

Jewish Camping

Jewish Camping for Young People with Disabilities



Howard Blas, Director of the National Ramah Tikvah Network

“Including campers with disabilities in summer camp is beneficial for campers with disabilities and neurotypical campers,” says Howard Blas, Director of the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England and the National Ramah Tikvah Network. In an article published earlier this year in The Canteen camp blog at MyJewishLearning.com, Blas encouraged parents to consider summer camping for their special needs children for the following reasons:

- It offers fun, stimulating activities
- Campers engage with friends and role models
- It is an all-encompassing Jewish living environment
- It is the next step toward independence
- Camp (perhaps most importantly) offers parents a well-deserved and needed respite.

This fall, the National Ramah Commission named Blas as the first Director of the National Ramah Tikvah Network, which was formed to promote the growth of programming for campers with disabilities within the Ramah movement and beyond. Blas has served as director of the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England for 14 years, and sees the field of disabilities camping as evolving and expanding.

“Many camps are turning to Ramah and our 45 years of experience for guidance as they start new programs and modify existing programs,” he says. “We have begun inviting colleagues in the field to participate in our twice-a-year Ramah staff training programs, and we enjoy working collaboratively to share programs and best practices.”

Many other camping movements and Jewish organizations have found ways to include and support campers with a range of disabilities. Camps often serve specific populations and age groups, and offer a range of approaches, from fully inclusive to somewhat separate.

What follows is an overview of some of the camping options offered by Jewish groups.



Tikvah campers cooling off at Camp Ramah.

The Tikvah Program was started in 1970, when Camp Ramah in Glen Spey, New York, which later relocated to Camp Ramah in New England in Palmer, MA, inaugurated its overnight program for campers with disabilities. Forty-four years later, the Tikvah Program continues to be a central part of the Camp Ramah community. All eight Ramah overnight camps and three of its day camps in North America now serve campers with a range of disabilities. In addition, Tikvah encompasses family camps, vocational training programs, and Israel programs.

Camp Chazak, a program of URJ Eisner and Crane Lake Camps in Great Barrington, serves campers from 8 to 14 years old, whose social delays impair their ability to function in a “typical” camp environment. Camp Chazak runs concurrently with NFTY Northeast’s Summer Institute, and campers enjoy a wide range of camp activities. Camp Chazak targets individuals with social deficits who are high functioning in regards to toileting, dressing, hygiene, etc. Many of these campers are diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, high-functioning autism, and other disorders involving social developmental delays.

The Springfield Jewish Community Center runs a number of summer camp programs for campers with a range of disabilities, including Summer Inclusion Camp and Camp Kehillah Special Needs Camp, a program they describe as “a substantially separate camp.” It is “for campers with special needs, but will work well for those campers who need extra support.” Camp Kehillah has predictable days, visual schedules, fewer transitions, and smaller group size than inclusion camp. Group size is limited to 12 campers per class, except for the teens/young adult age group in which up to 20 can be accommodated. Age groupings are flexible and appropriate.”

Yachad/NJCD (National Jewish Council for Disabilities) reports that they “provide unique and inclusive sleep away and day camp programs. Participants have the support of trained, highly motivated staff and, in the sleep away programs, sleep in their own bunkhouse. Each day, on an individual or group basis, they participate in camp activities with other bunks and campers. They enjoy swimming, boating, sports, arts and crafts, drama, learning, and more together with their mainstream peers.” Yachad says it offers “a complete camping experience, filled with warmth and care, and a focus on the development of social skills, fostering socialization, friendship, self-esteem and independence within a safe, secure environment.” Yachad

also offers “shadow programs for maximum inclusion, where campers are FULLY integrated into a typical bunk together with supportive ‘shadow’ staff to facilitate and promote meaningful socialization and inclusion. In these programs, campers may have learning disabilities or Asperger’s Syndrome with mild to moderate social skills deficits, and, while not able to function in the bunk independently, they can do well in the typical bunk with the support of staff.”

Special Needs Jewish Camping: A Few Facts

The following data were selected from a summary of research conducted by Lazlo Strategies for the Foundation for Jewish Camp. The 2013 survey garnered results from 170 camp staff members (from 124 camps), 262 parents, and 141 campers.

Campers Served

- The field of Jewish camp is serving 2340 – 2590 children with special needs
- The majority of the special needs population in Jewish camp have neurological disabilities. Few camps are equipped at this time to properly serve children with more significant/complicated disabilities.
- 43% attend public school, 4% of these children attend Jewish day school, and 24% attend a specialty school for children with disabilities. 43% attend a synagogue based religious school, and 47% had attended a Jewish day camp.
- 93% of parents were satisfied/extremely satisfied with their child’s experience at Jewish overnight camp.

Camp Staff & Programming

- Camps operating a program for special need campers most often have a designated staff member to oversee campers with special needs. This staffer engages with the family during the intake process, selects and trains camp staff, acts as a support during crisis situations, communicates with parents and other outside supports, and creates and evaluates individual camper plans.
- Parents of special needs campers are extremely satisfied with the way camps are infusing Jewish values/learning for this population of campers.

Barriers and Perceptions

- 75% of camps report that tuition for special needs campers is the same or lower than typical campers. 47% of parents, however, report the cost of overnight camp as a barrier.
- It is not as important as previously thought that siblings attend the same camp. 43% of parents report “it would be nice, but it is more important that they go to the camp that best serves their individual needs.”
- Parents report the biggest factor in choosing a camp for a child with special needs are:
 - 43% – The camp supports and accommodates children with similar disabilities
 - 34% – The child can connect to Jewish heritage and community

Young Judaism

The Art of Crafting a Jewish Identity at Camp

By Arielle Sebestyen



At the ripe old age of ten, I expected my summer camp experience to be like the movies. I anticipated campfires, bunk beds, friendships, and bug juice. Camp Eisner did give me all of these things, but then it stretched to give me more. I was not expecting daily services, open discussions about Judaism, and such a caring environment.

I was surrounded by Jewish traditions, both ancient and brand-new. I was immersed in a place where I could ask all sorts of questions without feeling self-conscious. Asking allowed me to craft a Jewish identity by integrating my personal beliefs with tradition.

As my first year at Eisner passed, I knew I was not done learning. Year after year, I felt the pull to come back, even after my final session as a camper. With the help of the Jewish Federation of the Berkshires, I was fortunate enough to go on a five-week journey the following summer. I spent the first week all over Europe. The next four were dedicated to exploring Israel from top to bottom with my closest friends from camp. I can’t do my experience there any justice in a few sentences, so I won’t attempt it. All I can say is that being in Israel was completely life changing – cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually. Consequently, the Jewish identity that I had crafted at Eisner morphed, grew, and strengthened.

Of course, being a camper and traveling to Israel gave me amazing memories. I will cherish them, look back on them, and discuss them for a lifetime. However, more important than the memories are the tools I received. I can now say with confidence that at any point in my life, I will be able to find a sense of community. Right now, I find that community in the Boston University Hillel and my two Jewish roommates. I also gained the tools to shape my Jewish identity. I have been given a foundation in tradition and the ability to question the world around me. I have no doubt that at different phases of life, my beliefs and circumstances will change. Ultimately, no matter where I go, I have a strong yet ever-changing Jewish identity to carry me through.

Lenox native Arielle Sebestyen is currently a junior at Boston University, majoring in Graphic Design.



AS ADULTS, CAMPERS ARE 25% MORE LIKELY TO DONATE TO A JEWISH CHARITY.



AS ADULTS, CAMPERS ARE 26% MORE LIKELY TO BE MEMBERS OF A SYNAGOGUE.



AS ADULTS, CAMPERS ARE 25% MORE LIKELY TO REPORT THAT MOST OR ALL OF THEIR CLOSE FRIENDS ARE JEWISH.