

HOWARD I. BLAS

## *Campers with Developmental Disabilities: The Tikvah Program*

### Disabilities: What the Ancient Rabbis Knew

**A**T A PRE-SEASON RETREAT, twenty senior staff members of Camp Ramah in New England spent a weekend discussing the educational theme for the upcoming summer—the biblical concept of *betzelem elohim*—the idea that everyone is created in the image of God.<sup>1</sup> As the participants studied a series of biblical and rabbinic texts, it became clear that the rabbis of the second through sixth centuries debated the implications of similarities and differences in people. The ancient rabbis puzzled over which blessing to say upon encountering people who were blind, were missing limbs, or had “unusual skin.” It may seem strange to say a blessing in such circumstances, yet a person was expected to acknowledge the entirety of God’s human creations.<sup>2</sup>

In the Mishneh Torah, Moses Maimonides, a respected rabbi, Bible commentator, physician, and philosopher, who lived in Egypt and Spain from 1138–1204, discusses the blessing recited upon seeing people who are different in some way. He suggests that one blessing is said upon encountering a person who is *born* a certain way, and an entirely different blessing is recited upon seeing a person who *becomes* “different” (i.e., someone who loses his or her sight or limb). In the former case, one is expected to say the blessing, “Blessed are you God, King of the world, who makes living creatures different,” whereas in the latter case, one says, “Blessed are you, the True Judge.”<sup>3</sup>

As documented by Eleanor Eells in *History of Organized Camping: The First 100 Years*, camp programs for children with various special needs began to

**HOWARD I. BLAS** is a social worker and special education teacher living in New Haven, Connecticut. He worked as a counselor and rosh edah in the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England from 1984–1988 and has been the director of the Tikvah Program since 2001. In July 2009, he was named to the first cohort of Jim Joseph Foundation Fellows at the Lookstein Center at Bar Ilan University, a program that focuses on leadership, community building, Jewish literacy, and technology.

emerge in the late nineteenth century, and there has been slow, steady growth since then.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, now parents of children with all types of special needs easily can access information about camping programs through various print and online directories.<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to pinpoint a date when integration began in so-called regular or typical camps.<sup>6</sup> However, it is clear that “a number of camps operated by religious organizations were in the vanguard of running planned integration programs.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the first Jewish summer camps to offer an overnight camping option to campers with special needs was Camp Ramah in New England.<sup>8</sup> The Tikvah Program, now in its fortieth year, is an eight-week overnight camping program for campers with developmental disabilities such as mental retardation, autism and autism-spectrum disorders, and neurological impairments. After four decades, Tikvah is such a natural part of the Ramah community that it is difficult to imagine the camp *without* Tikvah. Yet, when the Tikvah Program was started in 1970, the concept of a program for campers with special needs, as part of a typical camp, was not embraced universally or welcomed.

The next section provides more details of the pioneering Tikvah Program at Ramah in New England. The section after that offers an overview of special needs programs at other Ramah camps. Finally, we look at the lessons that the Ramah Camping Movement has learned from the Tikvah experience, as evidenced by the stories of Ramah and Tikvah staff members, as well as Tikvah families.

### **The Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England**

#### *The Tikvah concept and the early years*

According to Herb and Barbara Greenberg, the founders and the directors of the Tikvah Program for twenty-nine years, the concept of a camping program for Jewish adolescents with special needs first was proposed in the late 1960s. The subcommittee on Special Education of the United Synagogue of America Commission on Jewish Education requested that a Jewish summer camp incorporate a group of adolescents with developmental disabilities into its population. Various Jewish camps already had rejected this proposal. In early 1970, the proposal was presented to the National Ramah Commission. Ramah camp boards and directors expressed fears that the presence of a group of mentally and/or emotionally handicapped children in the camp community would disrupt the structure of the camp.<sup>9</sup> Greenberg further reports, “The leaders of Ramah felt that a program that introduced children with disabilities into the camp would create anxiety, both among the other campers and among

the staff. They also worried that some parents might be afraid to send their children to camp if these children were there.”<sup>10</sup>

Donald Adelman, z”l, the director of Camp Ramah in Glen Spey, New York, “was the lone dissenter, the only Ramah director who really wanted this program,” according to the Greenbergs. “He took an enormous risk, and he staked his whole career on it. . . . He saw it as a moral responsibility toward those with special needs.”<sup>11</sup> In an interview, Herb Greenberg reports, “Years later, we learned that Don had insisted that if there was no room at Ramah for Tikvah, then the whole point of the camp would be lost. ‘This is what Ramah should be, and I insist on having it.’”<sup>12</sup>

Tikvah originally was designed to be an overnight camping program, serving a preadolescent population of mentally retarded campers. However, “[i]n the months before the opening of the Tikvah Program in 1970, it became apparent in recruiting campers that a somewhat different population was more receptive to and more in need of a special camp program.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the initial group of campers consisted of children classified by their respective school systems as brain injured, learning disabled, and emotionally disturbed.

The first year of the Tikvah Program took place at Camp Ramah in Glen Spey, New York and included eight campers and five staff members. When the Glen Spey site closed, the Tikvah Program moved to its current site at Camp Ramah in New England in Massachusetts and has operated there continuously since then. In the early years of the program, Tikvah included campers with a wide range of developmental problems. Greenberg notes, “At the outset of the program, we admitted very impaired teenagers including those with Down Syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, and those classified as emotionally disturbed.”<sup>14</sup>

In the early years, the Greenbergs spent many hours helping campers and staff members become more comfortable with the idea of a program for campers with special needs as part of the larger Ramah camp. The work was not easy. Even some camp doctors felt uneasy with the Tikvah campers. They feared lawsuits and insisted that the child’s primary physician be contacted before any treatment or medical intervention could be taken. Many Israeli staff members also expressed discomfort about working with Tikvah campers. Greenberg reports, “At the time, Israelis were still coming off the euphoria of the Six-Day War (1967) . . . they couldn’t tolerate any overt display of weakness, and they even said so.”<sup>15</sup>

Some members of the camp community warmly welcomed members of the new program. Bruce Lipton, head of the Ramah New England kitchen from 1968–2006, recalls, “Back then, we didn’t think one way or another about

special needs—they were just kids—we taught him [a Tikvah camper he employed] how to work in the kitchen—and he is now employed by a large grocery store in the Midwest.” Lipton proudly reports that this man came to camp nearly every summer to help set up the kitchen.<sup>16</sup>

The program continued to grow each summer with as many as forty campers with very different special needs participating. The camper population also was quite diverse geographically and religiously. Campers attended Ramah New England from across the United States (as well as from Israel and Mexico) and from across the Jewish religious spectrum—from the unaffiliated and non-observant to those who identified as Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Orthodox, and Hasidic. The Tikvah Program has always strived to create a positive bunk and division experience while also remaining sensitive to the individual needs of each camper. Greenberg notes how, in the early years, Tikvah campers were “desperate for their own peer group.”<sup>17</sup> Some campers with learning disabilities who were socially adept were placed in regular bunks, while youngsters with learning disabilities but limited social capabilities remained in bunks designed specifically for Tikvah campers.<sup>18</sup>

The inclusion of Tikvah campers in all aspects of camp life historically has provided the parents of Tikvah campers with a model of what was possible in their home communities. And Tikvah parents historically have worked to help and support each other, through conversations during the year, and by coming together at the Tikvah Parent Conference, a two-day meeting held each summer, where Tikvah parents from across the country share experiences, resources, and advocacy skills. According to the Greenbergs, the experiences of both the campers and their parents in the camp program would impact on and empower families and lead to changes in “every institution in the larger community—schools, group homes, et cetera.”<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to note that while the camp was pioneering inclusion and integration for campers with special needs and offering support for parents, the same children were experiencing separation from their so-called typically developing peers in their home communities and school districts. Several years before Tikvah was founded, a series of court cases, beginning with *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954, challenged the notion of the segregation of students. In the *Brown* decision, separation of students based on race was challenged. This case ushered in a period of “intense concern and questioning among parents of children with disabilities who asked why the same principles of equal access to education did not apply to their children.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1972, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens brought a class action suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The suit

established the right of free public education for all children with mental retardation. In 1975, the PL-94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandated free, appropriate public education for all children with disabilities, ages six to twenty-one. It also protected the rights of children with disabilities and their parents in educational decision making, required the development of an individualized education program (IEP) for each child with a disability, and stated that students with disabilities must receive educational services in the least restrictive environment.<sup>21</sup> Congress reauthorized the amendment and renamed it four times, most recently in 1997, when it was restructured and renamed IDEA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 105-17).

### *The range of services for campers with special needs*

The Tikvah Program is part of the Camp Ramah in New England community. Currently, the program consists of four components: the Amitzim camping division for campers ages thirteen to eighteen; the Vocational Training Program known as *tochnit avodah* (and by the more informal Voc Ed) for qualified eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old graduates of the camping program; Post Voc Ed, a program that offers a select group of Voc Ed graduates an opportunity to work as salaried camp employees; and Inclusion, a program through which nine- to twelve-year-old campers with a wide range of special needs are included in the daily life of typical bunks and *edot* (divisions).

**Activities for Tikvah campers.** The Tikvah schedule strives to maintain predictability and routine. Amitzim participate in the entire range of camper activities. At Ramah New England, for example, campers wake up, daven (using a special Tikvah siddur), eat in the *badar ochel*, and return to their bunks—specifically designated for Tikvah campers—for *nikkayon* (bunk cleanup). Three morning *perakim* (periods) typically include *bug* (arts and crafts, woodworking, nature, newspaper, video, drama, etc.), sports, and *shirah* and *rikkud* (singing and Israeli dancing). Bogrim Buddies (fourteen-year-old peers) and Machon Helpers (fifteen-year-old peers) participate with Tikvah campers in *bugim* and sports several times a week.

Following *aruhat tzohorayim* (lunch) and *she'at menuhah* (rest hour, which includes letter-writing time), campers participate in a rotation of four afternoon periods that always include swimming and a Jewish studies class. Although most Tikvah campers participate in these activities with other members of the Tikvah Program, some campers are mainstreamed with other *edot* for such activities as *rikkud*, *ommanut* (arts and crafts), and Jewish learning. Other activities in the rotation include *pe'ulot tzerif* (bunk activities, which might include time at the ropes course, alpine tower, and trampoline), *ommanut*, and a period where campers work at various job sites in camp. After

dinner, campers participate in a *pe'ulat erev* (evening activity), sing *Rad hayom* in a closing circle, shower, and conclude their day with winding-down time (usually consisting of a bedtime story or a calming musical piece), and the recitation of Shema before lights out.

**Tikvah camper interaction with the larger camp community.** The location of Tikvah Village, which consists of two male and two female *tzerifim* (bunks) and a large *mo'adon* (multi-purpose room), fosters interaction with the camp community. Tikvah Village intentionally was constructed on what is called B-Side, the home of the thirteen- to sixteen-year-old “typically developing” campers. (A-Side, a ten minute walk from B-Side, houses the nine- to twelve-year-old “typically developing” campers). Many classes, electives, and camp-wide activities take place in the pine grove and in the buildings just behind the Tikvah bunks. Thus, socialization and interaction occur as campers walk past the Tikvah bunks, en route to division or camp-wide activities or Friday night services. Interaction also takes place on the porches of the Tikvah bunks and in the areas in front of the Tikvah bunks.

There are numerous additional formal and informal opportunities for interaction between members of the Tikvah Program and other campers. As an individual's comfort level increases, his or her level of involvement with the Tikvah Program increases.

On the most basic level, campers and staff members share the physical camp site with the Tikvah Program. Therefore, they see and interact (at first, sometimes from a distance) with Tikvah campers throughout the day—on walkways, ball fields and classrooms, in the dining room, and at all camp-wide activities. Observing Tikvah campers at camp-wide activities can be quite powerful and instructive to members of the camp community. For example, when Tikvah campers compete in the camp-wide sports day, campers in other divisions sometimes see how fast or skilled at volleyball or softball a person with disabilities can be. When a member of the Tikvah Program leads prayers or blessings for the entire camp, a younger camper, perhaps not yet possessing such skills or confidence, sees how people with disabilities possess many abilities. For the past two summers, a member of the Tikvah Program who has been taking dance lessons for many years, performed a solo tap dance for the entire camp at the *zimkudiyyah* (song and dance festival).

Beyond observing from a distance, there are numerous opportunities, both planned and spontaneous, for campers and staff to interact with Tikvah campers. The youngest campers (entering third grade), who attend camp for a two-week mini-session, traditionally visit with members of the Tikvah Program and tour the Tikvah bunks as part of their Jewish Studies curriculum on the theme of being created “in God's image.” This curriculum focuses on

similarities and differences between human beings. Tikvah counselors visit the bunks of the youngest campers to answer questions the evening before these campers visit Tikvah Village. When the campers experience Tikvah Village, they have an opportunity (often for the first time in their lives) to walk up the ramp, hold the grab bar in the bathroom, and sit on the shower chair. The campers compare and contrast these bunks to their own. (They are often jealous to see how spacious, well-lit, and climate-controlled the bunks are!) Later in the week, the campers join Tikvah campers for prayer services.

Campers ages nine to twelve interact with Tikvah campers through participation in counselor-planned bunk or division activities. Younger campers typically enjoy many of the same activities as the Tikvah campers. Campers in the thirteen- to sixteen-year-old divisions can study rabbinic sources dealing with disabilities in their Jewish Studies classes and participate in a dialogue with a panel of Tikvah campers and graduates. In addition, fourteen- and fifteen-year-old campers can elect to participate in a buddy program. Each camper electing to be a buddy spends forty-five minutes, twice a week, socializing and/or working one-on-one (on a skill, sport, etc.) with a Tikvah camper.

Sixteen-year-old campers have the option to work with Tikvah campers as part of their counselor-in-training (CIT) experience. These CITs learn the skills that are required to serve campers with special needs, and they work two full days per week with their Tikvah bunk (at such crucial times as wake up, rest period, and preparation for bedtime). Although CITs may exhibit typical sixteen-year-old behavior in their own divisions, they tend to display their best, most responsible behavior in their CIT role. They serve as excellent models of appropriate dress, behavior, and language for the Tikvah campers. In the summer of 2007, an unprecedented twenty campers volunteered to serve as CITs. Parents of Tikvah campers always are pleased that their children have opportunities to interact extensively with “typically developing” teenagers.

Although Tikvah campers are clearly the recipients of the assistance and coaching offered by peers from other divisions, it is important to emphasize that the relationships are beneficial to “typically developing” campers as well. Volunteering brings out the best in the teenagers, who often feel proud that they have succeeded in what may have appeared to be a difficult area. Such direct involvement with campers with special needs tends to demystify this population. These teenagers often choose to donate money to the Tikvah Program as part of a bar/bat mitzvah project, they sometimes choose to volunteer or perform additional community service with a similar population in their home communities, and many former buddies and CITs return to camp to serve as Tikvah counselors.

**Vocational education and inclusion programs.** Nearly twenty years ago, Tikvah started a vocational education (Voc Ed) program. Select graduates of the camping program live in a group-home-like setting where they are responsible for their own laundry, cleaning of shared rooms and the common area, light cooking, and kitchen chores. “Voc Eders” work at various jobs throughout camp. Some graduates of this program are hired as salaried workers of camp. In New England, several members of the Post Voc Ed Program are in charge of operating and maintaining the newly constructed, six-unit guest house, while others work in the art department, the mail room/information center, the *gan* (camp program for staff children), and the infirmary. Post Voc Eders live in staff housing, work with a job coach, and receive support around problem solving, socialization issues, and negotiating days off. Similarly, graduates of the other Tikvah programs are hired by the camps.

Developments in the field and in the lives of children and families with special needs encourage the program to challenge its established practices and consider additional programs and models of service delivery. When families of current and prospective campers began raising questions about Tikvah’s “separateness” from same-age peers in typical divisions, the camp explored the possibility of starting an inclusion program. A small inclusion program for campers too young for Tikvah, funded by a grant, was started at Ramah New England in 2005. Such a program allows same-age campers (with and without identified disabilities) to begin camp together at a young age and “travel” through the various edot together.

Currently, the Tikvah Program is examining its age of graduation policy. Although graduation from high school (at twenty-one or twenty-two, depending on one’s home school district) has historically been considered to be the end of eligibility for Tikvah; it has become increasingly apparent that some campers can continue to benefit from the program. In addition, many campers with developmental delays exhibit uncanny growth in their late teens and early twenties. On a case-by-case basis, some campers have remained in camp beyond the graduation age.

**Teaching values and decision-making: Tikvah campers as givers.** Campers with different areas of strength and weakness tend to help and receive help from others. They also help and receive help from members of the larger Ramah community. For example, a particularly strong female camper who was not very verbal took it upon herself to push the adult-sized stroller of a camper with cerebral palsy. Tikvah campers tend to reach out to visitors by showing them the correct page in the Tikvah siddur and by introducing themselves with words and a handshake to guests who attend Tikvah Shabbat morning services.

Although Tikvah campers are recipients of the kindness of others, they also are taught to contribute. They help clean the camp on Fridays, often set up benches and prayer books, and clean candle holders for Shabbat. One summer, Tikvah campers regularly volunteered to make a minyan for a staff member saying kaddish. Tikvah campers study the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and participate in various charitable activities. On Fridays, Tikvah campers bake hallah to raise money for *tzedakah*. Campers who participate in the Tikvah Israel trip during the winter routinely deliver gifts to children (including Israeli Arabs) in a pediatric unit of a hospital, plant trees, and engage in other forms of *gemilut hasadim* (acts of kindness).

Tikvah campers also contribute by donating their talents to the camp community. One camper, a skilled tennis player, volunteered to teach tennis to nine- and ten-year-old campers several times a week; another camper, an excellent volleyball player, served as an assistant coach for the camp volleyball team. Several members of the Voc Ed program play in the weekly staff softball game and have made major contributions to their teams. A mother proudly tells the story of how her son was helped in preparing for his bar mitzvah by a Tikvah camper who possessed excellent synagogue skills. (That young bar mitzvah student returned to camp years later to serve as a Tikvah counselor!)

### **The Development of Other Ramah Programs for Campers with Special Needs**

In 1973, a second Tikvah program was established at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. The current Ramah Wisconsin program is primarily for adolescents with learning problems and social difficulties, specializing in the needs of campers with Asperger's Syndrome. In addition to an eight-week camping program, Wisconsin also offers a four-week "Taste of Tikvah" option for first-time campers who are in junior high school. In the early 1980s, a program was started at Camp Ramah in California; another was started at Camp Ramah in Canada in 1993. The Tikvah programs in Canada and California, like that of New England, offer overnight camping experiences for adolescents with developmental disabilities. Ramah Canada offers a six-week Tikvah program for campers ages twelve to twenty-one. Campers aged eighteen to twenty-one also participate in a vocational education program. Current Tikvah campers may remain in the program until age twenty-four, whereas new campers are accepted through age twenty-one.

Camp Ramah in California offers a four-week program for adolescents ages eleven to fifteen with learning, emotional, and developmental disabilities, as well as a similar program for fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds. "Ezra," a seven-week vocational training and independent living program, is offered to eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds. Ezra participants live in a new dorm built in the

*Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, former director of Camp Ramah in Canada, reflects on establishing Tikvah at Canada:*

When I became the director of Ramah Canada in 1990 after having spent seven summers at Ramah California, I immediately felt the absence of a Tikvah program. Tikvah in California had a large impact on me as an educator, particularly in the ways in which the program impacted on the entire camp.

I began planning for a Tikvah program at Ramah Canada. I received Board approval, as long as I could find the funding to create such an expensive new program. In particular, Ab Flatt, my Board president, and Gloria Silverman, an executive committee member and senior camp educator, were strong supporters of this idea. The Federation proved to be very supportive, and I submitted a proposal for approximately \$60,000 over three years, which was approved. The main obstacle was finding a director.

Dr. Mitch Parker, a teacher at camp, was a psychologist who worked in a school with a special needs population in Buffalo, and I asked him whether he knew of anyone who might be interested in directing a new Tikvah program. I'll never forget the phone call, a few days later, when he called me back and said, 'How about me?' I was thrilled, and that call was the beginning of an eight-year relationship [at Ramah Canada]. It was critical to have someone with the professionalism and specific expertise that Mitch possesses to allay the fears of many parents, board members, and staff members that perhaps we could not handle youngsters with developmental challenges at camp.

Now, after many successful summers of the Tikvah Program, an entire generation of campers and staff can't imagine Camp Ramah in Canada without Tikvah! The Tikvah Program has provided many special experiences for all members of the camp community. One highlight for me was the bar mitzvah of Brian, a Tikvah camper from Toronto, whose parents were disappointed that he could not have his bar mitzvah at a Toronto synagogue. They approached me about doing a bar mitzvah at camp, and needless to say, it was one of the most emotional events of my career. The entire camp came to tefillot to be part of this experience, and when Brian raised his hands in triumph in front of the Torah, there wasn't a dry eye in the room.

These experiences continue at Ramah Canada and at special needs programs throughout the Ramah camping system.

summer of 2008. In anticipation of the building of the new dorm, Elana Naftalin-Kelman, director of Camp Ramah in California's Tikvah/Special Needs programs, said, "To have a space of their own within camp where the Ezra participants can learn to cook their own meals, do their own laundry, and host their friends and family—all while continuing to learn how to live Jewish lives is an invaluable component of our program. This dorm will radically expand and enhance each participant's experience at camp and their impact upon camp as well."

In 2003, Camp Ramah in the Berkshires established the four-week overnight Breira program for campers with learning and/or social challenges. Each summer, Breira serves twenty campers through age fifteen. Common diagnoses of Breira campers include attention deficit disorder (ADD), pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), Asperger's Syndrome, language-based learning disabilities, and anxiety disorders. According to Dr. Beth Jaret, the director of the Breira B'Ramah program, as quoted in the program brochure, the goals of Breira are "to honor attitude over aptitude, effort over ability, and cooperation over competition; to utilize feedback from campers and staff in order to increase self-awareness regarding personal hygiene, social responsibility, and social growth; and to provide the tools that are necessary to enable Breira campers to strengthen their identity, observance, and commitment to Judaism."

Rabbi Paul Resnick, the director of Ramah Berkshires, has said, "Before this program began, parents had to make the choice between a place that would support their child's needs and a camp with a Jewish soul."<sup>22</sup> He writes of the early planning stages of Breira:

What was discussed in 1999 was a program to serve mainstreamed children in a mainstream camp. It was nothing short of a radical change in camping. . . . We [met] in the offices of Camp Ramah in the Berkshires in the Union Theological Seminary dreaming about something new. . . . We were committed and we knew that this would become a groundbreaking program in the world of informal Jewish education.<sup>23</sup>

In the past five years, several Ramah camps have established family camp programs designed for families with children with special needs. Camp Ramah Darom in Georgia runs Camp Yofi, a family camp for children with autism, their parents, and siblings. Rabbi Loren Sykes, director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin and former executive director of Ramah Darom, was recognized by the Covenant Foundation in 2006 for this innovative program. After the program's first year in 2005, Rabbi Sykes wrote:

There is nothing small about each victory for a child with autism, a sibling, or a parent. Each win is major and significant. . . . As we entered Shabbat that week, it became clear that I had never been involved in anything more meaningful or moving than Camp Yofi. I met an incredible group of families parenting at a level most of us can never understand. The first gathering of Jewish families with children with autism had, in a very short time, created one of the most spiritual communities I have ever joined.<sup>24</sup>

Camp Ramah in California runs Camp Ohr Lanu, a week-long camp for families who have children with special needs. Camp Ramah in the Poconos announced the opening of its Tikvah Family Camp for the summer of 2009

for the families of children with developmental disorders and/or social learning disorders. Keshet, a program for campers with deafness, existed for several summers at Camp Ramah in the Poconos but is no longer in existence.

Each of the Ramah special needs programs has unique features. Ramah California, Wisconsin, and New England have offered Israel programs to a wide range of Tikvah campers and alumni. Additionally, various camps offer a vocational training program with employment *in* camp. Wisconsin has experimented with transporting program participants to jobs *outside* of camp in the Eagle River, Wisconsin community. As mentioned earlier, Ramah California has a special Café Ezra, run entirely by members of the vocational training program. At the Ramah Day Camp in Wheeling, Illinois, a program for children ages five to eleven is offered in partnership with Keshet, a Chicago-area program for Jewish children with special needs. This inclusion program is for children with a wide range of disabilities.

Each Ramah camp has stories to share about in-camp Tikvah bar and bat mitzvah celebrations. And each camp proudly offers stories of people whose lives have been changed by Tikvah—from Tikvah staff members, to Tikvah campers and families, to campers in other divisions, staff members, Israeli *shelihim*, and Shabbat visitors. The following section demonstrates that the impact of Tikvah is indeed extraordinary, and the Tikvah model teaches many valuable lessons.

### **Special Needs at Ramah: Lessons for the Field**

Tikvah campers and the various Tikvah programs clearly have had a strong impact on the Ramah community. Several generations of Ramah campers and staff members have benefited from the presence of the Tikvah Program as part of the larger Ramah community. Important lessons (which may be applied to a variety of settings) can be learned from the Tikvah experience.

#### *Lesson 1*

**All beginnings are hard but usually are worth it.** (Or, *na'aseh venishma*: Do it now! Collaborate with other believers to work out the difficulties as they arise.)

Herb and Barbara Greenberg's description of the early years of Tikvah indicate an initial reluctance and even a resistance to establishing a program for campers with special needs as part of the larger camp community. These feelings could derive from nervousness or fear.

Rabbi Mitch Cohen, the current National Ramah Director, who was the director of Camp Ramah in Canada when that camp initiated its Tikvah Program, notes:

To our shock and dismay, many staff members—particularly those who had been on staff for many years—thought we might be hurting camp in some way, shifting the focus of Ramah, or taking on more than we could handle. I was appalled that something as wonderful as Tikvah could be the focus of such a negative reaction. Thankfully, these fears quickly dissipated when the Tikvah participants arrived. Our Tikvah staff was fantastic with them and with integrating them into the camp community. Almost everyone in camp saw that we could handle this new population and that their presence in camp would only add value to Ramah. That has been the legacy of Tikvah . . . as now an entire generation of campers and staff couldn't imagine Camp Ramah in Canada without Tikvah!

Dr. Mitch Parker, former director of the Tikvah Program at Ramah Canada, recalls the jitters felt by the entire Ramah Canada community as they prepared for their first group of Tikvah campers. He recalls a conversation between a Tikvah counselor and a veteran Ramah counselor just before the campers arrived, “Why are you doing this? Tikvah is going to ruin the Camp Ramah experience for everyone!” Parker recounts:

We put on a brave front, but no one was really sure what challenges day one, day two, or day three would bring. . . . Today and for the past fifteen years, the Tikvah Program is an integral part of Camp Ramah in Canada. Every summer, when the campers in Tikvah return home at the end of the sixth week of the season, there is a palpable sense of loss among the campers and staff. The rest of the summer, despite many exciting activities and events, is just a little bit less bright.

Herb Greenberg observes, “It is a testimony to the Ramah community in that it demonstrated tremendous patience, sensitivity, and resilience in learning how to deal with this population.”<sup>25</sup>

## *Lesson 2*

**The impact on the camp community as a whole is great. Tikvah shapes attitudes and influences career choices.** Tikvah offers a great deal not only to campers with special needs but also to the larger Ramah community. Campers regularly write and call to share stories of the impact of Tikvah on their growth and development and sometimes on their career choices. They recall an interaction or experience with a certain Tikvah camper—from time spent as a Bogrim Buddy, to a more informal interaction—dancing together in the hadar ochel, playing catch on the *migrash*, sitting together on the tennis court during a camp-wide barbecue, or watching a Tikvah play. Some campers and staff members return to their home communities or college campuses and volunteer in various capacities to work with people with special needs (e.g., Special Olympics or tutoring for bar and bat mitzvah). Many campers serve informally

as “attitude and language monitors” in their homes and communities, “correcting” parents, neighbors, and fellow congregants when words like “disabled” are used to describe people with disabilities. Many such campers request to work as Tikvah counselors when they return to camp as staff members.

To more systematically study the attitudes of campers, Ramah New England administered the Learning and Development at Camp Ramah Inventory (a survey of social and emotional issues) to one hundred fifth-through seventh-grade campers.<sup>26</sup> Results were significant for a very high rate of agreement to the twelve questions that were included to better understand attitudes of typical campers toward the Tikvah Program and to assess the likely impact of the Tikvah Program on their life paths. Key findings include:

- Seventy-nine percent strongly agreed or agreed that “[t]he Ramah experience has helped me to feel more comfortable around people with special needs.”
- Sixty-three percent strongly agreed or agreed that “[m]y experiences with campers from this camp’s special needs program will carry over into other areas of my life.”
- Fifty-eight percent strongly agreed or agreed that “[m]y experiences with campers from this camp’s special needs program have made me a better person (for example, more patient, more tolerant).”

Although the study included only campers, we know anecdotally that counselors from both the Tikvah Program and other divisions and specialty staffs sometimes pursue studies and seek employment in special education and related fields. Ilana Blidner, the director of the 2008 Tikvah Program at Ramah Canada, is one of the countless people who have decided on career paths as a result of the Tikvah experience. Blidner reports, “I had no idea where four years as a counselor would lead. That first experience working as a counselor in Tikvah provided me with a completely alternate perspective to my life goals and ambitions.” She went on to pursue degrees in psychology, child study, and special education and notes:

I dream of opening my own learning center one day that caters to the social and emotional development of children with special needs. . . . I can say with complete certainty that if it wasn’t for my opportunity four years ago to enter the Tikvah Program, I would not be where I am today, academically and professionally.

Blidner captures the essence of the impact of Tikvah on Ramah quite eloquently when she says:

I think the camp benefits from having Tikvah there. I know that our campers bring a different energy to our camp. They are the most appreciative

individuals who benefit from many aspects of Camp Ramah life. I have had countless experiences where our campers have participated in an event with another edah or had members of [the] *mishlahat* engage in activity with them—and everyone leaves with large smiles, laughter, and a sense of fulfillment. The campers of Tikvah have this tremendous ability to empower others in our camp. Magshimim campers, Nitzanim campers, campers of all ages have approached me in the past to relay a special experience they had with one of our campers or to ask if they can participate in our pe’ulot erev or tefillot. It always seems that other campers and staff in camp gravitate toward the Tikvah edah. It is remarkable. I believe that a significant benefit that camp receives from having Tikvah as a part of our camp is the awareness it brings to others—that is, it sheds light on the diversity that surrounds our communities and provides an opportunity for individuals, who don’t usually have the opportunity at home, to spend time with our campers, to learn from them, and spend time with them. It is wonderful for such young campers (and campers and staff of all ages) to learn about various developmental disabilities and observe individuals with different strengths and needs.

Rose Sharon, Tikvah Program co-director at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, captures how integral and involved Tikvah is in all aspects of camp life—from the integrated Machon-Tikvah play, to the fact that former Tikvah campers work on staff. This level of involvement in the community continues outside of camp, where campers are welcomed and included in United Synagogue Youth (USY) activities. A Tikvah Wisconsin camper, Mitch Paschen, was invited to deliver a speech at the USY international convention some time ago.

Ralph Schwartz, a former counselor and rosh edah in the New England Tikvah Program, the founding director of the Breira Program at Ramah Berkshires, and the current co-director of the Tikvah Program at Ramah Wisconsin observes, “In each of these Ramah camps, the rest of the campers and the staff have gained tremendous understanding, sensitivity, caring, and respect for Tikvah campers.” Speaking personally, Schwartz notes, “My work in Tikvah affects my life, my relationships with others, and my understanding of our world. All of us are truly created in the image of God.”

### *Lesson 3*

**Tikvah families need Tikvah. Without it, their children would not reach their Jewish potential nor feel included in the Jewish community.** After families find Tikvah, they feel as if they’ve “won the lottery.” Although historically families learned of Tikvah by word of mouth from families with children in the program, through rabbis, or through other members of the Jewish

community, increasingly they are learning of Tikvah through online searches and through directories of camp and special needs programs. Some families report feeling satisfied that their rabbi or cantor knew of Tikvah through their own Ramah experiences, whereas other families report disappointment and are upset that their clergy never mentioned Tikvah *despite* their involvement with Ramah and their awareness of the congregant's child with special needs. Families typically report a shortage of Jewish camping programs (day and overnight) for children with special needs. Some families come to Tikvah after what they describe as “failed” experiences at other overnight camps.

Tikvah families, especially those who have discovered the program when their children are still young enough to benefit from many years in the program, tend to be very pleased with their child's growth and development as a result of their Tikvah experience. Parents report their children's increased socialization and independence through their camp experience. One mother reports that “sleepover camp is [my son's] opportunity to expand his social ‘circle’ and do so in an independent setting—away from mom and dad and school.” They are pleased that he has the same opportunities as other children to attend summer camp. Parents highlight opportunities to grow and mature socially, emotionally, physically, and psychologically, and to develop self-care skills, independence, and confidence. They are pleased with their children's opportunities to be with “typical” peers and to be involved in “real interactions.”

Many Tikvah families express their gratitude that Ramah provides their children with “exposure to Jewish learning, values, traditions, history, and ritual.” Whereas some campers participate in Jewish rituals year-round at home, one family (though quite involved Jewishly) notes that their son attends a boarding school and does not have ongoing exposure to Jewish rituals. Several families expressed frustration at the lack of ongoing Jewish educational opportunities in their home communities. “At camp, [my daughter] has received a wonderful Jewish education. This is very important to us—because she has not been able to attend religious school and receive a Jewish education because of her disabilities.”

Tikvah parents also recognize the benefit of Tikvah for the other Ramah campers. One mother observes:

Other kids learn to be more accepting and tolerant—it opens their eyes to something they may otherwise never be exposed to. Walls of ignorance and lack of understanding are broken down when they all live and play in the same environment. I have to believe that interactions with Tikvah campers help make the other campers and counselors more sensitive to and understanding of those with special needs and appreciative of their own abilities.

*Excerpts from a letter dated September 1994 to Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, then director of Camp Ramah in Canada, from Paula David, a Ramah Canada Tikvah parent:*

We have always loved Brian and been proud of his accomplishments. We, as his family, never had the imagination, the skills and the courage to push him in new directions that Ramah seems to have done just by existing. He arrived home from camp and immediately set the table, wolfed down supper and followed with *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals). As he pulled his various papers and craft projects out of his duffle bags, he serenaded us with appropriate Hebrew prayers, songs and words that had been part of his camp life. In spite of his deafness and speech problems, we were all able to recognize the tunes and words he meant. . . .

This is from a child that we thought would never have the capacity to understand what goes on in shul, never mind have a sense of Jewish identity. This is now the child that inspires his four siblings to accompany him to synagogue services and learn his camp songs so that they can all sing together. This is the child who gathers *kippot* for family dinners and makes sure everyone has a *sid-dur* in front of their plate. This is the child who wraps himself up in his *tallit* and *tefillin* and quietly davens when he is sad. . . . His family never really enjoyed or felt connected to a synagogue, mainly because of the reception (or lack thereof) that Brian receives. Camp Ramah has given Brian a magical belonging that we were unable to provide and are thrilled to see . . .

I know you look for special staff and you follow through with special training for the Tikvah staff. In this case, the word 'special' becomes overused, and there aren't really words to describe the bond and the unconditional acceptance that we've seen Brian enjoy with his counselors. Yaniv has become an ongoing part of Brian's circle, taking him out most week-ends and supporting him in Special Olympic bowling and swimming. Even though Brian was heartbroken when he finally accepted that Yaniv wasn't returning to camp this year, we were able to see how he was proud and excited to introduce and talk about Michael and Rafi. In many ways, our family now feels that Brian's counselors join our ranks, because they have lived with him and recognize the gifts he brings into others' lives. Brian's circle, and therefore his family's because of Camp Ramah, continues to widen and strengthen. Until the Tikvah Program, Brian, although he knew he was loved, never knew the wonder of having loving friends and peers.

Other parents note, "By having Tikvah in the larger camp community, there are great benefits—from understanding that there are differences in people, to acceptance of the differences, to working with the differences. . . . It's a win-win situation for all concerned. Welcome to the 'real world', where there are differences!" And, "Typical campers can see firsthand that people with special needs are not a monolithic entity, and each camper brings his/her uniqueness, as well as those special aspects of personality, adolescence, and social needs that all campers share."

## Conclusion

When the Tikvah Program first was created, there were few overnight camping programs that offered services to campers with special needs and that also were part of a regular summer camp. Programs geared specifically to Jewish campers were even harder to find. Now, after forty years, the Tikvah programs, and other programs serving campers with special needs, are integral parts of their respective Ramah camps. These programs offer opportunities and benefits for all members of the Ramah community. Nonetheless, such programs present special issues and challenges. The Ramah Camping Movement continues to grow and evolve to meet these challenges and the changing requirements of campers with special needs. The impact of the Tikvah Program, as well as other Ramah programs for people with special needs, is tremendous and is clearly felt throughout the Ramah Camping Movement and the entire Jewish world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Campers at all Ramah camps spend one period each day learning in a Jewish Studies class and a Hebrew language class. The staff retreat served to kick off the theme of the coming summer, where campers would be exploring what it means to be created “in God’s image.”

<sup>2</sup> There are many categories of blessings in the Jewish tradition. Some are for expressing thanks and enjoyment; others are recited as part of the three-times-a-day, fixed-prayer service; and others were formulated by the ancient rabbis for such rituals as lighting Sabbath or Hanukkah candles, using the four biblical species on the Sukkot (Tabernacles) holiday, etc. Just as it is a commandment to show thanks to God for things we experience through our various senses, such as food and beverages, pleasant fragrances, and rainbows, so too it is expected that people say blessings when they encounter the important or famous (e.g., presidents and prime ministers), as well as those who appear “different.”

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides writes, “One who sees an Ethiopian (a person with a different color of skin from what the rabbis were accustomed to seeing) or a person with a disfigured face or limbs recites the blessing, ‘Blessed are you God, King of the world, who makes living creatures different.’” One who sees a blind person or an amputee (this may refer to someone who is “crippled” or paralyzed as well) says the blessing, “Blessed are you, the True Judge.”

<sup>4</sup> Eleanor Eells, *History of Organized Camping: The First 100 Years* (Martinsville, IN: American Camping Association, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> For example, the organization Resources for Children with Special Needs ([www.resourcesnyc.org/rcsn.htm](http://www.resourcesnyc.org/rcsn.htm)) publishes a camp guide that is updated every year. At [www.mysummercamps.com](http://www.mysummercamps.com), one can access a link to “special needs camps,” and click one of twenty-four subcategories, such as Asperger’s, autism, cerebral palsy, developmental disabilities, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Blake, “Opening Doors: Integration of Persons with a Disability in Organized Children’s Camping in Canada.” *Journal of Leisureability* 23 no. 2 (1996): 1–9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Blake refers to a personal communication with the director of a Mennonite camp who said he became involved in integration because, “it’s just who we are and what we believe in.”

<sup>8</sup> According to Rabbi Mitch Cohen, the National Ramah Director, the Tikvah Program actually opened its doors on the campus of Camp Ramah in Glen Spey, New York. The Glen Spey site was closed in 1971, and all campers were transferred to either Camp Ramah in the Berkshires or Camp Ramah in New England. Tikvah was relocated to the New England site in Massachusetts.

<sup>9</sup> Herb and Barbara Greenberg, "Our Tikvah Mission: A Recipe for Leadership," in *Ramah Reflections at 50: Visions for a New Century*, ed. Sheldon A. Dorph (New York: National Ramah Commission, 2000), 140. See also "The Tikvah Program," *The Pedagogic Reporter* (American Association for Jewish Education) 30 no. 1 (Fall, 1979): 31–33. Also, Barbara Greenberg, "Yesh Tikvah—There is Hope," *Women's League Outlook* (Winter, 1987): 10–12.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Herb Greenberg.

<sup>11</sup> *The Tikvah Program at 25 Dinner Journal*, Herb and Barbara Greenberg Talk with William Novak, 4–5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Herb and Barbara Greenberg, *The Pedagogic Reporter*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication with Herb Greenberg.

<sup>15</sup> Ramah camps bring a delegation of thirty to fifty Israelis to camp each summer. The comfort level of the Israelis working with the Tikvah Program has increased every year since the program was established. Some returning Israelis even request to serve as counselors or live-ins in the Tikvah bunks.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with Bruce Lipton, November, 2006. Also, in B. Greenberg, "Yesh Tikvah—There is Hope," 12.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication with Herb Greenberg.

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication with Herb Greenberg. There were many variables that determined placement in bunks outside of Tikvah, and they included and were not limited to the following: (1) parental inclusion or suppression of data from schools and specialists; (2) school placement (children who were successfully mainstreamed throughout the school year were given an opportunity for regular placement); (3) medication factors (anti-depressants, Ritalin dosage, other central nervous system (CNS) stimulants, seizure disorders, etc.) were determinants in placement because of monitoring issues; (4) background in Jewish education; (5) successful integration in USY programs in the home community. Full regular cabin placement was always limited through the end of my tenure. One of the main factors was the fact that the camp had to deal with many socially and emotionally troubled kids who had never been considered for Tikvah placement.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Herb Greenberg.

<sup>20</sup> William H. Howard, *Exceptional Children: An Introduction to Special Education* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>22</sup> Tammy Arnow, "Breira B'Ramah Adds Another Dimension to Camp," *Mifgash Ramah: The Voice of Camp Ramah in the Berkshires* (August 2005): 9.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication with Rabbi Paul Resnick.

<sup>24</sup> Loren Sykes, "Parashat Ekev," *Derisbat Shalom* [e-mail newsletter] (August 26, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication with Herb Greenberg.

<sup>26</sup> Additional results from this survey are discussed in the chapter entitled "Social Climate at Ramah: Relationships and Motivation" by Jeffrey S. Kress and Michael Ben-Avie in this volume.