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The Ramah Experience and the Religious Attitudes and Behaviors of Sheliḥim

Introduction

EACH SUMMER, without ever boarding an airplane, thousands of North American youth spend their summers living and working with Israelis. Ramah camps, along with many other Jewish educational summer camps, welcome a cadre of *sheliḥim* to their communities each summer. *Sheliḥut*, as explained by the Jewish Agency Web site, is considered to be collaboration between the state of Israel and American Jewry.

The Israeli *shaliḥ* is in fact an Israeli “ambassador.” With activities and educational aids that he or she brings from Israel, such as posters, music, photographs, stories, and games, the *shaliḥ* creates an Israeli atmosphere at camp and inspires the campers’ love for Israel. . . . [I]n this environment, the campers and staff learn about life in Israel and its current culture and see the *shaliḥ* as the face of Israel.¹

The *sheliḥim* are invited to camp to serve as representatives of Israel to global Jewish communities and to be a cultural link between the two. The *shaliḥ*’s agenda includes education about Israel and Zionism. *Sheliḥim* bring to camp Hebrew language and a representation of an Israeli way of life. Their customs and personal life narratives are seen as connecting the campers to Israel in everyday *pe’ulot* at camp.

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Being a shaliah who represents Israel abroad is considered a prestigious and sought-after position by many Israelis. It is offered as an honor to soldiers and veterans and opens a path to hold other official and governmental positions in the future. Sheliḥim come from a wide spectrum of Israeli society—from a variety of socioeconomic and religious backgrounds. They are chosen based on previous experience as youth leaders or as educational staff in the army and by their professional background in various arts and sports. Approximately one thousand sheliḥim undergo training by the Jewish Agency, during which sheliḥim from all affiliations are gathered for orientation about life at camp and are assigned to the specific camp they will attend. The sheliḥim attend sessions about North American culture, Jewish life in North America, general information for expectations of camp life, and educational tools. Those who will attend Ramah camps also experience a “Conservative-style” Shabbat. For some sheliḥim, this is the first time they celebrate and observe Shabbat; for others, this experience of Shabbat is quite different from their previous traditions.

Prior to arrival at camp, the sheliḥim are assigned to be either educational/specialty staff or counselors. Educational/specialty staff members teach music, arts, drama, folk dance, sports, photography, camping, Hebrew, aquatics, and more. Counselors are assigned to a bunk and live with campers; many educational/specialty staff live with campers as well.

Whereas the cultural *mifgash* (encounter) of sheliḥut is usually thought of in terms of its impact on campers at the participating camps, the sheliḥim themselves are encountering, perhaps for the first time or for a first extended experience, the everyday cultural life of North America (or at least the cultural experiences brought to camp by the particular segment of the population that populates Ramah camps). More directly to the point of this chapter, this also might be the shaliah’s initial encounter with Conservative Judaism and with Jewish traditions and expressions that are the norm at Ramah camps and in many North American Jewish communities but are far less common in Israel.

Previous studies of sheliḥim in North American summer camps point toward the possibility that new religious traditions may be highly salient to this group. For example, Ezrachi finds that “Israelis indicate that they were willing to open up the question of their own Jewish identity. They are open to the possibility that there might be flaws in the Israeli approach to Judaism and that the camp experience could be a positive learning opportunity” (1994, 218).

However, Bram and Neria (2003) report less openness on the part of sheliḥim to seeing the camp experience as a vehicle for religious change. Though most of their respondents reported that their Zionist identity became stronger and that they came to see American Jewry in a different light, these

Israelis felt that they came mainly to give rather than to receive. The sheliḥim saw themselves as representing the nation of Israel and not Judaism. They did not view the experience as an encounter between a variety of Jewish streams but rather as an encounter between Israelis and Americans. Most of the sheliḥim in the Bram and Neria study did not recognize the experience as an influence on their Jewish identity.

In the current study, we look in more detail at the question of the Judaic encounter and ask further about the carryover of the experience upon the return home to Israel. Preliminary interviews were conducted with five sheliḥim in Israel. Responses, along with input from Ramah leadership, were used to create a Hebrew-language survey consisting of Likert-type scales and free response items. The interviews and the survey focused on the respondents' backgrounds (particular Jewish backgrounds), the parameters of their sheliḥut, and their perceptions of their religious experiences at camp. The survey was posted online and distributed to sheliḥim who attended Ramah during the summer of 2007. In addition, at one camp, a staff member distributed paper versions of the survey to sheliḥim there and returned these for analysis. The first author also visited a Ramah camp to speak with and observe the sheliḥim there. Finally, notes submitted by sheliḥim to the National Ramah director are included to help illustrate current findings.

Findings

Participants' backgrounds

Eighty sheliḥim, ranging in age from twenty to fifty-six years old (mean age = twenty-four years old) completed this survey. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents were female, and respondents were divided fairly evenly between those who had finished high school and those who graduated or are currently enrolled in college. Sheliḥim from each of the overnight Ramah camps (excluding Canada) and the Nyack day camp responded; however, Ramah Wisconsin was disproportionately represented (a staff member there took the initiative to collect paper copies from the sheliḥim).

Respondents report being motivated for their sheliḥut by their love for education and youth guidance, the opportunity to spend the summer abroad, a wish to represent Israel, a desire to understand and deepen the relations between Israelis and American Jewry, and the opportunity to practice and advance their English language skills. More sheliḥim were assigned to Ramah than those who specifically chose Ramah as the site for their sheliḥut (approximately 60% and 40%, respectively). We asked those in the latter group about the reasons they chose a camp affiliated with the Conservative Movement.

Some responded that they saw the movement as a middle ground between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, observant but not too much so, a place that an Israeli Jew who is *hilloni* will feel comfortable and at the same time learn about and be exposed to a new community.

The sample was fairly evenly split between those for whom the current sheliḥut was their first at Ramah and those who had been sheliḥim at Ramah previously. (It is not known if the respondents did a prior sheliḥut at a different camp.) Members of the latter group have served as sheliḥim at Ramah, on average, three to four times previously. Those who returned to Ramah report doing so primarily because they enjoyed the experience, not necessarily to become more involved in the Ramah organization.

Jewish identification

Studying the issue of sheliḥim and the Conservative Movement presented an immediate challenge of nomenclature that itself may be emblematic of the challenges to be discussed in this chapter. The official designation of the Conservative Movement in Israel is the Masorati Movement. The word *masorati*, however, means traditional, so asking about one's background as masorati creates ambiguity in a language without capital letters at the beginning of words. Does claiming to be masorati mean that one is Conservative (that is, that one affiliates with the Conservative Movement) or that one is from a traditional background (perhaps Orthodox)?² Many Israelis use the latter meaning of the term. To try to add consistency to the process, we used the term *conservativi* in Hebrew to refer to the Conservative Movement and masorati to refer to a traditional background.³ Though definitions of these terms were not provided to respondents, it was assumed that presenting both masorati and conservativi as mutually exclusive response options would prompt for the desired meanings of these terms. Nonetheless, responses regarding denominational affiliation must be understood as potentially ambiguous.

Slightly more than half of the respondents grew up in homes they considered to be *dati*, whereas one-quarter report coming from masorati homes. Smaller numbers come from *hilloni* (13%), Conservative (5%), or other or mixed families of origin. Currently, slightly fewer than half identify as *dati*, slightly fewer than one-quarter as masorati, and the rest as *hilloni* (16%), Conservative (11%), and other or mixed denomination. Of the nine respondents who currently consider themselves conservativi, five report growing up in *dati* homes, two in Conservative homes, and two in masorati homes.

Overall, respondents report high levels of ritual participation including saying Kiddush (80%) and eating Shabbat meals (86%) weekly. Sixty percent of female respondents report lighting candles each Shabbat, and close to half

of all respondents (45%) attend synagogue weekly on Shabbat. Additional Jewish ritual behavior is summarized in the following table.

Ritual Practices of Sheliḥim

| RITUAL BEHAVIOR | PERCENT "YES" |
|--|---------------|
| Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah | 79 |
| Synagogue on Yom Kippur | 88 |
| Synagogue on Passover | 61 |
| Separate dairy and meat in the home | 86 |
| Separate dairy and meat outside the home | 77 |

Encountering a Different Judaism

As shown in fig. 1, it appears that many sheliḥim had little knowledge of the Conservative Movement prior to their sheliḥut.⁴ Only one-quarter of respondents had ever attended a Conservative synagogue prior to their sheliḥut, and their attendance was for the most part only occasional.

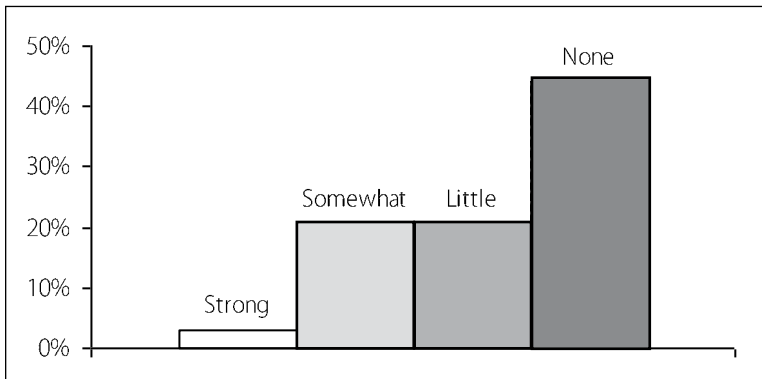


Figure 1. Knowledge of Conservative Movement Prior to Camp

For Israelis who are ḥilloni, this lack of familiarity with the Conservative Movement is part of a larger trend of limited knowledge of Judaism. Some report feeling generally rejected by Israeli Orthodoxy and feeling like outsiders with regard to Jewish ritual. For these Jews, the ritual experience of camp was particularly salient; Ramah holds the potential to serve as a welcoming and educating community demonstrating a different reality. As one shaliaḥ reports, “Camp Ramah opened us to Judaism; in Israel they viewed us as heretics, and here people welcome us and explain . . . it’s like ‘Judaism for beginners’ for us.” Many sheliḥim use the term “community” when they speak about camp. They relate to it as a community of learners, “my Jewish community,” and describe the feeling of a large, welcoming environment.

Respondents were asked to report those rituals at camp that most surprised them. Mixed seating during *tefillot* was most frequently cited, generally as a positive experience, though some sheliḥim report it was strange at first and for some it was a shock that took time to become accustomed to. In the words of one shaliaḥ, “I survived, and even more than that, I enjoyed it!” Some sheliḥim commented that mixed tefillot contributed to the feeling of a warm community, as voiced by this respondent, “Mixed tefillot were strange at first, but I learned to love the togetherness.”

Participation of women in prayers and ritual—receiving *aliyot*, wearing *kippot* and *tallit* and *tefillin*—were new to all but the few Conservative-affiliated sheliḥim and seemed to be more controversial in the eyes of the respondents. Responses ranged from begrudging acceptance to embracing an empowering and wonderful new tradition. “The fact that women are treated as equals made me so happy. . . . I would love to see this liberalism in Israel.”

Most of our sheliḥim indicated songs and *zemirot* to be positive traditions they encountered. The notion of joyous Jewish practice impressed them, and they report it as an exciting, pleasurable experience that brings people closer to each other and to Judaism. The most repeated response to the question of the shaliaḥ’s perceptions of the religious impact of the Ramah experience had to do with opening their eyes to new and varied Jewish lifestyles.

The encounter with the camp community along with its religious values, openness, and tolerance opened a window into a new, fascinating world for which I have the fullest respect. I hope that this world will grow bigger and affect more Jewish people from Israel and the Diaspora.

They report developing a tolerant view of the other Jewish streams beside their own. The sheliḥim report that the time spent at camp made them appreciate and respect the Conservative Movement that some came to see as their new community, “Today my friends and my Jewish community are Ramah graduates; they understand the world that I am deeply connected to.”

Secular sheliḥim were opened to the possibility of leading a religious life at some point in the future. A considerable number of sheliḥim report an increase of their Jewish awareness as compared to before camp. This awareness is frequently described as being part of the Jewish people. Some of the secular sheliḥim came to see religion as more than a set of restrictive rules that was handed down to them because they found a religious Jewish community of which they truly feel a part. Orthodox respondents, on the other hand, tended to have more difficulty with the new *minhagim*, and some felt the need to protect their past convictions.

Respondents comment that they experienced many personal spiritual peaks during camp, such as this shaliaḥ who read Torah for the first time in

many years: “I felt much excitement while reading the Torah. My voice was shaking. It was the most powerful religious experience I have had since my bar mitzvah. I’m excited now even as we talk.”

Encountering other denominations and schools of thought and being exposed to the Conservative Movement’s ideas and values at camp can lead to self-exploration of prior Jewish engagement, whether or not there was such self-exploration before camp. “Being at camp made me ask myself, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is my religious path?’ I had to learn new things in order to decide which way to turn.”

Quotations such as these demonstrate the potential for the Ramah experience to be a catalyst for Jewish growth beyond the summer, with the communal nature of the experience serving as a catalyst. Sheliḥim describe feeling more connected to Judaism. “I’m ḥillonit, and I find egalitarianism a wonderful thing. Communal life at camp made me feel at home, surrounded by my family members. . . . I was a different person when I returned home—more Jewish than when I arrived.”

The challenge of carryover

There is great potential for the Ramah experience to not only introduce sheliḥim to new Jewish expressions, but also to impact their Jewish engagement and that of their families upon their return home, particularly for those sheliḥim who return multiple times. One long-time shaliaḥ who attended camp with his family wrote:

[E]ach summer, when we went to camp, the kids loved the Conservative *nusah* for *tefillah* and the communal nature with boys and girls together. When we returned home to Israel, it was difficult for the kids to join in the Yemenite *nusah* [of our synagogue]. But when we got home after services, we did *birkat hamazon* in the Conservative style and also *havdalah*—which is something that captured the kids’ hearts—in the flavor of camp. . . . Now, my kids are in America. I am happy that both of them put on tefillin each morning (I don’t put on tefillin!), and every *erev shabbat* and Shabbat morning they go to synagogue with love. The *nusah* fits them and reminds them of Ramah. . . . I have no doubt that the window that opened for them at Ramah helps them today more than ever to connect to their Jewish roots when they are far from home.

Independently, one of this shaliaḥ’s sons wrote:

The Conservative form was new to me in every way; till then I could never understand what I was saying in prayers, let’s face it, no one really does . . . I didn’t even know how to start telling my friends back home how fun it is

to do the *Adon Olam* in “Rock around the Clock” style, they would never understand, you just had to be there to believe it. . . [Ramah] taught us the beauty and joy in the Conservative form, in such a stylish way. Even the way we dressed up every Shabbat was new to me; I felt like I was going to my bar-mitzvah every week all over again.

Practices which seemed foreign before the summer may now be accepted (e.g., “Seating men and women together at shul was something that I never experienced before camp, and today it seems to be the most natural way for me.”) and may even be incorporated in one’s Jewish practice (“The Conservative Movement was new to me, and I learned a great deal about it at camp. I was exposed to Judaism and to my Jewish roots. It influenced my Jewish identity and since then I observe some minhagim.”) There are other indicators of such effects in the current data. For example, close to half of respondents have prayed in a Conservative synagogue since their sheliḥut, while only about a quarter had done so prior to camp (fig. 2). Of these, the largest number report doing so on numerous occasions. In the words of one shaliaḥ, “I was opened to the Conservative Movement and loved what I saw at camp. Ever since I returned to Israel I try to go to Conservative shuls for tefillah whenever I can.”

While this response shows the shaliaḥ’s enthusiasm for the Conservative Movement, it also alludes to a recurring theme in the responses of the sheliḥim, the idea that “whenever I can” may not be very often, as many respondents report that they do not have a Conservative synagogue in their area. In fact, the increase in attendance at Conservative services must be interpreted along with comments written by several respondents that such attendance took place only at structured events (e.g., staffing a Conservative-affiliated program or attending a family or friend’s event).

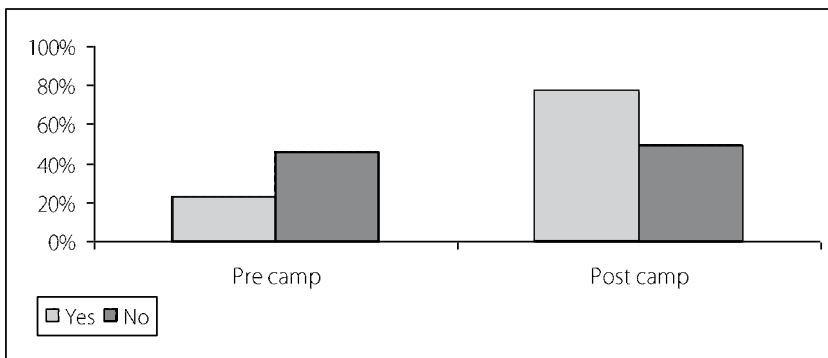


Figure 2. Attending Conservative Synagogue

Discussion and Recommendations

Every year Camp Ramah hosts a group of devoted, energetic, and charismatic young Israelis. Some of these sheliḥim encounter expressions of Judaism—egalitarian and spiritually joyous—that run counter to their preconceptions of what life could be like in an engaged Jewish community. Others encounter rituals that seem foreign and even uncomfortable at first but develop an appreciation for their value. What happens to these sheliḥim upon their return to Israel? Some of the Orthodox sheliḥim discussed not only being more accepting of Jews of differing denominations, but also that they educated others in their communities about tolerance of religious pluralism. Many sheliḥim—both secular and traditional—leave camp deeply influenced by camp religious life and motivated to implement their new religious experiences and minhagim within the Conservative Movement after returning to Israel. However, many of these same sheliḥim discuss, often with frustration, their inability to sustain this pattern of change and describe their return to their familiar frameworks of Israeli Orthodox or secular life. The pattern may be punctuated by particular events (e.g., attending a Conservative-sponsored program or the family event of a Conservative friend or even another summer at Ramah), so perhaps part of the impact of Ramah can be seen as linking the shaliaḥ with other opportunities to engage in Conservative Jewish practice.

However, it should be noted that the transition from camp is far from seamless; and for many of the participants in this study, it does not bring with it the opportunities to retain the engagement and excitement initiated at camp. These participants do not see the institutions of Conservative Judaism as available to them either because they lack information about local Conservative congregations or because no such congregation exists in their area.

Further, a shaliaḥ's decision to stay involved in the Conservative Movement in Israel might have to do with perceptions of community in addition to the existence of actual communal organizations. It was the warm, embracing, community feel that seems to have facilitated much of Ramah's impact. To sustain that, relationships must be fostered, for example, through reunions or Web-based networking.

The Conservative Movement has the opportunity not only to influence the lives of Israeli Jews, but also to use the sheliḥim to increase its own presence in Israel. Many sheliḥim are deeply moved by warm, communal, and egalitarian expressions of Judaism at Ramah that run counter to their preconceptions and their expectations regarding the Jewish communities from which they come. However, such enthusiasm cannot be sustained in an environment in which there are few opportunities to re-experience these positive moments

and in which the status quo is quite different from what exists at Ramah. If the Conservative Movement wishes to build on the experience of its sheliḥim, it must become more proactive in building the scaffolding for the connections and transitions between camp and Israel in the lives of the sheliḥim.

For other first-hand accounts of the impact of Ramah on sheliḥim, see the contributions by Benny Gamlieli and Maya Aviv in the Reflections section.

Notes

¹Translated from: http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/Hebrew/Education/Shlichim/Summer+Camps/Want_to_be_shaliach/jobs.

²Interestingly, a similar issue would exist if capitalization were not used in English. Would “I am C/conservative” refer to a denomination or a political leaning?

³In this report, percentages reported as Conservative are those indicating conservativi in Hebrew; those reporting masorati are those who indicated that term.

⁴Due to a problem with the online survey, only those completing paper surveys responded to this item.

References

- Ezrachi, E. 1994. Encounters between American Jews and Israelis: Israelis in American Jewish summer camps. PhD diss., Jewish Theological Seminary.
- Bram, C., and E. Neria. 2003. *Veni VEDI Li: Israeli sheliḥim identity encounters in U.S. Jewish summer camps*. Research presented to the Research Unit in the Department of Education in the Jewish Agency.