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Ramah: A Paradigm for Conservative Jews

AT A CONVENTION of the Rabbinical Assembly in the 1980s, I recall hearing Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, the executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, observe that he knew of no other movement in the history of Judaism that was as negative about itself as the Conservative Movement. Indeed, even a cursory overview of the history of the movement reveals a highly self-critical group fixed more on its failures than its successes. Is it too extreme to suggest that today the movement consists largely of doubters and critics, rather than adherents who are proud, even passionate about Conservative Judaism and its critical importance to the survival of traditional Judaism? I think not.

How is it, then, that amidst this preoccupation with such negativity, one educational enterprise has managed to transcend this movement-wide obsession with all that is wrong and be characterized as a success? I speak here of the National Ramah Commission (NRC) and its panoply of seven overnight and three day camps scattered around North America and its programs in Israel. Indeed, it has been noted on many occasions that Ramah is the movement's most successful accomplishment.¹

Notwithstanding an external environment that over the decades has challenged Ramah's mission and founding principles, the Ramah Camping Movement has managed to withstand those forces, whether external or internal, and continue to produce an identifiable product in keeping with its founders' wishes; a product that has made a meaningful contribution to the traditional Jewish community. "Notwithstanding fiscal problems, shifts in educational emphases, and unceasing efforts to adapt to the changing demography of North American Jews, Ramah remains . . . authentic, steadfast, and inspiring."²

Indeed, although much greater study of the Ramah experience remains to be done, a 2001 study, which itself emerged from a larger longitudinal study, convincingly shows the considerable impact of Ramah on Jewish youth who

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have had a Ramah experience. The research, conducted by Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin, shows that when Ramah campers are compared to other campers, Ramah is more successful in inculcating its norms and values in its campers.

Ramah emphasizes religious practice, the power of Jewish community and belonging, and Israel. . . . [T]he widest gap of any variable is on weekly Shabbat celebration. . . . Ramah campers clearly express a more Zionist outlook than teenagers who attend other Jewish camps.³

So what is it that characterizes the Ramah program that has enabled it to transcend the otherwise ubiquitous negativity of Conservative Jews? How is it that Ramah is regarded as such a success by those familiar with it, including the vast number of Conservative Jews who are highly critical of virtually all other efforts and initiatives of the Conservative Movement? Chancellor Emeritus Ismar Schorsch has observed that:

[T]he Seminary stands for a Judaism grounded in the soil of the Jewish State. . . . [I]t is also a Judaism that makes demands upon us as individuals. It sets boundaries and curbs appetites. Its religious discipline constantly reminds us that we do not live by bread alone. . . . [T]he Seminary stands for a Judaism that has never become fossilized, a Judaism unafraid to confront the challenges of any age. . . . In sum, the Judaism of the Seminary is an authentic yet modern, vibrant yet balanced, clear, yet multifaceted expression of an eternal religion.

Our[s is a] determined quest for a genuine synthesis of the old and the new, the Jewish and the secular, the national and the emotional, the parochial and the universal.⁴

This, by extension, is also what characterizes what Ramah stands for. Whether we look at principles established with the founding of the first Camp Ramah in 1947 at Conover, Wisconsin, or at the latest mission statement adopted by the NRC in 1990, we see an enterprise characterized by a desire to inculcate in young people the values, philosophy, rituals, and practices of this Judaism.

What comes to mind when we think about Ramah, besides camp, summer, fun, and sports is young people engaged in Jewish learning in an open and informal, yet sensitive environment, identifying as Jews, and learning to live as committed Jews in an open, pluralistic environment. Indeed, as Professor Ralph Tyler, Director Emeritus at The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and an early advisor to Ramah noted, Camp Ramah is more than a summer camp. It's a setting in which campers are responsible for planning and developing the activities in light of their group deliberations on purpose and consequence.⁵

In 1977, Jakob Petuchowski wrote that “Conservative Judaism refuses to elevate the lowest common denominator to the status of a norm, due in part, to the existence of Camps Ramah and Ramah’s educational standards, which at the time, required campers to be engaged in a minimum of six hours of Hebrew school per week throughout the year.”⁶

So, perhaps the success of Ramah, both in fact and in perception, can be said to be attributed to four factors, to:

- Being built on a vision that its early leaders carefully developed, nurtured, and passed along to others.
- The creation of a group of early lay leaders who understood the vision and worked to insure its realization.
- A similarly dedicated group of professional leaders, mostly Seminary students and faculty, who recognized in the program a unique way to achieve the broader educational goals of the Seminary.
- An ability to adhere to its founding vision and values, notwithstanding the external and internal pressures for change and dilution of its operating principles. In doing so it earned respect from the larger community for its ability to stand for a serious Judaism.

Regarding the first of these four factors, it is noteworthy that the title of a lengthy interview by William Novak with Rabbi Seymour Fox, is titled “Vision at the Heart.”⁷ In this interview Fox notes that:

We wanted to create an educational setting where young people would be able to discover their Judaism and learn how to live it in their daily lives. We hoped this would nurture Jews who were deeply committed to their tradition and actively involved in American society.⁸

Novak adds that “Ramah emerged out of an ambitious dream, a carefully considered idea of educational possibilities.”⁹ Indeed, a review of the literature reveals an overwhelming preoccupation with the undertaking of an educational vision that would change the face of the North American Jewish community; perpetuate the educational and religious goals of the Seminary with its commitment to traditional Judaism; and build leadership—lay and professional—for the Conservative Movement.

But had the visionaries had only their vision, they could not have produced the outcome that they did. Indeed, without the communal lay leaders who embraced that vision and invested in it, the vision could not have taken off, let alone resulted in the enterprise that came to be known as the Ramah Camping Movement. Alvin Gershen, himself a key lay leader in the Ramah Camping Movement until his untimely death in 1989, observed that “the real success story [was] the ability of professional and lay leaders to work together

with respect and dedication toward a clearly developed common goal.”¹⁰ This was also true of the key lay leaders associated with the first Ramah camp in Conover, Wisconsin.

They were personally and emotionally involved . . . convinced of [Ramah’s] value . . . for the whole Movement, that their attitude towards the Movement . . . would have been adversely affected had they not been able to involve the national leadership in [support of the] . . . project.¹¹

Much of this cooperative work was done under the organizational umbrella of the NRC, which included a core group of dedicated Ramah lay leaders whose primary loyalty was to the success of Ramah in general and their camps in particular.

Over the years the Commission worked with the camps to supervise their operations, assist in short- and long-range planning, provide consultative support in areas such as capital improvements, maintenance, and commissary, and operation of a joint insurance program for the camps. The Commission also worked closely with the Seminary to maintain educational standards.¹²

The intensity of commitment of the early lay leaders was rather unique for its time. Fox notes that “in the 1970s and 1980s, most American Jews of status and means cared mainly about Israel, hospitals, and defense organizations. Jewish education and culture ranked very low.”¹³

These lay leaders gave of their love and money because they embraced the vision, and they understood the potential to be realized for the Conservative Movement and the American Jewish community. They sent their own children to the camps and spent time at their respective camps. These lay leaders replicated themselves over the years and their successors continue to be a major force in the furtherance of the Ramah mission. So when Gershen attributes the success of Ramah to the ability of everyone involved to work together, he is only partially correct. They could not and would not have been able to do what Gershen lauds had they not been motivated by the achievement of a common goal and a shared vision.

This was equally true for those who staffed the individual camps. First, the camps did not skimp on staff; making sure that the selected individuals were people skilled in the area for which they were hired, yet willing to learn and be stimulated by their staff colleagues. In time, staff emerged out of the ranks of the local camps. The camps produced staff who by virtue of an extensive camping experience already had developed their own passion for the Ramah experience. Notwithstanding their having been former campers, a great many of the professional staff were students of The Jewish Theological Seminary and

quickly came to understand the connection between the educational goals of the Seminary and the mission of Ramah. Former National Director Rabbi Burton I. Cohen has written that from the outset the Seminary recruited staff for Ramah from its student body [and] provided a scholar-in-residence from its faculty.¹⁴ Cohen also notes that “from [the summer of 1947] until the present [1989] there has been no entering class at the Seminary which did not have in it one or more alumni of Ramah.”¹⁵

It was not just that subsequent staff members emerged from a population of campers, but Ramah, particularly in its early years, saw one of its goals as being leadership development. In an effort to maintain a high quality of staff, Ramah in its first years, limited the number of campers accepted so as to be certain that it could provide a staff that met Ramah’s standards. To deal with the issue of the limited numbers of qualified staff available, it created its own leadership training program, known as Mador. Open to high school graduates only, it produced a significant number of key professionals for the Ramah system.¹⁶

With the Mador program, Ramah was able to continue to be highly selective in its recruitment of staff while simultaneously expanding staff, enabling it to found additional camps.¹⁷ For a great many of these individuals, their steadfast connection with Ramah represented the charting of a new path for Jewish professionals. As Fox observed, “At Ramah they were really going out on a limb in terms of their future careers.”¹⁸

But so great was their belief in the vision and their commitment to its success that they were willing to be pioneers in the creation and execution of Jewish camping as yet another avenue of Jewish communal service. Indeed, Ramah created the Jewish camp director as a viable occupation for rabbis and Jewish educators.

That Ramah has managed to be viewed by the great majority of Conservative Jews as a success might suggest that Ramah has neither faltered during the course of the past sixty years nor had difficult moments. On the contrary, Ramah has encountered its fair share of trials and tribulations during these past six decades. Indeed, the 1970s were a particularly difficult decade in which the camps faced significant financial challenges, along with deteriorating physical plants throughout the camping system.¹⁹ That decade also required Ramah to confront the challenges of an emerging egalitarianism that was a development affecting the entire Conservative Movement at the time.

Throughout these past sixty years, the relevance of Ramah’s mission and the nature of its program have, from time to time, come under scrutiny. For example, as the population of Conservative children in day schools increased, many questioned the need for a program of intensive Jewish learning and living

over the summer. In addition, the need for and desirability of an eight-week program came under scrutiny. Today, several of the camps offer four-week sessions. Eight-week programs have been under attack for some time due to the evolution of the single parent family, the escalating cost of overnight camp, and the desire for multiple summer experiences.

For the founders and visionaries of Ramah, the place of Hebrew in the program was of paramount importance. Over the years, Hebrew has become less and less a focus of the program. To their credit, the camp leadership and the NRC leadership continue to grapple with the challenge of keeping Hebrew as a pillar of the program's educational goals. However, the founders would be very disappointed today were they to know the degree to which Hebrew has slipped from the core educational mission.²⁰ Following close behind the decline in the use of Hebrew in the camps is the declining commitment to formal classes. Here, too, communal pressures for a less stringent and less formal program have been felt.

And yet notwithstanding these issues, as well as others that are beyond the scope of this essay, Ramah continues to be held in high regard by those familiar with it and passionately supported by its alumni and supporters. In November 2007, Ari Magen, then sixteen years old, contacted all the campers in his *edah* from Camp Ramah in the Poconos through the online networking site Facebook to suggest that they all wear a Ramah T-shirt to school on a given day to show their "Ramah pride." In just a few short weeks, word had spread and more than one thousand high school and college-age campers, former campers, and staff members from the United States, Canada, and Israel wore a Ramah T-shirt to school on the prescribed day. Magen noted afterward "[W]e all need Ramah in our lives."²¹ Were a thousand young Conservative Jews equally passionate about needing Conservative Judaism in their lives! Might not Ramah serve as a paradigm for Conservative Jewry; teaching us that we are capable of believing in ourselves as Conservative Jews and that we are capable of being passionate about Conservative Judaism and its relevance for our times despite its critics, despite its imperfections, and despite its ups and downs?

Indeed, were we all to be equally proud and passionate about Conservative Judaism and its manifold contributions to Judaism and the Jewish community, I have no doubt that we would be a more successful group both in our own eyes and in the eyes of world Jewry.

Notes

- ¹ One such occasion was on November 25, 1986 when Chancellor Ismar Schorsch addressed a conference celebrating Ramah's fortieth anniversary. In *Thoughts from 3080: Selected Addresses and Writings*, 7; Alvin E. Gershen, foreword to *The Ramah Experience: Community and Commitment*, ed. Sylvia C. Ettenberg and Geraldine Rosenfield, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1988), ix.
- ² Burton I. Cohen, "A Brief History of the Ramah Movement," *The Ramah Experience*, 16.
- ³ Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin, *Camping Experience 1995–1999: The Impact of Jewish Summer Camping on the Conservative High School Seniors of the 'Four Up' Study* (New York: National Ramah Commission, 2001), 32.
- ⁴ Ismar Schorsch, *The Seminary at 100*, ed. Nina Beth Cardin and David Wolf Silverman (New York: JTS Press, 1987), 3.
- ⁵ Ralph W. Tyler, preface to *The Ramah Experience*, vii.
- ⁶ Jakob Petuchowski, "Conservatism and Its Contribution to Judaism," *Judaism* 103, 26 no. 3 (Summer 1977): 355.
- ⁷ Seymour Fox, interview by William Novak, "Vision at the Heart: Lessons from Camp Ramah on the Power of Ideas in Shaping Educational Institutions" (The Mandel Institute and the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1997).
- ⁸ "Vision at the Heart," 10.
- ⁹ "Vision at the Heart," 2.
- ¹⁰ Cohen, "A Brief History," 11, 12; Louis Winer, *My First 89 Years* (Self-published, 1993), 20.
- ¹¹ Simon Greenberg *The Ramah Camps: Their Place in the Conservative Movement*, undated manuscript, Ratner Center, R.G. 27–2–19, Simon Greenberg File.
- ¹² Cohen, "A Brief History," 11, 12.
- ¹³ "Vision at the Heart," 35, 36.
- ¹⁴ Cohen, "A Brief History," 10.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. This has remained true until the present day.
- ¹⁶ Burt Cohen, "Louis Newman's Wisconsin Innovations and Their Effect upon the Ramah Camping Movement," in *Studies in Jewish Education and Judaica in Honor of Louis Newman*, ed. Alexander M. Shapiro and Burton I. Cohen (Ktav, 1984), 34.
- ¹⁷ Chanan Alexander, "Ramah at Forty: Aspirations, Achievement, Challenges," in *The Seminary at 100*, 111.
- ¹⁸ "Vision at the Heart," 43.
- ¹⁹ Michael Brown, "It's Off to Camp We Go: Ramah, LTF, and the Seminary in the Finkelstein Era," in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, 1, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), 841–43; Winer, 21.
- ²⁰ Indeed Fox acknowledges that "Ramah's second failure was that, despite all our efforts, we never became a Hebrew-speaking camp." "Vision at the Heart," 40.
- ²¹ National Ramah Commission, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2008.