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Finding a gift at camp

by Adam Broms

It is Shabbat morning at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin and the edah, or camp unit, is together for morning services. A camper stands, trembling, at the front of the room, clutches the table and reads slowly from a card placed in front of him. Then he grins widely.

Beaming with pride, a staff member recognizes the significance of the moment and begins the Shehecheyanu prayer. More than 30 staff members and campers join together to celebrate this -- the first time this camper has been called to the Torah.

This is never an ordinary moment. But it is even more extraordinary given that this particular camper has developmental disabilities and was a member of Camp Ramah's Tikvah program, which mainstreams youth with special needs into the Ramah camping experience and is marking its 40th year this summer.

The impact of these moments is felt not only by the campers themselves, but also by their families, staff members and the greater camp community.

Campers in Tikvah often have a hard time fitting in at home, may not have many friends, and are seldom given the chance to fully develop socially or Jewishly. But at camp, Tikvah provides a safe space for them to feel accepted, develop friendships and explore Judaism in ways they cannot elsewhere. Tikvah gives campers individual attention to develop their social and vocational skills while integrating them into the broader camp community.

The program highlights a value that is not emphasized nearly enough in our communities -- that each individual has something to learn and contribute, and that every individual should have an opportunity for that discovery and expression.

As a Tikvah staff member for three years, I experienced firsthand the power of this incredible program.

Facilitating these experiences provided me an opportunity for my own discovery. The program encouraged me to rethink my approach to communication and collaboration. I pushed myself to find alternative methods for group development and new approaches to problem solving. My experience became not just about my campers' growth, but also about my own.

The impact is felt around the camp and well beyond the end of the summer season. As one example, the Tikvah program at Ramah in Wisconsin pairs 10th-graders with Tikvah campers for an entire summer. These chaverim, paired friends, spend time together, play games, take walks and create long-term friendships that are fundamental to a camper's social development.

One camper -- a participant in the chaverim program -- once said to me: "I originally thought that Tikvah was about working with people with different disabilities, but I realize that it is really just hanging out with people with different personalities."

This camper's reflection captures the gift that Tikvah provides for the entire camp and for all of us. It highlights the value of the individual as part of the community.

Since 1970, Tikvah has grown to include 13 special needs programs at eight Ramah camps across North America, and I am proud to have been part of it. On this, the 40th anniversary of Tikvah's inception, we must, as a community, reaffirm our commitment to inclusion and appreciation of each of our unique qualities.

Adam Broms, human resource associate at Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, is a graduate of George Washington University and lives in the District's Foggy Bottom. He spent 10 summers at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin.