

ALBERT THALER AND AMY SKOPP COOPER

Ramah Day Camp in Nyack: Creating a Unique Community of Staff

1. RABBI ALBERT THALER

IN THE WINTER OF 1970, I was invited by Rabbi David Mogilner, z"l, to assume responsibility for Ramah Day Camp in Nyack. At the time, I was completely unaware that there was a Ramah day camp program in existence. I did know that Nyack had been the site of the American Seminar, which was a program for youngsters who, for various reasons, were either unable or chose not to participate in Ramah's Israel Seminar.

After the Six-Day War in 1967, the number of participants in Ramah's Israel Seminar increased dramatically. During the post-war period of euphoria, student travel to Israel became more popular, while a summer at Nyack became less and less attractive. The American Seminar, a small program, became progressively smaller. Opening a day camp was proposed to take advantage of both the Seminar staff of young educators and the underused camp site. Members of the education staff were recruited to help with the fledgling day camp, which at the time drew children from the local community.

When I began to serve as the director in 1971, a small day camp program had already been in operation for a few years. However, by this time, the American Seminar no longer existed, and the facility had become available for an expanded day camp program. Although the camp was in poor physical condition, it was conceivable that we could house a staff large enough to support an increased camper population. Ramah in the Berkshires had its beginnings as a Ramah overnight camp in Nyack. If the Nyack site could house an overnight Ramah camp for several summers, as in fact it had, the facility could certainly house the required number of counselors, specialists, and educators

RABBI ALBERT THALER served as the director of Ramah Day Camp in Nyack for twenty-seven years. He has been the spiritual leader of Temple Gates of Prayer in Flushing, New York since 1980, after having served for twenty-six years at the Queensboro Jewish Center. Upon his retirement from Ramah Nyack in 1997, he received the Max Arzt Distinguished Rabbinic Service Award from The Jewish Theological Seminary.

to serve a large number of day campers. Along with Rabbi Stanley Bramnick, whom I had asked to serve as camp administrator, I set into motion a slow, but ongoing, series of renovations using funds that the camp itself generated. We received no funds from any source other than camper tuition fees. During my years as director, we put approximately one and a half million dollars into the facility. This program of renovating, building, and adding activity areas began in the early seventies and continues to this day under the leadership of Amy Skopp Cooper as director and Mark Friedman as business manager.

I invited a few of the American Seminar teachers to continue to work at the day camp. There were approximately eighty children registered for the day camp program in the summer prior to my arrival. The model of a small staff in residence had already been established because holdovers from the American Seminar were spending summers at camp. We decided to seize the opportunity. Our plan was to grow the day camp program and recruit staff by offering them the best of both worlds. They could live at camp, working with children during the day, and then participate in a program of education and recreation after camp hours, creating and becoming part of a vibrant community. It was abundantly clear that to create an exciting summer day camp program for children, we had to cast a net wide enough to attract quality staff people with the knowledge, talent, and skills necessary to implement a Ramah program. We could not rely solely on the local community to provide that staff. Further, we wanted to include a *mishlahat* (staff from Israel) to bring the reality of Israel and its message into our camp community. All of this, of course, meant providing decent housing with a functioning kitchen and dining room staff.

The opportunity for young adults that we offered was unique, and though difficult, our search for staff was successful. Simultaneously with this search, we began to recruit campers in geographic areas beyond Rockland County. We reached out to communities in New Jersey, Queens, Westchester, and Manhattan. Within a few years the number of children grew to well over 600 campers with a staff of more than 200. Essentially we were running two camps—one for children and one for the staff members. We were on to a most exciting idea. Every summer we were creating an active Jewish community whose participants worked, played, studied, taught, inspired, and in turn were themselves inspired. I looked upon the effort as a project of *livnot ulhibbanot* (to build [others] and to be built [ourselves]). During my twenty-seven years as director I felt that our work with the staff was as important, if not more important than our work with the children, for they too were “our children.” A significant byproduct is the approximately forty marriages that resulted from people meeting during summers at Nyack. Many children of those marriages are today’s Ramah campers.

There were other factors at work. The attraction of Shabbat at camp with only staff members present was an enormous plus. Shabbat could be enjoyed in its essence and in its fullness. There were beautiful Ramah *tefillot*; spirited *zemiroth* (Sabbath songs) at meals; softball and volleyball games in the afternoon; the availability of a swimming pool; and time for reading, personal study, formal classes, and informal discussions. Shabbat would draw to a close with *se'udah shelishit* (the third Sabbath meal) and a *havdalah* service with its special mystique. In the eyes of many outside of our camp community, the Ramah overnight camps were “the real thing.” For us, Nyack was just as real and every bit a Ramah experience. It was exciting, rewarding, fun, and for many of us, it was home. We developed a loyal, creative, caring, and giving staff.

While all this was happening, the day camp program was greatly enhanced by having the staff available to meet, plan, and work after camp hours so as to prepare for upcoming events. *Yom yisra'el*, Maccabiah, *zimriyyah*, *rikkudiyah*, Senior Citizen's Day, *onsei shabbat*, the Tish'ah Be'av service, and other special programs required much planning and work. The staff was invested, and their enthusiasm was infectious. Their zeal contributed to the anticipation and excitement with which our children arrived each morning.

Although there are now two other Ramah day camps, the Nyack program with its resident staff remains unique. Where possible, Nyack's model is eminently worthy of replication. Its continuing success speaks for itself.

2. AMY SKOPP COOPER

RABBI THALER RETIRED AS DIRECTOR in 1997. His visionary leadership, charismatic personality, and creative brilliance have left an enduring mark on Ramah Nyack. Admittedly, transitioning into the role of the director who followed him was challenging. Rabbi Thaler served as my teacher and behind-the-scenes mentor during my first years as director. Many talented and loyal senior staff members remained in their positions and offered me invaluable guidance and support.

During the past twelve years, we have invested considerable time, energy, and resources into the physical plant and camp program. We built the Ramot Ramah third tier of camp, which now includes multiple sport fields, tennis courts, a high ropes course, gymnastics wing, and by the 2010 season, a brand new staff facility that will sleep seventy staff members and house fall and

AMY SKOPP COOPER is the national assistant director of the National Ramah Commission and the director of Ramah Day Camp in Nyack. She has also served as the education director of Congregation Bnai Israel in Millburn, New Jersey, and as the assistant director of the high school Prozdor program at the Hebrew College in Boston.

spring family retreats. The camp continues to attract a talented and committed pool of young adults to serve on staff. Over the past few years, our camper population has grown, and as a result, we now hire close to 350 staff members annually; approximately 200 reside in camp.

Creating a vibrant, dynamic, egalitarian, and serious Jewish community for our residential staff remains a top priority for Ramah Nyack. We hire young adults who understand that their day does not end at 4 p.m. Instead, the expectation is that staff will study, participate in numerous after-camp programs, plan activities for campers and peers, participate in *hadrachab* (leadership development) sessions, and become active partners in planning their summer experience. On any evening of the week, from 4 p.m. until 1 a.m., staff members are engaged in a plethora of programs. These include weekly guest lectures by educators from The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), an ulpan, on-going dialogue with *shelihim* (Israeli staff members), social action, guided *havruta* (study-with-a-partner) learning, a staff choir, an Israeli dance troupe, a staff band, and *tzedakah* events. As I walk through camp late each evening, I note with great satisfaction that virtually every porch and indoor space is being used for programs, that the walkway is a hub of activity, and that young adults are sitting on steps playing guitars and singing Israeli songs.

Nyack also has positioned itself as a resource and learning center for the greater Jewish community. A variety of Jewish professional education conferences are hosted at camp each summer, affording educators the opportunity to observe camper and staff programs and meet with our senior staff. The community is invited to weekly staff lectures and evening programs, to daven with staff on weekday mornings, and to join us on Tish'ah Be'av. In turn, Nyack staff members volunteer within the greater Rockland community. Staff members visit the local Jewish senior home every Friday afternoon to lead pre-*kabbalat shabbat* services and train as mitzvah clowns in connection with *bikkur holim* (visiting the sick) at local hospitals.

Staff members are also encouraged to spend time during the summer preparing for religious school teaching positions and youth work. Knowing that many of our staff members will be offered teaching and youth-group advisor positions, we offer an ongoing group training program to our university-age staff members, through which staff are introduced to theories of education, lesson-plan development, and effective teaching strategies. They meet with mentors on a regular basis. Each summer we identify staff members whom we encourage to consider professional careers in the rabbinate, Jewish education, and Jewish communal service. During the summer, professors and deans from JTS come to camp to teach and meet individually with these prospective students.

In particular, I want to mention the evolving role of the *mishlaḥat* at Nyack. Our priority has become to hire young *sheliḥim* who are committed to fully integrating into the staff community. Consequently, in recent years, we have moved away from hiring Israeli families and now select singles, newly out of the army. The members of the *mishlaḥat* no longer live together and eat together as a distinct group. They are expected to become full participants in the staff community, working closely with their North American peers, socializing with them, studying and developing programs together. We have noted that our North American staff has become increasingly connected with our *sheliḥim* and as a result, with Eretz Yisra'el. In turn, we have observed that our *sheliḥim* have connected much more with the egalitarian religious life at camp, which has had a significant impact on them.

Shabbat continues to be a hallmark of the Nyack staff experience. Over 200 young adults daven together, eat together in a leisurely manner, study with a Shabbat guest lecturer, sing and dance, participate in a late Friday evening *tish* and enjoy one another's company. Shabbat programs are planned by staff members; young adults are encouraged to offer *divrei torah*, lead *shirah*, learn how to read Torah, and become *shelibe'i tzibbur* (prayer leaders). Over the years, we have celebrated incredible Shabbat moments, including celebrations of bar and bat mitzvah and engagement announcements! The Shabbat guest community continues to swell with Ramah *vatikim* (camp "veterans") and prospective staff members.

Approximately 70 percent of staff members return to camp for three consecutive summers. Unfortunately, this limits the number of new staff we can hire each summer. However, for the young adults who spend most of their college summers with us, we know that Nyack is a formative experience in their Jewish lives. They have participated in a unique, peer-run, engaging, and serious Jewish community. They are empowered and seek Nyack-like communities year round.

As we face the future, we are proud to look back on four decades of extraordinary success at Ramah Nyack, educating and inspiring children and their families. The most outstanding success is Nyack's model of staff education, which continues to be unique in the world of Jewish informal education. Ramah Nyack provides nurturing Jewish experiences for hundreds of staff members ages sixteen and up who themselves provide excellence in day camp programming. On a personal level, maintaining and building upon the wonderful model developed during Rabbi Thaler's tenure has provided great satisfaction. We look forward to the next decade of success.