MAKE YOURSELF A FRIEND AT A JEWISH SUMMER CAMP

BY AMY I. SALES

THE RAMAH CAMPS, a jewel of the Conservative movement, set their clocks to Ramah time, which is an hour off from time in the real world. When I first visited these camps when I was working on a national study of Jewish summer camps, I found the shift curious. Summer days are long and lazy and although people at camp are aware of meal time, swim time, and tefillah time, they seem unconcerned with 10 o’clock versus 11.

I have come, however, to appreciate the symbolism of the time change. It is another way in which camp is set apart from life back home, separate from the rest of the world, a cultural island. It also reinforces the message that camp is not about time. It’s about life lived in the here and now.

The research, commissioned by the AVI CHAI Foundation, took us to 22 Jewish overnight camps across the country, including several Ramah camps. It also gave us an opportunity to survey more than 2,000 staff members and 4,000 parents. The study was to focus on camp as a Jewish educational institution. What emerged was an understanding of the power of Jewish friendships. Education at Jewish camps, including Ramah, as important as it is, is trumped by the formation of friendships that can change the Jewish life trajectory of a camper or counselor.

Friendships are central to life.

We documented this simple truth by asking parents and staffers to rate 13 aspects of life in terms of how much each one defines them and their lives. Friendships were by far the number 1 item on the list: More than 80 percent of the parents and 90 percent of the staff said that friendships “very much” or “totally” define them. Friendships supersede everything else – professional achievement, intellectual growth and challenge, artistic and cultural expression, political involvement or social activism, physical fitness, spirituality, Jewish learning, Israel, and synagogue life.

The Jewish character of these friendships varies.

Parents were asked how many of their own and their children’s closest friends are Jewish. The answers (none, a few, half, most, or all) describe the Jewish density of their social circles. Across the camps, almost half the children have friendship circles that are predominantly Jewish while two-thirds of the parents do. On average, the children have sparser Jewish social circles than their parents do.

Importantly, results vary significantly by denomination. Those who identify with the Conservative movement are much more likely than Reform, Reconstructionist, or secular Jews to surround themselves with Jewish friends. Nonetheless, even within our movement, the differential between parents and children holds.

There are two possible explanations. Perhaps we are seeing an age difference. If so, once the campers grow up, graduate college, and settle down, they may feel closer to other...
Jews and begin to look like their parents in terms of friendship choices. Or perhaps this is a cohort effect. It is quite possible that today’s young people are building their friendships differently than the way their parents did. They are more open, less concerned with ethnicity, race, and religion, and more disdainful of what they might consider to be their parents’ narrow, parochial choices. If so, their friendship patterns are likely to continue into adulthood.

Camp creates Jewish friends.

Data from our surveys and our research on Jewish young adults consistently suggest that camp is the great source of Jewish friendships. Those who attended or worked at a Jewish summer camp invariably have denser Jewish social circles than those who did not. For example, we looked at a matched sample of parents who are similar to our camp families but who did not choose to send their child to a Jewish overnight camp. There are virtually no differences between these families. They are the same in income, affiliation, Jewish education, volunteerism for Jewish causes, and the like. The only differences are that the families made different choices about camp, and that the children who do not attend Jewish overnight camp have significantly sparser Jewish friendship circles than those who do.

Close friendships that began at camp abound. Sixty-six percent of the campers met at least one of their closest friends at camp and 80 percent were with at least one of their closest friends at camp the year of our study. Going to a Jewish camp raises the likelihood that a close friendship will be a Jewish friendship.

Why does any of this matter?

Return rate is the coin of the realm for Ramah, and not just because it is good business. To the extent that camps work magic, as many of us believe they do, it happens because they have our children for more than a few weeks one summer. When children return, year after year, the camp gets to touch their lives at different ages and stages, from middle school, past bar mitzvah, into high school, and in some cases into college and young adulthood if they stay on as CITs and staff. All things being equal, our research shows that the most important factor in whether a camper returns is his or her camp friends. The second most powerful factor is parental satisfaction. Even if the parent is not completely satisfied but the child has friends at camp, you should bet on the child returning. Such is the power of friendships.

It is also the case that all things being equal, the primary reason staffers return to camp is their friends. Camp is every bit as important to these young adults as it is to the campers. Many are college students on the brink of making big life decisions about career, life partner, and worldview. From a communal perspective, or from a Jewish parent’s perspective, we want them to be at camp. But they do not go for the Jewish community and they do not go for their parents. They, too, go for their friends.

In Jewish life we are always playing the odds, but the idea is to stack the deck. A reanalysis of data from the 2000 National Jewish Population Study suggests that the Jewish density of someone’s high school social circle is directly correlated with his or her adult Jewish life, including marriage choice. Who your friends are now can make a big difference in the future.

It’s not just about the numbers.

Our survey also gathered thousands of comments from parents, many of whom wrote glowingly about the friends their child made at camp. Camp friendships are not like friendships back home. There is something special about them because they are born of living together intensively, 24/7, over a period of weeks or months, in an isolated youth community that has its own sense of time and is apart from the outside world and all of its distractions. They are friendships grown in the fertile soil of camp fun, creativity, and teamwork.

The camps know that relationships are central to their success, that if there are good friends and a strong sense of community—camp spirit—campers and staff will return and alumni will stay connected for years. Camps also know that these connections are essential to their capacity to fulfill their (continued on page 61)
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Jewish mission. Without friendships and community, the educational program is meaningless. Children do not come to camp for the education. Once they are there, they participate willingly in educational activities, not for the content but for the chance to be with their friends.

Ramah camps, I would suggest, are a model for the kind of institutions we want for our children and for ourselves. Our schools, synagogues, and other organizations could learn much from Ramah. They could learn to shift the lens from content to process, from the quality of the educational material to the quality of the relationships, from the importance of knowing “stuff” to the importance of feeling a part of something.

It is also a shift from agendas and timelines to here-and-now experiences. Yet, every year, as the end of the season approaches, the sense of time runs up - the precious days dripping away, parents’ arrival imminent. We visited the camps for only a few days each, but leaving and having to change our watches to sync once more with reality was jarring. No sooner were we out the gates then we missed camp.

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I was drawn to “September 1944 – Shabbat in Paris” by the photo of the banks of the Seine. I was born in Paris and lived there then, and that’s how I remember it. My home was not very observant but I distinctly remember one holiday, either before or during the war, when my father held my hand and took me to the synagogue in rue Notre-Dame de Nazareth.

How amazing to read Rabbi Nadich’s memoir about the service held in the Grand Synagogue in Paris after the city was liberated. Some years ago I interviewed an American soldier, Jules Doneson, about the Simchat Torah service. His story appeared in my book This Jewish Life, Stories of Discovery, Connection and Joy. How interesting to come across an account of that incredible time from the other side of the bimah.

Shira Doneson Klein told me that as a result of the article, she had been in touch with Chaplain Nadich’s daughters. What a small world it is!

Debra Darvick

I too experienced Shabbat at this beautiful synagogue. While not as poignant as the author’s, my experience there touched me deeply.

The first time I visited was a Friday evening in June 1974. I was a university student, traveling with a friend who wanted to visit all the synagogues in Europe. We found ourselves in the mechina there when a gentleman welcomed us and asked who we were and where we came from. He suggested we join a group of people our age for an oneg Shabbat. These people immediately befriended us and invited us to join them for Shabbat dinner. We did, and we then had dinner invitations for the rest of our time in Paris and we made friendships that lasted for several years. It is important to note that the shul was full.

Fast forward to August 2007. My husband and I were in Paris for a week. I had yahrzeits for my maternal grandparents and thought there would be no better way to honor their memories than to recite kaddish at rue de la Victoire. After a day of sightseeing we went to the shul, where we were greeted by standard post-9/11 security. After a barrage of questions we finally were admitted, but to our dismay there was no minyan. We were told to return on Friday evening. While there was a minyan then, it was a far cry from the full capacity shul I had seen 30 years earlier.

The synagogue now housed both a Sephardic and an Ashkenazi congregation holding joint services, which offered a better chance of having a minyan. But the beauty of the architecture remained, as did the ambiance. After services, we were greeted with the same enthusiasm and warmth I had remembered from 1974. Where were we from? Why were we there? Would we return the next day for services and kiddush? We felt at home.

But I also felt sadness. What a difference 30 years had made. What would it have been like 30 years before my first visit, in 1945? Surely the congregants of 1974 noticed the same thing.

Thank you for answering my unspoken question.

Rachel Cohen
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