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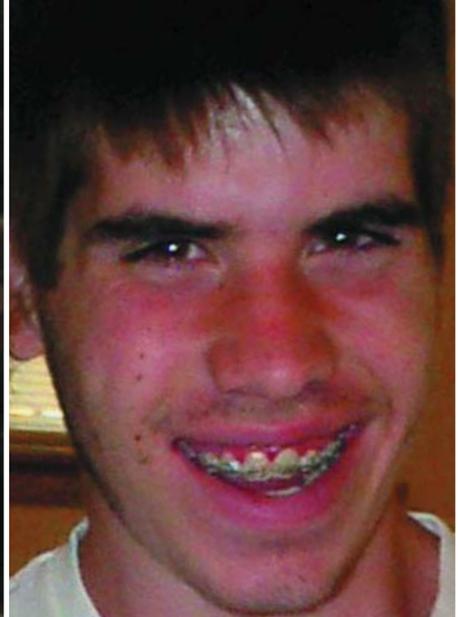
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**JEWISH CAMPING:
NEW DIRECTIONS**



STEINHARDT FOUNDATION



JEWISH CAMPING IN GOD'S IMAGE: Opening the (Camp) Gates for All Campers

by HOWARD BLAS

As they enter the gates of Camp Ramah in New England (CRNE), visitors are greeted by a sign proclaiming “welcome” in Hebrew and a guard asking for identification. The security guard may direct the visitor to the front office, the guest house or to a group tour of the picturesque Palmer, Massachusetts facility. What a casual visitor may not know is that the guard, the office worker, the guest house worker and the tour guide all have one thing in common — they are all graduates of Camp Ramah’s Tikvah Program for campers with special needs.

For 38 years, the Tikvah Program at CRNE has been offering overnight camping, job training and employment opportunities to campers with a variety of developmental disabilities, including mental retardation, autism, and neurological impairments. Tikvah, meaning “hope,” was founded in 1970 by special educators Herb and Barbara Greenberg, who believed that the program was “a moral responsibility toward those with special needs.”

The Tikvah program, an eight-week overnight camping program for 13 to 18 year olds with special needs, takes place

within the confines of Camp Ramah, overseen by the National Ramah Commission of the Conservative Movement. Tikvah has its own director and specially trained staff, but makes full use of camp facilities and resources, and it functions as a part of the larger camp community.

Campers in the CRNE Tikvah Program have a variety of developmental disabilities. Many have mild to moderate mental retardation. Several campers have mobility impairments due to conditions such as cerebral palsy or spina bifida. Language processing and articulation difficulties are common. Some campers function at a high cognitive level and have no overtly visible disabilities, but have autism spectrum disorders which require specific attention. Some have genetic disorders such as Down Syndrome, and there are also campers with rare syndromes such as Smith-Magenis and Prader-Willi Syndromes — conditions requiring unique expertise and individualized support systems.

Prospective Tikvah campers are carefully screened through an extensive application process. In addition to a detailed description of the child’s behavior and specific conditions, parents are asked to submit neuropsychological evaluations, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and evaluations from spe-

cialists. An in-person interview with the Tikvah director is mandatory.

Throughout the day, Tikvah campers participate in the same activities as typical Ramah campers. Campers begin each day with morning prayers, which are participatory and musical. Following services, campers attend breakfast with the rest of the camp, followed by bunk clean-up. Tikvah counselors accompany the campers to activities such as Hebrew singing, Israeli dancing, sports, swimming, boating and woodworking. Tikvah campers also participate in overnight camping trips and other outings.

To help campers keep track of their activities, the daily schedule, in words and pictures, is prominently displayed in the bunk. Tikvah bunks are fully handicapped-accessible and have a large amount of floor space. They contain single beds only — not bunk beds as found in typical bunks. The bunks also have high-quality lighting, air conditioning and specially designed bathrooms. The camper to counselor ratio is about 2.5 to 1, with seven or eight campers and two or three counselors living in each bunk.

Tikvah campers benefit from a highly structured, predictable program. Where possible, changes are anticipated and announced in advance. Tikvah campers often have receptive and expressive lan-

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guage issues and require patient, simplified directions. Many Tikvah campers have medical issues such as seizure disorders. In addition, many do not communicate illness or discomfort in the same way typical campers do. Tikvah counselors must therefore carefully observe campers for behavioral changes or other possible indicators of illness. Most Tikvah campers take medication daily — some as often as five times a day. This requires ongoing vigilance and close collaboration with the camp medical staff.

Since its inception, the Tikvah Program CRNE has expanded to include a vocational training program for select 18 to 22 year olds. Members of this program work at job sites throughout camp, including the guest house, mail room, infirmary and canteen. Vocational trainees live semi-independently in a house which simulates a group home environment. With the help of advisors, they participate in cooking, cleaning and other household chores. Graduates of the vocational training program are often hired as full staff members in subsequent summers.

Three years ago, CRNE initiated an inclusion program where campers with special needs are more fully integrated into the camp life. Inclusion campers may have developmental disabilities similar to Tikvah campers, or they may have a range of other, often milder impairments, including social skills deficits and language issues. This summer, two bunks were redesigned to accommodate campers with mobility impairments. Selected inclusion campers live in typical bunks

and spend their days participating in activities with typical campers. Trained staff provide additional support to the inclusion campers and their bunk mates.

The success of the Tikvah program is largely dependent on the opportunity for interaction with the larger camp community. Tikvah campers participate in camp-wide activities such as plays, dance festivals and Kabbalat Shabbat prayer services. Typical and Tikvah campers are often seen walking together, playing board games on a Shabbat afternoon, or watching the staff softball game side-by-side. This past summer, a twelve year old camper initiated a bat mitzvah service project where she assisted Tikvah campers with letter writing. There are also numerous formal opportunities for interaction: fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds may volunteer for “buddy” and “helper” programs, where they work one-on-one with Tikvah campers, while sixteen-year-old campers serve as counselors-in-training.

A select group of veteran Tikvah campers and alumni participate in a specially designed, multi-sensory Israel experience each December, accompanied by the Tikvah director and several Tikvah counselors.

Several Ramah camps other than CRNE, including those in Wisconsin, California and Canada, offer services for campers with special needs. Camp Ramah in the Berkshires established the Breira Program, a full-inclusion program

for younger campers with social skills deficits. Ramah Darom in Georgia sponsors an annual week-long family camp for families with autistic children.

There is clearly a need for additional special needs programs in Jewish camps. In order to succeed, camps must first define the range of campers they intend to support. For example, while campers with mobility impairments may require physical modifications to buildings, deaf campers may necessitate the hiring of specialists to

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assist in communication. Once a target population is identified, it is important for directors, key personnel and the board of directors to fully engage in the program and promote it within the camp community. Good communication with staff, families and campers is necessary to overcome potential discomfort with the special needs population. Resources must be devoted to the formal training of staff. Experts in the fields of special education and the helping professions should educate staff in cognitive and behavioral issues, physical impairment and socialization. In addition, ongoing support and mentoring of staff must take place throughout the summer.

Campers with special needs deserve an opportunity to experience Jewish communal life in a camp setting. The Tikvah program is a living reminder to the camp community that we are all created *B'tzelem Elokim*, in God's Image. 🌸