



# What Can Research Teach Us about Jewish Camp Life?

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## What Can Research Teach Us about Jewish Camp Life?

Jewish summer camps offer researchers wonderfully rich opportunities to study Jewish life, learning, and development. Whether researchers focus on campers, staff, or their interactions, camp life provides a stage on which many of the dynamics of Jewish living play out. No wonder we have witnessed in recent years an increase in research on Jewish camps in North America.

This special issue on Jewish education at Jewish summer camps celebrates that increase and calls attention to the variety of educational questions that researchers have begun to explore. This issue focuses on five educational questions about Jewish camps:

- (1) Of all the ways that Jewish camps make Israel visible to campers and younger staff, which most capture their attention?
- (2) What makes Shabbat at camp a powerful learning experience for older campers?
- (3) What motivates veteran counselors to return to camp?
- (4) How do campers with disabilities experience inclusion within camp activities?
- (5) What were many Jewish camps like before they focused on their Jewish mission?

The first four are practical questions that engage practitioners as well as researchers. No doubt many practitioners have their own responses based on their experience with camp life. What then can researchers add to what practitioners already know? In our view researchers can add to practitioner knowledge in three particular ways. First, researchers—free from other responsibilities—have the luxury to focus their attention exclusively on gathering and interpreting data that can illuminate a single aspect of camp life like learning about Israel or celebrating Shabbat. Second, while practitioners know what works in their camps, researchers can study a given question across camps and time periods. Third, researchers know the literature on related research and can compare camps to other educational institutions. They can see, for example, how hiring and retaining counselors is like hiring other seasonal staff in comparable contexts. While research may not provide direct answers to complex questions, it does allow educational practitioners to view questions they confront from a larger and more comprehensive perspective.

To illustrate what empirical research can teach, let's begin with the place of Israel in camp. Many Jewish camps have increased the presence of Israel and Israelis at camp. But do we know which of these efforts pay off in terms of campers and young staff paying attention to and thinking and feeling about their connections to Israel? In our first article, "What's Happening Around the Flag? Studying Camps as Institutions for Israel Education," Netti Aharon and Alex Pomson present a survey study of 12 Canadian Jewish camps that provides interesting perspectives. First, campers and staff both are drawn to the people, music, and dance they associate with Israel. They notice Israeli staff at camp and appreciate how Israeli music and dance draw them in. Second, when asked about key camp moments they most associate with Israel, campers name Israel Day,

*mifkad* (flag raising), and Shabbat. Israel day seems obvious, and *mifkad* involves raising the Israeli flag. But what about Shabbat? The authors surmise that the increase usage of Hebrew on Shabbat may lead campers to link Shabbat to Israel. This surprising finding reminds us that we adults do not entirely understand how campers make sense of the complex array of camp experiences.

If it is hard to predict where Israel will show up for campers, it may be even harder to answer the question: What do campers learn from their ongoing participation in Shabbat at camp? In our second article, “Shabbat-at-Camp at Three Jewish Camps: Jewish Learning Through Ritual Participation,” Joseph Reimer notes how little has been written about Shabbat at camps. Given the centrality of Shabbat celebration to the Jewish camp experience, that is a surprising lacuna that this participant observation study addresses. Reimer has studied the Friday night experience at three dynamic Jewish camps to discover the ways these camps draw their older campers into Shabbat celebration and offer them Jewish learning experiences unique to camp. He claims that what might look to casual observers like a carnival atmosphere is actually a well-crafted set of camp rituals that deeply engage older campers and prepare them for future leadership roles at these camps.

Reimer also notes how deeply engaged the veteran counselors are in the Shabbat rituals they share with their older campers. But how do Jewish camps successfully retain those veteran counselors? In our third article, “A Reason to Stay: Staff Retention at Jewish Overnight Summer Camps,” Leah Zigmond reminds us that most counselors work for only two summers before leaving for other opportunities. While some probably should leave, what about those who have learned to be effective staff, enjoy their time in camp, and yet are attracted by other opportunities? Their leaving is a real loss for camps. Through interviewing returning veteran counselors, Zigmond identifies a key element that could make a difference: camps sculpting internships and externships that counselors can use to build their resumes for future employment. Camps need to realize how vital resume building is to this generation of college students and become more creative in making working at camp a skill-building experience that receives greater recognition from the broader world of employers.

Our fourth article, “Bringing Inclusion Into Focus: A Camp-Based Research Study,” focuses on the experiences of campers with disabilities. The authors note that 41% of Jewish camps currently have some sort of inclusion program, and yet we have little idea how campers experience those programs. This research employs a novel methodology to learn more. The researchers focused on a single inclusion program at one camp in which neuroatypical and neurotypical campers worked together to create a set of photographs that captured their experiences of inclusion and Jewish engagement. Then two sets of researchers analyzed the photographs themselves and the campers’ reflections on those photographs. The two set of analyses led in a single direction—affirming for all the campers involved a strong sense of connection to their peers and the camp as a whole. The campers expressed that what camp offered them were special ways to participate together in a Jewish community in which each felt included and honored in ways that affirmed and strengthened their Jewish identities.

Finally, in our fifth article, “Playing Indian at Jewish Camp,” historian David Koffman takes us back to the interwar period when most Jewish camps were not focused on their Jewish mission. In a move that today may seem strange to us, camp leaders often drew on American Indian themes and rituals to fill that vacuum. Of course, as Koffman points out, these were not actual Native American rituals or themes but versions invented by White educators to evoke an imagined early American way of life before the coming of modernity. There were Jewish voices then—notably that of Mordechai Kaplan—bitterly

protesting that move. Yet today we can perhaps only appreciate how far Jewish camps have traveled in their embrace of Judaism by looking back 80 years to what were the norms of those days.

These five diverse studies illuminate different aspects of the educational work of Jewish camps and hopefully represent a first wave of new research on Jewish camps. There is much more to explore. We hope this issue whets the appetites of both researchers and camp professionals to learn more about how Jewish camps touch the hearts and minds of campers and staff.

We wish to express our gratitude to the AVI CHAI Foundation for sponsoring this special issue and sharing it with the Jewish camping community. AVI CHAI has long been a champion of the Jewish educational potential of Jewish camps and has supported multiple ways of enhancing the Jewish missions of these camps. AVI CHAI has also been at the forefront of encouraging research into Jewish camp life and the effort, embodied in this issue, to bring together the wisdom of professional practice with the special perspectives that empirical research can provide.



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