

An Emerging Vision of Ramah

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I am firmly convinced that in terms of social import, in terms of lives affected, Ramah is the most important venture ever undertaken by the Seminary. A few years ago that conviction prompted me to mobilize a project to produce a comprehensive history of Ramah, one that would do justice to the subject historically, educationally, ethnographically, and, finally, statistically. Months of joint effort went into conceptualizing the study, designing it, and identifying the right people to carry it through. We envisioned an extensive opinion survey and a final product that would comprise two volumes. But the proposal perished for want of funding and lies interred in the files, buried but not unmourned, for the proper evaluation of Ramah can never be achieved without such a multifaceted study. The achievement of forty years deserves to be demonstrated, soundly and impartially. The results would reveal the impact of Ramah on the entire course of American Judaism.

So permit me to start by doing a bit of justice to the historical record. Your invitation has given me a chance to reflect about past accomplishments. I know you want me to speculate about future directions, to project a vision for the next four decades, and I will offer at least some glimpses. But my training as a historian has equipped me with more hindsight than foresight, and I feel more surefooted scouring the road taken. To begin with, I shall emphasize the obvious: namely, that the Ramah experience served to validate the legitimacy of childhood. The bulk of Jews pouring into the ranks of American Conservatism came from a religious culture that knew no childhood. Nearly a generation ago, the French social historian Philippe Ariès wrote an electrifying book called *Centuries of*

Childhood in which he showed the lateness of the very notion of childhood in Western civilization. The commonplace often fails to register on our consciousness, and the ubiquity of children does not necessarily create the idea of a distinct and valid period of life preceding adulthood. I have long felt the utility of Ariès's insight for the study of eastern European Jewish society, where the idea of childhood was woefully underdeveloped. Play went unappreciated not because of poverty or backwardness, but because of a cerebral religious culture in which the process of religious education could not begin early enough. With the *ilui*, the talmudic prodigy, being the cultural ideal, it is hardly surprising that the child was viewed merely as a miniature adult. The drive to begin the process of religious socialization as early as possible chipped away at the independence of a stage in human development that should be governed by the innate needs of childhood. And that ethos has not withered with modernization. The resurgence of the *yeshivah* world in Israel and America in our day again deprives countless youngsters of the carefree pleasures of childhood.

Ramah legitimized childhood for first- and second-generation Conservative Jews. There was nothing sinful or wasteful about spending a summer in play. A child was to be treated as more than an empty receptacle for the mechanical imparting of knowledge. Camp life respected the need for individuality, for affection. Ramah embodied the conviction that childhood was a period of life unto itself, not to be obliterated by a premature assault of adult activities.

Yet, as we all know, Ramah was far more than just fun and games. It certainly had its serious and cerebral side. The life of the mind did not go unattended. Daily study was part of the regimen, and its character conveyed the essence of Conservative Judaism. The mode of study was undogmatic and open-ended. The sanctity of the text was not diminished by the use of one's critical faculties. No questions were rejected as inadmissible, and answers were not known in advance.

What distinguishes us fundamentally from the Orthodox is not the way we live but the way we study. The observance of a few more or less halakhic prescriptions does not constitute an essential difference. Professor Saul Lieberman, for all of his

ingenuous piety, would never have been invited to teach at the Yeshiva of Yizhak Elhanan, where the tools of modern scholarship remain as abhorrent as they once were at Volozhin. His supreme mastery of the Greco-Roman world and philological acumen violated the thoroughly interior mode of traditional rabbinic study.

At Ramah, youngsters caught a glimpse of Seminary scholarship. In the person of a rabbinical student or a faculty member, they witnessed the expansive approach, the thrill of discovery, the relevance of new meanings. Freedom of inquiry served to enhance the sanctity of sacred texts by endowing them with new vitality and wisdom.

But Ramah was not a celebration of individual freedom, a setting that released one from communal constraints. If the mind was set free, the body was not. The stubborn insistence on the use of Hebrew as a medium of expression epitomized the allegiance to ancient loyalties. The open society was beginning to suffer from a surfeit of self-worship, and individualism, the great achievement of the modern world, threatened to turn into narcissism. Amid this atmosphere, Ramah dared to assert the value of community. To speak in Hebrew was an act of self-denial and self-transcendence. It signified curbing the power of self-expression to identify with Israel, to appropriate an abandoned religious legacy, and to reclaim membership in the Jewish people.

It is true that Ramah's educational policy was refreshingly sensitive to the specific needs of the individual child. But so was his environment back home. What Ramah uniquely afforded was the opportunity to experience the uplift that comes from living as a Jew in a community governed by the rhythm and parameters of *halakhah*. Ramah recaptured the primacy of the group in Judaism. If public prayer in Judaism requires a *minyan*, then existential meaning for the individual is derivative. The *kahal* is the source of sanctity, and religious experience should be collective. And moments of such intense, collective experience of God's presence abounded at Ramah—*kabbalat Shabbat*, *zemirot*, Israeli dancing, *Havdalah*, Tisha B'Av, to name just a few. Ramah reminded us in an age of rampant selfishness that to be a Jew means to submit to the discipline of communal life.

Paradoxically, constraint bred creativity. The fervor of

communal worship at Ramah altered not only individual lives but also traditional practice. In time, Ramah gave rise to a distinct *nusah*, a recognizable liturgical mode. Great religious centers in the past were always distinguished by a specific adaptation of the common forms of prayer. The ability to generate such a *nusah* is the sign of a praying community. An individual may compose a *siddur*, but only a community can produce a *nusah*. Without benefit of a new prayer book, Ramah imbued the daily obligation of prayer with a unique blend of the modern and the traditional. On the one hand, it recaptured the participatory quality of the pre-emancipation synagogue; on the other, it steadily increased the amount of participation allotted to young women in the religious life of the community. At Ramah praying was anything but passive. Everyone was expected and trained to participate. Prayers were recited in Hebrew, borne aloft by impulses of song and illuminated by interludes of study. Education was geared to performance by all. Knowledge and community rendered the numinous accessible.

The diffusion of this Ramah *nusah* is tangible evidence of the impact of Conservative Judaism on popular observance. The eruption of the *havurah* movement in the 1960s and the substantial Conservative *aliyah* to Israel both elude explanation without recourse to the Ramah experience. Whether in Boston or Los Angeles or on French Hill in Jerusalem, the mode of prayer—informality, pervasive participation, fervent and melodious singing, undogmatic study, and varying degrees of egalitarianism—betokens the patrimony of Ramah. To be sure, the exposure to Ramah often distanced our youngsters from the Conservative synagogues to which they returned. The intensity of the religious experience and the intimacy of a supportive peer group were not easily replicated in the confines of a large suburban synagogue. The movement as a whole responded sluggishly to the needs of youngsters who had tasted of the probing and passion of the Ramah *nusah*. And yet the tension, for all its drawbacks, was fertilizing. Aside from spawning new institutions like the *havurah* and the Conservative synagogue in Israel, it contributed to the proliferation of Solomon Schechter schools and the gradual enrichment of the Conservative synagogue in America.

In the final analysis, what Ramah attempted to achieve was the formation of a Conservative laity. It may well be that the genesis of the Conservative Movement in America resulted from a confluence of "schoolmen" and immigrants. But through the agency of Ramah, the Seminary injected itself forcefully into the shaping of that immigrant population. Saturated with ideology, Ramah became an instrument of mass education affecting the quality of thousands of Conservative homes. Ramah disseminated the Judaism nurtured at the Seminary—a Judaism that pulsed with intellectual ferment, halakhic continuity, commitment to Israel, and artistic expression. If Zunz's Synagogue or Frankel's *Volksgeist* or Schechter's Catholic Israel ultimately delineates the parameters of Judaism in any given age, Ramah bespoke the Seminary's determination to mobilize for that task an informed and committed laity. Conversely, it was precisely this link to the Seminary which cast Ramah in its dynamic and seminal role in the drama of American Judaism.

But what of the future? To be cognizant of past accomplishments is to prepare for future campaigns. Unfortunately, I have been remote from the Ramah enterprise for too long to presume to offer a cogent and comprehensive vision. Permit me to settle my account with a few suggestions.

By nature I am a pragmatist and therefore will begin with the concrete. My first suggestion is to form an alumni association, despite the fact that the very success of Ramah compounds the difficulty of the task. If such an association existed, it would be easier to conduct the kind of quantified study that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Its large and diverse membership certainly would simplify the measurement of influence over time. But beyond attesting to past success, the association could contribute to future development. The campers of yesteryear quickly become the parents of tomorrow. An alumni organization would constitute an invaluable source of new campers and additional funding. Above all, it would help us to retain the allegiance and harness the energy of an elite sector of Conservative Jewry for the cause of the Seminary and the movement.

Secondly, I want to urge that we not abandon the youngsters who attend Ramah over the other ten months of the year.

It seems to me irresponsible to provide children with the high of a dynamic religious community without follow-up or continuity. We must assist them to readjust to the letdown of the ordinary religious situation, while sustaining their commitment to a loftier ideal. The framework for periodic contact is most suitable for the regional level and can probably be best effected by the local camp director, though planning and coordination at the national level must also address the issue. Above all, we should recognize the opportunity for coordination on many issues provided by the network of Solomon Schechter schools.

Both Ramah and Schechter are in the business of dispensing intensive Jewish education. Indeed, it is a heartening fact that a substantial percentage of our campers study during the year in Schechter schools. And yet I am not aware that we have made any concerted effort to bring the educational leadership of Ramah and Schechter together to identify areas where cooperation would be beneficial. Certainly differences in origin and aegis must not be allowed to obstruct an exploration of how each educational setting might serve the other, of how to avoid duplication in curriculum, of how to achieve social and religious continuity. We have barely begun to consider how we can marshal these vast educational resources generated over the last few decades for a bold venture to energize the whole Conservative movement.

Thirdly, I would like to endorse an idea put forth by a few of our friends and associates in Israel: namely, to open an overnight Ramah in Israel. With its impressive string of day-camps, Ramah has already created a modest presence in Israel. But the fact is that the quintessential Ramah experience is to be achieved only in the total setting of an overnight camp. As with Marshall Meyer in Argentina, the camp would offer a uniquely effective channel for the dissemination of Conservative Judaism among the youth of Israel. Linked to Noam—the Conservative youth movement—and the Tali schools, the camp would constitute part of a triad of institutions modifying and mediating an expression of Judaism increasingly in tune with Israel sensibilities.

With these practical suggestions out of the way, I would like to raise, finally, two theoretical considerations which ought

to inform our thinking on matters of education and prayer, the very heart of the Ramah enterprise. My impression is that the instructional program today at Ramah is little more than a patchwork, a quilt of bright ideas accumulated over years of effort without much pattern or coherence. I am not sure that the program has ever been thoroughly revised to reflect the momentous changes in the contours of Jewish education in America over the last two decades. A governing idea which would shape educational policy is, of course, intimately connected to the much larger question of the kind of Jew we wish to produce. And it is to this fundamental debate that I wish to contribute.

The youngsters who emerge from the Ramah experience should be endowed with an appreciation of the twofold character of Judaism, a pattern of living and a mode of study. While both obligate, the one is restrictive and the other permissive. Judaism consists of *halakhah* and *midrash*, of the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Moreh Nevukhim*, of prescribed behavior and undogmatic study. If the *halakhah* imposes conformity and continuity, then *midrash* encourages freedom and individuality, and together they combine to achieve a balance of stability and dynamism, constancy and responsiveness. The way Judaism is lived at Ramah inculcates the continued primacy of communal norms. The expression of religious sentiment is neither spontaneous nor arbitrary, but patterned and perfected. *Mizvot* are the bridge to the divine.

What we study at Ramah should convey the equal centrality of *midrash*. A few years ago Gordon Tucker, the dean of our rabbinical school, fielded a Seminary marathon team with a T-shirt motto reading "Jews for Exegesis." The phrase, obviously intended to mimic and counter the "Jews for Jesus" phenomenon, cut unknowingly to the core of Jewish thinking. For in fact, Judaism is a vast corpus of exegetical literature which resembles an inverse pyramid. Judaism rests on a canon, a sacred text never actually brought to closure. Each generation "deconstructed" that text to excavate the boundaries and meanings necessary for its own day. Through the ingenious instrument of *midrash*, the Bible became a center of gravity that permitted freedom of movement. We tend to conceive of the principle of revelation (*Torah min ha-shamayim*) as constricting,

but in the minds of our ancestors the very opposite was true. The principle was profoundly expansive because, unlike human speech, the word of God resonated with an infinity of meanings. The rabbis invoked the enigmatic verse in Psalm 62, "One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard; for might belongs to God," to account for the reality of polarities, contradictions, and multiple meanings in the biblical text. That attitude granted each age the right to confront the text afresh; that is, to plumb it for consolation or adjust it to new sensibilities.

It is that spiritual engagement and intellectual vitality that we must seek to transmit to our children. Our curriculum at Ramah ought to be conceptualized around the dynamic force of *midrash*. It ought to stress the centrality of the Bible not only as an end in itself, but as the basic text of the Jewish mind. It ought to give repeated evidence of the exegetical quality of Jewish thinking. The study of Mishnah and Talmud, of the various specimens of Jewish literature should be coordinated from the perspective of this ongoing dialectical relationship that never allowed the Bible to become irrelevant. In the process, I would hope that we could sensitize our students to the difference between the literal and allegorical meaning, between the *p'shat* and *drash* of the biblical text, and to the indispensability of both. A Jewish movement ready to settle for only one will soon find itself bereft of either intellectual integrity or religious passion.

The emphasis on *midrash*, on the dynamic character of interpretation, should also facilitate our teaching of pluralism. Diversity is a fact but pluralism is an attitude, and it is the latter for which we strive. The study of the history of Jewish exegesis, which is what I am suggesting, though obviously attuned to the comprehension level of our children, reveals an incredibly diverse literary canvas. The same text has yielded to an endless array of different readings. Serious interaction with a text is an unpredictable adventure, governed by a host of elusive factors. Its effervescent character is an object lesson in diversity and points at least to one of the sources of the variety of Jewish practice through the ages.

At this juncture, Ramah can also serve Conservative Judaism by incorporating the value of religious pluralism. The exten-

sion of egalitarianism to Ramah on the basis of the responsum by Joel Roth creates opportunities for religious participation and expression not formerly available, without infringing on the sensibilities of those unpersuaded. The responsum is most assuredly in the exegetical tradition that undergirds the halakhic system and thereby warrants the traditional egalitarianism adopted by the Seminary. The creation of two services in consequence is not a sign of weakness but of strength. We continue to interact, to study, to eat, and to socialize together. Flexibility grounded on principle has preserved the fabric of the community, while significantly enlarging the pool of talent and commitment for religious leadership.

It is that model of legitimate pluralistic religious expression that we seek to transplant to Ramah and even to the local Conservative synagogue. The abstraction of pluralism is coming home to roost; we must learn to live with it in miniature and not merely to advocate it globally. I have long cherished the picture of Main Street America where some half-dozen churches of different stripes can often be found side by side within the confines of a single block or two.

In truth, Ramah is really about educating adults, the future laity and leadership of the Conservative Movement. Historically speaking it validated childhood for a generation still hounded by the ghosts of a monolithic Orthodoxy bred in downtrodden insularity. But today it has the mission of countering the material blandishments and the spiritual deprivation of the open society. An experience rooted in the forms of Jewish living and the freedom of Jewish thinking, in the passion for commitment and the respect for diversity, in the power of community and the integrity of the individual, is not an inconsequential response.