

ALVIN MARS

Jewish Education and Ramah: Changing Behavior in a Particular Direction

I WAS TERRIFIED. Everyone else seemed to know what was happening. They knew the rhythm of the place. They knew where things were. They knew when things happened. They knew what was expected of them. All that I knew was that I was new—and that I didn't know anything!

It was the summer of 1964, and I had come to Ramah for the first time as a *madrish bachir*, a senior counselor and also a trainee to become a future *rosh edah*. I did not fully understand the concept of an edah, let alone the role of rosh edah. *Madrish bachir* was a term I had never heard. I am not really sure that I knew what the word *bachir* meant. I had not been a camper at Ramah, although I had visited a friend there for one weekend when I was fifteen. Certainly, I had never been on staff. My summers had been spent at day camps and Boy Scout camp. But, I had decided that my life and career were to be devoted to Jewish education, and I had even applied and been accepted to a graduate program in Jewish education. And there were friends and advisors around me who said that if I really wanted to understand Jewish education, I would need to spend at least one summer at Ramah. So, there I was!

My discomfort was not just the result of being in a new place. It was also because I was in the presence of so many people who were known to me by reputation only. They were rabbis and educators and professors who seemed to know so much and whose every word carried the weight of experience, know-how, and great learning. I was afraid to open my mouth lest what I said would reveal how little I knew and the paucity of the experience I had. These were men and women who were already in their late twenties. Some were even in their thirties. A few were pulpit rabbis and others were teachers and principals. Most were married and had families. They knew children. They knew Ramah.

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They knew education, and they knew life. I was a twenty-one-year-old kid. It was all very intimidating.

And the most intimidating one of all was the camp director, Rabbi David Mogilner, ז"ל, my Ramah director. Simply put, he was larger than life. He seemed to be the embodiment of everything that was Ramah. He was intelligence, and he was Jewish learning. He was educational philosophy, and he was camp counseling know-how. He was the model of serious Jewish commitment, and he was the consummate Jewish educator.

I feared him, and I was in awe of him. He sat with us regularly in education classes and used the daily, weekly, and summer schedule and the counselor's daily routine as our texts. He made us think of the educational implications of everything we did, from the first moment that we woke our campers until we sang the Shema with them after lights out at night. We needed to think of how we behaved at morning *tefillot*, of how we distributed food at our tables, of how we managed the work wheel in our cabins during *nikkayon*. He taught us about the notion of home haven, of making our bunks a safe place for our kids so that that they could go out into the life of hard knocks that the camp provided, and then have a place where they could return to lick their wounds and be loved and comforted.

He even taught us one of the most important lessons we would ever learn about being a Jew in the open, accepting environment of twentieth- and now twenty-first-century America; and he did it, quite simply, by describing the vehicle that Ramah created to have campers select their daily and weekly activities. By requiring our kids to make choices between art and baseball and hiking and camping and canoeing and fencing, we were teaching them how to choose and how to live with the consequences of their choices. It was only baseball or basket weaving, just games and activities; and the specific choice was not important, but rather the process of choosing. But it was, in fact, vitally important. It was the stuff of the life of a kid while at camp. It was the kid's life. And as Mogilner taught us, in life one needed to know how to choose if one were to choose to be a Jew in a society in which it was so easy to opt out, or worse yet, just fade away because one did not bother to make a conscious choice to maintain a Jewish identity.

The educational tool that Mogilner used that was the most intimidating of all for me was his constant demand for *batzdukah hinnuchit*, for educational justification. Every time you opened your mouth and suggested a program or an idea, you had to be prepared to justify it with a rational, reasonable, educational, and Jewish justification. "My God, can't I just live life and enjoy it with these kids without thinking about it and justifying it?" "No," would be his answer. What makes Ramah an educational institution is that anything and

everything that happens must be open to educational justification. If you cannot justify it, you probably should not be doing it. If you are serious about being a Jewish educator, even for just this summer at camp, you *must* be prepared to think about everything you are doing, what kind of impact it is going to have on the kid, and whether or not it will be positive Jewish education.

I remember the day, the class, and the session when this remarkable man within the remarkable institution that is Ramah repeated an unremarkable definition. David spoke in Hebrew as he restated John Dewey's behaviorist definition of education as a "change in a person's behavior." And then he said that that was not enough for Ramah. Rather, at Ramah, Dewey's definition would have to be restated as a "change of a person's behavior in a particular direction." It does not seem like very much now, but those were words that gave meaning and purpose to my own life as an educator. For, it clarified for me what was one of the most important elements in the educational and institutional strength of Ramah. Ramah had a clear purpose. It understood its direction and its mission. Embedded within it were both a notion of best practices, those educational methods and programs that can touch a person and effect change, as well as a clear sense of what the direction of change should be. Its vision of the Jewish person it wanted to create was clearer than in any other place that I have ever worked.

The educational lessons I learned had an impact on every Jewish educational institution I ever headed. For me, at the beginning of my career, the Ramah experience was as broad as the Poconos camp and as deep as David Mogilner and the staff he brought together. What I consequently discovered was that my experience was replicated time and time again at Ramah camps across the country and with directors who were very different in temperament from David Mogilner. Years later, I myself was privileged to become one of those Ramah directors.

Discussing and defining what is meant by "a particular direction" is interesting in and of itself. Ramah has been the stalwart of the Conservative Movement, creating a living environment that links the notion of historical Judaism to a vibrant present. It has been the Conservative Movement's quintessential living laboratory, a laboratory for the Jewish future. It has occasioned strife and struggle as issues of great import were faced each summer at camp, often long before our scholars at The Jewish Theological Seminary and in the movement faced them.

Much has happened during these summers with youth communities tucked into a mountain valley, seemingly removed from the push and pull of everyday life, yet giving shape and texture both to the life of the individual Jew who has attended and to the larger community to which she has returned.

It is to these Jews and to this Jewish community of which we are all a part, to the stakeholders of contemporary Jewish life, to which I want to give my attention. Cast in the language of this magnificent institution that is Ramah, these stakeholders would include the following: (1) our campers, (2) our parents, (3) our staff, (4) our movement, and (5) our people, the Jewish people. And the ultimate question I want to ask is how has the direction of the lives of each stakeholder been affected by Ramah over these sixty years, and what are the qualitative differences that Ramah has made to them?

In thinking about this question, I considered the appropriate metaphor to capture the experiences, the memories, and the learning of Ramah. One morning during my personal davening as I was beginning with *pesukei dezimra*, I read the words of Genesis 22 (the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac) as I do almost every day, and I began to envision Ramah as the mountain peak experience it is, both figuratively and literally. And then a question entered my consciousness that I could not shake. How is Ramah like the *akedah*?

What a problematic question that is, and what uncomfortable imagery it offers for thinking about Ramah! After all, the *akedah* is about the binding of Isaac, and it is about a parent's willingness to sacrifice his child. Who is prepared to do that? No one I know! We all want to enhance our kids' lives. We would rather sacrifice ourselves for our kids and not the other way around. And so I would like to struggle with this problem of the *akedah* a bit and see how it might better help us understand those who are the stakeholders in Ramah and capture a bit of what Ramah has meant to their lives.

To do this I discuss the following five things: a television commercial, a snow bound Hebrew class, a painted stone, an educational myth, and *birkat hamazon*.

The Television Commercial

I remember being caught up in a number of commercials that were ingenious in their use of misdirection and disingenuousness. They sold different products, but more or less, they told the same story. Picture this: a teenager is packing up and ready to leave for college. You can sense his inner turmoil, a mixture of the excitement of things to come and melancholy about leaving his home and parents behind. This is a rite of passage for him, but how will his parents manage without him? There seems to be genuine sadness and concern, both for the child and for the parents. In fact, in one of the commercials, the mother does not even descend the steps to bid the youngster farewell. The implication the viewer draws from the student's expression is that he empathizes with his mother's pain at his leaving home. The conclusions of these commercials vary, but the message is always the same; the parents are happy to get rid of the

youngster. In one, they dance for joy and start packing for their vacation in Hawaii. In another, it becomes obvious that the mother was unavailable to say goodbye because she was too busy measuring the child's room with plans to use the space for a master bedroom expansion.

This is certainly a redefinition of what it means for a parent to stay behind. At first, I thought that these parents could not be Jewish. It was not the way Jewish parents were supposed to behave. Whatever pleasures becoming an empty nester bring, the angst of sending your child out into the world, symbolized by going off to college, is a family rite of passage that is emblematic of change, usually irreversible change. And that is something that causes concern and insecurity for parents, not to mention for children. In the commercials, could the investment of the parents in their children have been so minimal that children were viewed as mere impediments to a more comfortable, private lifestyle?

Then I thought of the akedah, of Abraham and Isaac, and even of the two lads they left behind. "You stay here with the donkey," Abraham told them. When Abraham left his homeland, he was leaving his past. As he took Isaac off to sacrifice him, he was, in a real sense, leaving his future. These were hard decisions. There was pain between parent and child, heading off to that mountaintop. And there must have been some disgruntlement, too. How did those lads feel? After all, weren't they and their feelings discounted? Abraham and Isaac were going off to a peak experience somewhere. They might well be changed by the experience. But what would become of the lads? They would not be sharing the experience. Ultimately, they would never be able to fully comprehend what had happened, and they would be left behind in more important ways than were implied by the mere fact that they stayed in place with the donkey.

I could not see that commercial, nor contemplate this Torah story without thinking about my experiences with parents: Jewish parents, loving parents, who sent their children off to a summer at Ramah. There were those who saw it as a wonderful opportunity and believed that it was great for a child to be at camp, any camp. There were those who did not give it much thought at all. The children need to do something constructive in the summer, and Ramah sure sounds constructive. And there were those who were really concerned about Ramah and sent their children to camp with great hesitation.

When I was the director of education at Beth Sholom in Philadelphia, I was proud that we were able to send fifty-five of our students to Ramah for a summer, and that was when everyone went for an eight-week session. Fifty-five was a large number in those days, but I remember how much more difficult it was to convince the parents in my congregation to send their children to

Ramah than it was to convince the children that they should go. Usually, a charismatic teacher or youth group leader could influence the students, and of course, their friends' encouragement was the most powerful device of all in my recruitment arsenal.

The parents already were members of a Conservative synagogue, but they seemed to be afraid of the religious experiences their children would have at camp. Different from the parents in the television commercials, they seemed to sense that sending their children to a Ramah camp for a summer was more than just gaining some empty-nest intimacy. The child would certainly be returning, but would it be the same child?

The power of the Ramah experience is something that informed parents learn about very rapidly. From my years as an education director, a day school director, and a Ramah director, I remember the many conversations I had with parents. They expressed their issues differently, but the heart of their concern was whether their child would return from camp different, different from what he was now and different from them, his or her parents and their family. Some focused on whether their sons would wear *kippot*, and others struggled with their own personal refusal to make their homes kosher. These conversations really amused me because, for most, the child had not yet been to camp and could not have thought of the idea, let alone made the request. In effect, the parent was saying that I want my child to have a peak experience, but I do not want that experience to remove my child from me. I want my child to learn. I want her to grow. But I do not want her to change and thereby grow away from me.

Of course, there were those parents who were happy for their children's opportunity and regretted that they had to be left at the base of the mountain, much as the two lads were left in the akedah story.

Over the years, Ramah camps have learned how to enable our Isaacs (i.e., our children) to bring their Abrahams (i.e., their parents) along up the mountain with them for the experience. Today, there are adult accommodations for summer institutes at Ramah. There are family camps to share the rich experience among young, and not so young, alike. There are even winter *shabbatonim* at Ramah in California and Ramah Darom, packaging the Ramah Shabbat experience in a format appropriate to create inspiring, elevating adult experiences. Different from the akedah, in the Ramah of today, neither lads nor parents would be left behind.

A Snowbound Hebrew Class

I was twenty-one. Rabbi David Clayman was maybe thirty-three or thirty-five. I remember the first time we met. He invited me to his office at Mount

Airy Jewish Community Center where he was rabbi. He hired me for some short-term employment.

There were some youngsters in his shul he wanted to send to Ramah, and they wanted to go. But there was an important impediment that stood in their way. Before they could be admitted, they had to pass a Hebrew admissions exam, and David Clayman was afraid that the Hebrew language program at his synagogue school had not properly prepared them. And so, he hired me to teach at his synagogue for about three hours a day over the course of the entire winter vacation from public school. That I showed up every day was no surprise. I was being paid to teach a class. But there were about half a dozen students who came daily, who trudged through the winter streets even after a major snowstorm that made the windows of our classroom appear to be encased in walls of snow and ice.

I was impressed! Not only did they learn a lot of Hebrew, but they passed the test and were admitted to camp. And the experience is one that has remained with me as a teacher for a lifetime. The students were great; they seemed to have an intense inner motivation. They wanted to go to camp. Basically, the class taught itself. I was just along for the ride, empowering these teenagers to acquire those skills that would enable them to go to camp.

I wonder if there are any of our camps that have these kinds of requirements today. Certainly, that was not the case in the California camp during the years that I directed it.

I am always impressed with any youngster who decides to attend Ramah. In the first place, going to any overnight camp or even to a different overnight camp for the first time must be a daunting prospect for a youngster. Making a decision to attend Ramah with its religious dimensions adds an overlay of the unknown for many of our campers. One has to admire their guts to make such a decision and go through with it.

We may not make the hurdles quite as high as those that the students in my winter vacation class faced; however, the hurdles are there. And, although the children do not really know what the payoff will be at the end of the course, they are prepared to accept the challenge of going to Ramah anyway.

In a real sense, these are young people who are much like Isaac in our story of the akedah. No, we are not leading them off to slaughter, God forbid! But we are asking them to go to the mountaintop, to Ramah, and we have no real way to tell them what that means. It is just an experience we want them to have, and we promise them that it will touch their souls, change their lives, and be a lot of fun, too. And all of what I have just written cannot mean anything to a youngster who still does not have the experience of going to camp. Nevertheless, they trust us, much as Isaac trusted Abraham.

The story of one of the students in my class underscores the potential that Ramah has to touch the lives of its campers: to shape them and give them added meaning and purpose. This youngster's name was Bennett Solomon, of blessed memory. When we met for the first time in that Ramah Hebrew class, he was twelve years old, not yet bar mitzvah. He was handsome, tall, and blond with a winning smile, on the threshold of adolescence.

I was there for his first summer at camp, and what happened to him was as wonderful as it was unremarkable for Ramah. He had a fabulous counselor and a great group of kids as his friends and confidants. That group remained together pretty much throughout all their years at Ramah, went to Ramah Seminar in Israel together, and returned for the National Mador, which then operated at Ramah in the Poconos in Pennsylvania. After Mador, Bennett served as a counselor and in many other educational staff capacities during the following summers.

Bennett's world became Ramah. He was in constant touch with his friends during the winter, and this was long before anyone even heard of the Internet. These bunkmates supported each other, cared about each other, and maintained their personal connections through high school, college, graduate school, and during the establishment of their families and professional lives. From that group have emerged rabbis, physicians, business people, college professors, and Jewish educators. Bennett was one of the latter. He attended Brandeis University and completed his doctorate at Harvard with a dissertation on the idea of curriculum integration in day schools. He became the headmaster of a Schechter day school in the suburbs of Boston and built a school of recognized quality. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by disease, but even in his limited years, his contribution to the Jewish people was very great.

Bennett Solomon is emblematic of the power that Ramah has to shape the lives of its campers. It challenges them to undertake a journey to its mountaintop, it exposes them to fabulous educational role models, it envelops them with a rhythm of Jewish life that is made real and intense by the shared experience of young people living in close community, and it provides them with a network of friends and experiences that lasts a lifetime. And what must not be forgotten—it does all this by connecting them to their tradition and their people and invests them with the commitment to make their own contributions to that tradition and people.

The Painted Rock

It was my second summer at Ramah, my first as a rosh edah. The painted rock refers to the last element of a major program our edah, Nitzanim, undertook over a period of a few weeks. On one special day, a *yom me'yubad*, we constructed a

program that took the entire edah on what today would be called virtual aliyah. The youngsters traveled across the lake on rowboats, or marched in lines from distant sections of the camp pretending to come to Israel from the four corners of the world, a reenactment of *kibbutz galuyyot*. They constructed a *ma'barah* (new immigrant's camp), cooked Israeli food, defended their encampment as the Army would have, had an evening campfire presenting skits from their countries of origin, and listened to a radio broadcast of the United Nations vote on the partition on Palestine of November 1947. The next day and the week that followed, they collected rocks and worked to build a map of Israel that surrounded the flagpole on the boys' campus. The map was to be made of rocks painted blue and white and set in a bed of cement that had been poured into a furrow that was dug in the shape of the map of the State of Israel.

It took a few weeks to finish the project because we were all better counselors and educators than we were builders and artisans. Digging the outline was tough and tedious, but painting the rocks was the craziest activity one could imagine. Have you ever tried to paint a rock? It's easy to do it on one side, but what happens when you have to turn it over? And we were dealing with thousands of rocks that we had gathered. What happens is that a little paint gets onto the rocks, but all the boys and girls in the edah turn blue and white themselves from head to foot. What a mess it was, but what fun! Although these may not have been the kinds of rocks Abraham collected to build his altar on Mount Moriah, these Ramah stones did, indeed, help to build an experience for our campers who touched them, painted them, and were in turn touched by them.

I smile when I think of this, and at the same time, my smile reveals a bit of melancholy because I cannot think of that activity and that summer without remembering rabbi-to-be Chuck Rheinisch, of blessed memory. Chuck was tall and broad. He was a big fellow, but not one to be feared. He was a kind of a teddy bear, very soft and loving in spite of his size. He was great as a counselor in Nitzanim, the youngest division.

I do not believe that Chuck was then more than eighteen years old, but his leadership potential already was evident. I was then a wise old man of twenty-two, and I delegated the overall operation and administrative responsibility for this activity to Chuck. He was very effective, and he motivated his friends on our staff to accomplish things at a level of excellence that I have rarely seen, even in some of our finest Jewish educational institutions with the best teachers and administrators.

When I think of Chuck, I hear the voice of David Mogilner echoing in my ears, when he would say, "The real power of Ramah is that it is a place where youth is empowered to educate youth." Consequently, it becomes a place where

youngsters learn from accessible role models, those who are not more than a few years older than they are themselves. And those who were the educators were learning at least as much and perhaps even more than the students.

I think it is no coincidence that so many rabbis and educators developed at Ramah. We all learned Judaica. We all had classes in education. But more important, Ramah was a living laboratory of experience, growth, and educational training that taught each of us lucky enough to be on staff how to be a parent, how to be a teacher, how to be an administrator, how to be an institutional leader, how to be a caring person, and how to be a competent human being. We learned this from each other on staff, and we were mentored, each one of us, by someone a bit more experienced, a bit more knowledgeable, and a bit more mature.

When I became a Ramah director, I quickly realized that Ramah was probably an even more valuable experience for each young person I brought to be on staff than it was for each child who came to be a camper. Teaching, after all, is the most effective tool we have for learning.

An Educational Myth

A criticism that is often leveled at the Ramah experience is that it creates a hothouse environment for Jewish life. It isn't real. It does not replicate what the child experiences in her or his family at home, and it is often very far from the experience the youngsters have in their own Conservative synagogues in the city. Ramah, therefore, is a make-believe world, one that cannot be replicated at home and when our campers try, they are destined to experience frustration and failure.

I believe that rather than being a shortcoming, this hothouse and mythical environment at Ramah is actually one of the great gifts to the Conservative Movement and to the world of Jewish education.

Sometimes myth can shape reality. Is the akedah story a myth? Even if it is, it has helped to shape the reality of who we are as Jewish people, parents and children, and how we behaved individually and collectively over the generations.

Likewise, Ramah creates Jewish educational myths built upon educational experiences provided to its campers that are rooted in a vision of, and goals for, a more vibrant Jewish future. The notion of educational myth¹ states that it is the role of the educational institution to have a vision for how the world would become. The world is not yet so. It is myth, not reality. But it is the role of the educational institution to create that world within its boundaries, as if that myth were reality. For those who have the experience, the myth will become reality, and it will inspire them to live their lives in the world

according to what they have experienced. This is what Ramah has been doing so well for all the years of its existence. I even remember a time when Ramah extended that myth into a winter program called Leaders Training Fellowship (LTF), which extended the same futuristic vision of the summer into the city lives of its campers. Ramah's vision of the Jewish future, its hothouse myth, has changed the lives of tens of thousands.

Birkat Hamazon

For me, a single line that we recite in the birkat hamazon is emblematic of Ramah's contributions to the entirety of the Jewish people. The line is: *Harahaman hu yevarech et medinat yisra'el reishit tzemihat ge'ulateinu* (may the Merciful bless the State of Israel, the beginning of the flowering of our redemption). The story of how this line came to be part of our daily ritual is a Ramah story. I believe it represents the kind of Jewish educational struggle we experience as we try to make sense of the literary nuances found in the akedah story and their meaning for our lives.

It happened in the summer of 1965 at Ramah in the Poconos. David Mogilner had gathered a very large *hanhalah*. There were *rashai edot*, *yo'atzim* (advisers) for the edot, *yo'atzim* for Mador and for the *madrich bachir* program, as well as a collection of rabbis and professors-in-residence. As a consequence, meetings, especially those with a theoretical or philosophical agenda, were often painfully long. Sometimes it felt as though there was too much wisdom in the room.

Israel had celebrated seventeen anniversaries. It was two years before the Six-Day War, an event that would generate an upheaval in Jewish identity and Israeli consciousness. There were already those on the Ramah *hanhalah* who believed we must begin to introduce the notion of the contemporary State of Israel into our daily religious observance. David Mogilner had just returned from an extended stay in Israel as had others. The California camp already had added a line to its version of birkat hamazon stating: *Harahaman hu yevarech et medinat yisra'el veyagen aleha* (may the Merciful bless and protect the State of Israel).

The proposal was made that the same words be added to our birkat hamazon in the Poconos. What followed was a week of emotional deliberation. I remember one discussion that led to anger and tears when one rabbi claimed that the modern State of Israel was a temporal matter, and our prayers can be directed only toward that which is eternal. Benny Mushkin, a local educational director on the camp staff, suggested a compromise. His proposal was to begin the phrase with *Harahaman hu yevarech et medinat yisra'el* and add the modifying words from Israel's Declaration of Independence, *reishit tzemihat*

ge'ulateinu. The compromise was adopted and added to the birkat hamazon the following Shabbat. As far as I know, it has become an accepted part of our ritual, far beyond the boundaries of a Ramah camp.

Who knows how many such discussions on a myriad of issues and concerns of the Jewish world took place at Ramah? It is reasonable to believe that the fabric of Jewish life and of the Jewish people today is woven of many threads that were spun on the wheel of Jewish living and learning experience at Camp Ramah.

So we understand that over the course of sixty years, Ramah has had a significant impact on all who have had contact with it: its campers, its staff, its movement, its parents, and its people.

My experiences at Ramah were my most formative experiences as a Jew and as an educator. Certainly, that is the case with regard to my years as director of Ramah in California. But it is especially so for the years I spent at the Poconos as a counselor, rosh edah, *yo'etz*, and professor. I learned more from David Mogilner and the camp during the few summers I spent at the Poconos than I did in four years of undergraduate work and six years of graduate work in education. I learned how to think as an educator. I learned how to think and feel as a Jew. I learned how to create experience for others, how to create a world that created a new future for them as Jews.

I am convinced that my Jewish educational vision and practice, as well as the course of my career at the University of Judaism, the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, the American Hebrew Academy, and the Mandel Center for Jewish Education of the JCCs of North America were shaped by my Ramah experiences. When all is said and done, I believe that my years as a Ramah director were among the most fulfilling and meaningful of my career. For me, working with a youngster within a Jewish educational setting that creates a total environment is the most powerful work I could ever want to do as an educator. For me, Ramah has been an unbounded blessing.

May our people be blessed with another sixty years of Ramah achievement.

Note

¹“Educational myth” is an element of a Reconstructionist philosophy of education, a theory of education unrelated to Reconstructionist Judaism. The only connection is that the thinking of John Dewey was a significant influence in both.