

**CHERYL MAGEN**

*Bridging Academia and the Field:  
The Davidson School and Camp Ramah*

**S**INCE THE INCEPTION of Ramah as a system of camps in the 1950s, The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) has been a supporter, partner, and provider of oversight for each of the camps. The relationship over the years has taken different forms, but the connection always has been a driving presence. The partnership was renewed and strengthened in 2003 with the appointment of Dr. Steve Brown as the dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education and of Rabbi Mitch Cohen as the director of the National Ramah Commission (NRC). Both are products of the Ramah Camping Movement, and this partnership was a natural outgrowth of their dedication to the educational mission of Ramah. The same year that Steve Brown and Mitch Cohen began serving in their positions, I came to the Davidson School after serving for nineteen summers as the director of Ramah Poconos. Both Steve and Mitch decided that I would serve as the Davidson educational consultant to Ramah. And so, a new element in the Ramah–JTS/Davidson partnership was formed.

Mitch, Steve, and I began to meet on a regular basis to outline projects that would be useful to the Ramah camps and that when possible, would involve the collaboration of some of the Davidson students. There was also an understanding that the Ramah camps would serve as fertile ground for possible recruitment of new students to Davidson to pursue either a master's degree or a doctorate in Jewish education. Working closely with the admissions professional from the Davidson School, as well as the admissions directors of the other JTS schools, each summer we forged connections with Ramah camp

**CHERYL MAGEN** serves on the education staff of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary as the educational consultant to the National Ramah Commission. In addition, she is the director of the master's degree program in Camp Administration and Leadership at Touro University–Nevada. She served as the director of Camp Ramah in the Poconos for nineteen years.

directors and *rashei ḥinnuch* (heads of education) to identify potential candidates for pursuing graduate degrees in Jewish education. Beyond assisting with recruitment, my position includes three main portfolios, *ḥinnuch* (education), *hadrachab* (leadership training), and *tefillah* (prayer). Each of these portfolios has yielded significant opportunities for year-round collaboration. I describe each of these portfolios in turn.

### **Ḥinnuch: Creating Contexts for Collaboration**

The *rashei ḥinnuch*, like many other staff members, are not year-round, full-time Ramah employees. Although there is much to be gained by bringing educators together to enhance their work, geography and the schedule between summers make it difficult to create meaningful connections among these *rashei ḥinnuch*.

In the spring of 2004, through the generosity of the Davidson School, the *rashei ḥinnuch* from all seven of the Ramah overnight camps and the Nyack day camp were invited to a two-day conference at JTS. This was a new opportunity to share the goals of the educational missions of the different camps, compare curricula, work together to solve challenges, and plan strategically for the future. Since then, the *rashei ḥinnuch* meet regularly each fall and spring for two days of sharing, collaboration, and professional development. Meetings in the fall afford an opportunity to “unpack” and process the summer experience and plan for the next summer, set goals for the shared work of the group, and share materials developed over the summer. Each *rosh ḥinnuch* is given a flash drive so that he or she can share curriculum easily with other educators and contribute material to a centralized resource bank. The spring meetings are devoted to discussions about faculty training, including the integration of staff and curriculum into all arenas of the camp, as well as about team-building ideas and staff week schedules.

There is professional development for the *rashei ḥinnuch* at both the fall and spring gatherings. Faculty and staff from the Davidson School and JTS spend time teaching and leading sessions to enrich the educators’ knowledge and to support their summer efforts. For example, after attending a poignant experiential learning session with Dr. Neil Gillman, former chair of the Department of Philosophy at JTS, the *rosh ḥinnuch* at each camp emphasized the importance of including God in formal and informal discussions with campers and staff. In a session with Dr. Carol Ingall, a professor of Jewish Education at JTS, the group learned the “8 E’s” (guidelines for moral education) from her book, *Transmission and Transformation*. This information became the basis for the creation of a *berit* (covenant) for each *yahadut* (Judaica) class at Camp Ramah in New England.

### *Curriculum development*

The sessions with the rashei ḥinnuch also led to curriculum development. A unit for each of the *edot* on *shemirat halashon* (avoiding offensive language) was developed collaboratively by all the rashei ḥinnuch after a learning session with Dr. Steve Brown. As stated in the introduction to the materials, the shemirat halashon curriculum addresses the following concern:

Being away from parents and the rigors of school limits, the camp atmosphere often feels permissive when it comes to trying on behaviors and testing new limits. After all, in a peer community such as Ramah, it seems natural to try language and behaviors that are closely watched at home under parental supervision. Specifically, campers tend to use more foul language than is acceptable at home and tend to be intensely motivated to share details about others—whether true or false—more readily than at home as well.

The shemirat halashon curriculum has four units. Each unit is intended for short-term use by the educators in *shi'urim* and by the *madrachim* in the *tzerifim*. The units can be used in *tefillot* and other *pe'ulot* as well. One of the hallmarks of a Ramah experience is learning to look at one's choices in life through a Jewish lens. These units present one window into the issues that surround the use of foul language and the existence of gossip and rumors, and the units include actions to make camp a “cleaner” environment when people speak.

Another example of curriculum developed by this group is “Jews and Social Justice,” which is designed for rising tenth-graders so as to enable all camps to implement the study before the campers go to Israel on Ramah Seminar. The curriculum analyzes the issues of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and the impact of terrorism in the United States, Canada, and Israel. An important goal of the “Jews and Social Justice” curriculum is the integration of ḥinnuch into the everyday life of a camper. Therefore, it includes not only the study of formal texts but also *pe'ulot* for the bunk and the edah using different perspectives and modalities. In this way, campers with various learning styles and abilities can connect to the material. One *pe'ulat erev* focuses on terrorism in Israel and examines four different aspects—social, economic, political, and cultural—of what happens to the victims and the differences before and after a terrorist attack. The materials also include readings from investigative reporter Barbara Ehrenreich's best-seller *Nickel and Dimed*,<sup>1</sup> the use of the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*, and the lyrics of “Don't Laugh at Me,” a song by Peter, Paul, and Mary. All the materials are provided so that this educational kit is extremely easy to use at camp. As an outgrowth of this

educational initiative, the Israel Seminar program added more opportunities for volunteer work in Israel.

The other major outcome of bringing the *rashei ḥinnuch* together was a clear mission statement of the educational goals for Ramah. Even though the camps are different in many ways and serve different regional populations, we came to a shared vision of education in the Ramah camps. The following statement emerged from these deliberations:

### *The educational “viSSion” of Camp Ramah*

The “viSSion”<sup>2</sup> of education at Camp Ramah is to create an observant, Conservative, Jewish, learning community with an overarching purpose to convey appreciation for the joy and richness of Jewish life.

When immersed in a positive, informal, and fun Jewish learning environment, campers and staff can successfully make connections between *tefillah*, song, *mitzvot*, and *middot*, incorporating them into their daily lives, which we hope will carry over into a lifelong pursuit of Jewish learning.

The viSSion of informal education at Camp Ramah is also to foster a love for and an appreciation of the Hebrew language, and to recognize and appreciate one’s place in Jewish history in order to create the future leaders of the Jewish community.

Through integrated educational experiences, Ramah hopes to instill enthusiasm for and a desire to spend time in Israel in any of many capacities (e.g., touring, studying, *aliyah*), as well as to develop a sense of pride in one’s Jewish identity and a passion to advocate for it.

All of these learning experiences are carefully designed to contribute to the social and emotional character development and positive self-esteem of the campers and staff who spend time in Ramah programs.

### *The master binder: A collaborative resource bank*

The eight educational directors have collaborated on the creation of a master binder for use by *ḥinnuch* faculty at the Ramah camps. This compilation consists of two parts: (1) Ramah-specific pieces, such as the viSSion statement, a list of educational websites, and a rubric for planning electives; and (2) pieces specific to the individual camp that every educator needs, such as the logistics for duplicating materials and how to arrange for snacks for a *siyyum*. In developing this master binder, faculty members at each camp gained a better understanding of the Ramah Camping Movement and the knowledge that they were contributing to a movement-wide effort.

### **Developments in Staff Training**

Staff training is a second key component of the Ramah–Davidson/JTS partnership. The Bert B. Weinstein Counselor Training Institute and the Louis and Shoshana Winer Training Institute for Rashei Edah serve as important vehicles for the training of staff for the Ramah Camping Movement. As the representative of the Davidson School, I helped National Ramah with various staff training programs—developing training materials and leading sessions. In particular, I worked closely with Mitch Cohen and Amy Skopp Cooper, National Ramah Assistant Director, to create a set curriculum for the Winer Institute, which is held annually prior to the start of the summer season. The Winer curriculum is intended to supplement the staff development programs that camp directors lead for their own rashei edah. At the end of each summer, rashei edah who have attended Winer have reported that the training was invaluable, enabling them to understand the complex nature of this senior staff position. For staff members who feel overwhelmed and unprepared before stepping into the role of rosh edah, the Winer Institute not only provides specific direction for working with staff and the directors for the good of a particular age group, but also gives participants a sense of being part of the larger Ramah Camping Movement.

In 2006, the new director of Ramah New England, Rabbi Ed Gelb, implemented regularly scheduled formal training for counselors and junior counselors. This change was facilitated by the reintroduction of educator-led shi'urim into the daytime program. Previously, shi'urim were led by the madrichim themselves, who now were available for intensive, ongoing hadrachah. To support this effort, Mitch Cohen asked me to create a set of formal sessions to be used in hadrachah at the New England camp. With the guidance and input of Meryl Sussman, the Poconos staff training coordinator, I adapted material that had been developed over time at Ramah Poconos to design twenty-one sessions for junior counselors and sixteen sessions for senior counselors on topics ranging from “Disciplining with Dignity” and “Seizing the Teachable Moment” to “The Emotional Bank Account” and “Your Future with Ramah.” This new curriculum also is used at Ramah Darom and Ramah Poconos to augment their existing training programs.

### **B'racha B'Ramah: An Important Resource for Tefillah Education**

The third portfolio, tefillah, yielded a fruitful three-year collaboration among students from all five schools at JTS and professionals from the William Davidson Graduate School. JTS graduate students who spent their summers at Ramah as participants in the Alexander M. Shapiro Fellowship Program gathered together in the fall of 2004 under the leadership of Rabbi Mitch Cohen to talk about the importance of establishing National Ramah guidelines

for tefillah education in the camps. The tefillah initiative that became known as B'racha B'Ramah developed as a result of these conversations. B'racha B'Ramah, a compilation of graded tefillah resource materials, is intended to guide, empower, and provide support to camp staff to enhance the quality and quantity of tefillah education.

The initial discussions about the nature of the curriculum to be developed and the focus for each edah were a particularly interesting part of the process. For guidance, we turned to Dr. Steve Brown, an expert in tefillah education. Steve suggested that we “just start at the beginning” by teaching the opening of the *shaharit* service to the youngest edah and proceeding from there, rather than targeting specific prayers for specific age groups based on the content or meaning of the prayer (as other tefillah educators might suggest). Steve reasoned that if campers spend the typical five to eight years at a camp, then they would know virtually the entire service by the time they “graduated.” In addition, it became important to advocate that any prayer could be taught in any summer to any age group. The edah guidelines were suggestions for organizing the materials, but they were not intended to be limiting. The goal was to empower the edah staff to teach tefillah and to avoid repeating the same material summer after summer.

In April 2005, Rabbi Dahlia Kronish submitted her Davidson School master's thesis entitled “How to Teach Birkhot Hashachar to Rising 4th and 5th Graders,” which became the very first component of the B'racha B'Ramah curriculum. B'racha B'Ramah was produced through monthly meetings with students from List College, the Graduate School, the Davidson School, the Rabbinical School, and the H. L. Miller Cantorial School. Some of the students were former Ramah campers or staff, and some had never been to Ramah but were committed to the idea of tefillah education. Each student worked on one aspect of the materials. As developed by Rabbi Kronish in her thesis, text pages are designed like a page of Talmud with the commentary around the center box including key words, central themes, sources, choreography, and fun facts about the tefillah. A sample page from the fourth- to fifth-grade unit appears on the following page.

B'racha B'Ramah consists of 300 pages of resource materials and two music CDs. The curriculum for each edah focuses on a particular section of the weekday shaharit service. Each unit includes several selections of prayers from that part of the service, ideas for *divrei tefillah*, stories for use in tefillot or before bedtime, and program ideas for pe'ulot tzerif, pe'ulot edah, and pe'ulot erev. These materials follow the model of integrating *hinnuch* in all program areas throughout the day. The areas of focus for each age group are summarized in the following table:

## THE NATIONAL RAMAH COMMISSION

In partnership with the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education

## רעיונות מרכזיים

טבו מה is a prayer that helps us take a look at our surroundings and turn an ordinary place into a מקום תפילה.

Reflects the beauty of communal worship and communal institutions.

Written in the first person – highlights personal connection. (ואני...ואני...ואני).

The collection of verses in this prayer expresses love and reverence for the synagogue that in the absence of the Temple is the place where God's Glory resides among Israel (Scherman, 1998, p. 12).

Our מקום תפילה as a place of God's presence, God's dwelling, God's compassion and Grace.

The power of turning a curse into a blessing as provided by the allusion to Balaam.

The power of words.

טבו מה functions as a way of preparing us for entering into a prayer space – physically and spiritually. In this *tefillah* we begin to articulate our relationship with God (we kneel, bow before, bless the Creator).

God is a God of Kindness חסד and Salvation ישועה.

## הידעת?

The tradition of saying טבו מה upon entering the synagogue is derived from the Talmudic interpretation of "your tents" as houses of study and "your dwelling places" as synagogues. (Brown, 1996, p. 140).

## בימוי

This prayer was appended to the fixed liturgy when the preliminary preparation to *Shacharit* (otherwise known as *birkot hashachar*) was moved to the synagogue.

Depending on custom of the place, טבו מה can be recited individually prior to putting on *tallit* and *tefillin*, or communally after the two have been donned.

מה טבו אהליך יעקב,  
משכנתך ישראל. ואני  
ברב חסדך אבוא ביתך,  
אשתחיה אל היכל  
קדשך ביראתך. ה'  
אהבתי מעון ביתך,  
ומקום משכןך כבודך.  
ואני אשתחיה ואכרעה,  
אברכה לפני ה' עשי.  
ואני תפילתי לך ה', עת  
רצון, אלהים ברב  
חסדך, עניי באמת  
ישעך.

How wonderful are your tents, Jacob, your abodes, Israel! I, by Your great love, enter Your house, and bow down reverently before Your holy shrine. Adonai, I love Your house of dwelling, the abode of Your glory. I will humbly bow down low before Adonai, my Maker (L. Hoffman, 2002, p. 50).

## מילות מפתח

מה טבו -- טוב  
How wonderful!

אהליך -- אוהל, אוהל מועד  
Tents; Tent of Meeting (*Mishkan*).

יראתך -- י.ר.א.  
To revere.

חסדך -- ח.ס.ד. (חסיד, גמילות  
חסדים)  
Kindness.

ישעך -- י.ש.ע. (ישועה, מושיע)  
To redeem.

## מקורות

במדבר כ"ד פסוק ה': מה טבו  
אהליך יעקב משכנתך ישראל:  
See Numbers chapters 22-24 for  
the full Balaam story.

תהילים ה' פסוק ח': ואני ברב  
חסדך אבוא ביתך אשתחיה  
אלהיכל קדשך ביראתך:  
Psalms 5:8 -- Here the verse  
appears as part of a lament  
asking God to let the worshipper  
pray at the Temple (L. Hoffman,  
2002, p. 52).

תהילים כ"ו פסוק ח': ה' אהבתי  
מעון ביתך ומקום משכןך כבודך:  
Psalms 26:8 -- Here the verse  
appears as part of a lament  
requesting God's help based on  
the worshipper's past piety, namely  
how much he loved going to  
God's Temple (L. Hoffman, 2002,  
p. 52).

תהילים צ"ה פסוק ו': באו נשתחיה  
ונברכה נברכה לפני ה' עשנו:  
Psalms 95:6 -- Notice how the  
Biblical verse is written in the  
plural voice, whereas in the  
*tefillah*, it is changed to the  
singular.

תהילים ס"ט פסוק י"ד: ואני  
תפילתי לך ה' עת רצון אלהים  
ברב חסדך עניי באמת ישעך:

### Areas of Focus of B'racha B'Ramah By Age Group

AGE GROUP	AREA OF FOCUS
Rising 4th and 5th graders	Birchot Hashaḥar
Rising 6th graders	Pesukei Dezimra
Rising 7th graders	Shema Uvirchoteha
Rising 8th graders	Amidah
Rising 9th graders	Torah Service
Rising 10th graders	Minḥah and Ma'ariv
Rising 11th graders	Concepts of Israel in Tefillah

The first of the two CDs accompanying the curriculum, “The Nusah of the Weekday Shaḥarit Service” was produced at JTS by recently graduated cantors studying in the Davidson School for their master’s degrees, along with several students in the Miller Cantorial School. It contains the nusah used at the various Ramah camps. This CD can be used to teach those who want to hone their davening skills or their ability to lead tefillot. The second CD is “The Music of the Weekday Shaḥarit Service” and contains original music for tefillot found in shaḥarit by noted musicians Debbie Friedman, Rick Recht, and Craig Taubman.

The materials were piloted in the camps in 2005 and were fully in place by the summer of 2007. The ongoing challenge will be for each rosh edah, and ultimately for each director, to make sure that the resources are being utilized on a consistent basis. After that happens, we can plan assessments and updates and then, perhaps, move toward similar materials for Shabbat. Currently, the materials are utilized as intended—by the staff as resources to help in the educational venture of tefillah at camp. Each Ramah camp is at a different place in terms of how its staff teaches tefillah and who delivers the educational messages and resources regarding prayer. Hopefully, the B'racha B'Ramah resources will become the standard for this instruction.

### Conclusion

The partnership between the Davidson School and the Ramah camps and programs is a strong example of true collaboration with committed professionals working together toward the goal of developing inspired campers and staff, the future leaders of the Conservative Movement—rabbis, cantors, educators, and educated lay people, who then will help raise a new generation of leaders. Institutional collaboration can be an example of how the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Each group brings their unique perspective to the table that can serve as a check and balance system. In this case, you have the rich academic



resources of the Davidson School working alongside the creative practitioners of the Ramah camps.

Overall, the collaboration enriched both of the partners and hopefully, will lead to the development of more educational materials in the future. The Davidson School is committed to supporting the work of Ramah by dedicating personnel, research time, and student-faculty collaboration. In return, the school will continue to benefit from Ramah's best and brightest who choose careers in Jewish education.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>B. Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>ViSSion = a combination of "mission" (a focused and specific set of outcomes) and "vision" (global, all-encompassing goals). This term was coined by Dr. Jeff Kress and Cheryl Magen in their work with the Informal and Communal Education program at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education.