

MITCHELL COHEN AND JEFFREY S. KRESS

Looking Back, Moving Forward

1. RABBI MITCHELL COHEN

THE CALL I RECEIVED FROM DR. SHELDON DORPH, then director of the National Ramah Commission (NRC), in the spring of 1989 changed my life profoundly. I was working as a litigator in a New York City law firm while also attending rabbinical school, contemplating some combination of law and rabbinic employment upon ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) the following year. “Mitch, do you know about the Camp Ramah up in Canada, near Toronto?” Shelly asked. “Their director, Judy Markose, is leaving that position after five years, and I thought you might be interested.”

In truth, this question should not have come as too much of a shock. During my junior year in college at Hebrew University, Sam Fraint, Glenn Karonsky, Rob Saposh, and others convinced me, after a wonderful ten-year relationship with Cejwin camps in New York, to begin attending Ramah, given its thriving communities of motivated Jewish youth and extraordinary role models for learning. “If you really aspire to be a leader in the Jewish world, you must go to Ramah in the summer,” they would say.

My first summer in 1979 as *rosh tefillah* in Ojai, California, led to six more fantastic summers as a *rosh edah* and the summer assistant director, even as I was attending law school, rabbinical school, spending two additional years in Israel, beginning employment, and meeting and marrying my wife, Cari. Throughout the 1980s, Cari and I became committed Ramahniks in every sense of the term, even though we had never attended as campers. (Now, of course, we are proud Ramah parents, with all three of our children—Talia, Danit, and Noam—completely committed to Ramah Canada, Tichon Ramah Yerushalayim (TRY), Seminar, and all their Ramah friendships.)

RABBI MITCHELL COHEN *is the director of the National Ramah Commission. After working in law as a corporate litigator for five years, he served as director of Camp Ramah in Canada for eleven years and as founding principal of the Solomon Schechter High School of Westchester for three years. He also worked at Camp Ramah in California from 1979 to 1988.*

Rooming in law school with Steve Goldstein certainly had its impact. His almost irrational passion for Ramah was contagious—he would return summer after summer as the Ramah Berkshires waterfront director, eventually founded its alumni association, and served as the president of its board of directors.

At Ojai, I found the leadership experiences incredibly satisfying. The thought of spending a career in this field was exciting and was fueled by consistent encouragement from Alvin Mars, Elliot Dorff, Robin and Gil Graff, and Etan and Debbie Milgrom, among others.

As I have heard hundreds of times from young Ramah leaders, there is simply nothing as satisfying as molding young lives, contributing to the Jewish and personal growth of children and teens, and bringing others closer to a deep and rewarding relationship to Judaism. All of this, and much more, takes place each summer at Ramah camps throughout the world.

I accepted Shelly Dorph's invitation to interview for the director position at Camp Ramah in Canada and subsequently spent eleven years in that role. Among the highlights of my career at Canada Ramah, I gained particular satisfaction helping the camp establish its Tikvah Program, rebuild and expand an aging physical plant, begin to create a committee infrastructure for capital fund-raising, revamp training for junior counselors and other staff, and continue to ascend in importance as a partner to Conservative synagogues throughout the region.

Lay support was crucial. My dear friend Ab Flatt served as the camp president for my first seven years. Together with subsequent presidents Stan Freedman and Sheldon Disenhouse, I enjoyed wonderful relationships with leaders who were passionate about the mission of Ramah, knew how to support the camp, how to lead the board, and who never let personal issues get in the way of excellent leadership. Most significantly, I was extremely fortunate to run the camp with four incredible partners, whose talent and dedication made the camp better and who touched the lives of thousands of campers and staff with warmth and caring: Dennis Maister as business manager, Debbie Spiegel as assistant director, Gloria Silverman, z"l, as board liaison and consultant in so many ways, and Howard Black, the summer assistant director, who would take time from his law practice each summer to come to camp. Running camp was always challenging, but the fun and the satisfaction that we shared far outweighed any difficulties.

After eleven years at Ramah Canada, I was intrigued by the challenge of creating and leading a new Solomon Schechter high school in Westchester County, New York. I gained deep insight into the world of formal education through my three years as the principal. Eventually, however, I returned to

Ramah as the national director in 2003, recommitting myself to the unique combination of informal Jewish education and camping called Ramah, which I believe continues to have a more significant impact on nine thousand campers and staff annually than any other experience for our youth.

National Perspective

For a camp director and upper school principal, the goals of the positions were reasonably clear—certainly not simple, or easily achievable, but clear. Enroll participants, hire the best staff possible, and run a safe and fiscally-responsible educational program.

When I began as the director of National Ramah, I quickly learned that no such definition existed for my new role. On the one hand, Ramah camps in the recent era have achieved a high degree of independence, with mostly strong and autonomous boards of directors and professionals responsible for all aspects of camp operations. National Ramah movement-wide programs and support can add tremendous value to an individual camp's program and operation but are not always considered essential to basic functioning. On the other hand, I continue to find that some of our most important work focuses on keeping Ramah camps deeply connected through policy and new programs, the sharing of best practices, and the convening of leadership training on many levels. And, of course, the NRC is there for all our camps when difficulties arise, as has been evident numerous times over the past seven years.

The similarities among the seven overnight Ramah camps are astounding, by far overshadowing the differences. As I travel to each camp every summer, I marvel at the shared culture, traditions, and attitudes of the participants. Whether in Ojai, Clayton, or Wingdale, in Utterson or Palmer, in Conover or Lake Como, Ramah camps are characterized by warm, caring staff members nurturing eager campers who are willing to grow and learn from their counselors.

Additionally, each of our three Ramah day camps continues to play an important role as a vehicle for education, as well as a feeder for our overnight camps. The successful growth of the day camps in Philadelphia and Chicago strengthens our Ramah camps in the Poconos and Wisconsin. The unique, hybrid model of Nyack continues to thrive as a community for over one thousand young people each summer, combining a day camp for young children (a strong feeder for Ramah Berkshires) with an overnight camp and leadership training experience for hundreds of young adult staff.

I am often asked which Ramah camp “has the best food,” or “uses the most Hebrew,” or “has the best sports program,” and indeed significant differences exist. We work best when this “competition” in excellence raises levels

throughout the movement. As we celebrate sixty years of camping excellence and build an even stronger network of Ramah camps and programs for the future, we must continue to innovate and develop, taking the best that each camp has to offer, and helping to ensure that such excellence becomes system-wide, whether it be in fiscal practices or educational growth, recreational activities, or strong leadership.

Recent Trends and Accomplishments

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ramah has experienced great challenges, as well as unparalleled success. In the early part of the decade, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent economic downturn, coming soon after the bust of the dot-com boom, created great challenges for enrollment. Most of our camps experienced some decline, but by mid-decade there was a significant increase. By 2008, over nine thousand campers and staff were participating in a Ramah summer program, the highest number in history. The current recession has hit many families and communities quite hard, but significant increases in scholarship fund-raising helped Ramah maintain its registration numbers. Nevertheless, camp affordability remains a great concern.

Of significant note is the ascent of the influence of the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC). Following his tenure as lay president of Camp Ramah in New England, proud Ramah father Jerry Silverman (“the best Jewish experience that my kids have ever had, and they have had them all!”) became the FJC leader and took FJC to new heights. Recruiting large givers from the Ramah movement, from other camping organizations, and from the larger Jewish community, FJC has been able to leverage major funding for program grants and, most significantly, incentive awards to attract new families to Jewish camping.

In summer 2009, for example, FJC provided Ramah camps with over \$200,000 in funding for new campers. The success of FJC fund-raising in recent years has challenged Ramah leadership, both national and regional, to consider the increased opportunities for fund-raising on a movement-wide basis. There are strong indications that more of our leaders than ever before are ready for these cooperative efforts and that a coordinated approach with major funders and foundations will inure to the benefit of all Ramah camps and programs.

Harold Grinspoon from Springfield, Massachusetts, a well-known Jewish philanthropist and friend of Camp Ramah in New England, created a division of his charitable foundation specifically supporting Jewish camps. Through matching grant programs, board development, and professional mentoring, the initiatives of the Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy have

helped Ramah camps raise millions of dollars for new capital projects and organizational improvements and are helping our boards and professionals to see fund-raising as more essential than ever to the health and future of Ramah. At a 2007 meeting of the Ramah directors, Harold implored us to “stop being so scared to ask for money. You people are geniuses at running great camps and inspiring Jews, but you have to have more self-esteem about fund-raising!”

In the last few years, the NRC has been able to secure major new funding for the strengthening of our camps. The Avi Chai Foundation, for example, has awarded the NRC a major grant for increasing the use of Hebrew language at Ramah camps, and the Legacy Heritage Foundation is funding innovative Israel education. The Jewish National Fund has funded staff training programs that bring Ramah counselors to Israel for Negev-based service projects, and the Jewish Funders Network has funded an NRC initiative to train our teen campers in youth philanthropy. The Weinberg Foundation provided a grant to enable children with special needs from poorer families to attend our Tikvah programs. Various individuals have provided funding to connect our young adult leadership with the leaders from Masorti youth programs in Buenos Aires, Berlin, Ukraine, and Israel. Most notably, a generous gift from Miriam and Mort Steinberg has helped us endow these efforts.

The NRC has piloted many other initiatives in recent years, not necessarily dependent upon major funding, but aimed at providing more leadership training, connectedness among Ramah camps and Ramah alumni, and positive messaging about the Ramah brand among Conservative Jews and North American Jewry in general. Our online development has included a vastly expanded program bank, Hebrew-language scripts for drama productions, resource materials for camp fund-raising, the extremely popular Ramah marriages website (www.ramahmarriages.org), and the Ramah College Network for high school or college students seeking other Ramahniks on university campuses. The NRC has provided follow-up programming for *shelihim* after they return to Israel to capture the enthusiasm generated for Jewish life of our Israeli staff, and it is piloting new programs to connect Ramah graduates on North American campuses and in major cities.

All these initiatives require staff time, and the NRC staff continues to grow. In addition to the hiring of student or young alumni interns each year, the NRC designated Amy Skopp Cooper as the national assistant director. In addition to her work directing the Nyack Day Camp, Amy now leads many National Ramah initiatives, working with lay leaders, donors, directors, staff, and others. Having Amy as a partner in the directing of all these programs has been indispensable to our growth, as her talent and energy brings excellence to all these projects.

Parallel to these NRC efforts, our camps have developed more sophisticated methods for seeking support from camp alumni and regional donors and foundations. While some of our camps have seen more success in fund-raising than others in recent years, all Ramah camps have demonstrated increased professionalism in development and alumni relations and show great promise for growth.

Toward the Future

Will these trends last? Some believe that Jewish camping, currently a hot topic in the first decade of the twenty-first century, will peak as a communal priority in the coming years. Others see a more optimistic future, especially for Ramah. To continue to thrive and grow as we face the future, we must focus on the following three areas: strengthening, expanding, and extending—strengthening our existing programs while maintaining our high standards, expanding the number of campers involved in Ramah programs, and extending Ramah and Ramah-like experiences to every season of the year.

Strengthening existing programs while maintaining high standards. From its inception, Ramah has maintained an elite profile, simultaneously creating great pride as well as controversy. Flying in the face of consumer fads and business trends in North American summer camping, Ramah maintains that length of session matters greatly—that the longer a child stays in camp, the more powerful the experience. Additionally, Ramah camps continue to require Jewish study year-round, provide formal, as well as informal education at camp, stress Hebrew language, hire a significant number of Israeli shelihim, and require staff, as well as campers, to study at camp. Ramah camps continue to emphasize a well-rounded camp program, where all campers learn outdoor skills and sports, as well as music, dance, theater, and the fine arts. Ramah camps strive to consistently improve in all of these areas, and successful advances are usually adopted throughout the movement through excellent collegiality and sharing on many levels. In addition to the excellent rapport among Ramah directors, assistant directors, and business managers, this sharing is the result of the establishment of new networks of professional collaboration among Ramah's education directors, development directors, and special needs directors, as well as multiple movement-wide staff training programs annually among camp staff at JTS, in Israel, and in various venues throughout North America.

Our partnership with JTS, Ramah's parent organization, continues to grow and thrive, especially through the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education. With the strong support of JTS, the NRC helps each of

the Ramah camps maintain high standards, usually in concert with committed board members from the camp committees.

Of course, Ramah achieves camping excellence not only as an institution of Jewish education. Every camp works hard to maintain high standards in sports, the arts, outdoor education, staff training, business practices, health and safety, and lay leadership development. Our camps thrive when they advance year after year in each of these areas, all of which must be maintained and strengthened individually and movement-wide.

Expanding the number of campers involved in Ramah programs. At Ramah's sixtieth anniversary celebration in 2007, JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen stated:

We need Ramah more. We can do more with Ramah and, therefore, we need more Ramah, more camps, more campers, more exposure, more hours, more students, more leaders, more *mitzvot*, more study, and more prayer that's enlivened by the wholeness of self that comes about only in a camp setting.

In summer 2010, Ramah opens its first specialty camp, Ramah Outdoor Adventure, under the leadership of Rabbi Eliav Bock, with generous funding from the Jim Joseph Foundation in partnership with FJC. Focusing on campers from Colorado, Texas, and throughout the southwest, but also accepting applicants from all parts of North America, Ramah Outdoor Adventure is Ramah's first truly rustic, environmentally-focused camp, providing our youth with extraordinary character-building experiences, while maintaining core Ramah values. This experiment with specialty camping, and with outdoor adventure in particular, will prove extremely instructive as we consider other avenues of growth in future years.

At present, other ventures for Ramah expansion being considered include the possibility of another Ramah California campus in the San Francisco Bay area, as well as possible new Ramah day camp programs in various cities. Some of our camps have started new programs in special needs education, building upon our forty-year excellence with our Tikvah programs. Most recently, Darom, California, and Poconos have started family camp programs for families with children with special needs. Berkshires established its Breira B'Ramah inclusion program. Wisconsin, California, and New England continue to expand opportunities for young adults in their inspiring Tikvah vocational programs.

Ramah Programs in Israel has expanded greatly in this decade under the leadership of Dr. Joe Freedman. After a few years of low enrollment in our Ramah Israel Seminar during the years of the *intifada*, Ramah became

the only teen program in the Jewish world to surpass its own years of record enrollment. Seminar now attracts well over 250 Ramah teen graduates of Ramah camps each summer and continues to experiment with new and exciting supplemental programs. Together with TRY and USY High, our academic high school programs in Israel, our Ramah Israel Institute (RII), serving over a thousand Israel travelers (school and synagogue groups, children and adults) each year, and our Ramah Israel Day Camp in Jerusalem, more people than ever are enjoying a Ramah experience in Israel.

Extending Ramah and Ramah-like experiences to every season of the year. Should Ramah continue to primarily be the address for Jewish youth during the summer only? Or should Ramah also forge new partnerships with our synagogues, schools, and communities, extending the lessons of Ramah informal education, the talent of Ramah staff, the strength of Ramah's organizational excellence, and the positive associations with the Ramah brand into the fall, winter, and spring seasons? This question, currently the subject of intense strategic thinking on a regional and national level, will have important implications for the future of the Ramah Camping Movement, the focus of the NRC, and perhaps the future success of the Conservative Movement in North America. As Ramah grows and the Conservative Movement contracts, Ramah can potentially play a more significant role with our youth and families. Defining that role is currently a crucial challenge and an exciting one.

As Ramah faces the beginning of a new decade and marches on toward the seventieth anniversary of what is widely considered to be one of the most successful programs in Jewish education, these and many other challenges will continue to require unprecedented levels of Ramah movement-wide collaboration and cooperation. In the end, however, nothing will ever become more important than that which has characterized Ramah from its inception—creating summer communities where children, teens, and young adults can comfortably and joyously grow as people and grow as Jews, forging relationships with others that sustain them throughout their lives. This is the essence of the Ramah experience. We are proud of our first sixty years, and we look to the future with great optimism and excitement as we continue our sacred work.

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THE RAMAH CAMPING MOVEMENT is indebted to innumerable people for their roles in bringing us through the first six decades of Ramah history. Lay leaders, donors, camp professionals, summer staff members, camp families, and Conservative Movement partners have supported Ramah with great dedication. Having JTS as our parent organization has been invaluable. Throughout his tenure, Ismar Schorsch, the chancellor emeritus of JTS, was committed to

the mission of Ramah and maintained close working relationships with the NRC leaders, inspiring us with his insight and vision. We are thrilled to continue this wonderful relationship with Chancellor Arnold Eisen, who spends a significant amount of time visiting Ramah camps and thinking about our future. He consistently cites Ramah as one of the most important experiences for our youth, encouraging all of us who lead Ramah to strive for even greater excellence. Michael Greenbaum, vice chancellor and chief operating officer of JTS, is the long-time secretary of the NRC. He is a true mentor and partner to me and the NRC leadership, providing us with critical guidance and support.

When the idea arose to create a new book for Ramah's sixtieth anniversary, I approached Jeff Kress, who became my partner and co-editor for this entire project and devoted countless hours to helping ensure that this book achieved excellence. Representing the best of the collaboration between Ramah and JTS, Jeff always brought his sense of academic integrity to this project and continues to be a wonderful colleague.

Lastly, as we continue through the seventh decade of the history of Ramah, we must thank Shelly Dorph, National Ramah director from 1989 to 2003. Shelly's passion and vision for Ramah laid so much of the groundwork that continues to propel us into the future.

2. DR. JEFFREY S. KRESS

I CAN TRACE MY JEWISH DEVELOPMENT by the summer overnight camps I attended. I started at a camp named after a Native American tribe. I don't remember much about the camp except for the Friday night ritual gathering at which the camp director, wearing only a loincloth and an elaborate feathered headdress, would chant incomprehensibly while stomping around and praying loudly to the god of fire. The god of fire (in the guise of a counselor hiding in a tree, as I later realized) would respond by sending a burning coal into the gas-soaked pile of kindling and branches in the middle of our circle, igniting a soaring bonfire. It made quite an impression on my bunk of eight-year-olds; we thought twice before misbehaving. It also made me glad that Judaism has not maintained a tradition of loincloths.

JEFFREY S. KRESS, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Jewish Education and a senior research assistant at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of The Jewish Theological Seminary. He also coordinates the school's concentration in Informal and Communal Jewish Education. Dr. Kress was recently appointed as the chair of the Network for Research in Jewish Education. He attended Ramah Berkshires in 1984 and from 1986 to 1989 and participated in the Ramah Israel Seminar in 1985.

I then spent several summers at a non-denominational Zionist camp, followed by a few summers at an Orthodox, politically right-leaning, Zionist camp. By my freshman year in high school (an Orthodox day school) I was, perhaps understandably, quite confused! I tried Ramah Berkshires at the suggestion of a close friend in high school. It would be a mistake to describe this decision as motivated by some deep connection to—or desire to explore—the Conservative Movement. At the time, what I knew about the Conservative Movement could be summarized by four words: *not Orthodox, not Reform*. I tried Ramah because as a student in an Orthodox day high school from a nominally Conservative family, I was looking for a more relaxed summer, religiously speaking. For me, it took some time for the Ramah experience *to take*, as it were. Starting Ramah at the age of fourteen in the oldest *edah* posed some social challenges. I felt like a newcomer to Ramah. It seemed like some of my bunkmates had been attending Ramah from birth. Actually, some of my bunkmates—being “staff brats”—*had* attended Ramah from birth (or before, though I am not sure if in utero experiences count). There was a lot of shared history—at least the type of “history” that results from years of confabulated memories—at the camp that was very much alive in the minds of my fellow campers: “Remember when Matt and Sarah [names changed to protect the innocent and also because, frankly, I cannot remember the real names of the people in question] messed up their lines in the Bogrim play?” or “Our swim instructor is so much better this year! Remember last year . . . ?”

It took a few years—a trip to Israel, working on *tzevet mayim*—for there to be enough history for me to have something about which I could reminisce along with the Ramah lifers. It still surprises me sometimes that Ramah has become a part of my life now.

Despite my late start and my initial ignorance of Conservative Judaism, Ramah came to be a very meaningful place for me. To me, Ramah’s impact was augmented by my experience at college. Socially, there was overlap between my “camp friends” and my “college friends,” many of whom attended one of the Ramah camps as youth, and several of whom spent summers with me at Berkshires during our college years. Regardless of which of the camps my friends attended, Ramah experiences provided a common shorthand that was important in making connections in a new, large, diverse setting such as college. Also, through Ramah and my campus Hillel, I learned that there were Conservative (and Reform and Reconstructionist and non-denominational) Jews who took their Judaism *very* seriously and were deeply engaged in the Jewish tradition (though the traditions in which they were engaged looked very different from one another). I learned to think in terms of *differently* Jewish, not *more* or *less* Jewish. Though the term would not become a buzzword

for several years, I came to appreciate Jewish pluralism. And, I started to learn that Conservative Judaism could be defined by what it *is* and not by what it *is not*.

Ramah also had a very personal impact on my life in a way that is easy to observe. I spent part of my winter break during my junior year in college at the lovely Homowack Hotel in the Catskills as part of the Weinstein Staff Development Program. It was there that I met my wife, Adena Lebeau, who was at the time a Ramah Wisconsin staff member (yes, we are a Berkshires-Wisconsin intermarriage, or perhaps a Wisconsin-Berkshires intermarriage; in either case we have successfully come to terms with this). Other elements of impact are less visible. One of my first “teaching” experiences, for example, was at the *agam* and I have occasionally thought that (almost) everything I know about Jewish education I learned on the Ramah waterfront:

- The importance of attending to the social and emotional elements of learning along with a focus on “content”—I knew that I was teaching much more than proper backstroke form.

- The impact an educator could have even when not formally teaching and the need to create structures to foster meaningful educator-learner relationships.

- That with appropriate motivation, students are willing (happy, actually) to take part in even repetitive tasks that might otherwise seem “boring” (even treading water can be fun!).

- That complex outcomes can be accomplished when broken down into small and simple steps and that everyone can make progress toward those outcomes.

The fact that I was teaching swimming and canoeing is hardly relevant. Standing in front of a class at JTS or in front of a group of professionals at a professional development seminar, I believe there is a certain line that I can trace to the Ramah experience—in particular, the confidence to speak in front of a group. That first experience of standing on stage and leading the entire camp in song or cheer is somewhere below the surface.

My Ramah experience also blurred the distinction in my mind between learning and “fun.” The campers I worked with were developing as people and as Jews, but aside from the *kittot*, this was achieved through relationships and experiences, not lesson plans. As a Jewish educational researcher, I am interested in a related blurring, that of so-called *formal* and *informal* education. Further, I have come to appreciate Ramah not only as a place where learning happens but also as a setting from which we—Jewish educational researchers and practitioners—can learn. Over the years, Ramah has contributed broadly to Jewish educational theory, research, and practice. It has done so

both through formal research and through serving as a testing ground for new ideas and as an inspiration for many Jewish educators. I am glad to be a part of Ramah's sixtieth-anniversary celebration and am honored to work together with Ramah's professional and lay leaders. I know that Ramah will continue to be a *mofet* (exemplar).

I conclude with a few words of acknowledgment. I have learned much from my collaboration with my co-editor, Rabbi Mitch Cohen, who brought his passion for Ramah and his thoughtful and caring leadership to this project. Mort Steinberg's work with the Reflections helped make that section a reality. It has been an honor to work together with Ramah's professional and lay leaders on this book, on Ramah's sixtieth-anniversary conference and celebration, and on other projects. I echo Mitch Cohen's acknowledgement of these individuals. In particular, Nancy Scheff was the engine that kept this project moving, providing the needed boost and momentum, as well as substantive input that greatly enhanced the product. When I first came to JTS, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch (now Chancellor Emeritus) designated me a member of the National Ramah Commission, and Dr. Aryeh Davidson (former dean) further encouraged my involvement with Ramah. My work has been further supported by Chancellor Arnold Eisen, Dr. Steve Brown (former dean), and Dean Barry Holtz. My colleagues at the Davidson School and the Department of Jewish Education at JTS have been influential in my thinking and research. Co-teaching with Cheryl Magen taught me much about the world of Ramah and Jewish camping. My thanks to Dr. Maurice Elias for all of his ongoing support and guidance. Finally, I thank my wife and fellow Ramahnik, Adena Lebeau, and my children, Ezra and Kira, for all of their love and support.