

**Integrated Informal Education in a Summer Camp:
The First Summer on the Cutting Edge of Informal Education**
By Lydia Bloom Medwin

Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, Mississippi is presently on the cutting edge of informal Jewish education. The summer of 2007 was of great significance both in the history of Jacobs Camp and of informal education in general, though this change involved rearranging only one hour's activities. For the camp, it meant the first major schedule change in its thirty-six-year history. For informal education, it was the realization of a dream: the dream of integrating Jewish content into every activity in camp and thereby creating consistently powerful Jewish learning experiences that connected them to Judaism and Judaism to their lives.

For years, the greater Jewish community has viewed supplementary religious education as just that, "supplementary" to the real work of educating our children. Jewish education was metaphorically stored in a box and taken off the shelf only on Sunday mornings (and at camp, one activity hour of the day). After the allotted learning time was over, we put our Jewish education back into its box and stored it again on the shelf, where it waited untouched for at least a week to be taken down again. When we did take it off the shelf, we often reused the same simple, pediatric messages over and over again – there was no way to build on past learning. In this way, the Jewish identities and Jewish thinking of our youth became stilted and stale, and were only as developed as the student would be at the end of their Jewish learning career: If the student stopped coming to religious school at 13, his ideas of God, Israel, and Torah would remain on a pre-teen level while his knowledge about fiscal responsibility or politics or social norms would continue to mature and become more nuanced. Our kids may grow up to be

multifaceted people and sophisticated thinkers in the “real” world, but they would still be thirteen in their “Jewish” world. It is no wonder that so many Jewish children leave Jewish education when they are no longer forced to go. What purpose could Judaism serve in their lives when it could only speak to a few hours of the many they spend living? The relevance of Judaism to everyday life must seem insignificant to so many young people; the perceived gap between our lives and our tradition is great when the wisdom of our tradition is not actively applied to the present world and the people living in it.

It was because of this reality that scholars began to research and write about the incredible benefits of informal education, such as the kind found in summer camps. There is something powerful about informal, experiential education, especially when experienced in connection with a tight-knit, intensive community. Suddenly, the campers could “experience Judaism as a live current”¹ not upon which to float and view from afar, but in which to immerse themselves and carry them along. According to Joseph Reimer, this “leaves a lasting impression”² on the Jewish identities of the campers, probably because of the organic nature of the learning. Barry Chazan agrees that “perhaps the way Jewish life was traditionally ‘taught’ is the best way to learn – [we should utilize] the entire campus of life to educate....”³ In other words, when Jewish education is integrated into the daily activities of a student, s/he can readily see the relevance and wisdom of such education and, therefore, value the tradition in ever deepening ways. Within a camp setting, these experiences can happen spontaneously, but they are more effective when

¹ Reimer, Joseph. "Jumping Into the Currents: The Art of Informal Jewish Education." *Sh'ma* 31(2001): 1-2.

² *Ibid.*

³ Chazan, Barry. "Informal Jewish Education as Art Form." *Sh'ma* 31(2001): 2-3.

“they are thoughtfully and carefully designed.”⁴ “Informal educators – at their best – are artful designers of other peoples’ experiences. They have to know enough about experiential learning to design programs that catch people a little off guard, and yet help them to take in and record the significance of what they have experienced.” Jewish scholars observed that the most powerful moments of learning for students was not always happening in the classroom. At Jacobs Camp in the summer of 2007, our camp director Jonathan Cohen, assistant director Abram Orlansky, and myself, as the education director noticed the same thing and decided to take these findings seriously.

How did this innovation come about? It had two main catalysts particular to this setting. The first was a response to the camping market. Due to the major trend of children choosing specialty camps, Jacobs Camp chose to select a specialty camp model so that campers could improve their skills and techniques in the specialty of their choice. Within this model, campers elected one specialty out of four – Science and Technology, Athletics, Arts, and Adventure. The oldest campers spent three out of the five activity hours of the day in these “mini-camps,” while the middle unit spent two hours at their specialty. This increase in time spent engaged in a specialty meant an exchange of one hour of the day. This brings us to the second catalyst, a point that rings true for anyone who has ever been involved at camp. The most meaningful moments in camp life – some of the most powerful learning opportunities – were happening outside of the hour of *shiur* (learning). Time spent with their counselors gave our campers meaningful Jewish role models. Quiet prayer by the lake during Kabbalat Shabbat provided them with their most poignant spiritual moments. The sight of the entire camp dressed in white and the sound of singing for an hour straight during Erev Shabbat created memories that last a lifetime.

⁴ Reimer, Joseph. "Jumping Into the Currents: The Art of Informal Jewish Education." 2.

It is the experience of living Jewishly as a community that shaped the Jewish lives of our campers. Why not offer our campers an abundance of those “connection” opportunities?

This is precisely what we did. The one-hour a day that the campers and staff liked the least – shiur (hour of learning) – was eliminated. Instead, each specialty had both a head of the specialty and an educator (though where we were short staffed, both roles were filled by one person – which may have inadvertently produced even greater integration). Together, they made sure to cover a wide range of Jewish topics, including Israel, Hebrew, Jewish values, famous Jews in that specialty, text study, prayer, ritual, and more. We offered them the opportunity to engage in Jewish learning and framed camp activities in a Jewish context inside of their daily activities. Just as NFTY “utilizes the overt and hidden aspects of the educational environment to transmit Jewish culture to a new generation of Reform Jews,”⁵ so too integrating Jewish education into camp life teaches that Judaism happens all of the time. By socializing our campers to thinking in this way, “they [were] doing Jewish and not feeling strange or awkward about it.”⁶ This model of integrated informal Jewish education “allowed them to make Judaism personally and communally meaningful.”⁷

The delivery of Jewish education looked different within each specialty because of the nature of the activity. In Adventure, it is natural to talk about the challenge ahead by looking at a text about Moses’ challenge in climbing Mt. Sinai. If you make explicit that Moses could only climb the mountain because he had faith in himself and in God, the climber experiences her Tower climb in a different way and with Jewish stories floating through her head. As she reaches the most difficult section of the tower, her counselors

⁵ Zeldin, Michael. "Understanding Informal Jewish Education: Reflections on the Philosophical Foundations of NFTY." *Journal of Reform Judaism* 36(1989): 26-34.

⁶ Reimer, Joseph. "Jumping Into the Currents: The Art of Informal Jewish Education." 2.

⁷ Reimer, Joseph. "Beyond More Jews Doing Jewish: Clarifying The Goals of Informal Jewish Education." *Journal of Jewish Education* 73(2007): 5-23.

and fellow campers below are encouraging her by asking her to remember the story and be like Moses. How might she feel about Judaism as she reaches the top? How might she interpret the story of Moses receiving the Torah from that moment on? When she makes it back down, we sit and debrief her experience, again using the lens of Torah.

In Athletics, the connections were not as obvious, but still plentiful. For example, we taught the Hebrew word for basket, *sol*, as the word we use for both the net in the game and the basket in which offerings were carried to the Temple. Then we asked the question: What might it mean that the basket you make in basketball is related to an offering to God? Their answer was that making a basket in the game is like giving an offering to your team – you know you could not have made the basket without them and so you give them thanks. From that day forward, the campers shouted, “Sol!” whenever they made a basket. Here is another example: We taught the words “kibbutz” (a place where people share everything and work and live together) and “k’vutza” (team) to the campers. We had an Israeli staff member talk about her kibbutz back home and how it functioned. Then we asked, “How does the idea of a “kibbutz” influence the way we think about our “k’vutza” here at Athletics? The campers answered, “When we act like a ‘k’vutza,’ that means we have to share the ball and work together to win.” Though others in our camp community had concerns that there might not be enough points of entry for tradition to speak to our specialties, we could have gone on and on – the possibilities for making Jewish content relevant, even to athletics, seemed endless.

The ultimate hope of this program is that when a camper finds himself on a soccer field back home, with his mostly non-Jewish soccer team, a memory from the summer will be jogged. A flash of Jewish teaching will go through his mind and suddenly, away from camp and his Jewish friends, he identifies as a Jew and is reminded of an important

Jewish value that he learned at camp. If our goal as Jewish educators is that our students learn about Judaism so that it can serve them well in their lives, we need to bring that education to confront their lives in relevant and meaningful ways.

There are, of course, obstacles to this new model of informal camp education. There is the issue of our beloved but mostly unknowledgeable staff who are ill-equipped to reinforce the campers' learning in the cabins or on the way to meals.⁸ There is also the serious shortage of resources required to hire educators for the initial generations of campers, who will eventually (and with greater knowledge than their predecessors) take the place of the older staff. This model also requires a great deal of communication between educators for each specialty, the specialty heads, the unit heads, the rest of the senior staff, and the staff at large. But the biggest obstacle is probably the intense resistant to change that most camp cultures encounter. The good news is that the changes modeled at Jacobs Camp, although symbolically affecting the entire summer, sought to physically change only one hour of the day. Reminding the staff of this fact seemed to calm some of their fears about the new program, which stemmed from a fear of "everything changing" at their beloved summer camp. We worked hard to sustain "normalcy" for campers and staff in the most camp-significant areas, such as Shabbat rituals, opening and closing day schedules, and in-cabin traditions, as we made changes in Jewish education.

Still, other parts of the camp culture have changed over time as this model was being developed, which has paved the way for the successful integration of Jewish education. For instance, over a three-year process, we moved from praying three times a

⁸ Interesting strides have been made in the effort to educate camp staff in British Progressive Jewish summer camps. See Shabi, Maya, and Walid W. El Ansari. "Leaders' Perceptions of Youth Identity in a Summer Camp in the United Kingdom: A Qualitative Enquiry." *Journal for Progressive Judaism* 13(1999): 51-66. Good researching here, Lydia!

week to having daily prayer, thus making explicit Jewish moments a more common phenomenon. The attitude from staff around Jewish study and activity also shifted slightly due to a series of staff development sessions and after-hours study opportunities with “cool” staff members.

Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow for a full discussion of all of the obstacles to this integrated education model. And it is hard to tell what direction the program will take after this inaugural year. There is still much to explore and a lot of experimentation to do. Thankfully, the camp director has worked hard during his tenure to make transformation a central part of Jacobs Camp culture, so these advances will be possible. But no matter what direction this program takes, it is thrilling to imagine the promise of this program. In a world that is so fragmented, the creation of a program that promotes the wholeness of a person’s various lives – whether it be the religious life and the secular life, the spiritual/emotional life and the corporeal life, and even the “inside of camp” life and the “outside of camp” life – is a program worthy of further investment and exploration.