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Reflections on Eight Summers of Lishma, 1999–2007

Background

THE SUMMER OF 2007 marked the ninth summer of the Lishma program—a joint program of Camp Ramah in California and the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies (ZSRS). Lishma is another in a long list of educationally innovative programs fostered by the creative spirit of Ramah camping, and the sixtieth anniversary of Ramah presents an appropriate time to reflect on Lishma's successes and challenges nine years later. What is Lishma? Lishma is an egalitarian, yeshiva-study, summer program where young adult Jews explore their Jewish identities through the lens of traditional Jewish text study, prayer, and practice. To date, more than 110 young adults have participated in the Lishma program, many of whom then continued to study for rabbinical ordination at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), ZSRS, Boston Hebrew College, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), and Hebrew Union College (HUC), or master's degrees in Jewish education at JTS and American Jewish University (AJU) and Jewish communal service at AJU and HUC. Just as important (if not more), most alumni are young, highly involved lay leaders in organized Jewish life, and some have made aliyah. This essay reviews the story of how and why Lishma first began, provides an assessment of its successes and challenges, including the place for Lishma and programs like it within the Ramah camping system, and presents suggestions for the future.

The Conservative Yeshiva: Seeds of an idea

In the spring of 1995, I was twenty-three years old and had completed a program of study at the World Union for Jewish Students (WUJS) Institute in Arad, Israel, with a thirst to study in a yeshiva to gain a deeper understanding

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of traditional Jewish texts and a grounding that would enable lifetime learning. No options existed within the Conservative Movement at the time. With the spiritual and financial support (and to the credit) of my childhood rabbi, Leonard Cahan of Congregation Har Shalom in Potomac, Maryland, I attended Yeshivat Hamivtar in Efrat, known to many as Brovender's Yeshiva for one of its *rashei yeshivah*, Rabbi Chaim Brovender. Studying at Brovender's was an enriching experience and although I joined late in the year and struggled in many classes, I gained a sense of the richness and complexity of Jewish thought and a love for being part of a passionate learning community. But I did not feel at home. Although as a male, I did not feel a sense of exclusion from public prayer in an Orthodox environment, my becoming more religious was a change from my family's practice, and I felt the Orthodox yeshiva to be too severe a break from the way in which I was raised. For these reasons, when I heard rumors in the summer of 1995 that a Conservative yeshiva would be founded in Jerusalem that fall, I stopped by the Fuchsberg Center on Agron Street and asked Dr. Pesach Schindler if I could enroll. I was thrilled to be accepted starting in early September.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in 1995, fifteen young adults gathered around a few tables in a humble building that bears little resemblance to the beautifully remodeled Fuchsberg Center that stands proudly in the center of Jerusalem today. We studied liturgy with Dr. Ze'ev Falk, ז"ל, a teacher of remarkable humility, wisdom, and gentleness, who instilled in me a lifelong love of *tefillah*. Dr. Shai Wald taught a stimulating introductory class in Mishnah, as well as a second, more advanced section in Talmud. Dr. Pesach Schindler taught *humash* and was a wise rebbe who expressed a genuine interest in, and acceptance of, each of the varied personalities around the table and our stories of who we were and where we were going. Beyond the teachers and our sparse environs, what I remember most is the excitement of being part of something that was truly unique: men and women praying together and studying Torah—not for an academic degree, but for its own sake—together around a table where each person's voice was equally valued and had equal access to the texts of our tradition. Though I departed mid-year for the United States for a job in the advertising world, my experience at the Conservative Yeshiva left me with a lasting vision of what the Conservative Movement could create—places where interested, non-professional Jews could seriously engage with and deepen their relationship with Jewish texts from a distinctly religious point of view.

A few years later, I would begin study at the newly formed ZSRS at the University of Judaism (now AJU). Rabbi Daniel Gordis, then dean of the school, had written an article in which he presented the case of the emerging

need for yeshiva-style study in non-Orthodox settings.¹ Rabbi Gordis witnessed the need for yeshiva-style learning in non-Orthodox settings first hand as a member of the senior staff of Camp Ramah in California and as the dean of the Brandeis Collegiate Institute from 1990 to 1994. After reading Rabbi Gordis's article, I raised with him the idea of founding a Conservative yeshiva-study program in the United States. His immediate, enthusiastic response was to approach Brian Greene, the director of Camp Ramah in California. During his tenure, Brian Greene had started the innovative Meitiv social action program for campers entering the eleventh and twelfth grades and had expressed interest to Rabbi Gordis in developing a program for eighteen- to twenty-five-year olds. Under the leadership of Brian Greene and Rabbi Gordis, along with significant grant-writing support from AJU, seed funding for the Lishma program was sought in the spring of 1998 from the Covenant Foundation. The proposal included an assessment of the need for opportunities for serious Jewish learning, particularly among the young adult population within non-Orthodox communities, and an outline of essential components of the core program.

The need for Lishma

In our proposal we argued first and foremost for the need for a program like Lishma in the American Jewish community. Our argument was based upon the reality that the college years are a time when young adults first begin to form their own identities, develop their personal beliefs, and establish their own homes. Unfortunately, it is during this period and the years immediately following college that non-Orthodox Jews demonstrate the greatest decline in Jewish involvement. We argued:

In contrast to the liberal Jewish world, the vitality of the Modern Orthodox movement is largely due to young adults in their 20s and 30s. Many of these young adults are products of the *yeshivah*—a place where participants worship together, live together, form a dynamic religious community, and most importantly, study together. The Orthodox community recognizes that ongoing commitment to Jewish life is powerfully fueled by a *spiritual* engagement with Jewish texts—rather than by the almost exclusively intellectual engagement the liberal community currently offers in academic settings.

Young people beginning their religious quest are not searching for academic rigor. They thirst for *meaning*. They want to encounter the Jewish tradition not exclusively as an historical or intellectual venture, but as a religious one—an all-encompassing experience that can help them formulate preliminary answers to the questions of meaning all of us address throughout our lives. In America—the largest Jewish population in the entire world—there is not a single institution for the 94% of Jews who are

not Orthodox to study Torah in a non-academic setting, as a religious enterprise. This is not for lack of desire on the part of young Jews. Every year, groups of newly energized young Jews emerge from programs such as Camp Ramah, the Brandeis Collegiate Institute, Jewish high schools and college programs, and ask, “What do I do next? How do I continue?”²

It was to fill this need that the Lishma program was created. We believed Lishma would make a powerful impact upon the culture of Camp Ramah in California, and we also believed it was a program that could easily be replicated in other Ramah camps and in many other Jewish summer camps around the country. In subsequent summers, two other Ramah camps, Ramah Wisconsin and Ramah Nyack, started other models of yeshiva-study programs as part of their camp communities, and the one at Wisconsin continues as of this writing.

The vision

Because Lishma could be replicated, we envisioned a transformation of the future leadership of the liberal American Jewish community and, through its work, a transformation of non-Orthodox communities for the twenty-first century. In initial discussions with the Covenant Foundation and subsequent discussions with Lishma funders, such as the Righteous Persons Foundation, the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles, and Joshua Venture, we argued that Lishma—and programs like it—could create a cadre of young adults who would live within the Jewish community and establish a hospitable environment for other young people who are seeking a way to become involved—for instance, those who have come back from inspirational experiences such as a trip to Israel or a summer at Ramah. This cadre would be the next generation of leadership for the liberal Jewish community, individuals who can provide religious vision as lay people, not necessarily as rabbis or academics. They would be able to articulate the role and significance Judaism plays in the choices, large and small, that comprise daily life.

Finally, Lishma offered exciting opportunities on an organizational level. First, as a collaboration between a summer camp and a rabbinical seminary, the program offered new opportunities for synergy and understanding between institutions with similar goals but dissimilar constituencies. Summer camp is an intense setting that catalyzes personal growth in a way that a graduate school cannot hope to match. Rabbinical education offers the bridge to Jewish text and tradition on which commitment to Jewish life is founded. Together, they can make a deep impact. Second, the curriculum of Lishma seeks to bridge two fissures that run through the liberal Jewish community. One is the fissure between non-Orthodox Jews and the tradition of learning

that, as noted above, so powerfully fuels the young adults of the Orthodox Movement. The other is the fissure between radically different conceptions of what Jewish investment is all about: the focus of the religious community on study and learning and the focus of the liberal community on the Jewish social action model, which has little ongoing engagement with the religious tradition. Each conception is anemic without the enrichment that the other provides, and a model is required that shows the two are complementary. Reproduced nation-wide, we hoped Lishma might begin to merge these critical rifts in the liberal Jewish community.

The first summer: Preparation

In the summer of 1998, Lishma received its first grant—\$72,000—from the Covenant Foundation to fund the program for the summers of 1999 and 2000. Funding was not to be used for operating expenses but rather to provide full scholarships for every participant and to fund \$500-stipends for each participant. In hindsight, the Covenant Foundation understood the immediate needs and eventual challenges of starting and running a program for Jews ages eighteen to twenty-five. Young adults not only lack funds to pay for supplemental programs; they feel pressure to find jobs and begin providing their own financial resources.³ The ability to offer prospective participants a \$500-stipend to help underwrite their studies provided a powerful tool for recruiting young adults to a brand new program.

Recruitment took place through a variety of means including campus recruitment. Out of geographic necessity, recruitment focused on campuses in the Southwest, as well as meeting people at college leadership conferences such as Koach Kallah, phone calls and e-mail messages to solicit potential candidates from Hillel directors and Jewish Campus Service Corps (JCSC) fellows, and limited print advertising. A formal interview—either face-to-face or more often by telephone—was a crucial part of the application process, both to allow the participant to ask questions she or he had about Lishma and also to ensure the applicant understood what the program was about and to assess his or her suitability for living in a close-knit, intense, communal setting for six weeks.

Lishma participants were not required to have an extensive background in text learning or Jewish practice but also were not to be totally unfamiliar with traditional Jewish study and practice; minimally, they were required to be able to read Hebrew phonetically. During the application process (often during the formal interview), participants were told that although there was no expectation that participants regularly prayed, kept Shabbat or kashrut, or practiced the traditional observance that would be part of the six-week program,

nonetheless, regular participation in these activities was an expected part of the program. Those who were unwilling to experiment with these practices during the program were dissuaded from attending. On the other end of the spectrum, a few applicants (and eventual participants) were Orthodox in their orientation to Jewish life. In interviews, these participants were told clearly that the community would be egalitarian in philosophy and practice. Whereas these individuals were not expected to violate their own religious principles (e.g., women were not obligated to accept an aliyah), they also could not opt out of participation in the community.

Similar to the experience of many Ramah campers and staff members, the aim of Lishma was to create a community in which members benefited from the isolation and the artificial nature of camp. Cut off from the social pressures of the outside world, Lishma participants could “re-invent” themselves; they could experiment with their identity and discover how regular prayer, study, and practice would affect their souls. Cut off from the time pressures of school and jobs that demand productivity and results, Lishma participants were given a summer-long Shabbat — “an island in time” at a pivotal moment in their identity formation — in which to evaluate who they were and where they wanted to go in their relationship with the Jewish tradition and the Jewish people. They agreed to become for their six weeks at camp someone they were not; we asked them to let go — to some extent — of who they were before the program and to be open to becoming someone different. We also told them that we had little expectation that after they left the program, they would remain exactly who they had been during the summer. What was expected was that during the summer they would demonstrate courage, openness, honesty, and authenticity in relation to each other and to the Judaism they encountered.

Programmatic Elements

The lead scholar and the beit midrash

After the participants were recruited, the next step was creating a program. We envisioned a program built around the core experience of yeshiva study. In addition to the living, praying, and recreating together, a yeshiva is distinguished by its active, participatory method of learning. Hebrew text is deciphered in *havruta* study, in which students form pairs and help each other translate and make sense of short passages through (often excited) discussion and the use of reference guides. When many pairs of students are learning together in a study hall, there is a buzz in the air from the spirited debate. Then, when the whole group is gathered later, all students take turns reading aloud and discussing the text with a scholar.

The program would be staffed by a rotation of lead scholars who would guide and teach morning and afternoon text sessions that would form the core of the program. Three lead scholars were found for Lishma's first summer: Reb Mimi Feigelson, Dr. Joel Gereboff, and Rabbi Joel Rembaum. In our grant application, and in initial discussions with the scholars, we suggested a traditional yeshiva curriculum structured around different texts with morning sessions focused on either Mishnah or Talmud and afternoon sessions focused on either *ḥumash* with Rashi or Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides. Reb Mimi, an Orthodox scholar and a student of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, expressed interest in teaching at Lishma but insisted that the teaching be structured by theme, rather than by text.

Reb Mimi, who taught the first two weeks of the 1999 and 2000 summers, focused her *shi'urim* on the subjects of forgiveness and compassion, and she taught texts that ranged from stories from the Tanach, passages from the Talmud, chapters from the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides, to passages from Hasidic literature. These sessions were immensely successful for a number of reasons. First, in terms of building participants' overall understanding of the Jewish textual tradition, students were exposed to a much broader range of Jewish texts than a more rigid curriculum would have allowed. Second, teaching thematically prevented sessions from getting bogged down in "academic" debates; in seeking to understand the meaning of the day's text, students also struggled with their own understandings of the limits of forgiveness in their own friendships and families. Finally, Reb Mimi brought unanticipated, and clearly vital, elements to Lishma: music and storytelling. I will never forget the first day of the first *shi'ur* as the group finally sat around the table after weeks and months of effort, and Reb Mimi took out her guitar and started to play and sing. Because there were no words to learn and because the *niggunim* repeated themselves, it was easy for everyone to join in, and so we did. Singing became the way that each day's session would begin and end, often interspersed with Hasidic stories appropriate to the day's discussion. The addition of music and stories to the learning, something that one would rarely, if ever, find in a Jewish studies course in a university setting, communicated a powerful message that our learning was not only an intellectual exercise. It was meant to open our hearts and to engage our total selves.

Starting with Reb Mimi was a tremendous beginning, but it also created problems for those teachers who had different styles. Transitions from one type of teacher to another were difficult and in future summers were minimized. In future summers, the number of scholars was reduced to one or two, which led to more continuity and the possibility to go into greater depth with one scholar. During the first summer, Dr. Joel Gereboff, the second Lishma

scholar and a regular teacher in the Mador program at Ramah California for many summers, focused on a traditional introductory chapter of Talmud—*Ellu metzi'ot*—from tractate *Bava Metzi'a* and engaged students in discussions about fairness and conflict resolution. Rabbi Joel Rembaum introduced students to the documentary hypothesis and forced students to struggle, many for the first time, with different theories of revelation and how a scientific approach to texts could be integrated into a life committed to Torah and traditional observance.

In subsequent summers, scholars focused on themes such as *dveikut* (clinging to God), *tzedakah*, the student-teacher relationship, honoring parents, leadership, and other topics, each of which exposed Lishma participants to a range of Jewish texts and engaged them intellectually, emotionally, and religiously. One potential weakness of the thematic model for text study is that in not moving through texts more “organically,” (i.e., studying a chapter of Talmud or Mishnah from beginning to end rather than choosing a particularly interesting *sugya*), some students experienced disappointment when, either during the program or after the program, they were confronted with texts that did not focus so directly upon existential issues. Although the other two scholars in Lishma’s first summer also chose to teach thematically, the fact that students were forced to confront texts that focused on more technical aspects of Jewish law challenged the students’ ability to see the relevance of Jewish text study as a whole. Overall, the teaching of the first summer achieved its goals—students walked away having been engaged as people and Jews and having been touched by the texts they had learned. A charismatic and engaging lead scholar was a key part of that success.

Ziegler rabbinical students and mentoring meetings

In addition to a lead scholar, the program was staffed by two—typically one male and one female—rabbinical students at ZSRS. These students were meant to be role models and mentors to Lishma participants. We felt it was essential to the sense of community that Lishma staff members live at camp and be accessible to students at all times. Since instruction at the Ziegler School is also based on a yeshiva model, Ziegler rabbinical students were familiar with the openness and supportive demeanor necessary to make intensive study a positive experience for newcomers. Having the rabbinical students live in close proximity to Lishma participants meant that the whole community ate together, learned together, prayed together, and “hung out” together—much like counselors and campers at camp. These close relationships communicated a message that the learning was meant to engage the whole self, not only the mind.

Mentor meetings served to further the relationships between ZSRS rabbinical students and Lishma participants. Each Lishma participant would meet with one of the two ZSRS rabbinical students three times over the course of the six weeks to connect personally about their experience. Meetings were structured—they were not an optional element of the program and certain, consistent, questions were explored with each participant. However, questions and the content of the meetings were open-ended and non-judgmental. The first meeting allowed the student to tell his or her “story” more thoroughly and invited the participant to share his or her goals for the program. Sample questions included:

- Tell me how you decided to participate in the Lishma program.
- What is your “Jewish story”?
- How is the program going so far?
- What did you really enjoy the first few days? What has been a challenge? What is different than you expected, and what is similar to what you expected?
- What are your goals for the summer? What hopes do you have?
- Are there concrete skills that you want to learn that we can help you with?

The second meeting served as a check-in meeting and helped Lishma staff to make mid-course corrections to the program. During the course of the first summer, one issue that surfaced in mid-summer meetings was that many participants were overwhelmed by the amount of prayer required. In response to hearing similar sentiments from many participants, a meeting was convened to hear concerns and figure out a solution. Each participant acknowledged that he or she was aware, intellectually, that regular prayer was an expectation of the program, but many felt emotionally overwhelmed by the intensity of the program and expressed a need for flexibility. Other participants were worried that if the prayer requirements were loosened, their own experience would be compromised. They expressed that they came to the program to have a strong “minyan experience” and did not want any of the prayer services cancelled. The group decided that regular *shaharit*, *minhah*, and *arvit* services would be maintained but that the whole group would only be required to come for shaharit. For the afternoon and evening services, the group would work together to maintain a minyan, and if some needed to take a break and either not pray or pray individually, they would do so only if there was a minyan. In addition to hearing about participants’ individual experiences, the middle check-in mentoring meeting also enabled us to receive important feedback from the group as a whole.

The last mentoring meeting was an opportunity for Lishma staff and students to reflect on and synthesize their Lishma experience. Participants were asked about their future, post-Lishma, plans. They had a chance to discuss the challenges of returning to regular life and integrating lessons learned from the summer into daily life. In post-summer evaluations, participants expressed how creating a structured space in which they were invited to articulate their fears, expectations, successes, and challenges made them feel heard and understood, not just as program participants, but as Jews and as people. Rachel Bat-Or, Lishma coordinator from 2002 to 2005, wrote, “So often a Lishmanik came to talk to me about what they had learned during that day that excited or upset them. We would talk about how it affected them, how they could understand it, and how to integrate it into the rest of their ideas.” An important element of many Christian seminary curricula and spiritual mentoring meetings are worthy of further exploration for inclusion in rabbinic training and even in synagogue settings to give individual Jews a structured opportunity to discuss issues of faith and practice.

A camp program: Building community

Notwithstanding the central focus on text study, Lishma still distinguishes itself as a camp program, with its participants sharing many of the goals and challenges that campers have during the course of a summer. Just as campers in a bunk often struggle to live together in a shared space and cohesive community, Lishma also struggled to build community within itself and within the larger camp community. We worked to ensure that the program was not a suffocating experience for those unaccustomed to the rigors of traditional communal Jewish life, but also to ensure that Lishma provided a strong communal experience for those who came seeking it. The Lishma coordinator, Rachel Bat Or wrote:

One of the changes that I made that I feel particularly proud of was adding a question onto the application about community building. I noticed that during my first summer, people did not have an easy time creating community. There seemed to be a split between those who wanted to reach consensus about a decision and those who wanted to do things their own way without group agreement. . . . The biggest problem was not the differences themselves but that those who wanted to bypass group discussion did not respect or want to hear from those who wanted to talk things through. There was no framework, no preexisting agreements to help us discuss the differences. Having a question on the application and a discussion during the interview about how each person helped to create community set up the context for conscious conversations about community building, and the tension of my first summer did not emerge again.

Beyond the beit midrash

To further address the critical issue of young adults' involvement in Jewish life after the program, Lishma must be more than just an enjoyable summer experience built around Jewish study. The following components were included that aim to expand the relevance and importance of Jewish study outside of the Lishma program:

Social Action. Participants devoted every Tuesday entirely to a community service project. Monday's evening program was often dedicated to the study of classic texts that speak to the importance and religious significance of social action as a way of introducing the activity for the following day. Texts illustrated social action as a religious expression that is as vital to Judaism as are study and prayer. Projects included activities such as picking oranges at a farm that dedicated a portion of its produce to a local homeless shelter, learning Torah with residents at Beit Teshuva—the only Jewish halfway-house in the country dedicated to helping Jews struggling with addiction, and visiting residents at a Jewish home for the aged.

Evening Programs. Often a highlight of the summer, evening programs were informal and exposed Lishma participants to guest speakers and to a wide variety of topics addressing the reality of bringing Judaism into everyday life. An additional aspect of evening programs featured in the first few summers was a book-author series in which Lishma participants studied with a series of local authors such as Rabbis David Wolpe, Brad Artson, Elliot Dorff, and Stewart Vogel. Each participant was given a copy of one of the author's books after the session with the author. This program gave participants a tangible beginning to building a Jewish library and beginning a lifetime journey of Jewish reading. Other evening programs (from the first and subsequent summers) included thought-provoking activities such as viewing *Trembling before God*, a film about homosexuality in Orthodox communities, and a subsequent discussion about Judaism and homosexuality. Other programs were less intense such as baking hallah for Shabbat, Israeli folk dancing, painting, making ceramics, and enjoying a camp-wide concert with Rick Recht.

Practical Halachah. Sometimes the challenge to Jewish observance is not motivation or means but knowing how. Several times over the course of the summer, time was set aside for participants to hear a halachic overview of Shabbat, tzedakah, kashrut and other aspects of Jewish life and to have an open discussion about the barriers to observance, its deep communal and spiritual meaning, and how it can be accomplished amid the pressures of daily life.

Channel Islands camping trip

One of the most memorable parts of the program for participants and staff alike is a Shabbat camping trip at the nearby Channel Islands National Park. The trip took place the first summer of Lishma and was repeated every summer thereafter. It includes a one-hour journey by boat from the Ventura harbor to Santa Cruz Island, the largest of the Channel Islands, often with the boat surrounded by hundreds of channel dolphins. Spending Shabbat on an island is easier because according to some halachic authorities, an island serves as a natural *eruv*, and carrying is permitted. Nonetheless, seeing the moment as an educational opportunity, Lishma scholar Dr. Aaron Amit (2005–7) constructed an *eruv* and taught participants the principles of how an *eruv* works. Highlights of a Shabbat of the camping trip includes a spirited Carlebach-style *kabbalat shabbat* as the sun sets over the Pacific Ocean, stunning hikes to remote ocean beaches, and on Sunday morning, helping the National Park service perform trail maintenance and rid the island of damaging, non-native plants. The Shabbat serves as a mid-summer break from the study routine and an opportunity for participants to bond with each other and return to camp renewed for the second half of the program.

Integration with camp

When we started Lishma, we anticipated that Lishma students would serve as important role models to the hundreds of campers and staff in residence at Camp Ramah in California. We hoped that campers and staff would be curious about these college kids who were spending their summer in intensive Jewish study, would engage them in discussion, and over the course of time, might begin to consider a similar experience for themselves. Lishma evening programs were made available to the general Ramah staff, and Ramah staff members could receive staff education credit for participation in Lishma classes. Lishma participants were invited to the Friday night *oneg* and Saturday night activities for Ramah's general staff. To facilitate interaction with Ramah campers, Lishma participants either taught or participated in *limmud* on Shabbat afternoons when the entire camp studies Pirkei Avot or some other Jewish text while sitting in circles on "The Hill"—a central, grassy area at camp.

These efforts at integration were only marginally effective. First of all, many Ramah campers were not aware of the existence of Lishma or if they were, they were not fully aware of what the program was and who the participants were. Either by choice or by necessity, Lishma participated in few of the core camp-wide activities. The allocation of space required that Lishma sit in

the small dining room and that the group eat lunch and dinner one-half hour prior to the rest of camp instead of joining campers and staff in the main dining room. Because we hoped that meals would be a setting for continuing discussions from the beit midrash and for getting to know one another, the noisy and fun but chaotic atmosphere of the main dining room was not necessarily the preferred place for Lishma to eat. When the rest of camp gathered on Friday nights to daven together in Kikkar Tziyyon, Lishma gathered in the small observatory at the top of camp for a spirited, intimate prayer service. These decisions served the Lishma program well internally but served to separate Lishma from the rest of the camp. When Lishma participants studied with campers as part of limmud on Saturday afternoon, campers often did not understand why Lishma participants were there, a curiosity that sometimes invited important conversations but at other times created distance. Furthermore, Ramah staff members often socialize by talking about their common challenges and successes in caring for and working with campers, providing little common ground with Lishma participants. What Lishma gained in creating a stronger program for itself, the overall Ramah camp lost as an opportunity for having Lishma participants become role models.

Students and teachers

The difference between academic learning and Lishma learning was felt not only by students but also by its teachers. Lishma scholar Dr. Aaron Amit is a professor of Talmud at Bar Ilan University and formerly a faculty member of Machon Schechter in Israel. After the 2007 summer, he wrote about the impact that teaching at Lishma had on him.

Teaching on this program . . . has affected me deeply and given me a perspective on teaching that I had never experienced before. In the course of a month we went through many situations together and in the process of learning, davening, eating and traveling together we fulfilled *lilmod, lelammed vela'asot* [to study, to teach and to do] in their full sense! And not just any students—the students who came to study at Lishma gave up summer jobs and mindless relaxation, committing themselves to four weeks of intense learning and spiritual growth. I have been so moved by the summers of Lishma that I find myself spending much of the time between summers thinking how I am going to teach it “this time” and what material I will add and change. I have been given a gift and I want to use it in the best way possible.

Lishma means learning Torah with no ulterior motives—learning Torah not in order to get a reward but for the love of the learning itself. The participants in Lishma learn over the summer the pleasures of learning for

its own sake. And yet, as the days pass and the participants speak—each letting their own unique view of Torah be heard, I find that the definition of *lishma* changes. If I had to try for a succinct definition, I would say that in this context *torah lishma* means—giving the Torah its own name. Torah lishma is the process by which each individual who learns Torah gives themselves the freedom to give Torah a new and unique name. If we allow ourselves to give Torah a new name, we have fulfilled the command to study because we have learned to integrate Torah into our own life.

But doing this is no easy task—it means being an active participant in the dialogue about life—about meaning—about God—it means coming to terms with difficult and obscure texts, it means addressing the deepest side of our existence and trying to understand our inner voice. It means allowing each person to understand that they matter and they have great untapped potential to teach the world a unique message. Many people go through the motions of daily routines without thinking about what they are doing. Torah lishma is about changing that and thinking about each one of our acts. Over the summers I have let myself express my deepest feelings and thoughts in a serious way in front of an amazing group of students. People share and grow together both individually and as a group. In the end there is no one who remains the same person who began the program and I am convinced that every participant will make Judaism a part of their life afterwards. I have stayed in contact with many of the participants and I see that the love of learning planted by the first experience of Lishma leads to a thirst for more.

Beyond North America

In the summer of 2004, three women from the former Soviet Union came to study at Lishma after reading about it on the Internet. In the summer of 2005, as part of a larger partnership between the Los Angeles Jewish Federation and the Baltic communities of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, three more participants came to Lishma from overseas. These participants brought an important dimension of diversity to Lishma. The Eastern Europeans had the opportunity to view an egalitarian Judaism that does not exist in the former Soviet Union. They also learned to deal with the culture shock of a different language, weather, culture, type of food, and way of observance. They sometimes struggled with all of that but at the end of the program, they brought a deep commitment to Jewish practice back to their communities. As for the Americans—they welcomed the newcomers and helped them to acclimate to American ways of doing things. They learned some Russian and taught the visitors what to expect when we went to Los Angeles for our social action days. The cultural exchange became an important part of the Lishma experience for both the Americans and those from the former Soviet Union.

Lishma through the Years

The Early Years—1999 to 2001

As one might expect, during the summers of 1999 and 2000 when participants were offered \$500-stipends to participate in Lishma, enrollment was high.

Lishma Enrollment by Year

1999	18
2000	16
2001	9
2002	9
2003	16
2004	15
2005	16
2006	11
2007	7
Total Alumni	117

During those years, the program also required participants to commit for six weeks instead of the current four-week model. In 2000, an additional New and Innovative Program grant of \$25,000 was secured from the Jewish Community Foundation. These funds were used for funding year-round-staff costs and to create a scholarship fund for future summers. Although financial aid was made available to needy students, enrollment declined in 2001 as the program shifted from paying stipends to participants to charging tuition of \$2,000. In 2001, as the founding Lishma coordinator, I was named a Joshua Venture Fellow. Funding from this fellowship sustained my continued involvement with the program until I became the executive director of Camp Ramah in California in the spring of 2002.

From 2002 to 2007

From 2002 to 2007, Lishma enrollment fluctuated depending on the fee structure, the year-round Lishma coordinator, and the existence of competing programs. Between summers, Lishma was directed by ZSRS students including Rachel Bat Or (2002–5), Scott Perlo (fall 2005), and Lizzie Heydemann and Jordan Gerson (spring 2006 to fall 2007). Funding for year-round coordinators was limited as Lishma transitioned from a “new and innovative” program, which gained substantial support from major foundations, to one of many yeshiva-study programs available around the country (see below). Lishma alumni made small donations but because they were young adults, they lacked the resources to form a core of regular donors to support the program.

In addition, having a ZSRS student as the year-round coordinator presented significant challenges. First, ZSRS students graduate after five years and also are unable to work on Lishma during their third year of the program while they study in Israel. Second, a Lishma coordinator is charged, most importantly, with recruiting, interviewing, and registering participants for the following summer and as the summer grows closer, preparing for the summer program. These tasks represent significant time commitments, take time to learn, and leave little time for additional tasks such as coordinating alumni reunions, publishing alumni newsletters, updating alumni databases, and sending letters to alumni and other Lishma supporters to help generate financial support. Valuable data about Lishma's alumni from 1999 to 2007 is not up to date because a viable staffing structure to accomplish these tasks did not exist and would be difficult to maintain, considering the small size and budget of the program. A committee of staff and lay leaders from Camp Ramah in California and ZSRS is currently meeting as of this writing to examine these challenges and chart a better way forward.

Challenges for the future: At camp and beyond

Lishma has extended a key element of the Ramah mission: cultivating the future professional and lay leadership of the Conservative Movement. Lishma graduates have gone on to become rabbis, educators, Jewish communal professionals, and perhaps most significantly, young lay leaders. Beth Allen, a 2006 Lishma participant wrote,

After a month, we're returning to our own communities strengthened. We know more deeply the practical halachic issues such as kashrut, davening (prayer) and Shabbat. We are also grounded in rabbinic logic, and more open to interpretation. We are educated enough to know that there's something that we bring to the Jewish table, and that Conservative Judaism wants to be a home for us. We will lead the future because Conservative Judaism embraced us—not as potential rabbis, but as lay people who are seeking and growing.

It is clear that the Lishma experience has strengthened an intense commitment to Jewish life amid many of its 100+ alumni. Yet despite its successes, Lishma's enrollment has suffered from a lack of funding, especially since 2002, and faces other significant challenges for its continued viability, including:

Staffing/recruitment. Lishma is run during the year on a part-time basis by rabbinical students with an extremely limited schedule. Because of limited funding and because of an already full academic schedule with limited time for travel, staff struggles to meet and recruit students "face-to-face" on campus and at conferences.

Integration into camp. Lishma struggles to find its place within the summer camp community and perhaps most importantly, within Ramah California's board of directors. Within camp, Lishma participants are recognized by Ramah staff, but except for their weekly participation in Shabbat limud, the Lishma program is largely unrecognized by Ramah campers. Ramah staff members are accepting of Lishma participants but have little in common with them because they lack a common, shared experience upon which to form bonds. Within the board of directors, the Lishma program enjoys some support, including some members who have funded individual Lishma participants each year since the inception of the program. Perhaps because of the lack of integration with the core summer program, most board members, although not hostile to Lishma, remain cautious of diverting resources—for example, financial and summer adult housing—away from the core summer camp program.

In addition, realities outside of camp pose challenges to Lishma as well:

A changed landscape. The landscape in 2007 looks very different than it did nine years ago. When Lishma began, we could write, "In America—the largest Jewish population in the entire world—there is not a single institution for the 94% of Jews who are not Orthodox to study Torah in a non-academic setting, as a religious enterprise." Now that is no longer the case. In North America, the Northwoods Kollel continues to attract six to eight staff members to Ramah Wisconsin each summer to engage in serious text study for part of the day and to work as teachers for the remainder of the day. Machon Hadar, an independent yeshiva-study program for young adult Jews on the upper West Side of Manhattan, opened for the first time in the summer of 2007 and was filled to capacity. Participants received substantial living stipends due to significant support from the New York Federation. The Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem is running a summer program and although not in the United States, it is reaching a similar constituency and is also experiencing high enrollment.

Returning to the Movement. Like graduates of many Ramah camps, upon completing the program, Lishma participants struggle to find communities within the Conservative Movement to which they can return. Services in the main sanctuary lack opportunities for participation and leadership by interested lay people, and many adult education courses lack a track for engagement with traditional Jewish texts. Having taken on a commitment to traditional Shabbat observance, many Lishma graduates—and many Ramah graduates—feel lonely in Conservative synagogues and too often, our most committed young people, committed both to observance and the Conservative Movement, gravitate to Modern Orthodox communities, not for theological reasons but rather, because they are seeking community.

Finally, the Conservative Movement is, frankly, unorganized in its approach to the population of committed young adults it produces. The current Lishma coordinator, Elizabeth Heydemann, writes,

A deeper issue lies with the relationship of Lishma to the Conservative Movement. . . . We invest so much in the foundations of our kids' Jewish lives by sending them to Ramah and to Israel, only to let Jewish learning and living fall by the wayside in college and beyond. Lishma is a life-changing, knowledge-building, identity-strengthening program, whose ripples extend far beyond the bounds of our movement. Lishma should be on every rabbi's list of programs to recommend to their young congregants and their middle-aged congregants' kids and grandkids.

Greater coordination is required if we are to succeed on the level of a movement in reaching this crucial age group as they consider whom to marry and what their religious commitment will be as they grow into adulthood.

Concluding Comments

Nine years ago, we wrote:

The broad, overarching goal of Lishma is to create a cadre of young adults who will live within the Jewish community and establish a hospitable environment for other young people who are seeking a way to become involved—for instance, those who have come back from inspirational experiences such as a trip to Israel or a summer at Ramah. This cadre will be the next generation of leadership for the liberal Jewish community, individuals who can provide religious vision as lay people, not necessarily as rabbis or academics.

To a great extent, Lishma has succeeded. Young adults at a critical stage in life have been inspired and educated. In transition between their parents' homes and establishing their own, they often lack financial resources and seek meaning and direction. Investing in their growth and development is a crucial element for gaining the long-term commitment of a population vital to the creativity and vibrancy of our community. It is our hope that Lishma and similar programs will become more and more important to our movement's agenda—*ken yirbu* (so should they multiply)!

Notes

¹Daniel Gordis, "Honey from the Word: Yeshiva Learning from Liberal Judaism?" *Jewish Spectator* (Spring 1994): 6–11.

²Grant application to the Covenant Foundation, submitted spring 1998.

³Ramah camps and USY summer programs continue to be powerful environments for reaching young adult Jews by giving them an opportunity to earn money as staff members while living and teaching in educational Jewish communities. Although salary levels are relatively low, the opportunity to earn money, rather than be a drain on family or personal resources should not be underestimated as a factor in why young adults choose to come to Ramah and USY summer programs.