

“For I Have Given You Good Counselors, You Shall Not Forsake Them”¹

By: Daniel Utley

On a cool, dark evening at the end of the summer only a small circle of tired voices remains. The voices are those of exhausted camp counselors and senior staff singing *Havdalah* blessings on their very last night of camp. The campers have all gone home, and only the devoted souls remain to close out the site. After a long pause, the director shares some final words of wisdom, “It is time to reveal the big secret of camp, now that we have made it through another amazing summer. This place, its purpose, and our work here go far beyond the experience of the campers. Camp is actually about developing you - the counselors.”

While the field of Jewish camping focuses on campers as the target audience, many other parties also benefit from the camp experience. From the varied constituencies that camp serves, both anecdotal evidence and scholarship confirm that it is counselors who stick out as the glue that binds the whole system together. As scholar of Jewish education and long time thought leader in the field, Dr. Michael Zeldin writes, “The camp counselor with a magnetic personality stands at the heart of the camp experience. Campers look up to, and often idolize, their counselors.”² Having such status places the transformative power of camp in the counselors’ hands. Sociologists of Jewish education Leonard Saxe and Amy Sales concur, asserting that, “Counselors are the essential key to Jewish life and learning at camp.”³ In short, counselors reside at ground zero for Jewish socialization at camp because they develop close and meaningful relationships with campers. They have the most face-time with campers, and their relationship is multifaceted: counselors are role models, caregivers, mentors, teammates, and when appropriate, a camper’s best friend.

With the primary mission of Jewish camp resting on counselors’ shoulders we should expect to see a large portion of a summer camp’s time, energy, and resources to be directed towards building their knowledge and skills. Moreover, any investment made in staff carries over directly to the campers. If for *Jewish* camps Jewish socialization is central to the purpose of the institution, then equipping counselors to be Jewish socializing agents, even informal Jewish educators, should be primary. Yet this is not the case. Astonishingly, educating counselors for this purpose even “falls to the end of the list” when it comes to staff training.⁴ It is high time we explored why camps tend to fail to prioritize their counselors’ Jewish learning and development. To be sure, liberal Jewish summer camps face several obstacles in developing counselors as educators. However, at least three specific factors mitigate prospects for change.

One difficulty is *time*. Health and safety, discipline, dealing with homesickness, and responding to emotional distress all vie for counselors’ attention during an average day at camp. These challenges require

¹ A pun on Proverbs 4:2 – “Behold I have given you a good doctrine - My teaching, you shall not forsake it.”

² Zeldin, M. (2006). Making the Magic in Reform Jewish Summer Camps. In M. M. Lorge, & G. P. Zola (Eds.), *A Place of Our Own: The Rise to Reform Jewish Summer Camping* (pp. 85-123). Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press., 89.

³ Sales, A. L., & Saxe, L. (2004). *“How Goodly Are Thy Tents:” Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences*. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press., 97.

⁴ Sales & Saxe, *How Goodly*, 133.

counseling skills that are taught during staff orientation, and learning each of these skills also takes time, practice, and mentoring.⁵ And rightly so. But just because these essential topics take precedence and are covered first, does not mean higher level Jewish educational purposes do not deserve or require serious and focused attention.

A second struggle is counselors' *lack of prior knowledge*, which compounds the problem of scarce time. Through no fault of their own, counselors often lack an awareness of how to share their Jewish identity and Jewish knowledge with youngsters. They are recent high school graduates and many bear only inchoate Jewish knowledge gained from their families and synagogues, and in some cases, day schools. But counselors' lack of Jewish knowledge and educational training should not be conflated with lack of will. Counselors do come to camp because they "believe in what they do there, 'because of the magic moments...kids holding hands, being there for each other, reaching to touch the Torah.'"⁶ Counselors, on the whole, are motivated, invested, and committed to furthering the mission of their Jewish camp. When given the chance, these young adults have a great deal of their own insightful *torah* to share with others. At the same time, the learning curve is far too steep to be able to teach counselors all of a camp's planned Jewish content and also cover the proper use of experiential education, all within the first few weeks of an already busy summer.

Finally, *misaligned interests* between counselors and camp directors presents a third challenge. Many counselors return to camp each summer to "give back" or "give campers the experience" that they had growing up, and nearly all counselors return to be with friends. These important personal priorities can sometimes rub up against the officially stated goals of a required staff education program. Counselors might not see that study reinforces their daily work, and are not sold on Jewish learning sessions that resemble school. For example, staff members at some Ramah camps are required to attend weekly or daily *Beit Midrash* sessions to study liturgy or Jewish text, but those are not favored times for many counselors.

While time, lack of knowledge, and misaligned interests are real challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed directly, they are not insurmountable. As one Ramah director, Zachary Lasker, suggests, "if there is alignment between [the counselors'] agenda and that of the camp, then successful education is quite conceivable."⁷ Indeed, too much is at stake to simply surrender all hope of tapping camp's most valuable resources. We know that counselors are the magic-makers; and as such, they should be the main transmitters of Jewish content and designers of the experience for the campers. Failing to develop counselors as agents of Jewish socialization has a domino effect on the entire camp program.

When camp shifts the responsibility for educational programming over to the experts (rabbis and educators working as faculty), counselors essentially become outside observers merely sitting with campers and moving them from place to place. While the intentions behind bringing the expertise of Jewish professionals' to camp are admirable (to raise the level of content provided in programs), the outcome ultimately fails both the counselors and the campers. Not only are the counselors given the message that

⁵ Sales and Saxe, *How Goodly*, 133.

⁶ Sales and Saxe, *How Goodly*, 98.

⁷ Lasker, Z. (2007). The Education of Ramah Counselors: Madrichim as Educators and Learners. In M. Cohen, & J. S. Kress (Eds.), *Ramah at 60: Impact and Innovation* (pp. 159-173). New York: National Ramah Coalition of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America., 166.

Jewish content is not theirs to own and appropriate, the rabbis and educators lack the deep relationships with the campers needed to fully capture their attention and trigger investment in the learning experience.

Moreover, if counselors continue to be overlooked as key learners of camp, themselves, then the camp system loses its ability to differentiate between generic activities and intentional programs. An activity could be anything one does with his or her time. At camp this could be a game of basketball, an hour at the pool, an art project, capture the flag, or a trip to the climbing tower. Ideally, in a well-*designed* camping environment, many of these activities will become programs, or, an activity that is planned with a goal or desired outcome explicitly tied to the mission of the camp. This is when capture the flag becomes the liberation of Jerusalem in 1967 and the climbing tower becomes an entire afternoon focused on building trust and reinforcing Jewish values in a cabin community. Designers and facilitators rather than hired observers are required to capitalize on these memorable learning moments. As Dr. Joseph Reimer, professor of Jewish education at Brandeis University writes, “being in the river and experiencing the current” is not enough; any experience, in order to be memorable and educative requires careful design and appropriate reflection.⁸ One must be artfully educated to know how to turn an activity into an educative experience.⁹

Yet another danger involved in continuing to ignore the key magicians of camp is, ironically, that *no one is making the magic for them, the counselors*. This means they are at risk for not getting nourished Jewishly. Counselors are not just a constituent group that serves camp, they should also be treated as a population served by camp. Camp is designed to involve everyone in the camp community as learners and educators, from the driver and the cook, to the director.¹⁰ Everyone is a part of the program. Therefore, failing to develop staff members in accordance with the camp’s mission does not honor their commitment and intention to be at camp and contribute to the community. As such, rather than a requirement, Jewish education for counselors could be framed as a personal gift; something they would desire and love, as their unique “program” at camp.

This learning gift must be something of value to counselors as emerging Jewish adults. It cannot look, feel, smell, taste, or resemble school, and it must begin by celebrating their commitment to fostering Jewish living at camp. I believe positive Jewish learning for counselors should meet the following standards:

- learning should occur in a *context of social connection and validation by peers*. (The learning experience results in counselors deepening peer relationships, building and celebrating their community, and eventually seeing each other as experts in addition to being friends.)
- learning needs to be *authentic*. (This means learning outcomes are valued, usable contributions to the lived camp community and the learner’s life at home.)

⁸ Reimer, J. (2001). Jumping Into the Currents: The Art of Informal Jewish Education. (S. Berrin, Ed.) *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, 31 (582), 1-2.

⁹ Reimer, J. (2003). *A Response to Barry Chazan: The philosophy of informal Jewish education*. Retrieved December 1, 2013, from The Encyclopedia of Informal Education: http://www.infed.org/informaleducation/informal_jewish_education_reply.htm

¹⁰ Zeldin, *Making the Magic*, 98.

- at least some of elements of the learning should be *self-directed*. (Learners should be encouraged to become connoisseurs¹¹ of Judaism - developing a sense of authority and ownership over their Jewish life.)

Rather than operating according to these or any standards, however, at present, counselor learning at many camps operates on what I call the sink or swim method. This “method” drops all counselors in various program planning and/or facilitation roles, with varying degrees of responsibility. Counselors work in teams to plan educational programs or lead *Shiurim* under the guidance of their unit head or faculty member.¹² This model seems positive because counselors become active leaders instead of hired observers. However, any counselor learning that takes place in this way results from a programmatic need that forces counselors to study a specific Jewish topic and prepare to teach campers from very recently acquired knowledge. This process lacks the opportunity for self-directed learning on the part of the staff member and even worse, each team of counselors only explores the topic their assigned day, remaining fairly uneducated about the topics covered in other programs. A counselor would have to be a part of this process for several summers and have many trial and error experiences to begin to develop as an educator. While counselors might grow from this process in some ways, it is a contrived experience ripe for innovation, beginning with more input from counselors as learners.

Happily, there are some glimpses of hope that camp culture can not only handle but thrive from a shift in educational priorities. On a national level, positive opportunities to develop counselors as Jewish socializing agents have existed for several years. The Foundation for Jewish Camp’s Cornerstone Fellowship has begun to shift the direction of counselor education and staff development. This successful program invites delegations of counselors from many Jewish camps to a seminar and year-long advising process in order to further their counseling skills, Jewish learning, and create an action plan to advance Jewish education at their own camp. Interested individuals can even choose to take a college level course in experiential education and Jewish camping while attending the seminar.¹³ While this program is rich in content and operates on a broad national level, it only directly involves small delegations of 4-6 counselors from each participating camp. But an important lesson to learn from this initiative is that the structure of learning and design of the program, as a “fellowship,” has led to a high demand for participation.

A second example of moving fruitfully towards developing counseling staff in these deeper ways is at Camp Ramah in California where counselors are invited in the off-season to propose camp programs and educational initiatives for possible grant-based funding for the summer. This opportunity gives counselors agency to design a new experience for their camp, research their idea, and implement the plan in the summer.¹⁴ While this program offers an authentic incentive in the form of peer and community recognition and funding, it also operates on a very small scale. More broadly, Ramah California, along with

¹¹ The concept of connoisseurship in education comes from the writing of education philosopher, Elliot W. Eisner. See his essay “The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism: A Personal Journey,” 2004. Accessed Dec. 19, 2014: http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/47602_alkin2e_ch31.pdf

¹² Models such as this exist at URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute and several other URJ camps.

¹³ The Foundation for Jewish Camp. (2013). *Cornerstone Fellowship*. Retrieved December 1, 2013, from The Foundation for Jewish Camp: <http://www.jewishcamp.org/cornerstone-fellowship>

¹⁴ Ramah California. (2013). *Staff Leadership Packet*. Retrieved December 1, 2013, from Ramah California: <http://www.ramah.org/cms-assets/documents/138200-553849.staff-leadership-packet.pdf>

other Ramah camps offer financial incentives for staff members who attend additional training during the year or enroll in Jewish Studies courses at their colleges and universities.

While these examples are positive, there is more intentional work to be done. The recent Pew Research Center study, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” only further confirms the suspected broad impact of Jewish camping on life-long Jewish engagement. Over one third of all Jews and 44% of “Jews by religion” surveyed in the study attended Jewish overnight camp as a child. The American Jewish community and its philanthropic foundations are well aware of the success of Jewish camp and have funded it generously over the last 15 years. So there is a momentous wave to ride of general success and generous resources in continuing to grow and sophisticate the field. This growth must not be limited to number of campers, amount of tuition, or range of recreational activities offered at camps. Indeed, during this period of camp fervor, it is easy to favor breadth over depth and quantity over quality. Too often, camps are calculating how many youngsters can spend an hour at the climbing tower in a day rather than focusing on how valuable that experience could be when led by goal oriented leaders.

In our camps we not only raise our children, but we also shape our immediate future – our very next congregants, leaders, rabbis, educators and parents. Let us fully honor their commitment. Camp owes it to those tired souls singing *Havdallah* after a long, hard summer, to ensure they are drained from creating lasting and valuable memories and moments, and from pondering new insights and perspectives, and not exhausted simply from a summer of watching children have all of the fun.