

**HERB GREENBERG AND BARBARA GREENBERG**

## *Our Tikvah Mission: A Recipe for Leadership*

**W**E BASK IN MUCH PRIDE and satisfaction as we reflect upon our efforts that spurred an entirely new direction in Jewish education. The era following the Six-Day War created an enormous surge of Zionist pride that led to an interest in innovation in Jewish educational and communal growth. As a result, our generation experienced a heightened degree of idealism and commitment to strengthening Jewish identity on both the personal and the collective level. In particular, informal education, as witnessed, for example, by the growth of the חבורה movement, created new opportunities for the greater Jewish community. Because of this trend, new leadership was needed to support a growing list of priorities in Jewish life. And so we began to link our professional experiences as special educators to the new agendas in the Jewish world.

In the late 1960s, a new voice emerged in the secular Jewish as well as non-Jewish communities. The de-institutionalization process had begun, and for the first time, most children and adults with special needs were being returned to their respective communities. Modest private efforts were implemented to deal with this novel situation. Jewish families were faced with enormous challenges that included the reintegration of many children with serious disabilities — and in some cases “unwanted” children — into their homes. Jewish communal and religious institutions did not have the resources to deal with these revolutionary changes in the mental health arena.

Forty-plus years ago Jewish youngsters who were developmentally challenged had no identity in their Jewish communities. The Jewish world did not acknowledge the birthright of this population. By and large, families of these children remained invisible to the Jewish community. They suffered in silence, though they craved a Jewish education and identity for their children.

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Until 1969, homogeneity of population had been the watchword at the Ramah camps, reflecting the reality in educational thinking of the time. The Jewish world, however, is indebted to the Ramah network for the contributions to Jewish educational innovation and leadership throughout North America, Europe, and Israel that Ramah initiated during this period. In late March of 1970, the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education for the Special Child found a home for the first Tikvah Program. Much credit is due to the members of this committee including, among others, Rabbi Joseph Kelman, ז"ל, Dr. Morton Siegel, Dr. Pesach Schindler, and Edya Arzt, ז"ל, who lobbied with great dedication for the creation of a new model to be known as Jewish special education.

The United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education worked closely with the National Ramah Commission to create a novel paradigm, one that was unprecedented at the time in the secular world. The opportunity to right a wrong, to perform תיקון עולם or repair of the world, created its own momentum. From its inception, the Tikvah Program endeavored to achieve תיקון עולם on two levels simultaneously. In the broader population, the Tikvah Program sought to dispel the myths and stereotypes regarding children who have special needs. The Tikvah Program embraced those developmentally challenged youngsters who had been disenfranchised for so long from Jewish education and social interaction with their "normal" peers.

Though Jewish special education in the late 1960s was an abstract concept without any concrete foundation, under the direction of Don Adelman, ז"ל, Camp Ramah in Glen Spey, New York, agreed to host this new venture. Three months before the opening of the 1970 summer camp season, there were no Tikvah campers and no Tikvah staff. During this period we personally made many hurried phone calls to rabbis of all denominations, Jewish educators, and Jewish community leaders in an effort to identify a suitable camper population for the inaugural season of the program. But to no avail! Adolescent Jewish children with developmental disabilities, along with their families, could not be found in Jewish educational and communal settings. We then turned to the world of secular special education, our professional milieu, realizing that Jewish parents were frequently very active in the various special education organizations of the time, often seemingly out of proportion to the number of Jewish special education students represented. When we turned to this world of secular special education, we began to identify our target population, though it was by no means a homogeneous group. The eight campers whom we then found exhibited a wide range of learning and behavioral disorders, ranging from moderate to severe. Aside from the fact that these eight youngsters possessed no Jewish background, none of them had

ever experienced social interactions with non-disabled peers. In addition to the differences between the intellectual and behavioral profiles of the first Tikvah campers and those of their non-Tikvah peers, the Tikvah campers also differed greatly from one another and from the rest of the camp in their educational, social, and religious experiential backgrounds. It became apparent to us that one of the first challenges we would face would be that of reconciling the varied expectations of our staff, the general Ramah community, and the parents of the non-Tikvah campers.

Next, we briefly outline our efforts to meet the new challenge of creating a model of integrated Jewish summer camping that would sustain itself for future generations. First of all, we must state that it was, and remains, our belief that an innovative educational or communal paradigm would benefit one subgroup, in this case youngsters with special educational needs, if and only if, there was a commitment among all the parties involved to share a common vision, to encourage and accept constructive criticism, to support consistent leadership, to provide the necessary financial and staff resources, to adjust goals to meet new challenges as they arose, and to inculcate the tenets of the program into the consciousness of the community at large.

The concretization of a vision is a milestone of leadership. During staff week in June of 1970, we told our staff of four counselors, “You are writing, figuratively speaking, a ‘Torah’ for developmentally challenged Jewish children.” In general terms, we further informed our staff that the goals, achieved through specific processes and activities of the Tikvah Program, would enable this new camper population to internalize many of the skills and values that we have always treasured as a Jewish people. We also hoped that, in the process of implementing this formidable goal, we would educate the entire Ramah community, enlisting everyone as a partner in our enterprise. Ultimately, we wished everyone who constituted the community of Camp Ramah to meet the challenge we presented, that of accepting the reality that members of the Tikvah Program must be guaranteed equal opportunity throughout the camp. As a starting point, we expected our staff to serve as role models for the entire camp, by demonstrating through their own efforts in daily interactions with Tikvah youngsters, that anyone who worked in Camp Ramah could draw upon his or her unique strengths to support this population. In so doing, every staff member would, by example, encourage the non-Tikvah campers to dispel any fears they harbored toward peers with significant deficits.

We must conclude after having founded and then having directed the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England for twenty-nine summers (1970–98) that the Ramah Camping Movement has proven itself to be an incubator for the creation and nurturing of leaders in all walks of Jewish life. For us

and for many others, our years at Ramah coalesced into a transformative experience. Despite certain bureaucratic restrictions inherent in any organization, Camp Ramah was open to institutional change and afforded us opportunities for experimentation and innovation, while at the same time, it provided the chance for almost any staff member to participate, either individually or as part of a group, in activities with the Tikvah campers. Camp Ramah encouraged our personal growth. In a very practical sense, our entire family—including our children Seth Greenberg and Gabie Greenberg Sykora—was changed by our Ramah experience. We all became fluent in Hebrew and internalized an ardent dedication to Israel, culminating in our עלייה or settling in Israel (1992, 1993, and 1999, respectively). One of the missions of Ramah during our early tenure there was to encourage עלייה, and the institution can share in our חתת or joy, as we now number nineteen family members, including eleven grandchildren, nine of whom are sabras, all living in Ra'anana, Israel.

During the first few years of the Tikvah Program, a leadership model evolved. This model enabled the project to resonate as a mission, a vision, and as a new reality for the Ramah community. To realize our vision, we had to consider many professional, as well as personal factors. We had to keep our goals clearly in mind while exhibiting some degree of flexibility in the means we employed to achieve them. We had to consider, for example, competing interests. In addition, on at least some level, there is always initial resistance to innovation, often accompanied by some degree of skepticism regarding the validity of the aims of any new program. It was, nevertheless, vital to maintain our consistency of purpose. In addition to these professional considerations, we had to sort out family issues because the implementation of this effort required an extraordinary investment of time, effort, and patience.

During the first years of the Tikvah Program, we waged a difficult struggle on many fronts. On the one hand, following the existing educational model, understandably the camp administration instinctively viewed the program as a self-contained entity within the total structure. Contrary to this attitude, however, the leadership of the Tikvah Program advocated on several fronts for inclusion of the Tikvah campers in all camp-wide activities and their acceptance as a legitimate division within the camp. We also campaigned for professional partnership in all administrative decisions and insisted on the right of the Tikvah Program to share the specialty resources of the camp. Though all of these expectations were enthusiastically supported by Don Adelman, ז"ל, the director of Camp Ramah in Glen Spey and later in New England, consensus among the rest of the senior leadership of the camp was lacking. It was not uncommon, for example, for camp-wide decisions to be implemented without regard for the unique requirements of the Tikvah Program. Such oversight

undoubtedly was due to adherence to the decision-making model that had existed prior to the advent of the Tikvah Program.

During the initial stages of our efforts, most non-Tikvah staff felt ill-equipped both emotionally and intellectually to offer their services to the Tikvah population. Don Adelman, *z"l*, as the camp director, set the tone the very first week. He told everyone on staff at the camp that the incorporation of the Tikvah Program provided a structure whereby the entire community could concretize many of the Jewish values inherent in the Jewish educational curriculum of the camp. Our vision was validated from the top, and our faith was confirmed that Camp Ramah truly demonstrated a resiliency imbued with both a desire for, and an ability to, withstand change.

In our leadership model, we demonstrated trust in our staff by delegating to them many roles and responsibilities. First, we trained staff to work with the entire camp community. Although camp counselors, specialists, and educators expressed discomfort and insecurity at the prospect of working with youngsters with special needs, the Tikvah leadership addressed all the well-known stereotypes of that era regarding people who were developmentally challenged. To this end, we refused to use—and would not countenance the use by others—the medical labels universally accepted in the field of special education at that time, such as mental retardation, emotional disturbance, brain damage, and so forth. We insisted that everyone refer to the campers in our program in a generic manner and that they address the learning and social challenges displayed by the members of our group in an individualized, descriptive fashion.

Through role playing, we established the basic principles of communication between our staff and each member of the Tikvah Program, such as, “You must establish eye contact with Moshe before you give him a set of directions.” Because Tikvah campers frequently communicated through touch, a means of approach often not accepted comfortably by relative strangers, we encouraged staff throughout the camp to respond in a calm voice, “I don’t like to be touched. Do not do that again. If you touch me, I will not talk to you, and I will go away.” We developed such strategies in partnership with the entire camp to ensure some level of consistency and to facilitate a shared community responsibility to this group. Our Tikvah staff attended all camp-wide orientation sessions, and we modeled for the general staff techniques of communication, as well as advocacy, to enable them to support our roles during the summer. As our staff became more comfortable in their roles as crisis managers, we encouraged selected staff and campers in the Camp Ramah community at large to work with our population as volunteers. Voluntarism always has been an important value at the Ramah camps, and we provided

many opportunities for volunteers to become sensitized to differences and to appreciate, in a practical sense, both the endless variation of God's creation and the fact that we are all responsible for one another.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to Rabbi Burton Visotzky, who served as a counselor during the first summer of Tikvah, went on to become a division head, and also assumed major fund-raising responsibilities. But perhaps his greatest contribution to the first Tikvah Program was the impetus he provided to advance the nascent field of Jewish education for youngsters with special needs. His wise counsel accelerated our efforts to provide training for the Tikvah campers in such areas as תפילות (prayers), the use of Hebrew as a spoken language, and Shabbat observance; as well as to promote their participation in informal activities that focused on the development of their emerging Jewish identity.

During the first weeks, Burt unwittingly found himself drawn into a thought-provoking and heart-wrenching discussion with the Tikvah campers that was to lead the Tikvah Program to a new height of honesty and integrity that remains its hallmark to this day. One of the campers asked Burt, "Why did God make me retarded?" This question opened the door to many Tikvah staff-camper discussions revolving around self-image, one's rightful place in the community, the challenges of independent living, and of course, a deeper interest in religious issues. How could we ever have anticipated engaging this group in a discussion about צלם אלוקים (the image of God) and the fact that we, regardless of our individual strengths or deficits, are partners with God in enriching our lives?

Rabbi David Halivni, who was the professor-in-residence during the early years of the Tikvah Program, gave us much support and insight in helping us understand how we could overcome the halachic restrictions placed upon the חרש and the שוטה (the hearing impaired and the person who does not speak). He offered us the concept of a "religious IQ," and he believed that modern psychology and educational methodology opened up new frontiers for this population. It was therefore reasonable, he proposed, to create higher religious expectations for our target population, the campers of the Tikvah Program, than had previously been thought possible, through the integration of special and Jewish education.

We first applied this principle during the early years of the Tikvah Program. Rabbi Steven Shulman, then a Tikvah counselor, designed the prototype of the first Tikvah סידור (siddur) and prepared one of his campers to become the first Tikvah bar mitzvah during a ceremony that took place at camp. Another staff member, in this case a member of the משלחת (staff sent

from Israel), who had a profound influence on the direction of the Tikvah Program was Yankele Berlowitz, ז"ל. Yankele, an Israeli ראש עדה (division head), resolutely promoted Zionism and עלייה. He expressed an unwavering dedication to ארץ ישראל, and he took upon himself the mission of imparting this zeal to as many members of the Ramah community as possible.

During that first summer in 1970, Yankele resisted the integration of the Tikvah Program into the camp. We engaged in many heated discussions; however at the time, he could not understand the potential of our group. Most Israelis, like many Americans, during the early years of Tikvah reflected the thinking of the time that youngsters with special needs should be separated from the community. Yankele forced us to analyze the Tikvah Program from his Israeli perspective, with its emphasis on fierce independence and mental and physical capabilities, a perspective that had never crossed our minds. The courage of our convictions prevailed. In subsequent years, Yankele directed day camp programs in Israel in which he included youngsters with special educational needs. Throughout the years, the remarkable and varied talents of the משלחת provided much enrichment and emotional support to Tikvah staff and campers alike.

At Camp Ramah in New England, two of the most influential members of the משלחת, in addition to Yankele, were Yehuda Gubani and Yedida Tzivoni. For more than twenty years, Yehuda has inspired a love of the Hebrew language in Tikvah and non-Tikvah campers alike. Yedida has enthusiastically welcomed Tikvah campers into the arts program and has encouraged some of the older ones to serve as assistants. Over and above their responsibilities in Hebrew and the arts, respectively, both Yehuda and Yedida consistently have served as two of the most vocal advocates for the Tikvah Program within Camp Ramah in New England. Howard Blas, the present director of the Tikvah Program, has done a superb job of extending the scope of the program. In our estimation, he represents the epitome of Ramah leadership. The Ramah community and the Jewish community of New England will continue to be the beneficiaries in the years to come.

Unfortunately, some educators view parents as adversaries rather than as partners in the educational process. We have always rejected this notion. We have always been faithful to the dictum that we have much to learn from parents, for they usually offer the most insight into, and direction for, their children. Many of the families with whom we worked over the course of twenty-nine summers at Camp Ramah in New England have become role models for us. Many of the early Tikvah parents were Holocaust survivors who were intent on building new families. These families inspired us to embed

the concept of עולמן תיקון into the program. Their devotion to their children's progress provided us with incentives to chart many unexplored directions for Tikvah campers.

In addition, at the outset we committed ourselves to provide professional services for these families. Beginning with the first year of the Tikvah Program, the summer culminated in a three-day parent conference, in which together we addressed behavioral, social, educational, Judaic, and other issues that arose during the summer. We also offered the parents strategies for reinforcing at home, during the school year, strengths that their children had developed during the eight-week summer session. We provided all parents with a detailed printed narrative of the summer, together with goals to be implemented during the year both at home and in school. This parent conference took place outside the camp, and we invited professionals from a wide variety of mental health and related fields. In some cases, the Tikvah director became the child's advocate during the school year when intervention was required. On one occasion, for example, the Tikvah director testified in federal court on behalf of a Tikvah family who wanted their child educated in the least restrictive environment.

There is no question that our tenure as administrators of the Tikvah Program sharpened our professional skills in many ways. First and foremost, we realized our goal of integrating Jewish education and special education. We were able to create new training models in the camp for staff, parents, and professionals. This process created a momentum in the greater Jewish community through the efforts of Ramah and Tikvah staff who sought opportunities for further growth beyond the summer. We were invited to speak at many conferences throughout the United States to encourage the launching of new ventures on behalf of Jewish children who are developmentally challenged. Over the years, our staff members pioneered Jewish special education classes in synagogues, social activity programs in recreation centers, group homes run under Jewish auspices, day school programs for Jewish children with special needs, Tikvah Programs in most of the Ramah camps, programs in Israel, integrated Jewish youth programs in all the denominations, as well as trips to Israel. We collaborated and consulted with Tikvah staff members and local Jewish leaders in support of these efforts.

The success of the Tikvah Program encouraged us to expand our vision and to imagine and develop new horizons for the Tikvah population, always in response to the needs of these campers as we perceived them. At each stage, we had to overcome initial opposition and skepticism. The "aging out" of the camper population presented a particular challenge to us. Families of older Tikvah campers were troubled by the prospect of their children's tenure in

the program coming to an end. These new directions included vocational educational training, referred to as the Voc Ed Program, for the eighteen-to twenty-one-year-old population, and the building of a training residence to prepare many graduates of the camper program for semi-independent or independent living. Beginning in 1984, some older campers and graduates of the Tikvah Program were invited to participate in organized Tikvah trips to Israel. During this past decade, selected Tikvah graduates of the Voc Ed Program were invited to become members of the Camp Ramah staff. In 2006, eight years after our retirement from Tikvah, our final vision was realized. The completion of the new guesthouse at Camp Ramah in New England, a project intended to provide training for employment opportunities in the hotel service industry for qualified Tikvah graduates, as well as much-needed guest facilities for the camp, clearly demonstrates “If you will it, it is no dream,” which became the slogan of the Zionist movement — the striving for a Jewish national home in Israel. The quote comes from Theodor Herzl’s book *The Old New Land (Altneuland)*, published in 1902.

The partnership that we nurtured between the Camps Ramah and the Tikvah Program has provided us with much spiritual gratification, which has proved to be our ultimate reward. Each morning we begin our תפילות by reciting מה טובו אוהליך יעקב, משכנותיך ישראל “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.” Malbim suggests that the “tents of Jacob” refer to the Israelites’ temporary dwellings in the desert, whereas the “sanctuaries of Israel” refer to our permanent homes in Israel. We see a parallel here with the role of the Tikvah Program as a training ground in which campers with special needs can hone their social, vocational, and other skills and thereby facilitate their eventual integration into the adult Jewish community.

We never anticipated how the inclusion of the Tikvah Program in all its various aspects would stir the spiritual senses of the Ramah community and encourage so many of its members to discover enriched value and significance in the מצוות. We derived much satisfaction and נחת as numerous traditional Jewish values came to life in the Ramah community. They include גמילות חסדים (acts of lovingkindness), כבוד הבריות (respect for one’s fellow man), and ערבות (the sense of mutual responsibility among members of a community). In diverse ways these values permeate the life of each Ramah camp that hosts a Tikvah Program. The Tikvah campers absorb these values through a combination of formal and informal education, including drama; and the rest of the camp does so, in part, by observing the Tikvah campers. This learning by observation and example is mutual, and each population within the camp has much to learn from the other. Rabbi Abraham Chill, z”l, grandfather of a former Tikvah camper, wrote *The Mitzvot* in 1974, in which he cited ייקרא

(Leviticus 19:18), ואהבת לרעך כמוך, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Rabbi Chill comments, “Our sages are almost unanimous in their agreement that [this] biblical commandment . . . is the basic pillar upon which the entire Torah is built.” Similarly, we recognize that it was our Torah tradition that provided the moral imperative for our efforts to confer dignity and self-esteem to a neglected population of children.

In our leadership model, we always emphasized to campers and staff that all of us have an obligation to give something back to the community that has nurtured us and helped us achieve our potential. In our remarks at the dedication of the guesthouse at Camp Ramah in New England, we observed that we had gained at least as much from our Ramah-Tikvah experience as we had imparted. On that occasion we concluded, “It has been a privilege for us to have shared our ideals and visions with this community. It is our hope that this building will enable Camp Ramah in New England to extend its reach as a leader in Jewish educational innovation for all its constituents.”