Following Up on Intensive Jewish Experiences

by AMY L. SALES

At her bat mitzvah, my daughter stood before the congregation and explained that she desired to live at home and go to school for ten months because she knew that, in return, she got to go to camp for two months. The former was payment for the latter. A true camper, she divides the year into the “two months” and the “ten months.” Unfortunately, for many such children, Jewish life and learning exists almost exclusively during the two months. Is it feasible to bring the two months into the ten, to extend the Jewish possibilities of camp into the school year?

Three main qualities give Jewish camp its power. One is its intensiveness. Campers are immersed 24 hours a day in a special community and place. They cannot go home at the end of the day, and their contact with the outside world is limited. Unable to leave, they must deal with whatever situation arises. Time is compressed: Relationships form quickly and strongly, community is built almost overnight, and participants soon take on behaviors appropriate to the program. They literally eat, sleep and breathe the experience.

The second quality is separateness from home. Camp works in large measure because it is not home. Removed from everyday life and from the everyday self, participants are able to try on new identities (note the prevalence of camp nicknames), experiment with new behaviors (note widespread, excited reports of first-time experiences), and make new friends.

The third quality is its finitude. The camp experience is powerful because it ends. The preciousness of camp — what makes participants relish the experience and yearn for it during the year — is the fact that, unlike school, it does not seem to go on and on. Rather, it has a trajectory that builds to a climax (think final banquet) and ends with both exhilaration and tears.

Given these qualities, the goal of follow-up cannot be to make home like camp or to extend camp into the school year. Given the reality of life, school-year programs cannot be immersive. Given the importance of separateness, camp needs to maintain its distinctiveness. And given the preciousness of limited time, it must end and should not be drawn into the school year.

This analysis suggests several possible avenues for camp follow-up.

1. **Camps can stay on message year round.** Unlike junk mail, communications from camp are welcomed and read. Camps can use this foot in the door not only to promote camp but also to continue Jewish education in the style of camp. Camp CDs with Jewish prayers, blessings, songs and other camp tunes have met with success. Counselors and campers report putting the music on their iPods, listening to it during the year, and sharing it with others. With their creativity and energy, camps could surely find other ways to use communication tools to maintain and further Jewish learning in the camp style during the year.

2. **Educators back home can learn from camp.** Even though the immersive quality of camp cannot be reproduced back home, the principles of Jewish life and learning at camp can be adapted to other settings. For example, campers have great camp spirit: They take pride in their camp and feel that they are part of something special. Camps intentionally foster this spirit with all-camp events, tee-shirts, traditions, inter-camp rivalries and the like. Children have little such feelings for their religious schools. They evince no sense of school spirit or of being a part of a special community. But if educators examined how community spirit is fostered at camp, they could abstract the general principles and adapt them to the school setting.

3. **Programmers back home can take advantage of camp friendship networks.** Camp friends are special, in part because of shared experiences and the intensity of living together day in and day out and in part because of the camp’s intentional focus on friendships, group dynamics and teamwork. A participant on another immersive summer experience — a teen trip to Israel — once wrote to me the following: “Living with people for a straight month, having Shabbat services with them, not showering for four days with them, singing with them… brought me closer to these people than I have ever been to anyone and taught me a lot about myself.” These friendships are a gift to programmers who can use them to build post-camp group experiences — whether organized formally or informally, in-person or on-line.

4. **Institutions can create camper-friendly settings where skills learned at camp can be exercised during the year.** When done well, Jewish life is seamlessly integrated into the camp experience. Campers sing Birchat Hamazon with all of the noise, hand motions, and enthusiasm that they do any camp song; they shout out “boker tov” in the morning as if speaking Hebrew were normal; they light the havdallah candle and sing with arms linked as if they always marked Shabbat’s ending. Counselors are sometimes able to recreate the camp experience at Hillel, but there are few places for campers to do so. When the synagogue tries to mimic camp, the effort is seen as “lame.” The fact that Jewish behaviors are learned and engaged in with gusto at camp tells us that they are possible. It seems that we simply have not as yet found the way to create such environments back home.

At the very least, educators can work with camps to coordinate learning. For example, the child who learns about Israel from the schlichim at camp should be given the opportunity to study about Israel in school, to communicate with an Israeli pen pal during the year, to visit Israel on a community trip, to attend an Israeli film festival, to meet the Israeli consulate, to do Israeli cooking in scouts, and so on. Camp can introduce and motivate the learning; the local community can follow up and build on this learning.

Together, the two-months and the ten-months could create a spiral of learning.

Recently, there have been calls for making a Jewish camp experience mandatory for children in congregational schools and for extending camp beyond the summer months. These calls are not surprising, but they are misguided. The Jewish community regularly shifts focus from one arena to another, always in search of the next big thing — the magic bullet that will make more committed Jews out of its children. Unfortunately, the institution in the spotlight is often expected to be the be-all and end-all of Jewish education. As the focus moves to summer camp, the field can easily become freighted with unrealistic expectations and demands for action outside of its realm. Rather, we should envision a community with a series of worthwhile Jewish educational experiences and a mechanism for assuring that, once engaged, participants readily move from experience to experience. Camp alone cannot create committed and educated Jews, but rather needs to be part of a continuum of Jewish education. The two months can best serve the ten months by perfecting their own realm, by providing insight into their educational principles, by building strong Jewish social networks, and by inspiring institutions back home to think anew about how they can capture the imagination of Jewish children and youth.

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