

BEYOND “FEEL GOOD” JUDAISM IN CAMPS:

ENRICHING JEWISH PASSION WITH JEWISH CONTENT

Dan Medwin • January 31st, 2008 • Social Foundations • SOE 405 • Contributing to the Field

There is little doubt that summer camps have mastered the art of inspiring passionate and confident Jewish

The assistant director of a typical Jewish summer camp stands on the stage and screams, “I love being Jewish!” The campers jump up and shout in response, “I love being Jewish, too!”

identities in their participants, through creating all-encompassing Jewish environments which provide the opportunity to live Jewishly 24 hours a day. According to recent Jewish population research,¹ Jewish summer camps are second only to Israel trips in terms of cultivating strong Jewish identities in their participants. We should laud the accomplishments of Jewish camping, however the idea that a passionate Jewish identity will inspire participants to seek out further Jewish learning on their own, is not often the reality. Furthermore, according to practitioners in the field, this model has been the status quo for over 30 years.²

Being able to express one’s Jewish identity enthusiastically is a significant accomplishment, although alone, it is necessarily insufficient. If campers are merely proud to be Jewish, but lack the necessary tools or education to continue their Jewish practices at home, their Jewish living is relegated to camp. Consider the popular anecdote of a camper who said she could not perform the Havdalah ceremony at home because they had no lake. Clearly, she and others like her, locate their Jewish practice in a specific setting. Without education regarding what they are doing and why, the campers are unable to bring these practices home and continue living active Jewish lives.

¹ National Jewish Population Survey, 2000

² This and other information gathered for this article come from interviews with a variety of camp directors (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox), alumni, educators, and recent Jewish population studies, as well as personal anecdotes and experiences.

It is time to challenge ourselves to bring Jewish camping to the next level. Since we have successfully discovered the recipe for building a love of being Jewish in participants, we must now face the challenge of building within them a substantial knowledge-base of what it means to be Jewish. (One hopes that the “love” will be an impetus to acquire the “knowledge,” although this is often not the case.) In fact, over the years, a number of camps have taken this challenge upon themselves, and have developed fairly successful models of integrating higher level³ Jewish content into the larger camp program. Surprisingly, many camps have been struggling with these issues for years already, however, these disparate and isolated approaches have not been greatly shared with the larger camping community.

Through interviews with many camp directors from a variety of religious denominations, two significant directions for change have emerged, along with a handful of possible additional changes. The first approach involves increasing the level of Judaic knowledge among the general camp staff through a variety of educational opportunities. The second approach examines specialty areas and attempts to integrate Judaic content specifically related to these activities. The other opportunities for change which will be discussed examine subtle but pervasive changes which can be implemented independently or in conjunction with the others.

The models themselves, or more likely, variations of these models, can be used in a variety of camps still struggling with this issue (and even in those camps that have not yet identified this as an issue). Camps may wish to experiment with a combination of these elements, selecting those which seem best suited for their particular culture and context. Successfully implementing change in any of these areas regarding high-level Jewish content can result in a significant increase in the level of Judaic learning throughout the summer.

Method 1: Staff Education

³ Jewish content beyond song lyrics, a Shabbat “experience,” basic Hebrew words and Jewish values

Perhaps the aspect of camp which is most rich with potential is staff education. General counselors, said to be on the “front line,” have the most direct impact on a camper’s summer experience because they are with the campers more hours of the day and night than any other personnel in camp. As such they have the potential to shape or “create the Jewish environment, design and implement both formal and informal Jewish educational activities, model and encourage everyday practices, and turn teachable moments into Jewish lessons.”⁴ Therefore, reaching this population and empowering them to recognize and act on Jewish teachable moments and to share Judaic content with their campers, can have the most pronounced impact on the campers themselves, and on the camp as a whole.

This is also the most challenging area in which to affect change. Clearly, “unless staff are ready, willing and able to create Jewish life at camp, it will not happen.”⁵ Unfortunately, counselors are generally the first voices to speak out against change, especially if they were campers themselves, and getting buy-in and a sense of ownership from them is both essential and extremely difficult. This may be easier at camps with a high staff turnover rate, although this type of change can be most effective when counselors’ knowledge is built upon from summer to summer. Additionally, in many ways the staff members are still children themselves, and teaching them to be Jewish educators also serves the practical goal of empowering their own confident and knowledgeable Jewish identities.

“My personal opinion is that staff are students first and teachers second and therefore we cannot expect them to educate unless we spend time educating them.”- Josh Brown, Education Director

There are a variety of methods which have been successfully imple-

mented to help increase the staff’s level of Judaic knowledge and ability to apply Jewish virtues

⁴ Sales, Amy L. and Leonard Saxe, “*Limud by the Lake: Fulfilling the Educational Potential of Jewish Summer Camps*,” p. 15.

⁵ *ibid.*

and lessons in a dynamic camp environment. Some of these methods involve engaging staff during the year, prior to the summer, in Judaic study through such venues as conference calls, online mini-courses, and chevrotah partner programs. These often mandatory sessions can focus upon the chosen educational theme for the summer, in addition to the generally applicable Judaic content. While in some ways functioning as a warm-up for the summer, these pre-summer learning opportunities create a year-long culture of learning and demonstrate the importance of Jewish education.

Once staff members arrive at camp for a typical week-long staff orientation, more intense education programming can be implemented. Through scholars-in-residence and a prepared and educated senior staff (who have also been studying intensively prior to the arrival of the general staff), counselors can engage in Jewish learning on many levels. The camp-wide educational theme can be taught at both the level at which the campers will study it, as well as a more mature level more suitable to the staff. Additionally, counselors can learn the general counseling skills which are usually covered during staff orientation, through the lens of Judaism, thus taking optimal advantage of Jewish teachable moments. For example, when learning about conflict resolution among campers, the topic can be presented through the lens of biblical characters, such as Cain & Abel, and Jacob & Esau. Additionally, when discussing dining hall procedures, the staff can learn (or review) the meaning of *Birkat Hamazon* (blessing after the meal), and develop appropriate behavioral guidelines in collaboration with the administration, taking into account the meaning of the words. Virtually every aspect of camp life from swimming in the pool (Jonah, Noah, *mikveh*, Israeli “*mayim*” dance, etc) to picking up trash (*ba'al tashchit* - do not waste, *lo aleicha hamlacha ligmor* - it is not your duty to complete the task) to getting ready for bed (bed-time *shema*, *hashkiveinu*) can be seen through the lens of Jewish content. When the counselors

study these themes, sharing them with their campers can become second nature.

Furthermore, staff development should not end with staff orientation, rather, it should continue throughout the summer. This can be accomplished in a variety of times/places within the camp schedule, including staff meetings, “lunch and learn” sessions, even parallel learning opportunities for staff during the educational programming block. Ultimately, the more exposure to Jewish content, as long as the staff is invested through a shared vision, the greater the chance of them passing it on to the campers.

Method 2: Integrating Judaic Content into Specialty Program Areas

Another extremely successful method of increasing Judaic content around camp, is through a partnership between the education director (and staff) and the specialty department heads (and staff). These two parties can work to integrate Jewish content into the previously “secular” activities of camp. Campers can climb the rock wall and discuss the Western Wall. Sporting activities can teach the values of *kavod* (honor, respect) and *shituf pe’ulah* (partnership). This concept is similar to the previously discussed staff training model, with the distinction being that instead of learning generic Judaic content with the summer education theme, the specialists can learn how this theme and other various Judaic pieces can apply to their specialty area. One camp, in particular, enjoys hiring knowledgeable Jews who are also trained professionals, artists, and athletes who can teach and discuss their own personal integration of their expertise and Judaism with the staff and campers. In certain circumstances, visiting faculty members can also provide such perspectives and guidance.

Method 3: A Variety of Implementable Modules

In addition to increasing the staff’s level of Judaic knowledge and working to integrate

Jewish content into the variety of activities around camp, there are also a number of stand-alone changes that together can help to increase the general level of Jewish knowledge in the community. This might include:

- Using Hebrew words and names, whenever possible, for activities, locations, cabin names & cheers, etc.
- Using song session and tefillah (prayer services) as opportunities for teaching new songs and texts, as well as, their meaning.
- Using tefillah as a venue for teaching prayer related content and meaning.
- Including Israeli staff in as many areas of camp life as possible, and asking them to share their personal stories and information about Israel.
- Providing assistance and resources for the Education director and education staff to prepare program materials and supplies related to the educational theme for use by staff throughout camp.

In each of these situations, the necessary ingredients for success are (1) a conscious intention for change and (2) the inclusion of relevant Judaic content. These can be achieved through a sense of ownership and buy-in from the staff and through properly trained and knowledgeable Jewish educators.

Responding to Critics:

Some critics raise fears of including “too much” Jewish content in camp. While some camps may actually be unable to handle such a transition (e.g. due to overly resistant staff or campers), most who make this claim have not yet explored implementing changes on this level in order to measure the affects. These types of changes in any setting are necessarily experimental in nature; Some will be successful and others may not be. Regardless, it is our duty to attempt to increase the next generation’s level of Judaic knowledge. For, if we are unsuccessful, we might be raising a generation of Jews who may be confident in their Jewish identity and passionate in expressing their love of being Jewish, yet who cannot articulate nor enact their Jewish values in any knowledgeable or substantial way. Worse yet, how can one generation of Jews pass Judaism

onto the next generation if, for them, it exists as merely a strong shell of an identity with no foundation of knowledge to support it? If we firmly believe that Judaism is a relevant and worth-while guide to living life, and its teachings can guide our actions and shape our influence on the world, can there be such a thing as “too much” Judaism? When implemented in a contextually appropriate way, supported by staff engagement, increased Judaic content can bring a greater depth of meaning and expression to a Jewish summer camp experience.

Admittedly, there are no simple solutions. A great deal of time and energy are necessary to create structures in which staff feel a sense of ownership and empowerment in implementing the new changes. Additionally, there are a number of considerable obstacles in this process, such as, finding competent Jewish educators and allocating or finding the resources for competitive salaries. Nonetheless, as our tradition teaches, it is not up to us to complete the transition to content-rich camp environments, but neither are we free to desist from the challenge⁶. Experimenting and failing can be a far greater success than encouraging stagnation out of fear. When wondering if we are ready to embark on such a meaningful and challenging course, we can ask ourselves, “If not now, when?”⁷

⁶ Adapted from Pirke Avot 2:16

⁷ Pirkei Avot 1:14