

# Camp Ramah: The Early Years, 1947-1952

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## Introduction

A new chapter in the history of the Conservative movement began in 1947 with the founding of Camp Ramah. Located in Conover, Wisconsin, Ramah was operated by the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues, the Midwest Branch of the United Synagogue, in cooperation with the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. While Ramah was the first camping venture of the Conservative movement, it was a pioneer neither as an educational camp nor as a Hebrew-speaking camp; successful camps of both types were already in existence.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Ramah's fame soon spread. From one hundred campers in Wisconsin in 1947, Ramah grew until, by 1987, it included a network of seven camps in which 3,200 youngsters were enrolled, in addition to programs in Israel in which an additional 450 were registered; staff numbered 1,400.<sup>2</sup>

Why was Ramah founded in 1947? Why did the Conservative movement enter the camping business? What forces in the American and Jewish environments came together to shape its inception? How was the camp established? What were its goals and ideology? What was the camp like in its early years? What is the importance of Camp Ramah in the history of Conservative Judaism, Jewish camping, and American Jewry? This essay seeks to explore these questions and offers some preliminary answers.

Research into the history of Camp Ramah, while fascinating, was exceedingly difficult. Records were not systematically preserved. While certain files were found which illuminated specific areas of research, other materials were difficult to locate. This is especially true of files stored in the attic of The Jewish Theological Seminary which were kept under

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numerous headings in various places. I suspect that materials on Ramah were not carefully preserved at the Seminary until the camps became a national concern. Since the early camps were local ventures, records were kept in the local offices. Yet, here, too, there were problems, particularly with regard to Camp Ramah in Maine, which was open for only two seasons (1948-49), then closed permanently; many of its records have disappeared. Some were transferred to the Camp Ramah in the Poconos office when that camp opened in 1950. That office moved from Philadelphia to New York and then back to Philadelphia, and many of the Maine records were probably lost or discarded at that time. Another valuable source of written information is the personal collections of yearbooks, educational outlines, and camp rosters saved by staff and campers.

Needless to say, then, the selective nature of the preserved materials required much oral research. The number of people involved in Ramah even during its early years is so large that I was forced to limit my interviewing to specific figures—directors, division heads, local rabbis, lay people, and Seminary representatives—as opposed to choosing general staff and campers.

In conducting research, an attempt was made to avoid the major pitfall of such a method, that of selective or inaccurate recall. Stated camp policies, stories, and descriptions of events were verified whenever possible by posing each question to at least two people. In the case of a conflict, I chose to be the judge of which person's account was more accurate. For example, a Seminary representative may have an excellent perspective on the ideology of a proposed camp, but a distorted view of the actual events of a camp season. The personal testimony of those who were present in the camps often contradicts the "official" view of camp events. Where possible, oral interviews were taped to maximize the accuracy of quotations and to minimize misinterpretation. While certain gaps of information still remain, a wealth of material was uncovered, allowing a surprisingly vivid impression of the period to emerge.

## Conservative Judaism in the Aftermath of World War II

In order to understand the founding of Camp Ramah in 1947, attention must first be focused on the state of American Jewry at the close of World War II. Knowledge of the enormous tragedy of the Holocaust has just begun to penetrate the minds of American Jews. As Dr. Gerson D. Cohen, now Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, expressed it, "I suppose unconsciously it began to seep into us that we are the last Jewish community of any sizable proportion."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Zionist idea moved closer to fruition. American Jews accepted the responsibility for this burden as well, and many worked for its realization through their own uniquely American form of Zionism.

Even as external forces heightened the sense of responsibility of American Jews, internal ones served to intensify a mood of expansion.

Jewish servicemen, returning home to make a life for themselves in America, became part of the move to suburbia where they would climb still higher on the ladder of social and economic mobility. New synagogues were built to accommodate this upsurge of Jewish population. This growth caused a tremendous shortage of qualified Jewish leadership at the time when it was most needed. The national demand for leadership could not be met by the organized bodies of Conservative Judaism.<sup>4</sup> In response to this need, the component bodies of the movement, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Assembly, and the United Synagogue, while remaining fully autonomous, decided to pool forces and resources.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the United Synagogue began to expand its regions, departments, and personnel to meet these needs.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the cry for leadership, the Jewish Theological Seminary became painfully aware of its failure to recruit and train new leaders. In 1946, Dr. Moshe Davis, then Associate Dean of the Teachers Institute, articulated the problem most clearly:

We do not train our own people. We rely virtually exclusively on the students that are prepared—and I would say ill prepared—in other institutions. The orthodox group leads this Seminary and every other Seminary. Unless we start preparing our own leadership, the time may come when we will not have that leadership.<sup>7</sup>

The Teachers Institute mirrored this problem most acutely; its 1946 graduating class consisted of two students.<sup>8</sup> The Register of 1944-45 reports that "during the past few years, because of war conditions, the Freshman class of the Teachers Institute has been discontinued."<sup>9</sup> Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founding Dean of the Teachers Institute, relinquished his post in 1947 in what Davis described as "despair." In addition, Davis stated that the Teachers Institute was in serious danger of being closed.<sup>10</sup> Their despair was related to the larger problem of the failure of Conservative Jewish education. Davis observed:

We alone of the three religious groupings have not established a system of Jewish schooling which will both meet our needs and satisfy our point of view.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, at the same time as the Seminary was beset by these problems, circumstances were combining to allow for their solution. First, the growth of the Conservative movement increased the fundraising potential of the Seminary. In 1944 Chancellor Louis Finkelstein said: "The growth of the Seminary's support and the number of its contributors enables us for the first time to engage in long-range planning."<sup>12</sup>

This practical consideration was bolstered by Kaplan's vision of an organic Jewish community. His plans for the reconstruction of American Jewish life influenced a generation of Seminary students. His proposals were neatly attuned to the realities of the time. A prime example is the

synagogue-center which was intended to restore the sense of community that had been lost in the move to suburbia. Equally influential was his plan for a University of Judaism to help solve the leadership problem. He once outlined the principles upon which the educational patterns of such a school would have to be based: 1. the primacy of scholarship; 2. the necessity for Judaism to be Hebraic; 3. the belief that Jewish life must have plenitude, e.g., through a maximum of observance; 4. gracious acceptance of the American environment.<sup>13</sup> These principles, incorporated into the thinking of Conservative rabbis and educators, found expression in the various programs initiated during the era of growth, one of which was Camp Ramah.

Leadership Training Fellowship, a program launched during this period, illustrates the coming together of the varied concerns mentioned above. Again it was Kaplan, in an address to the 1944 Rabbinical Assembly Convention entitled "The Training of Teaching and Leadership Personnel," who inspired the program.

If we confine ourselves to the raising of money we have failed entirely in our objective. Unless we go out with the same determination for the winning of souls, the winning of personnel for our cause, all our efforts are in vain . . . We ought to engage in a campaign for two hundred young people by the end of two years.<sup>14</sup>

Leadership Training Fellowship (LTF) Would be a national fellowship of high-school-age students committed to Jewish study. It was hoped that they would form an elite which would be inspired to study later at the Seminary, especially in the Teachers Institute. From this cultivated group of young people would emerge the next generation of leaders.

LTF was created also in reaction to the lack of Jewish education on the high school level. Davis noted:

Jewish high school education is virtually non-existent in our congregational life . . . It is in the high school age that we should begin to seek our future lay and professional leadership. These teenagers will be our immediate successors. Moreover, if we are serious about organizing a Halutzit for American Judaism, this is the age group with which to start. . . . The Leadership Training Fellowship is a small step in the right direction.<sup>15</sup>

This was no isolated attempt on the part of Jewish educators, but a link in a larger plan to rebuild Jewish education from nursery school up. Both Kaplan and Davis were deeply committed to this goal. Davis presented his ideas in "The Ladder of Jewish Education," a paper delivered at the Second Annual Rabbinical Assembly Conference on Jewish Education held in December 1947.<sup>16</sup> Atid (a nursery school project), LTF, and Camp Ramah were three elements of this plan.

In 1945, a plan for the fellowship was presented to and approved by the Rabbinical Assembly.

RESOLVED, that the Rabbinical Assembly adopt the plan for a Leadership Training Fellowship which will have as its primary objective to direct the

study and thinking of our best young people, to the end that they may be prepared for professional and lay leadership.<sup>17</sup>

Within two years, membership in LTF had grown to 270 young people from fifty congregations.<sup>18</sup>

This LTF project is crucial not only because it illustrates the priorities of the Seminary at the time but also because Camp Ramah benefited from these same priorities and emerged concurrently with the Leadership Training Fellowship. As Dr. Simon Greenberg, Vice-Chancellor of the Seminary, stated,

It is no coincidence that the Leaders [sic] Training Fellowship and the Ramah movement both came into being at the same time. They were both conceived as possible answers to this pressing question [of how the Conservative movement could find and train future leaders].<sup>19</sup>

The idea of a summer camp was mentioned as early as 1944, in response to Kaplan's plea before the convention. Rabbi S. Joshua Kohn commented:

I think in order to implement a proposition like the one we have, it might be a very good idea to have a permanent proposition where all of our young people could be sent for a summer's education, and then we can choose the most available and the best candidates for training, specific training. It might also be combined with the idea of a regular summer camp for the Rabbinical Assembly.<sup>20</sup>

As LTF developed, the idea of providing its members with an intense educational experience during the summer became more and more appealing. In the summer of 1946, a small group of LTFers studied at the Teachers Institute, but it soon became clear that a camp location was needed.<sup>21</sup>

Camp Ramah, then, was intended to serve as a laboratory for leadership training of high school youth. Simultaneously, some rabbis and educators, aware of the potential of camping for Jewish education, were interested in a camp for children of all ages to improve Jewish education. In 1947, Greenberg observed:

For decades now, we have been conscious of the fact that the summer months hold many blessings for Jewish education, if properly utilized. . . . What can we as a group point to as our achievement in the realm of Jewish education through camping? Unfortunately, nothing. Is it not high time that we have some summer camps for the members of our Young People's groups and for our school children?<sup>22</sup>

Moshe Davis saw the study camp as another rung in the ladder of Jewish education: "Concurrent with the afternoon week-day school and high school, a chain of study camps, local and country[-wide], should be organized."<sup>23</sup> Davis hoped to capture more time for Jewish education by utilizing the summer.<sup>24</sup> By 1946, it was clear that a national youth camp

was "a project which is no longer a luxury" for the Conservative movement, leadership training, and Jewish education in general.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the original conception of Camp Ramah grew out of the varying needs of the different branches of Conservative Judaism. It was not suggested by individuals committed to camping *per se* but by those who saw camping as one vehicle to further the goals of the Conservative movement as a whole.

### Jewish Educational Camping

The idea for Camp Ramah grew out of a specific blend of ideals and needs within the Conservative movement and the Jewish Theological Seminary in particular, but it clearly drew heavily on earlier models of Jewish educational camping in the United States. The first Jewish educational camp was begun by the brilliant Jewish educator, Dr. Samson Benderly, Director of the New York Board of Jewish Education. Benderly experimented in the summer of 1913, teaching children of families who vacationed in Arvenne, Long Island. The experiment succeeded, and his first real camp, Achvah, was established as the summer climax of a year-long training program.<sup>26</sup> Classes were its essence, and the language of the camp was Hebrew. Achvah began operation in 1926 and remained Hebrew-speaking until 1931. Benderly's experiment is crucial to an understanding of the history of Ramah. First, Benderly and Kaplan shared a close association and similar concerns about Jewish education.<sup>27</sup> Benderly's experiment undoubtedly influenced Kaplan's concept of a summer camp. Second, some people who were involved with Ramah in its early years were veterans of Benderly's experiment. Levi Soshuk is one example. Director of Ramah in the Poconos beginning in 1952, he served for many years as director of Ramah in the Poconos and later Ramah in Canada. Soshuk was involved in Achvah from 1926 to 1934 and felt that

I was influenced very much in my approach to Camp Ramah by my experience in Camp Achvah which had a very profound effect Jewishly and Hebraically on many of my friends and contemporaries.<sup>28</sup>

Cejwin was the first Jewish camp set up by an individual institution. Established in 1919 by the Central Jewish Institute, Cejwin successfully combined recreation and physical exercise with communal Jewish living. Informal Jewish education was stressed at Cejwin: by participating in Jewish life, campers would increase their Jewish commitment.<sup>29</sup> Formal study was not part of Cejwin's program; neither was the camp Hebrew-speaking. As Mrs. Sylvia Ettenberg noted: "Some of us who were in [Cejwin] saw the enormous possibilities of building this kind of society where we really could intensify Jewish life."<sup>30</sup> While other Jewish camps existed at the time, these two early ventures were especially influential in alerting Jewish educators to the potential of using the summer months for intensive Jewish education through study, Hebrew, and Jewish living.<sup>31</sup>

The Noar Haivri Organization also left its mark on the development of Camp Ramah, though indirectly. Begun in the 1930s, it grew from the following convictions:

1. That the Hebrew movement must serve as the foundation and guide for an organized Jewish community in America.
2. That the Hebrew language is not only a means for imparting knowledge but is the very soul of Jewish culture.
3. That the instruction of our children in Hebrew cultural values, past and present, through the medium of Hebrew language, is a prime essential in building a generation of Jews capable of preserving and enriching the cultural treasures of the Jewish people.
4. That the establishing of Hebrew cultural institutions in America in no way negates the Zionist idea; on the contrary, such cultural organizations are fundamental to its fulfillment.<sup>32</sup>

The group met regularly and became involved in a number of projects; a dance group; an orchestra; and a Hebrew newspaper, *Niv*.<sup>33</sup> One such project was a Hebrew camp where all of the above values might find expression. The spearhead of the project was Shlomo Shulsinger; the camp he founded was Massad. Moshe Davis and Sylvia C. Ettenberg, who helped him establish Massad, were later among those primarily responsible for the founding of Camp Ramah. Together, they determined the goals of Massad, its educational philosophy, and the actual program that would best reflect those goals. Opened in 1941 as a day camp in Far Rockaway, New York, Massad quickly grew into a successful venture, until, in 1945, it purchased its first summer camp in Tannersville, Pennsylvania.<sup>34</sup>

According to Shlomo Shulsinger, the main aim of Massad was

to create a Hebrew environment and to provide the children with those elements which are lacking in the Hebrew school. This aim is achieved through the medium of diversified cultural activities and through the normal daily life at camp without recourse to formal classroom studies.<sup>35</sup>

The educational program at Massad was guided by the following principles:

1. That the Zionist idea . . . should be the backbone of all cultural work.
2. That religious traditions should be observed in a positive spirit . . .
3. that the Hebrew language . . . should be used throughout the camp . . .
4. That American cultural values be reflected in camp life.
5. That the Halutz spirit be emphasized and that a nucleus for Aliyah be prepared at camp.
6. That the need for an organized Jewish community life in America, bolstered by Hebrew educational institutions, be emphasized in the program.
7. That the fervent hope of instituting justice and righteousness in society find expression in the daily life of the camp.<sup>36</sup>

A great majority of those involved in Ramah in the early years—founders, staff members, and parents—developed their first conception of and experience with Jewish camping at Massad. It was the only Hebrew-speaking summer camp at the time; many committed Conservative Jews worked at or sent their children to Massad.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Massad had a profound effect on the development of Ramah on all its levels.

The Sollel experiment of 1947 deserves special mention. An outgrowth of Massad sponsored by the Histadruth Ivrit, Sollel was a work-study, Hebrew-speaking camp which brought together seventeen-year-olds of different Zionist ideologies. Some early Ramah staff members deeply inspired by the Sollel experience were Rabbi Alexander Shapiro and the late Rabbi David Mogilner. Run by Gerson D. Cohen and Naomi Weiner (Later Dr. Naomi W. Cohen), both of whom also took part in Ramah in later years, Sollel influenced Cohen's concept of camping as well. "I became firmly convinced by the Massad and Sollel experiences of the educational value of living together, working together, and studying together."<sup>38</sup>

In many ways an outgrowth of Massad, Ramah was geared to an American Conservative constituency rather than a *yeshivah* group with a good grounding in Hebrew. Shlomo Shulsinger himself acknowledged the need for a camp that would serve supplementary school children, though he himself did not wish to accept campers from that milieu.

If children with poor Hebrew background make such excellent progress at Massad, why do we require adequate Hebrew training of 90% of the children? Because the primary aim of Massad is to create a richly Hebraic atmosphere. . . . If we do not insist on this principle, the entire project *would lose its Hebrew character and become devoid of Hebrew content*. Nevertheless, there is no denying the great need of establishing school-camps which would cater to children with weak Hebrew backgrounds.<sup>39</sup>

Sylvia C. Ettenberg championed the cause of this other type of camp.

We felt that there were many students who did not have a chance at day school education. . . . Though many were good students in their supplementary schools, we didn't feel that these schools would ever bring them to the point where they could feel truly at home in a Jewish environment. There just wasn't enough time in the curricula of the supplementary schools, and we believed that if we could find these people, bring them to camp, and increase their knowledge and experience, they would surely become an asset to the Jewish community.<sup>40</sup>

Spurred on by the success of Massad, Conservative Jewish leaders were inspired to found a camp to meet the needs of their movement, needs which Massad was never meant to satisfy. They hoped to adapt the Massad program to fit a more American, Hebrew-school population, to meet the pressing needs of Jewish education and leadership and insure the future of Conservative Judaism, as described above. In many ways, Ramah was an offshoot of Massad, yet it also represented a parting of the ways. As Massad began to take on more and more the character of its director, disagreements multiplied. Sources of conflict centered around the following issues: 1. American v. Jewish nationalistic orientation: Massad was a very Zionist-oriented camp.<sup>41</sup> Some people wanted an American camp with Americanized campers and counselors. 2. Hebrew: Hebrew as an end in itself was the preoccupation at Massad. Sylvia Ettenberg recalls: "A

number of us felt that although Hebrew should be the language, Hebrew was only an instrument. It couldn't be *the* goal."<sup>42</sup> 3. Religion: Some people desired a camp where Conservative religious ideology would prevail. They were put off by what they saw as the hypocrisy of Massad, Orthodox in theory yet with many staff members who were not religiously committed.<sup>43</sup> 4. Discipline: There was disapproval of the rigid discipline and thoroughgoing authoritarianism of Massad.<sup>44</sup> Many people felt that the total program should be an integrated one in which religion and education would stem from the same ideology.<sup>45</sup> Many of these people later constructively channeled their discontent with Massad by founding and working in Ramah.

Ramah's genesis, then, was heavily influenced by Massad, both positively and negatively. The negative elements may have loomed large at the time, thus providing one impetus to embark on a new venture. Ultimately, however, the positive aspects of Massad had an equal if not more important effect. They played a crucial role in shaping the early educational philosophy and program of the camp.

In sum, many forces within American Jewry at large, the Conservative movement in particular, as well as the Jewish camping scene combined in the founding of a Conservative Hebrew-speaking educational summer camp. Yet, influences alone did not a camp create. Months of work on many fronts were needed to transform the Ramah ideology into reality.

### The Founding of Camp Ramah

While the idea of a Conservative summer camp was crystallizing on the East Coast, similar efforts were launched in the Midwest. Rabbi Ralph Simon was the pivotal figure who introduced the idea of such a camp to the Chicago area and then closely supervised its development. His original impetus for forming a camp was personal:

Like so many ideas . . . we respond to the needs of our own family. My children were the first campers in Massad, and when we moved to Chicago [in 1943], the question was what to do with them in the summers. . . . There was no camp that had an Hebraic character in the Chicago area, so for several years my children would travel to Massad.<sup>46</sup>

First, Rabbi Simon turned to the Chicago Board of Jewish Education for support. Yet, he soon realized that any camp run by the Board would be dominated by the Orthodox in order to satisfy the greatest common denominator. Rabbi Simon, negatively influenced by what he saw in Massad, insisted on a Conservative emphasis for the camp he envisioned. He consequently turned to the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues, one of the strongest branches of the United Synagogue at the time, and presented the idea to them.<sup>47</sup> Most members, particularly the Council chairman, Reuben Kaufman, were receptive to the idea, for they were committed to meeting the needs of Chicago's Jewish youth.<sup>48</sup> At a

meeting in August 1946, the same year as the Rabbinical Assembly passed its resolution to initiate efforts to create a national youth camp,<sup>49</sup>

Mr. Kaufman announced that the Council officers were in agreement on the need for an intensification of the program of youth activities in the Conservative Movement, with particular attention to the establishment of a summer camp in 1947. . . . This camp will be for children of parents affiliated with a Conservative Congregation and will be sponsored by the Council only; that is not in connection with the Board of Jewish Education.<sup>50</sup>

The Council heartily supported this venture. Yet, who would supervise the project? Rabbi Simon was friendly with Moshe Davis and knew of Davis' feelings about Jewish education and the state of the Conservative movement. Simon proposed to the Teachers Institute an arrangement whereby the Chicago group would operate the camp while the Teachers Institute would hire and supervise the educational staff.

As has been shown above, the Seminary, for reasons of its own, was simultaneously investigating the possibility of running a summer camp. The Teachers Institute in particular had an interest in its success. Yet, despite Seminary efforts to undertake this type of venture, opposition began to surface when the concrete opportunity arose. Certain people at the Seminary expressed reservations about Simon's proposal.<sup>51</sup> Chancellor Finkelstein's reservations were primarily financial, for he feared that Ramah would involve the Seminary in a great deal of expense. Also, a summer camp would be a grave responsibility. For example, what if there were an accident in camp? Would the Seminary be sued?<sup>52</sup> However, these reservations were eventually overcome. Perhaps the poor condition of the Teachers Institute at the time encouraged even risky experimentation in order to save it. Also, since the Teachers Institute was the branch of the Seminary devoted to training Jewish educators, it was the department that was best able to staff and supervise the camp in addition to benefiting most directly from its success.<sup>53</sup> It was decided that the Teachers Institute would respond to Simon's proposal by offering to undertake the educational supervision of this camp. As Dean of the Teachers Institute, Moshe Davis became the guiding genius of Ramah.

In January 1947, Sylvia Ettenberg, Administrative Secretary of the Teachers Institute, was sent to Chicago by Davis to describe to the Council how such a camp would be run. She was sent by virtue of her position, but also because of her camping experience: at Cejwin, as one of the founders of Massad, and as Massad's head counselor in 1945.

The details of the camp's program were as yet undetermined, but Sylvia Ettenberg made clear the general principles that would guide the camp's program. Her description of the camp as a Jewish living experience with Hebrew and formal study as major elements in the program met with some opposition. Council members were particularly skeptical of the possibility of recruiting campers for a study camp. "Some of them suggested to me that when I meet with those potential campers, I shouldn't mention it [the

study aspect].”<sup>54</sup> Ettenberg strenuously disagreed with this approach. Personally interviewing many potential campers, she found few who refused to come because of the study program. Vindicated, Ettenberg returned to New York and began to hire staff for the camp. Hiring quality staff, she felt, was the most important guarantee of a successful summer.<sup>55</sup> Thus began Sylvia Ettenberg’s long association with Ramah. Now the Seminary’s Dean of Educational Development, she is the one person whose guidance has nurtured Ramah throughout all the years of its existence.

Both the Teachers Institute and the Camp Ramah Committee of the Chicago Council worked feverishly for the opening of camp. [In October 1947, the Committee was abolished in favor of a separate Camp Ramah Commission.<sup>56</sup>] One important point to note here is the crucial role played by laypeople. Reuben Kaufman is an outstanding example of such a person; he was instrumental in the physical and financial aspects of the founding of Ramah. Louis Winer, later chairman of the Commission, recalls:

This camping movement was an important laymen’s movement. People got involved in this camp and worked for and helped develop it. The funds for this camp were practically all raised locally.<sup>57</sup>

This was a fine example of the coming together of different elements of the Conservative movement for a common goal. According to Winer,

The Ramah committee [of Chicago] . . . developed a close relationship with the educators in all matters relating to camp, and a deep interest in the camp’s welfare was always upon the minds of those who were instrumental in its operation.<sup>58</sup>

Needless to say, all was not idyllic. Policy disagreements arose at all times; some of these disagreements will be discussed presently.

It was impossible to pinpoint how the name “Ramah” was chosen. The Chicago Council minutes report that “‘Kinneret’ could not be used because it was a duplication of other camps. The name ‘Camp Ramah’ was decided upon.”<sup>59</sup> It seems that the name was chosen by Sylvia Ettenberg based on a number of suggestions provided by the late Hebrew poet Hillel Bavli, then Professor of Hebrew in the Teachers Institute of the Seminary.<sup>60</sup>

The purpose of the camp was clear. Hoping to satisfy the needs of the Chicago community, the Seminary, and the movement as a whole, Ramah “was to train an indigenous Conservative leadership—both lay and rabbinical—and thereby insure the perpetuation of the movement.”<sup>61</sup> This is borne out by the report of the late Henry Goldberg, the first director of Camp Ramah, after the 1947 season.

Aware of the fact that the Conservative Movement should and must draw its future leaders from its own ranks, Camp Ramah should serve as a laboratory

for preparing a select group of boys and girls for leadership in the American-Jewish community.<sup>62</sup>

Ramah, therefore, was to be a hothouse environment, designed to cultivate leadership. Many people—rabbis, Teachers Institute representatives, Jewish educators, and laypeople—contributed their views as to which elements were pivotal to the development of leadership. Though complex in nature and varied in scope, Ramah ideology does generally fall into three major categories: Jewish living, Hebrew, and study. These values were at once both intertwined and separate, rooted in reality and transcending it.

The relationship of each facet of the ideology to the abstract goal of leadership was self-evident: in order to train Conservative Jewish leaders, one must first immerse the young people in Jewish living and teach them the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language, for knowledge is a prerequisite to leadership. The experience will propel these youngsters to become committed to Jewish life, to observe its rituals, and to continue to study on a higher level. Note how beautifully this ideology meshed with the various needs of the time.

### Jewish Living

First and foremost, Ramah would allow a child to live Jewishly. This was a crucial concept. Most children whose families were affiliated with Conservative synagogues had never experienced intensive Jewish living. Ramah hoped to supply that atmosphere. Ralph Simon explains:

It put a child in a total Jewish environment and enabled him to live the so-called ideal Jewish life from the time he got up until he went to bed. . . . And that was of tremendous value. Most children had never lived a complete Jewish life. Here they not only lived it, but they lived it without tension. It was the normal way.<sup>63</sup>

For Ramah’s ideologues, Jewish living meant both ritual observance such as kashrut, daily prayer, Shabbat observance, blessings before and after meals, and moral behavior. Thus, Ramah ideology stressed Jewish living at all times, not merely during religious ceremonies. “We were also concerned,” recalls Chancellor Emeritus Cohen, “with teaching values on the ballfield. We spoke a great deal about that.”<sup>64</sup>

Conservative Jewish living was stressed by those whose previous experience had been shaped by Camp Massad. Implicit in this was that Ramah would be noted for its Conservative religious practice and for tolerance of those whose observance level was different from the camp’s norm. By “Conservative,” these ideologues also had in mind a camp that would successfully synthesize the American and the Jewish environments. Ramah was to be an American camp with American staff and campers who chose to live Jewishly together, not a European-run or Palestine-directed venture.<sup>65</sup>

## Hebrew

Educators hoped Ramah would become a summer arm of Jewish education. Since Hebrew was central to the curricula of the afternoon schools, it naturally assumed a role in its summer counterpart. Yet, Hebrew in Ramah was to do more than this. Educators were convinced that Hebrew would be learned much more easily in a camp setting. By creating a Hebrew-speaking camp, these ideologues had in mind the improvement of both the campers' Hebrew and the quality of the supplementary schools as a result of the higher Hebrew level of the returning students. Hebrew speaking was crucial in yet another way, for it was considered fundamental to the background of any knowledgeable Jew. Since knowledge was a prerequisite for leadership, Hebrew would have to play an important role in Ramah. Clearly, one can see the mark left by the work of both Bendorly and the Noar Haivri Organization on these Ramah ideologues.

## Study

Study was the third pillar of the ideology. It, too, was rooted in the reality of Ramah's potential constituency. First, since the potential campers would not be fluent in Hebrew, formal study was essential to teach them the language. In class, campers could first learn the basic vocabulary without which no Hebrew-speaking environment could succeed. Second, many campers lacked basic knowledge of Judaism. In order to live a Jewish life, they would first have to learn some fundamental skills. Finally, the ideological base for study was rooted in traditional Jewish values. "Living a full Jewish life meant studying every day."<sup>66</sup> As such, study of Judaism became an ideal for all. Built into the Ramah ideology was the notion that everybody, including the staff, would study in camp.

While there was general agreement on the importance of these values to Ramah, different people stressed one or another of the values in accordance with their individual philosophies. Conservative rabbis stressed the fact that Ramah would be "Conservative in conception and in execution, and it would be open to anyone who shared our point of view."<sup>67</sup> Educators, on the other hand, were less concerned about the religious ideology of the camp than with Ramah's potential as a place to teach children a maximum of Judaism. According to Solomon Feffer, a former Ramah director:

[We wanted] to give them in those eight weeks of the camp the equivalent of at least a year or two of the typical Conservative Hebrew school education.<sup>68</sup>

A smaller though influential group of committed Hebraists hoped that the camp would teach youngsters enough Hebrew to create a vibrant Hebrew atmosphere, perpetuating the Hebrew movement in America.

Not to be forgotten amidst this emphasis on Ramah's unique ideology are the features common to summer camps which were central to Ramah

ideologues as well. Their philosophy did not preclude swimming, physical exercise, adventure, sports, and games. Rather, they firmly held that Ramah's particular ideology would best flourish in a total camp setting.

## Ramah in Wisconsin, 1947

Despite severe hardships on all levels, the summer season of 1947 was an undeniable success.

The writer [Henry Goldberg] believes that all who have had ample time to observe the camp in action and who were objective in their judgment would agree that despite the many handicaps under which we labored, we achieved many of the goals that we set up for ourselves.<sup>69</sup>

The camp's director, the late Henry Goldberg, was principal of the East Midwood Jewish Center Hebrew School and one of the most respected, innovative Jewish educators of the time. In October 1946, Goldberg had assumed the directorship of LTF. Evidence of the intertwining of Leadership Training Fellowship and Camp Ramah is the fact that one part of Goldberg's LTF responsibilities was the running of its summer camp, Ramah.

## Staff

The staff of 1947 consisted primarily of counselor-teachers, specialists, a swimming counselor licensed by the Red Cross, a division head, a professor-in-residence, a secretary, a hostess, plus some non-Jewish cooks and dishwashers. It was a small but very devoted staff, most of whom had had previous camping experience at Massad, Yavneh (the school-camp of what was then called the Hebrew Teachers College of Boston), or other Jewish camps.<sup>70</sup> David Lieber, then a rabbinical student and now President of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, was the head counselor. It was he who set the program, though most decisions during the summer were made by the staff as a whole.

The position of professor-in-residence was an innovation embodying the value of study in Ramah. Dr. Abraham Halkin, then Associate Professor of Jewish History at the Teachers Institute-Seminary College of Jewish Studies, held this position in 1947. For the campers, he served as a model of a Jew who continues to study.<sup>71</sup>

The staff in general seems to have been very competent. Counselors were responsible for their bunks as well as for teaching campers one-and-a-half hours a day. Specialists led activities in their area of expertise, e.g., arts and crafts, drama, and music. The Director reported that

in evaluating the work of the counselors, the writer can wax enthusiastic because in his opinion it would be difficult to find anywhere else a staff that could be matched in their sense of idealism, devotion, conscientiousness,

maturity, scholarship, and the ability to inspire. . . . The present staff has set a high standard for Camp Ramah.<sup>72</sup>

### Campers

Campers, too, were generally of a high caliber. According to the Director's report, enrollment in 1947 was one hundred campers, ranging in age from 8 to 19 (though the camp was intended for those age 10 through high school). There were 65 regular campers and 35 trainees (LTFers). The camp drew these individuals from eighteen communities; only one fourth came from the East. In keeping with the Ramah ideology, campers were required

to have a minimum of two years of Hebrew education for the ten year olds, three years for the eleven to fourteen year olds and four years for the fifteen year olds and above.<sup>73</sup>

Goldberg made it clear in his report, however, that in reality quite a few of the campers were unqualified in this respect.<sup>74</sup> Tuition for the eight-week session was \$350 for the children's camp and \$200 for the leadership group.<sup>75</sup> Notable among the campers that first season were Burton Cohen, now National Ramah Director, and Yochanan Muffs, now Seminary Professor of Bible.

### Program

The camp's program closely reflected its goals. Mornings were devoted not only to prayer and study but also to breakfast, cleanup, and a general swim. In the afternoon, campers went as a bunk to various activities including sports, arts and crafts, and music. Evening activities consisted of campfires, social dancing, movies, and vaudeville night for the children's camp. The Leaders Training group had similar activities plus discussions and lectures.<sup>76</sup>

### Jewish Living

Intensive Jewish living was an integral part of the program. Yet, in the translation of this aspect of Ramah ideology into practice, many problems arose. Central to the debate were the basic questions of who determines ritual policy for the camp and the specific nature of Conservative Jewish ritual. While its ideology made some aspects of Jewish living givens in a Ramah environment, other areas were open to question. Daily prayer, kashrut, blessings before and after meals, and general Shabbat observance were basics, central to the camp's program. Problems arose in deciding the details of such concepts: how much to include in the prayer service, how it would be run, what constituted Shabbat observance.

Some decisions were made by the Teachers Institute without much disturbance. For example, swimming was permitted on Shabbat but swimming instruction was not given; boating, on the other hand, was forbidden. Mixed seating was permitted at services. Other issues, however, caused a furor. Notable among these was the issue of the use of electric lights on Shabbat. The Seminary's policy for the camp was cautious. Since tolerance was one element in their ideology, the Teachers Institute representatives wanted to offend neither traditionalists nor liberals, and decided that the camp should officially refrain from using electric lights on Shabbat though individuals could turn lights on and off if they wished. Some local rabbis, more liberal in their orientation than the Seminary, pointed to this as evidence of violation of Ramah ideology. To them, Conservatism was implicitly more lenient. They were most annoyed with this and other policies which, in their eyes, typified the Orthodox leanings of the camp. Debate over issues of this sort started with the 1947 season and continued for many years to come.<sup>77</sup>

Disagreements, however, rarely burst into open confrontation. They were an undercurrent, disturbing but not seriously disruptive. Since the problems were not unique to Ramah—they were ones that plagued the movement as a whole—debate was never focused on the camp alone. Nonetheless, it served to heighten the sensitive points of Conservative ideology.

Other aspects of the Ramah ideology of Jewish living translated more easily into practice. Rituals such as grace after meals and daily prayer were scheduled as a normal part of the day. Both staff and campers participated in them, and group spirit was stressed. In addition, rituals were heightened by a sense of ceremony; for example, campers all wore white clothing on Shabbat.

### Hebrew

The camp was officially conducted in Hebrew. Yet, since quite a number of campers were deficient in Hebrew, it was necessary to teach them the language quickly so that they could participate more comfortably in camp life. Goldberg felt:

It was only because of the zeal of the staff and the presence among the campers of a sufficient number of students who were "at home" in Hebrew that we were able to carry out most of our plans.<sup>78</sup>

In this area of Hebrew speaking, ideologies invariably clashed with each other and with reality. Committed both to enrolling supplementary school children and to speaking Hebrew, ideologues were forced to compromise their views in light of reality. Hebrew was central to camp activities. Camp routine and all public announcements were conducted primarily in Hebrew. Nonetheless, campers rarely spoke Hebrew among themselves. Many could not do so even had they wanted to. Others gave in because of



peer pressure and convenience.<sup>79</sup> Inevitably, Hebraist ideologues were disappointed with the campers' progress in this area.

Despite the difficulty of the task, staff took Hebrew-speaking quite seriously; a maximum was accomplished during the first season. Staff made a conscious effort to speak Hebrew and served as Hebraist models to which the campers could aspire. Incentives were given for speaking Hebrew. At the lineup, the counselors announced the names of people who spoke Hebrew all day.<sup>80</sup> Campers received Hebrew letters (analogous to an athlete's earning a college "letter") for this accomplishment. Having accumulated a certain number of letters, campers were rewarded.

## Study

The value of formal study was easily incorporated into the camp program in the form of one and a half hours of classes five days a week. Study time was considered sacred.<sup>81</sup> Classes were divided according to age and background. The first few weeks were devoted to teaching the vocabulary necessary to everyday camp life. Once competence was attained, the study of Bible, Hebrew literature, grammar, Talmud, and Palestine was introduced.<sup>82</sup> Hebrew was the language of instruction.

In reality, study sessions did not work out this smoothly. Teachers tried to incorporate sophisticated concepts, and Jewish texts and Hebrew language, in their lessons, but often found that these goals were mutually exclusive. They did not want to sacrifice Hebrew for the sake of ideas. Yet, depending on the particular expertise and interest of the teacher, one aspect of instruction was often compromised for the other.<sup>83</sup>

The highlight of the summer was the Maccabiah. Competition was intense as campers strove to gain points for their teams in athletics, arts and crafts, spoken Hebrew, music composition, songwriting, and other creative endeavors. At this point in the summer Palestine was stressed: songs and dances of the *halutzim* were taught. Zionism, however, was generally not stressed at other times during the summer.

It should be understood by the reader that since the emphasis of this paper is on the ideology of Ramah and its translation into reality, problems in these areas have been stressed. However, in the summer of 1947 these difficulties were much less significant than the physical problems of the campsite. Located on swampy, uneven land, with no ballfields and no electricity except that provided by one temperamental generator, infested by bugs and mosquitos, Ramah in Wisconsin was indeed "very wild country."<sup>84</sup> Moreover, educational staff was often called upon to wash dishes and cook. According to Winer,

the major problem encountered in the first year was not in the area of Hebrew instruction but in feeding the campers. Lack of a cook who quit mid-season . . . forced educational staff to become directly involved in cooking and in other activities which they were not hired to do.<sup>85</sup>

Because of this combination of factors, staff morale fell very low. Fortunately, a deep sense of pioneering and idealism inspired these people to accomplish a great deal despite these serious handicaps.

At the end of the 1947 season, Camp Ramah was hailed as a tremendous success. In many ways, it was. The summer's end brought tears to campers' eyes, and Lieber recalls that many staff and campers "went away having a tremendous sense of elation."<sup>86</sup> Yet, Camp Ramah's ultimate goal had not yet been fulfilled, as, of course, it could not be in a single season.

Because of the camp's unparalleled short-range success, Ramah's continuation and expansion were made possible. Plans were made for a second season in Wisconsin and for a second camp in Maine. In fact, the idea of expansion was part of Ramah's planning from its very inception.

Significantly, Camp Ramah [in Wisconsin], being the first camp to be established in the Conservative Movement, was to serve as a model and to pave the way toward the establishment of several other camps in the next few years in other parts of the country.<sup>87</sup>

Only in this way could Camp Ramah hope to provide leadership and improve Jewish education on a wide scale. The Teachers Institute, by committing itself to this one season in Wisconsin, had simultaneously accepted the responsibility of eventually supervising a network of summer camps.

## Expansion: From One Camp to a Movement

"Ramah offers the privilege of a new and thrilling experience to those selected! . . . Ramah is the acme of summer living."<sup>88</sup> As this excerpt indicates, the brochure of 1948 exuded both confidence and excitement. Ramah's program was being expanded by the addition of a second camp located in the Belgrade Lakes of southern Maine. Operated by the New England Region of the United Synagogue of America, Camp Ramah in Maine was closely patterned after its Wisconsin counterpart. The program was to be identical; in fact, David Lieber, head counselor in 1947, was to direct this new experiment.

The administration of the Teachers Institute was enthusiastic about the prospects for a second site where they could affect the lives of more young people. Davis felt that the success of a second camp was crucial. "One camp is an experiment; two camps are a movement. I knew that if we would have two successful camps, the rest would follow."<sup>89</sup>

Unfortunately, Camp Ramah in Maine was a disaster. "Just as we ended Wisconsin on a terrifically high note," observed Lieber, "Maine ended . . . on a very low note."<sup>90</sup> Much of the problem stemmed from the arrangement made between Ramah and the camp's owner who retained control over the business aspects of the camp. As both owner and business manager, his primary concern was maximizing the profit margin, while the director was more interested in the quality of the program. Since, under

this contractual arrangement, the ultimate authority in Maine was the camp's owner and not its educational supervisor, the Ramah input was secondary to the owner's input.<sup>91</sup>

Relations between the owner and Lieber were extremely tense, and problems constantly plagued the camp. Lieber spent most of his time trying to resolve these conflicts, leaving head counselor Bernard Lipnick, a young rabbinical student, with much of the responsibility for implementing the program. (Lipnick is now rabbi of Congregation B'nai Amoona in St. Louis.) Problems reached such proportions that Lieber was ready to resign. Moshe Davis came to Maine and convinced Lieber to finish the season.<sup>92</sup>

As if these tensions were not enough, Ramah in Maine had a problematic physical layout. The site had two levels; in order to reach the athletic fields, it was necessary to climb a steep incline. Lipnick had to drive campers up to the ballfields every time a group was scheduled to play. Besides the constraints on spontaneity and scheduling, this also presented impossible supervisory problems. There is evidence, as well, that the staff was younger and less experienced than that of Wisconsin in 1947.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the many problems in Maine in 1948, the camp opened for a second season. Lieber, disgusted with his experience, left Ramah for several years. Once again, a director was brought from Wisconsin, Solomon Feffer. He had run the Wisconsin LTF group for the previous two years. As word of the camp's physical condition spread, it became increasingly difficult to recruit campers even from supporters of the Ramah idea.<sup>94</sup> After strenuous efforts, the camp was filled; yet, the same problems confronted Feffer, his staff, and campers.

Ramah in Maine is a perfect example of how a good idea can be crippled by poor implementation.<sup>95</sup> The camp was closed after two seasons. In addition to the unworkable relationship with the owner and the physical limitations of the site, the enrollment from New England was small.<sup>96</sup> The Philadelphia area, on the other hand, had sent a large contingent to Ramah beginning in 1947, primarily because of the enthusiastic support given Ramah by Rabbi David Goldstein of Har Zion Temple in Philadelphia. This community, through its Board of Jewish Education, had made several attempts to establish a camp.<sup>97</sup> None of the plans materialized, and as early as December 1948, inquiries were made about the feasibility of establishing a third Ramah camp in the area.<sup>98</sup> The Philadelphia Branch of the United Synagogue, whose executive Director was Rabbi Jerome Labovitz, formed a committee chaired by David W. Niesenbaum, Esq.

After the Maine fiasco, it became clear that a campsite must be purchased or, at the very least, leased with an option to buy. After investigating various sites, the committee learned that Rabbi and Mrs. Grossman, long-time directors of Camp Tabor, were looking to sell their camp. Rabbi Bernard Segal, representing the interests of the national United Synagogue, David Niesenbaum, and Jerome Labovitz were instru-

mental in working out the negotiations. The original plan was to sell the camp to the Philadelphia Branch of the United Synagogue. However, the branch had insufficient funds. Abraham Birenbaum saved the project by personally buying the camp and leasing it to the Philadelphia Branch.<sup>99</sup>

Camp Ramah in the Poconos was much more successful than its predecessor in Maine. Like Wisconsin, it enjoyed the support of a devoted committee.<sup>100</sup> Its director in 1950 was Feffer, who opened the camp in its new location. He ran a strict camp and was concerned primarily with furthering the learning and Hebrew aspects of Ramah ideology. A member of the faculty of the Seminary's School of Jewish Studies, Feffer was especially interested in encouraging older campers to continue their studies on a higher level.

There is evidence that Feffer, by stressing these elements of Ramah's program, may have neglected other areas of camp life. The details of the situation are not clear, though it is certain that many problems existed. Bernard Lipnick, returning from Israel in the middle of the season, was sent to camp to stabilize the situation. Lipnick, arriving as an outsider after the season had begun, failed to have a major impact that summer, and in fact could never quite determine what the problem was, though he and others recalled tensions between the staff and Feffer.<sup>101</sup> In addition, Feffer incurred the wrath of some local rabbis because of his religious policy which was, in their eyes, too Orthodox.<sup>102</sup>

The Camp Ramah Committee minutes echo this dissatisfaction. Some members did not want to rehire Feffer for the following season.<sup>103</sup> According to Feffer, representatives of the Teachers Institute asked him to run the Wisconsin camp in 1951. Not wanting to change camps again, he refused and left the Ramah movement. He was replaced as director of the Poconos camp by Rabbi S. Gershon Levi, then rabbi of the Jamaica (New York) Jewish Center. Rabbi Levi directed the camp for only one year. That he was a Conservative rabbi made him more acceptable to local rabbis.<sup>104</sup> Yet he, too, had problems running the camp. In 1952, Levi Soshuk was appointed director. An experienced Jewish educator with a background in Jewish camping dating back to Camp Achvah, Soshuk ran the Poconos camp until 1960, when he was asked to open Camp Ramah in Canada. He stressed the three pillars of Ramah ideology and raised their implementation to new levels.

While Ramah was attempting to establish a second camp on firm footing, its original camp in Wisconsin continued to do well. With the help of a concerned lay committee, notably Louis Winer, the late Daniel J. Glasser, and the late Maxwell Abbell, this camp was well provided for both monetarily and in terms of moral support and concern. It took a number of years to build a solid constituency, though, and an intensive recruitment program continued to be necessary.

Henry Goldberg continued to serve as director of Ramah in Wisconsin in 1948, providing needed stability during the second season. Upon ordination from the Seminary in 1949, Hillel Silverman assumed the

directorship. (Silverman is now rabbi of Temple Shalom, Greenwich, Connecticut.) Young, handsome, and athletic, Silverman presented a glamorous image to the campers. He ran the camp in a manner similar to that of his predecessor but with a greater stress on athletics and competition. Silverman fondly recalled the athletics and competition in which he had participated as a child in Camp Mohican and wished to add this element to Ramah. In addition, his experience in Yavneh and Massad firmly convinced him of the importance of using the informal summer setting to study and learn Hebrew. As director of Ramah, Silverman hoped to combine these elements—study, Hebrew, and Jewish living—with athletics and competition.<sup>105</sup>

Silverman ran a structured camp, believing that campers appreciated knowing the program and feeling at home with the routine. For him, this was a sign of a well-organized camp. His stress on healthy competition—color wars, leagues, and other activities—stemmed from his feeling that we live in a competitive world. By providing a proper outlet for aggression, he could prevent its improper manifestations.<sup>106</sup>

The quality of the staff remained high at Ramah in Wisconsin. The 1950 staff list included Gerson Cohen, waterfront counselor; Naomi Cohen, counselor; Norman Podhoretz, dramatics specialist; Moshe Greenberg, head counselor; and Shalom Spiegel, professor-in-residence.

One major issue during this period was the attitude of Ramah toward Zionism. The State had been declared and Zionism took on new meaning. American Jewry was largely pro-Zionist, and the question became: To what extent would Ramah reflect this outlook? Since Ramah was to be an American camp and not an Israel-oriented one, many staff members felt that there was no reason to raise the Israeli flag at the morning ceremony. Yet several Zionists among the staff strongly wished to do so. Some people at the Seminary were ambivalent about Zionism; this ambivalence, too, was mirrored in the camps.<sup>107</sup> Different solutions were attempted, but it is difficult today to determine what actually occurred in the camps. One interesting compromise was reached in the Poconos in 1950. According to Feffer, older campers raised the question of dual loyalty; they felt that the raising of the Israeli flag was un-American and perhaps illegal. Finally, a silhouette of the ten commandments was superimposed on an Israeli flag, forming a "Jewish people flag" rather than the flag of the Israeli nation. A postscript to this incident is the reaction of some Massad staff to the decision. Furious at this compromise in Ramah, some Massad staff members piloted a plane and dropped leaflets on Ramah in the Poconos, denouncing both Ramah and Feffer as anti-Zionist. A second, ground infiltration at night left the camp plastered with Israeli flags. In any case, the controversy dissipated as the camps eliminated the flag-raising ceremony.<sup>108</sup>

By the end of 1950, it was clear that the Ramah idea was working. Necessary now was an apparatus to facilitate the growth of a national Conservative network of camps by planning and coordinating policy. This

void was filled by the National Ramah Commission, organized during the winter of 1950-1. Representatives of the United Synagogue, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the Rabbinical Assembly made up the commission. The founding of the National Ramah Commission marked an organizational turning point of Ramah's early history. First, its creation signified the recognition of Ramah as being a concept larger than its two campsites. Second, it also meant accepting the responsibility that accompanied that recognition.

### The Newman Years

While the organizational evolution of Ramah is marked by the founding of the National Ramah Commission, its first ideological revolution began in Wisconsin in 1951. Until this time, the individual style, personality, or predilections of each director left its personal imprint on the camp: one director stressed study while another combined study, Hebrew, and Jewish living in an outdoor, athletic milieu. Yet these differing nuances were but variations on the original Ramah theme and ideology. None attempted radically to shift either this ideology or its translation into reality.

Louis Newman, who retired in 1985 as Director of the Bureau of Jewish Education of Boston, directed Camp Ramah in Wisconsin from 1951 to 1953. Newman was considered perfect for the job, for he was a man with deep Jewish commitment who spoke Hebrew fluently and an educator with a background in camping at Yavneh, Massad and Ramah in the Poconos. During the year, Newman had been teaching psychology at the Herzliah Teacher's Seminary and working for a doctorate in clinical psychology. He had expressed an interest in buying a summer camp where he could try out some of his educational ideas. When this became known, he was offered the directorship of Ramah in Wisconsin.

Though Newman had never before run a camp, he had some highly developed theories of education to guide his new undertaking. His ideas were strongly influenced by those of John Dewey, and the Progressive approach to education permeated many elements of his thinking. Committed to participatory education and to a democratic environment, Newman was noted for his dual belief in respect for the individual and individual respect for the group. Most important, since he believed that camp could affect character, he wanted to create an atmosphere to build it, not only one which would teach Hebrew and provide "a good time."<sup>109</sup>

As a Ramah director, Newman became the first to introduce this approach into Ramah and to attempt a synthesis of Progressive and Ramah ideology. Newman was so devoted to both of these sets of goals that he was often depicted with Dewey in one hand and Torah in the other. Rarely one to put his ideas on paper, Newman did write one statement of his thoughts in June 1951. In it, he included his vision of the aims of Ramah.

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In camp, we want (1) to create living situations through which all people, campers, counselors, and all workers will become better human beings. . . . We want (2) to transmit to our campers the knowledge of traditional Jewish values. . . . We believe that the experiences of our people as a whole, and of outstanding Jews individually, offer criteria to aid anyone choosing among alternate ways of behaving. We want (3) to teach a working knowledge of the Hebrew language both in reading and conversation.<sup>110</sup>

This stress on personal growth, while understood in the early Ramah ideology and by each of the preceding directors as being part of growth as a Jew, had never before occupied so prominent a place in the Ramah constellation.

Newman faced a lack of available models; no other Jewish camps in Newman's experience had tried this synthesis before. Thus, on a practical level, Newman had only concrete examples of what he did *not* want; he had seen enough activities managed from above by staff which ended up highlighting the talents of the leaders at the expense of the campers. Furthermore, not only were the child's needs often neglected but Newman also felt that certain areas of camp were patently harmful; for example, raids, stealing food, competition, and incentives. These were anathema to him, and he wished to structure an environment which would eliminate the need to perform useless or destructive acts. That a child may enjoy such activities is not a sufficient criterion for encouraging their continuation. Newman was convinced of the necessity of hiring older, married, mature staff capable of dealing with the emotional problems of children and adolescents and serving as role models. He felt that younger staff who had not yet found their emotional—particularly sexual—identities could not properly guide their young, impressionable campers.<sup>111</sup>

The closest Newman could get to a successful camping model from which to learn was the National Experimental Camp of Pioneer Youth of America. A record of its first six summers was published as a book, *Creative Camping*, by its director, Joshua Lieberman. Describing this experiment in actualizing Progressive ideology, the book deeply affected Newman's thinking. Earlier in his career, Newman had even considered working at the Pioneer camp and had met with Lieberman. However, the book did not incorporate the traditional elements of a Ramah camp—study, Hebrew, and intensive Jewish living. Thus, by attempting this integration, Newman was embarking on a pioneer adventure.<sup>112</sup>

Newman understood both his strengths and weaknesses. While he was a good theoretician, he was limited as an actualizer of ideas. Therefore, he selected Bernard Lipnick as head counselor. The two met regularly on weekends during the winter and spring of 1950–1. Lipnick would read and listen as Newman conveyed his ideas; Lipnick became persuaded by the approach. The two were well-suited complements to each other—Newman the idea man and Lipnick the executor.<sup>113</sup>

Most other members of the staff met with Newman individually once during the year when he came to Chicago. There, he shared a few of his

ideas.<sup>114</sup> While they expected the summer to be different, no one, including Newman, knew exactly how it would be different.

At the beginning of the summer of 1951 Newman created a furor by announcing that there was no schedule. No longer would campers go by bunk to prescribed activities. It was now up to the individual camper. Specialists and counselors were available and eager to help, but staff would not enforce a schedule or push campers to participate in an activity. Their example, and not their directive, would be the best teacher.<sup>115</sup>

The first week was chaotic. Campers wandered around doing very little.<sup>116</sup> Slowly, though, things began to take shape. Classes remained a set part of the day, since this part of the program was fixed by the Seminary. In the afternoon, campers were given a choice of activities. Bernard Lipnick devised a method whereby individuals could create their own schedules based on their interests. This was an extremely difficult method to actualize, yet it was essential as a way of giving structure to this open environment. In working out the mechanism, Lipnick had to reconcile the theory of giving children a truly free choice with the reality of scheduling activities. The availability of facilities, the number of participants required for certain team activities, and the age and sex of the campers involved were just a few of the variables that had to be built into a schedule of free choice; all of this had to be done each week. Together with the staff, Lipnick offered the campers a wide range of activities including sports, arts and crafts, music, drama, and even more study. He made it possible for the campers to choose any of these and also to be able to schedule a free period during the day if they so desired.<sup>117</sup>

Scheduling difficulties, however, were only half of the burden placed upon the staff by this new arrangement. The other part, more subtle, was in a sense more demanding. First, it was the counselor's responsibility to meet with each camper to determine his needs and help him make the choices which would be best for him. A child could conceivably spend the whole day in arts and crafts and never engage in sports activities. In general, such a child would be encouraged to diversify his interests, but such a program might be right for the given child. Only personal contact with and concern for the child could determine which was indeed the case. Second, counselors had to keep abreast of their campers' weekly schedules in order to know if the children were participating in activities. Clearly, this need to know each camper and his weekly program placed an enormous burden upon the staff.<sup>118</sup>

Other areas of camp life were equally affected by the new ideology; since campers spent most of their day pursuing individual interests, a conscious effort was made to encourage bunk projects which would foster group feeling. There were frequent bunk meetings and votes to decide what to do and how to do it. When the time for the Maccabiah arrived, Newman put the question of whether or not to have color war up for a vote. Newman was very much opposed to having a Maccabiah; the competitive spirit and adult management of the event ran counter to

everything he stood for. Yet to impose his bias, however strong, upon the group, Newman felt, would cause hostility and anger. Newman feared that he would lose in the long run though he might attain a short-range goal. "There are many cases where when you win you lose."<sup>119</sup> Newman announced to both campers and staff that he would abide by the outcome; it would not be an empty vote. Everyone in camp, including the director, had one vote. The decision to eliminate color war passed by majority vote. Newman had gambled and won.

Social dancing, held on Saturday nights for the older campers, was another controversial issue. Newman and his staff were sensitively attuned to the shy campers for whom the activity was potentially humiliating. In this case, though, the issue was not put up for a vote. First, it did not affect the whole camp. Second, Newman knew that there was nothing inherently wrong with dancing; the problem lay in the social pressure accompanying such an activity. It was decided by the staff to undermine this Saturday night ritual by offering a choice of other attractive options at the same time. Alternatives were emphasized, draining campers away from the socials. Slowly, the strategy began to work, until the socials were eventually destroyed from without.<sup>120</sup>

Newman's ideas changed other aspects of camp. The bugle was eliminated; and counselors began to wake their campers individually. Group problems received special attention as staff strove to talk out and resolve difficulties with their bunks.

By remaining true to his philosophy, Newman ended up eliminating many traditional summer camp activities. Color war was one example; another was raids. Newman and his staff believed that raids were dangerous, antisocial, and unethical. When a group did raid, Newman would be furious, saying, "The camp is yours. From whom are you stealing?"<sup>121</sup> Yet, he was keenly aware of the potential problems posed by eliminating these events, and he knew that he consciously had to program other expressions of fun and adventure.<sup>122</sup> Because of this belief, Newman invested in canoes, ping-pong tables, and power equipment for woodworking. He also introduced overnight outings into the program. Counselors encouraged and suggested adventuresome activities that would be challenging, real, and useful. For example, one bunk built steps from the lake to the dining hall; the library was painted pink at night by one group to the surprise of the camp.

In addition to their preoccupation with educational issues and camper needs, staff worked diligently to further the original Judaic aims of Ramah. On one level, they believed that their progressive educational philosophy was an expression of the ethical dimension of Judaism. Yet they also concentrated on the traditional aspects as well. The structure of Judaic aspect of the program was left unaltered by Newman. His staff tried to serve as models of learning, devoted Jews to deepen their campers' commitment to Judaism. Staff worked to foster meaningful religious expression by improving campers' ritual skills and standardizing the

structure and melodies of the prayer service. Hebrew speaking was also very important to the staff, and much energy was expended planning special programs and exciting ways to improve the level of Hebrew. Actually, Newman's educational philosophy, with its emphasis on the democratic process and sensitivity towards others, meshed well with Ramah's Conservative religious ideology and its stress on unity in diversity.<sup>123</sup>

Newman attracted a core of talented young people to his camp. Believing that some people's personalities clashed with the camp's ideology, Newman attempted to screen his staff by choosing mature, non-authoritarian people who he felt could work under his system. He also tried to provide housing for married couples in order to attract the mature staff he wanted. Newman worked closely with his staff and trained a group of young people who would later join him in having a major impact on Ramah and Jewish education in general: Dr. Burton Cohen, now National Ramah Director and Assistant Professor of Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary; Rabbi Jerome Abrams, Director, Camp Ramah in the Berkshires; Dr. Seymour Fox, Professor of Education at the Hebrew University; Dr. Joseph Lukinsky, Professor in Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary; the late Rabbi David Mogilner, former National Ramah Director; and Rabbi Alexander Shapiro, rabbi of Oheb Shalom Congregation, South Orange, New Jersey. All these men, who worked with Newman in Wisconsin, and served at one time or another as Ramah directors, were profoundly influenced by him. Members of his staff who were interviewed still speak about Newman with great reverence: "He is one of the great educators of American Jewish life. . . . Everybody who ever worked with him owes him more than can ever be said."<sup>124</sup>

Nevertheless, some people—staff, local rabbis, and laypeople—were unhappy with Newman's innovations. Several staff members opposed any change; others merely preferred the camp as it had been before 1951. Outsiders, on the other hand, opposed Newman because of his lack of formalism and his inexperience with public relations. This discontent eventually focused on the issue of cleanliness, for they were distressed by the dirty condition of some of the bunks and furious that Newman would not force the children to clean them. Rabbi Ralph Simon, in particular, was very upset: "I didn't think that cleanliness and hygiene should have been left to the conscience of the children."<sup>125</sup> While he approved of many of Newman's changes as being a needed corrective in Ramah, Simon felt that Newman was veering too much to the other extreme. Apparently, approval of Newman outweighed complaints, for he remained director for three years and deeply influenced Ramah.<sup>126</sup>

The Newman years permanently changed Ramah. While the other Ramah camps remained basically unaffected by his philosophy for many years, all eventually incorporated Newman's innovations, though with much modification. A junior counselor training program instituted by Newman was strengthened and expanded. Classes in education were

provided for staff. The practice of campers' choosing activities was introduced in modified form to the other camps (choices were offered less frequently than the original once a week). Color war, Saturday night socials, and bugles eventually disappeared from Ramah. All of these changes gained acceptance primarily through Newman's overwhelming influence on his staff, many of whom later became Ramah leaders.

As successful as Newman's innovations were, they also posed inherent dangers. By being acutely sensitive to children's needs and to the democratic process, Newman's philosophy had the potential to erode the original Ramah ideology of study, Hebrew, and Jewish living. For one thing, stress on discussions and decision-making undermined the goal of learning Hebrew. As one staff member put it:

As long as we didn't talk about anything, we could talk Hebrew, but when we started to talk about serious matters, then it became a problem.<sup>127</sup>

Second, fixed hours of study were incompatible with an ideology of free choice. Finally, tolerance of individual differences had the potential to undermine the goal of nurturing a Conservative Jewish laity committed to a lifestyle of Jewish observance.

Despite these potential problems, Newman's contribution was vital to Ramah. While, prior to him, Ramah had pioneered a new synthesis of study, Hebrew, and Jewish living, it had not developed an overall ideology for camp life. Newman helped bring all aspects of a Ramah camp into harmony with each other.

## Conclusion

Any conclusions about the ultimate success or failure of Ramah would require much research, especially into the lives of the thousands of campers and staff members who spent summers there. How many continued to study? What percent are devoted, observant Jews? How many serve the American Jewish community in leadership capacities? How many are dedicated to the Conservative movement? How many of the camp alumni have chosen to send their children to a Ramah program? These are only some of the questions that must be asked to evaluate Ramah's accomplishments relative to its goals. Yet, even without a fuller historical study of all the years of Ramah, one conclusion does emerge: Ramah, as early as its initial six years, played a major role in restoring to the Conservative movement faith in its future.<sup>128</sup> Had Ramah achieved only this goal, it would have been enough to justify the efforts of its founders. In the eyes of many, though, Ramah had accomplished this and more. As Dr. Simon Greenberg has stated, "No other educational enterprise 1947 that we have entered upon has repaid us so fully."<sup>129</sup>

## NOTES

1. A pioneer in Jewish educational camping is Cejwin, founded in 1919. A successful Hebrew-speaking camp was Massad, founded in 1941. These camps are described more fully below.
2. Statistics provided by Dr. Burton Cohen, National Ramah Director.
3. Taped interview with Gerson D. Cohen, March 24, 1976.
4. Henry Goldberg, "High school and Leadership Training Program," *Proceeding of the Second Annual Rabbinical Assembly Conference on Jewish Education*, December 22-3, 1947, pp. 62-3 (hereafter cited as *Conference Proceedings*).
5. Abraham J. Karp, *A History of the United Synagogue of America: 1913-1963*, p. 71.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Moshe Davis, "The Rabbi in Education," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* 10:180-1 (1946) (hereafter cited as *RA Proceedings*). Davis is now head of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.
8. *Jewish Theological Seminary of America Register* 1948-9, p. 45.
9. *Ibid.*, 1944-5, p. 55.
10. Interview with Moshe Davis, April 2, 1976.
11. Moshe Davis, "The Ladder of Jewish Education," *Conference Proceedings*, p. 11.
12. Louis Finkelstein, "The Seminary in Expansion Program," *RA Proceedings* 8:304 (1944).
13. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, pp. 527-8.
14. Mordecai M. Kaplan, "The Training of Teaching and Leadership Personnel," *RA Proceedings* 8:352 (1944).
15. Davis, "Ladder of Jewish Education," pp. 24-5.
16. This was also reprinted in *Conservative Judaism* 4:1-14 (May 1948).
17. "Rabbinical Assembly Resolutions," *RA Proceedings* 9:30 (1945).
18. Moshe Davis, "The Leadership Training Fellowship," *RA Proceedings* 11:74 (1947).
19. Simon Greenberg, "The Ramah Movement: Its History and Place in the Conservative Movement," unpublished paper, p. 1.
20. Response to Kaplan, "Training of Personnel," p. 356.
21. Davis, "Rabbi in Education," pp. 182-3.
22. Simon Greenberg, "Basic Problems and a Proposed Structure for Jewish Education in America," *Conservative Judaism* 3, no. 2:11 (February 1947).
23. Davis, "Ladder of Jewish Education," p. 36.
24. Taped interview with Moshe Davis, April 2, 1976.
25. Robert Gordis, "Official Reports," *RA Proceedings* 10:75 (1946).
26. Beverly Gribetz, "The Rise of Jewish Educational Camping," April 6, 1974, pp. 13-14.
27. Taped interview with Davis.
28. Taped response of Levi Soshuk, received April 23, 1976.
29. Gribetz, "The Rise," pp. 16-18.
30. Taped interview with Sylvia C. Ettenberg, February 16, 1976.
31. While these two camps are the most notable examples of early Jewish educational camping, other camps influenced early Ramah staff and deserve mention as well, especially Sharon, the school-camp of the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago, and Yavneh, the school-camp of Boston's Hebrew Teachers College.
32. Shlomo Shulsinger, "Hebrew Camping—Five years of Massad (1941-45)," *Jewish Education* 17, no. 3:16 (June 1946).
33. Conversation with Gilla Lantz, February 17, 1976, and taped interview with Ettenberg.
34. Taped interview with Shlomo Shulsinger, March 8, 1976.
35. Shulsinger, p. 18.
36. *Ibid.*

37. Yavneh was not founded until 1944, and even then it was primarily a school-camp. Examples of Conservative Jewish leaders who sent their children to Massad are Rabbis David Goldstein, Simon Greenberg, and Ralph Simon. Gerson Cohen, Louis Newman, and Alexander Shapiro were Massad staff members.
38. Taped interview with Gerson D. Cohen.
39. Shulsinger, p. 22.
40. Taped interview with Ettenberg.
41. Taped interview with Shulsinger.
42. Taped interview with Ettenberg.
43. Taped interviews with Alexander Shapiro, March 9, 1976, and Ettenberg.
44. Taped interviews with Simon Greenberg, February 26, 1976, and Shapiro.
45. Taped interviews with Ralph Simon, March 29, 1976, and Ettenberg.
46. Taped interview with Simon.
47. *Ibid.*
48. One notable opponent was the late Solomon Goldman who was a prominent rabbi in Chicago. He was afraid of the responsibility of such an undertaking. Taped interviews with David Lieber, February 9, 1976, and Simon.
49. "Rabbinical Assembly Resolutions," *RA Proceedings* 10:279 (1946).
50. A Digest of the Minutes of the Dinner Meeting of Presidents of Conservative Congregations and Officers of Conservative Synagogues, August 7, 1946, Minutes of Chicago Council of United Synagogue of America, National Ramah Commission, New York, p. 56.
51. Taped interviews with David Goldstein, March 15, 1976, Ettenberg, and Simon.
52. Taped interview with Ettenberg.
53. *Register* 1942-3, p. 32.
54. Taped interview with Ettenberg.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Minutes of Chicago Council, p. 114.
57. Taped interview with Louis Winer, March 30, 1976.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Minutes of Board of Directors of the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues, February 12, 1947; Minutes of Chicago Council, p. 110.
60. Taped interviews with Ettenberg and Lieber.
61. Marshall Sklare, "Recent Developments in Conservative Judaism," *Midstream* January 1972, p. 6.
62. Henry Goldberg, "Report on Camp Ramah—1947," files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia, p. 1.
63. Taped interview with Simon.
64. Taped interview with Gerson D. Cohen.
65. Taped interviews with Gerson D. Cohen and Goldstein.
66. Taped interview with Lieber.
67. Taped interview with Simon.
68. Taped interview with Solomon Feffer, March 11, 1976.
69. Henry Goldberg, "Report," p. 2.
70. Some of the staff members were Kassel and Shirley Abelson, Leo Landes, Nechama Rosenberg, Baruch Diener, and Mr. and Mrs. Solomon Feffer.
71. Taped interviews with Ettenberg and Lieber.
72. Henry Goldberg, "Report," p. 11.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
75. Camp Ramah brochure, 1947, files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia, p. 3.
76. Henry Goldberg, "Report," p. 13.
77. Taped interviews with Ettenberg, Lieber, and Simon.
78. Henry Goldberg, "Report," p. 15.

79. Taped interview with Burton Cohen, March 9, 1976.
80. *Ibid.*
81. Taped interviews with Burton Cohen and Ettenberg.
82. Henry Goldberg, "Report," p. 4.
83. Taped interview with Ettenberg.
84. Taped interview with Winer.
85. *Ibid.*
86. Taped interview with Lieber.
87. Henry Goldberg, "Report," p. 2.
88. Camp Ramah in Maine brochure, 1948, files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia, p. 1.
89. Taped interview with Davis.
90. Taped interview with Lieber.
91. Taped interviews with Bernard Lipnick, March 29, 1976, Feffer, and Lieber.
92. Taped interview with Lieber.
93. Conversation with Shlomo Balter, March 29, 1976, and taped interviews with Lieber and Lipnick.
94. Taped interview with Lieber.
95. Taped interviews with Davis and Lieber.
96. Minutes of Conference with Rabbi Bernard Segal, November 8, 1949, files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia.
97. Taped interview with Goldstein.
98. Labovitz to Segal, December 9, 1948, files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia.
99. Segal to Labovitz, February 24, 1950, files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia.
100. The original Camp Ramah Committee (Poconos) was composed of:
  - David W. Niesenbaum, Esq., Chairman
  - Abe Birenbaum
  - Hyman Bomze
  - David H. Cohen, Esq.
  - Harry J. Finkel
  - John B. Goldenberg
  - Rabbi David A. Goldstein
  - Bernath L. Jacobs
  - Rabbi Jerome Labovitz
  - Dr. Milton Nevins
101. Conversation with Sara Schaffler, March 29, 1976, and taped interview with Lipnick.
102. Taped interviews with Goldstein and Feffer.
103. Minutes of Camp Ramah Committee (Poconos), January 10, 1951, files, Camp Ramah in the Poconos office, Philadelphia.
104. Taped interview with Goldstein.
105. Taped interview with Hillel Silverman, March 29, 1976.
106. *Ibid.*
107. Taped interview with Lipnick.
108. Taped interview with Feffer.
109. Taped interview with Louis Newman, March 25, 1976.
110. Louis Newman, "My Reflections on Counselorship," June 1951, personal files of Louis Newman, Boston, p. 1.
111. Taped interview with Newman.
112. Taped interview with Newman; Joshua Lieberman, *Creative Camping*.
113. Taped interviews with Lipnick and Newman.
114. Taped interviews with Joseph Lukinsky, March 11, 1976, and Burton Cohen.
115. Newman, p. 5.

116. Taped interview with Lukinsky.
117. Taped interviews with Lipnick and Newman.
118. Taped interviews with Burton Cohen, Lipnick, Lukinsky, Newman, and Shapiro.
119. Taped interview with Newman.
120. *Ibid.*
121. *Ibid.*
122. Taped interviews with Lipnick, Newman, and Shapiro.
123. Taped interview with Newman.
124. Taped interview with Lukinsky.
125. Taped interview with Simon.
126. Newman returned to Ramah in 1955 as Director of Camp Ramah in Connecticut for one year. He later served Ramah in other capacities, particularly as Director of the Mador-National Camp Leadership Institute.
127. Taped interview with Burton Cohen.
128. Taped interview with Davis.
129. Taped interview with Greenberg.

## *Tefillah* at Ramah: Goals, Methods, and Impact

*Neil Gillman*

No one will disagree that prayer is the very heart of the life of religion. Nor will anyone disagree that prayer is one of the most subtle and complex of human activities. But if it is difficult to pray, how more difficult is it to teach someone else to pray! "Religious education" is an elusive term, but whatever it means, it must include the attempt to teach children to pray. We must acknowledge Ramah's readiness to meet that challenge.

But from here on in, problems abound. Many of these problems are not of Ramah's doing but are indigenous to Judaism and to the fact that with the exception of the late Abraham Joshua Heschel, I know of no contemporary Jewish thinker who has attempted a thorough analysis of the phenomenology of Jewish prayer. Our contemporary Jewish educators have had little input from the theoreticians of Jewish religion on which to build educational strategies.

The indigenous problems are genuine and complex. First, we are bedevilled by our natural tendency to use the generic English term "prayer" to cover a variety of forms of Jewish religious expression, each of which has its own distinctive theology, halakhic structure and function. Our ancestors fine-tuned the act of what we call "prayer," creating distinctions which we tend to blur. *Birkhot hashahar* is not *psuke de-zimra*, and neither of these is *kriat sh'ma uvirkhoteha*; and none of these is *tefillah*. The last is strictly applicable only to what we call the *amidah* or the *shmone esre*—yet we blur the term and use *tefillah* as a generic translation of the English generic "prayer," thus compounding the confusion. Finally, as we know, *tefillah* is a different experience if we are talking about Shabbat, *hol* or *yom tov*.

The Ramah *shaharit* service, then—the one daily service in which every member of the Ramah community is required to participate—is actually a composite of at least four distinctive forms of worship. We work against ourselves if we insist on treating all of these as one experience, whether we call it "prayer" or "*tefillah*."

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