



## **CAMP RAMAH EXPANDS ITS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG JEWISH ADULTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

**MAJOR RUDERMAN FAMILY FOUNDATION GRANT ENABLES POST-HIGH SCHOOL CAMPERS WITH DISABILITIES TO RETURN TO CAMP, STRENGTHEN THEIR JEWISH IDENTITY, AND GAIN VALUABLE JOB AND LIVING SKILLS TO USE IN THEIR HOME COMMUNITIES**

(NEW YORK — JULY 22, 2013) Young people with disabilities do not need to say goodbye to Jewish camping when they age out of Ramah’s programs for campers with special needs.

Camp Ramah, a trailblazer in special needs Jewish camping since 1970, when the first Tikvah (“hope”) program was established, is leading the way in vocational education camp programs that maintain crucial connections to Jewish community for young people with disabilities, and help prepare them for employment and independent living when the summer ends.

This summer, more than 50 young adults in their late teens and early twenties are participating in vocational education programs at four Ramah camps across North America. The participants, with disabilities including autism spectrum disorders, learning and processing disabilities, Down syndrome, and vision and hearing loss, work both at the camps and in adjacent communities.

“For so many years, kids in Tikvah didn’t have the choice that neurotypical campers have to consider coming back as staff members,” says Elana Naftalin-Kelman, Tikvah director at Camp Ramah in California. “Now, with our Ezra (“help”) vocational education program, they not only have the option to return, but they also hold really meaningful jobs at camp.”

Camp Ramah in New England in Palmer, Massachusetts, is the site of Ramah’s longest-running Tikvah program. Participants in its Tochnit HaAvodah (“work program”) vocational education initiative do a variety of jobs at the camp, including running the Tikvah Guest House, a six-unit motel operated exclusively by young people with disabilities.

At Ramah California, Ezra participants work on campus at the camp’s office, supply room, garden, staff store, and music program, as well as at a local library and food pantry in the camp’s town of Ojai, California.

Vocational education participants at Camp Ramah in Canada in Utterson, Ontario, work in the camp’s laundry facility and guest housing. They also help look after the staff’s children and assist in cooking and art activities for neurotypical campers. In the nearby town of Bracebridge, they volunteer with seniors at a retirement home, and greet members and take care of equipment at a YMCA.

Young adults with disabilities at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin’s Atzmayim (“independents”) program work at 12 different off-campus job sites in nearby Eagle River, Wisconsin, including

retail stores, restaurants, a museum, an inn, and a daycare center. The owner of the Eagle Roasters coffee shop notes that, “the partnership with Ramah has made us into a better business, and really given a lift to our employees.” At the Conover, Wisconsin, camp, Atzmayim participants are employed in the business and programming offices, as well as in the sports and waterfront programs.

“Ramah partners not only with local businesses, but also with the participants’ job sites and schools back home, so that these young people will succeed year-round,” explains Howard Blas, Tikvah director at Ramah New England. “Disabilities and poverty often go hand-in-hand, and this is a coordinated and mindful effort to combat that connection.”

Parents are seeing the positive results. “The program itself is a natural continuation of the school program she finished last year and the life skills program she is currently in,” notes a mother whose 23-year-old daughter attends Camp Ramah in New England. “The Voc-Education program, while fun and interesting, also contributes to continuity in Sarah’s life, which is so very important to this whole population of young people.”

“[The program] boosted his self-confidence incredibly and gave him real skills that he used in working in the cafeteria of the Jewish day school and in the synagogue pre-school,” another parent says of her 26-year-old son. “It helped him see himself as a working adult, not a kid. It made him become responsible as an adult worker and made him feel responsible in an important way.”



*Leah readies the Tikvah Guest House at Camp Ramah in New England for visitors*

## **About Camp Ramah**

[Ramah](#), the camping arm of Conservative Judaism, operates eight overnight camps and three day camps in North America. It also runs a day camp and other educational programs in Jerusalem, Israel. The Tikvah, Breira B’Ramah, and Camp Yofi programs comprise the network of Ramah’s programs for campers with disabilities, which are offered at nine Ramah camps.

The first Jewish camp to address the need to extend camping opportunities to children with disabilities, Ramah also pioneered full inclusion models within some of its special needs programs.

The National Ramah Commission of The Jewish Theological Seminary provides oversight, educational planning, and coordination on behalf of the network of Ramah camps throughout North America and Ramah Programs in Israel.

**Howard Blas**, the Tikvah director at Camp Ramah in New England for the past 12 years, and a consultant to the National Ramah network of special needs programs, is a 2013 recipient of the Covenant Award, given by the Covenant Foundation for Excellence in Jewish Education. Blas was cited for having “widened the portal for youth with developmental disabilities and their families to enter and thrive in a Jewish educational environment and set them on a course for life.”

## **About the Ruderman Family Foundation Grant for Vocational Education at Ramah**

The Ruderman Family Foundation has awarded a \$50,000 grant to the National Ramah Commission to support the development of the vocational education programs at four of the Ramah camps this summer. The funds made it possible for Ramah's vocational education staff professionals to work together on planning their programs, for the expansion of the programs to include more employment sites, and for the development of camp-based activities and learning opportunities for vocational education program participants.

Previously, the Ruderman Family Foundation funded Ramah's new year-round programs for campers with special needs, connecting them weekly by videoconference so they can stay in touch with camp friends and counselors beyond the summer season.

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:**

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