

Ramah as an Incubator for New Ideas

Philanthropic Dollars a Sign of Confidence in the Ramah Model of Jewish Camping and Staff, leadership Development

by H. Glenn Rosenkrantz

When the newest Ramah camp opened this past summer, it was watched closely by those in the funding world who had put considerable dollars behind it.

Ramah Outdoor Adventure, at Ramah in the Rockies, was designed and marketed as the first-ever overnight, Kosher, shomer Shabbat camp with an intense wilderness experience element. Not quite Outward Bound, but close.

The first season attracted 120 campers from 17 states and all regions of the country – plus Canada and Israel – to a remote and dramatically set 360-acre ranch nestled in the Pike and San Isabel National Forests, 90 minutes from Denver.

There, extreme adventure and environmental education were integrated with Jewish learning and leadership training to create a camp experience unlike any other.

Among the VIPs who flew in for a site visit was Jeremy Fingerman, CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Camp. The organization helped develop Ramah Outdoor Adventure with a substantial grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation to help establish five new specialty summer camps across the country.

“The camp is spectacular,” Fingerman said, “and we are thrilled with its first year of performance. The kids I spoke to were thoroughly engaged. In partnership with the talented and passionate staff there, they formed a real community.”

More broadly, the inaugural season proved that new models of Jewish camping – ones that shatter existing paradigms – could exist and thrive.

“Camps can transcend established formats and regional patterns and become new, powerful and vibrant centers of the Jewish camping movement,” Fingerman said.

The Foundation for Jewish Camp has committed to funnel more than \$1 million, and so far approximately \$400,000, into Ramah Outdoor Adventure.

In fact, this \$1 million commitment is about a third of the total from foundations and philanthropists supporting camping initiatives and movement-wide leadership training programs in recent years, Ramah officials said.

“Ramah is an incubator for new ideas and approaches to camping and to staff development,” said Rabbi Mitch Cohen, Director of the National Ramah Commission. “All Jewish camps do development well. But some foundations and others invest specifically in Ramah for the staff

development angle and our intense approach to Jewish education, leadership and community building.”

Ramah’s focus and measurable successes in developing staff, from counselors to directors, makes for a natural pairing, leaders of Jewish organizations and foundations said.

“Leadership and development statistics are consistent across the movements, pointing to the unbelievable power of the Jewish camping experience,” Fingerman said. “What is special about Ramah is that it has a very centralized and strategic way of thinking and developing. It is easier for us to support those with a long history and a track record.”

Beyond redefining the Jewish camping experience by developing the new camp in the Rockies, new funding and partnerships are enabling Ramah to enhance and expand staff development as a key part of its mission.

This is especially true now, during camping’s off-season, when staff and leadership development moves to the forefront in preparation for next summer.

Ramah’s belief is that skilled, thoughtful and visionary leaders will make an impact on campers. But also that they will become engaged members and leaders within the Conservative movement and the larger Jewish community, a vision that foundations and others share.

“Ramah young adults have the potential to be in the top echelons of American leadership and the Jewish community,” said Rabbi Eric Lankin, chief of Institutional Advancement and Education at the Jewish National Fund (JNF).

“Ramah camps are cauldrons of those being transformed by Jewish life. Why wouldn’t we want to be close to that energy and do what we can to enhance it?”

In January, 40 Ramah staff members, mostly second- and third-year counselors, will travel to Israel for a week as part of Alternative Winter Break, a joint program of JNF and Ramah now in its third year.

Participants will engage in social service projects in the Negev. Activities will range from painting apartments, building playgrounds, tending to forests and forging new relationships with Israelis in development towns dotting the region.

The notion is that they will return more engaged and connected with Israel, and with a can-do, community building spirit that they can pass on to Ramah campers, colleagues and others.

“We are at a moment in time when there is an opportunity to identify youth who have shown leadership potential in camp, and engage them in the broader Jewish community,” said Harlene Appelman, executive director of The Covenant Foundation.

The Covenant Foundation has supported Ramah with a planning grant for a proposed fellowship program. Ramah officials envision a national cohort of post-college Ramah senior staff bringing

Jewish educational and engagement programs to children, teens, and families in schools and other Jewish institutions across the country.

“Experiential opportunities within the Jewish community at a young age create innovative leaders of our community for a new generation,” she said.

In another unique training program, the AVI CHAI Foundation is funding an initiative, Daber, to train counselors and directors on how to more effectively inject Hebrew into everyday camp settings. The program began this year.

Ramah camps have long identified Hebrew usage as a core value and objective. The grant seeks to enhance use of the language as a connection to community and Israel, and is leveraging Ramah’s commitment to leadership training to make it happen.

“Hebrew has been used at summer camps generally, but it has lost some of its magic and less emphasis is being put to it,” said Joel Einleger, senior program officer at the foundation. “Daber sends a message to Ramah staff and to the Jewish community that Hebrew is our communal language. We want to strengthen and emphasize it and create connections through its use.”

“I worked with campers who had little Hebrew background, but wished that they’d had more,” said Rami Schwartz, 22, a unit head at Ramah New England this past summer and one of the inaugural staff members to take part in the Daber program. “I am now equipped to make that happen.”

The new programs and others join longstanding ones, such as the Weinstein National Ramah Staff Training Institute and the Winer National Training Institute for camp unit heads, which placed Ramah at the forefront of camping movements committed to intensive staff training and development.

“What our partners and funders see, and what we try to achieve, is a Jewish experience for campers and our staff that extends beyond the summer and along the continuum of a lifetime,” Cohen said. “And this, we know, is worth the investment.”

More information on the Ramah camping movement is available on the [Camp Ramah website](#).