

RAMAH PHILOSOPHY AND THE NEWMAN REVOLUTION

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A new chapter in the history of the Conservative movement¹ began in 1947 with the founding of Camp Ramah. What started as a modest venture in response to the specific needs of various groups within the movement eventually became a major innovative educational institution with a far-reaching impact that is still evident today. Certainly, the motivation for its establishment lay in the mood and priorities of American Jewry in the postwar period. In the wake of the Holocaust, American Jews were painfully aware that they were the last Jewish community of any sizable proportions. With this knowledge foremost in their minds, the preservation of the Jewishness of their community became a vital necessity. Yet the means for ensuring the future of Judaism in this country were sorely lacking.

The Conservative movement, in particular, suffered from a dearth of rabbis, educators, synagogues, and schools. Camp Ramah was one answer to these various needs. Ramah would be a laboratory for the leadership training of high school youth. It would provide the Jewish Theological Seminary of America with a pool of potential students who could then be trained to serve the Jewish community as rabbis and educators. At the same time, Ramah would partially solve the problems of Jewish educators who were struggling with the lack of time for Jewish education. By utilizing the summer months, these educators hoped to intensify the level of Jewish education received by American Jewish youth. Of course, Ramah was established also to provide members of the Conservative movement with a Jewish summer camp for their children. It was this final reason which motivated the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues to support the venture.²

Though Ramah grew out of a unique combination of factors which came together in the postwar period, it drew heavily on earlier models of Jewish educational camping in the United States. Camp Achvah, founded by Samson Benderly, was a camp with classes as its essence and Hebrew as its official language. Established by the Central Jewish Institute, Cejwin Camps combined recreation with communal Jewish living. Camp Massad, directed by Shlomo Shulsinger, was a camp with Hebrew and Zionism at its core. These three camps in particular deeply influenced the founders and staff of Ramah, for many of them had worked at or attended one or more of these camps.³

The original philosophy of Ramah, then, was developed in response to the pragmatic needs of the Conservative movement and in light of the experience of other Jewish educational camps. In 1947, three values stood out above all others as the pillars of the Ramah philosophy: Hebrew, study, and Jewish living. All three would be emphasized in a total camp setting consisting of adventure, sports, and games.

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First and foremost, Ramah would allow a child to live Jewishly. Most children whose families were affiliated with Conservative synagogues had never experienced intensive Jewish living. Ramah would supply that atmosphere for them. As Ralph Simon, one of the key figures in the establishment of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin in 1947, explained:

It put a child in a total Jewish environment and enabled him to live the so-called ideal Jewish life from the time he got up until he went to bed And that was of tremendous value. Most children had never lived a complete Jewish life. Here they not only lived it, but they lived it without tension. It was the normal way.⁴

For the architects of the Ramah philosophy - Moshe Davis, Sylvia Ettenberg, Henry Goldberg, and others-Jewish living meant both ritual observance like Kashrut, daily prayer, and Shabbat observance, and moral behavior. They believed that Jewish living implied a certain sensitivity to the needs of others.

Conservative Jewish living was the facet of this concept stressed by those whose previous experience had been shaped by Massad. They wanted Ramah to be distinguished by a specifically Conservative religious practice, which for them included tolerance of those whose observance level was different from the camp's norm. By Conservative, these ideologues also had in mind a camp that would successfully accomplish the synthesis of the American and the Jewish environments. Ramah would not be a European-run or Palestine-directed venture but, rather, an American camp with American staff and campers who chose to live Jewishly together.⁵

In order to understand the key position given to the Hebrew language at Ramah, one must recall the needs of Jewish educators at that time. Striving to capture more time for Jewish education, they hoped Ramah would become a summer arm of Jewish education, not a camp alone. Since Hebrew was central to the curricula of the afternoon schools, it naturally assumed a role in their summer counterpart. Yet, Hebrew in Ramah was to do more than this. Educators were convinced that Hebrew would be learned much more easily in a camp setting. By creating a Hebrew-speaking camp, these ideologues had in mind the improvement of both the level of the campers' Hebrew and the quality of the supplementary schools as a result of the higher Hebrew level of the returning students. In addition to these pragmatic reasons, Hebrew speaking was crucial in yet another way: A grasp of the language was considered to be a fundamental part of the background of any knowledgeable Jew. Since knowledge was a prerequisite for leadership, Hebrew would have to play an important role at Ramah.

Study the third pillar of Ramah's philosophy, was so rooted in the reality of Ramah's potential constituency. The need for study in camp originated from two practical considerations. First, study was the only way in which Hebrew could be firmly established. Since the potential campers would not be fluent in Hebrew, formal study was essential to teach them the language. In class, campers could first learn the basic vocabulary without which a Hebrew-speaking environment could not succeed. Moreover, many campers lacked a basic knowledge of Judaism. In order to live a Jewish life, they would first have to learn some fundamental skills and concepts. Finally, on a theoretical level, the importance of study was firmly rooted in traditional Jewish values. Thus, at Ramah everyone—staff as well as campers, teachers as well

as those deficient in Jewish knowledge—would study on a regular basis . The camp would have a professor-in-residence whose very presence would symbolize the importance of study.

There was general agreement on the importance of these values to Ramah. Yet, different people stressed one or another of the values based on their individual philosophies. Conservative rabbis stressed the fact that Ramah would be “Conservative in conception and in execution, and it would be open to anyone who shared our point-of-view.” Educators, on the other hand, were not so concerned about the religious ideology of the camp. For them, Ramah would be first and foremost a place to .teach children a maximum of Judaism. A small though influential group of committed Hebraists hoped that the camp would teach youngsters enough Hebrew to create a vibrant Hebrew atmosphere. Through this they would keep alive the Hebrew movement in America.⁶

Not to be forgotten amidst this emphasis on Ramah’s unique philosophy are the general aspects of summer camps which were also important to Ramah ideologues. Their philosophy did not preclude swimming, physical exercise, adventure, sports, and games. On the contrary, they firmly held that Ramah’s ideology would best flourish in a total camp setting.

The camp’s actual program in the summer of 1947 closely reflected its goals. Mornings were devoted to prayer, breakfast, cleanup, study, and a general swim. In the afternoon, campers went by bunks to various activities, including arts and crafts, sports, and music. Evening activities consisted of programs like campfires, social dancing, and movies. Hebrew was central to camp activities, and both public announcements and camp routine were conducted primarily in Hebrew.⁷

The first Ramah camp season was an undeniable success, and the Jewish Theological Seminary saw the opportunity for expansion. Camp Ramah in Maine was opened in 1948, and Ramah in the Poconos in 1950. During these subsequent years, the 1947 summer remained the model , and the Ramah philosophy was essentially unchanged, though individual directors left their personal imprint on the camps they ran. It was not until Louis Newman assumed the directorship of Ramah in Wisconsin in 1951 that the ideological revolution began.⁸

Newman was seen as the perfect person for the position. He was a man with deep Jewish commitment who spoke Hebrew fluently and had a background in camping—all important qualities for a Ramah director. During the year, Newman had been teaching psychology at the Herzliah Teachers Seminary and had expressed an interest in buying a camp where he could try out some of his educational ideas. When this became known, he was offered the directorship of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin.

Though Lou Newman had never before run a camp, he had some highly developed theories of education to guide his new undertaking. His ideas were strongly influenced by those of John Dewey, and the progressive approach to education affected his thinking profoundly. Since Newman believed that a camp experience could affect a person’s character , he wanted to create an atmosphere that would build character , not merely one which would focus on teaching skills and Hebrew and providing a good time. Newman became the first person to introduce this approach to the Ramah movement, attempting a synthesis of progressive educational ideology and traditional Ramah philosophy. So devoted was he to both sets of goals that he was often

depicted as the director with “Torah in one hand and Dewey in the other.” Though he rarely put his ideas on paper, Newman did write one statement on his thoughts in June 1951. In it, he included his vision of the aims of Ramah.

In camp, we want (1) to create living situations through all people, campers, counselors, and all workers will become better human beings... We want (2) to transmit to our campers the knowledge of traditional Jewish values... We believe that the experience of our people as a whole, and of outstanding Jews individually, offer criteria to aid anyone choosing among alternative ways of behaving. (3) to teach a working knowledge of the Hebrew language, both in reading and conversation.

This stress on growth as a person, while understood by each of the preceding directors as being part of the growth of a Jew, had never before occupied so prominent a place in the Ramah philosophy.

One of the major problems Newman faced in attempting to implement his ideal was the lack of available models. No other Jewish camp in which Newman had been had tried this synthesis. Thus, Newman was motivated primarily by the many negative aspects of camping which he hoped to change: he was disturbed by the realization that the child’s welfare was often neglected in camp. He had seen too many activities which were managed from above by staff and which ended up highlighting the talents of the leaders at the expense of the campers. Furthermore, not only were the child’s needs often neglected but also, Newman felt, certain areas of camp were patently harmful to the child, for example, raids, stealing food, competition and prizes. That a child enjoys such activities was not sufficient criterion for encouraging their continuation. They were anathema to Newman, and he believed that it was necessary to structure an environment which would remove from campers the need to perform useless or destructive acts. Newman also knew that he did not want immature staff as role models. He was convinced of the necessity of hiring older, mature, preferably married staff who could better deal with the emotional problems of children and adolescents. He felt that younger staff who had not yet found their emotional—particularly sexual—identities could not properly guide their young, impressionable campers.

The closest Newman could get to a successful camping model from which to learn was the National Experimental Camp of Pioneer Youth of America. A record of its first six summers was published as a book, *Creative Camping*, by Joshua Lieberman, the Pioneer camp director.¹⁰ It describes Lieberman’s experiment in realizing progressive ideology, and Newman was deeply affected by it. Newman had even considered working at the Pioneer camp and had met with Lieberman. However, while *Creative Camping* was an excellent guide for Newman, it was an incomplete one, for the book did not, of course, incorporate the traditional elements of a Ramah camp-study, Hebrew, and intensive Jewish living. By attempting this integration of traditional Ramah values and progressive ideology, Newman was embarking on his own pioneer adventure.

Newman understood both his strengths and his weaknesses. While a good theoretician, he was limited as an actualizer of ideas. Therefore, in choosing a head counselor, he selected Bernard Lipnick, someone who Newman felt possessed this necessary quality. The two met

regularly on weekends during the winter and spring of 1950-51. Lipnick would read and listen as Newman filled him with his ideas; Lipnick became persuaded by the approach. The two were well-suited complements to each other—Newman the idea-man and Lipnick the implementer.¹¹

Most other members of the staff met with Newman individually once during the year when he came to Chicago. There, he sounded them out with several of his ideas. While they expected the summer to be different, no one, including Newman himself, knew exactly how it would differ.¹²

The beginning of the summer of 1951 was extremely difficult. Newman created a furor by announcing that there was to be no schedule. No longer would campers go by bunks to a prescribed number of activities. It was now up to the individual camper to design his own program. Specialists and counselors were available and eager to help out, but staff would not enforce a schedule nor push campers to participate in an activity. Their example and not their directive would be their chief avenue of guiding the campers.

The first week was chaos. Campers wandered around doing very little. Slowly, though, things began to take shape. Formal study marked one definite period of the day. Since classes were required by the Seminary, they remained a fixed part of the morning. Campers chose their own activities for the afternoon, it was Bernard Lipnick who devised the system whereby individuals would create their own weekly schedules based on their interests. In working out the mechanism, Lipnick had to reconcile the theory of giving children a truly free choice with the reality of scheduling activities. The availability of facilities, the number of participants required for team sports, and the age and sex of the campers involved were just a few of the variables that he had to build into a schedule of free choice, and this schedule changed weekly so that no one would be boxed into an activity that he no longer wanted. The campers were offered a wide range of activities, including sports, arts and crafts, music, drama, and even more study. Lipnick made it possible for the campers to choose any of these and also to schedule a free period during the day if they so desired.

Scheduling difficulties, however, were only half of the responsibility placed upon the staff by this new arrangement. The other part, more subtle, was in a sense also more demanding. First, it was the counselor's obligation to meet with each camper to determine his needs and help him make the choices which would be best for him. A child could conceivably spend the whole day in arts and crafts and never engage in sports activities. In general, such a child would be encouraged to diversify his interests, but there were situations when such a program would be considered right for a given camper. Only personal contact with and concern for the individual child could determine which was indeed the case. Second, counselors had to keep abreast of their campers' weekly schedules in order to know if the children were participating in activities. Clearly, this need to know each camper and his personalized weekly program placed an enormous burden upon the staff.

Other areas of camp life were equally affected by the new philosophy: since campers spent most of their day pursuing individual interests, a conscious effort was made to encourage bunk projects at other times in order to foster group feeling. There were frequent bunk meetings and votes to decide what to do and how to do it. This democratic process was extended to

the camp as a whole on the controversial issue of the Maccabiah, a highlight of the summer in previous seasons. When the time for the Maccabiah arrived, Newman put the question of whether or not to have this “color-war” up for a vote. Newman was very much opposed to having a Maccabiah; the competitive spirit and adult management of the event ran counter to everything for which he stood. Yet, Newman felt that to impose his own bias, however strong, upon the group would cause hostility and anger. Newman feared that he would lose in the long run, though he might attain his immediate goal: “There are many cases where when you win you lose.” Newman announced to both campers and staff in advance that he would abide by the outcome; it would not be an empty vote. Everyone in camp, including the director, had one vote. A majority did vote to eliminate color-war. Newman had gambled and won.

Social dancing was another controversial issue for Newman. Held on Saturday nights for the older campers and enthusiastically supported by the more popular among them, dances were often devastating for those who felt socially ill at ease. Newman and his staff were sensitively attuned to those shy campers for whom the activity was a potentially humiliating experience. In this case, though, the issue was not put up for a vote. First, it did not affect the whole camp. Second, Newman knew that there was nothing inherently wrong with dancing; the problem lay in the social pressure accompanying such an activity. It was decided by the staff to undermine this Saturday night ritual by offering a choice of activities at the same time. Alternatives were emphasized, draining campers from the socials. Slowly, the strategy began to work, until the socials were no longer held.

Newman’s ideas changed other aspects of camp as well. In keeping with the emphasis on individual needs, the bugle was eliminated, and counselors began to wake their campers individually. Group interaction problems also received special attention as staff strove to talk openly and resolve difficulties with their campers. By remaining true to his philosophy, Newman ended up eliminating many of the traditional, adventurous summer-camp activities. Color-war was one example; another was “raids.” Newman and his staff believed that raids were dangerous, antisocial, and unethical. When a group did go on a raid, Newman would be furious, saying, “The camp is yours. From whom are you stealing?” Yet, he was keenly aware of the potential problems posed by eliminating these events, and he knew that he consciously had to program other exciting and adventurous activities. Because of this belief, Newman invested in canoes, ping-pong tables, and power equipment for woodworking. He also introduced overnight outings into the program. Counselors suggested and encouraged activities that would be challenging, useful, and real. For example, one bunk built steps from the lake to the dining hall. To the surprise of the camp, the library was painted pink one night by a group of campers. Newman, ever-aware of the potential dangers that could result from undirected adolescent energy and emotion, encouraged healthy, constructive projects to channel these feelings.

The Judaic part of the program was not fundamentally altered by this new educational philosophy, and its structure remained unchanged. Formal classes continued. Hebrew speaking remained important to the staff, and much effort was devoted to planning special programs and exciting ways to improve everyone’s Hebrew level. In addition, the staff hoped to provide meaningful religious experiences, standardize the melodies and structure of religious services,

and teach ritual skills to the campers. Most important, they tried to serve as models of committed, observant Jews who were themselves improving their knowledge of Judaism, for they believed this to be a primary way of deepening the campers' commitment to Judaism.

This emphasis on Judaism at Ramah tied in with Newman's philosophy in two ways. First, his focus on the needs of the child was seen as an expression of the ethical dimension in Judaism and thus in harmony with Jewish educational goals. A potential Jewish leader, in addition to being knowledgeable and observant, also had to be a sensitive and mature individual. It was the recognition of the need consciously to foster this aspect of development that Newman brought to Ramah. Second, Newman's philosophy helped legitimize differences in Conservative practice. Variations in religious observance posed difficult problems at Ramah as the Teachers Institute sought to set policy and establish norms, especially for prayer and Shabbat observance.¹³ By stressing individual choice and responsibility, Newman transformed the reality of Conservative diversity into a matter of principle.

Newman attracted a core of talented young people to his camp. Believing that some people's personalities clashed with the camp's ideology, Newman attempted to screen his staff by choosing mature, non-authoritarian people who could work under his system. He also tried to provide housing for married couples in order to be able realistically to hire the mature staff he wanted. Newman worked closely with his staff and trained a group of young people who would later join him in having a major impact on Ramah and Jewish education in general. Some of these people are: Dr. Burton Cohen, national Ramah director; Rabbi Jerome Abrams, director, Camp Ramah in the Berkshires; Dr. Seymour Fox, director, School of Education of the Hebrew University; Dr. Joseph Lukinsky, associate professor of education at the Jewish Theological Seminary; the late Rabbi David Mogilner, former national Ramah director; and Rabbi Alexander Shapiro, spiritual leader of Oheb Shalom Congregation, South Orange, New Jersey. All of these men worked with Newman in Wisconsin, and all served at one time or another as Ramah directors. They and others who worked in camp were profoundly influenced by Newman.

Nevertheless, some people—staff, local rabbis, and laypeople—were not so enthusiastic about Newman's innovations. Several staff members opposed any change, and others merely preferred the camp as it was before 1951. Outsiders, on the other hand, opposed Newman because of his lack of formalism and his inexperience with public relations. This discontent eventually focused on the issue of cleanliness, for opponents were distressed by the dirty condition of some of the bunks and were furious that Newman would not force the children to clean them. Apparently, approval of Newman outweighed complaints, for he remained director of Ramah in Wisconsin for three years: Newman also served as director of Camp Ramah in Connecticut in 1955. He later worked for Ramah in other capacities, particularly as director of the Mador-National Camp Leadership Institute.

Newman and his staff were so steeped in Hebrew, Jewish learning and Jewish living that they were able to synthesize the original with the "Newman philosophy" and implement both in camp. However, the potential for conflict between the traditional Ramah values and the progressive educational philosophy was always there: For example, stress on discussing problems and group decision-making undermined the goal of speaking Hebrew. As one staff

member put it: “As long as we didn’t talk about anything, we could talk Hebrew, but when we started to talk about serious matters, then it became a problem.”¹⁵ Tensions such as these surfaced during the Newman years and have vexed Ramah to varying degrees ever since.

Despite the difficulties, Louis Newman made a profound contribution to the Ramah movement, and Ramah was permanently changed because of his efforts. While other Ramah camps remained basically unaffected by this new philosophy for many years, all eventually incorporated Newman’s innovations, though with modifications. The junior-counselor training program instituted by Newman was strengthened and expanded. Courses in education as well as those in Judaica were taught to staff. The practice of campers’ choosing activities was introduced to the other camps, though in modified form, since choices were offered less often than the original once a week. Color-war, Saturday-night socials, and bugles eventually disappeared from every Ramah camp. So pervasive was Newman’s impact that contemporary Ramah staff find it almost impossible to believe that Ramah ever condoned such activities. Thus, Newman’s philosophy became a crucial part of what has become known as the uniqueness of the “Ramah experience.” Yet his influence extended beyond Ramah as well, since so many of the people who worked with him in Ramah in those years were inspired by him to continue his work in other spheres. Many of them went on to become prominent Jewish educators who themselves have made significant, original contributions to the field of Jewish education. As one of the many people who worked with Lou Newman commented almost thirty years later: “He is one of the great educators of American Jewish life... Everybody who ever worked with him owes him more than can ever be said.”¹⁶