials attributing strong identity to summer employment at camp, this area of research would benefit from a study that tracks a cohort of counselors from one summer to the next, assessing their skills and values immediately before and after the season.

Conclusion

Jewish residential summer camps are a haven for educators, as they are filled with children and young adults excited and eager to meet new people and grow their skills and values. Camp Ramah in particular keeps education at the heart of its mission, in the hope of raising future leaders for the Jewish community. The primary educator in the Ramah environment is a young adult aged seventeen to twenty years old. To succeed in educating campers, counselors require proper training in the areas of youth development, experiential pedagogy, and Jewish content. When successfully trained and properly supervised, these counselors can make a lifelong impact on their campers. Further, when successfully trained and supervised, the counselors themselves grow a set of skills and values that prepares them for a lifetime commitment to Jewish living as professionals, participants, parents, and/or lay leaders.

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