

One Summer Camp in '65: A Theoretical and Practical Civil Rights Education

Posted At : October 18, 2010 3:54 PM | Posted By : Tara Bognar

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"Civil rights for African Americans were woven into Judaism in a seamless garment to be experienced and lived." **Jewish Summer Camping and Civil Rights: How Summer Camps Launched a Transformation in American Jewish Culture**, 2009

Professor Riv-Ellen Prell's essay studies how denominational (primarily Reform and Conservative) Jewish summer camps aggressively included civil rights programming and education into their vision of American Judaism, and the camper experience in the 1950s and 60s, and how that emphasis eventually fell away. But its story is achingly relevant today.

The pivot point in the essay is a fascinating incident that took place at Camp Ramah Nyack's experimental "American Seminar" program in 1965. The coed program brought sixteen year-olds together for an intensive summer of traditional Jewish learning in the mornings and social action volunteering (largely in/with African American communities) in the afternoon.

Fairly late in the summer, a leader of the African American Jewish youth group, Hatzair Haatid, arranged for group members to spend a weekend visiting American Seminar and share community, learning, and praying, with its campers. But the camp's leaders were unsure about the halachic Jewish status of the visiting group, and they consulted the Conservative movement's chief legal authority, Rabbi Moshe Zucker.

He ruled that any male in the group (this was prior to women gaining rights to participate equally in religious life in the movement) past the age of bar mitzva who was enrolled in a yeshiva or day school could receive an Aliyah. He reasoned that the educational institution would vouch for the "authenticity" of the young man's Judaism. This ruling was agreed upon by the camp director, Lukinsky and the Talmud professor, who served as the scholar-in-residence and the religious authority for the camp.

But on the morning in question, Rabbi Lukinsky could not bring himself to make the inquiries that would be required for enacting that policy:

"In any other Jewish setting," he asserted, "if a person presented himself as a Jew the inquiry would stop there. There was only one reason I asked the young men on a Shabbat morning if they attended a yeshiva and it was because they were Black." He decided then and there simply to assign Aliyot to the guest campers.

Later that day, the rest of the camp learned that after the service, the Talmud teacher asked a group of young men to stay behind to repeat the entire Torah service, holding based on R. Zucker's ruling that the "the Aliyot taken by the Black Jews rendered it

illegitimate."

That decision led to agitation and outrage, and culminated in the two camp leaders holding a public discussion on their positions and their decision making processes. One camper remembers:

I know now that our teacher followed his teacher Zucker, and that is what the halakhic system required. But we heard the rabbi say "I was just following orders.?" We had all seen (the film) Judgment at Nuremberg that year and here he was saying that he should have followed orders. He heard it too and tried to explain ten to fifteen more times that this was a halakhic requirement.

(That Talmud professor was a Holocaust survivor whose Auschwitz tattoo campers saw every day).

That one incident called into question the premise of the summer - the possibility of the 'seamless' integration of progressive values and traditional Judaism. In Prof. Prell's interviews with the Rabbis and campers involved, decades later, the challenges and tensions of that day still sound fresh. Interestingly, the Talmud teacher is never named, a presumably voluntary anonymity implying that, in 2009, he preferred not to have his name publicly associated with the incident.

The often implicit tensions made explicit in this incident will, I'm sure, sound familiar to many who are involved in or implicated by topical Jewish struggles around questions of gender, sexuality, intermarriage, and pluralism. The question of the halachic status of African American Jewish communities like that which composed Hatzair Haatid, is, as far as I know, still not more resolved within the Conservative movement.

Eventually, Prof. Prell relates, "civil rights no longer served as medium for expressions of Jewish social justice," but

These campers were to create many revolutions in American Jewish life... Summer camps of the 1950s and 1960s proved to be a powerful testing ground for experimenting with new articulations of Jewish identity.

Are there revolutions fomenting in Jewish summer camps today? Or perhaps the testing grounds of Jewish identity are elsewhere? Or maybe we're still working out, at camp, online, in new and experimental schools and yeshivot, at Limmuds and Havurah Institutes, the struggles that our Boomer forebears cracked open ahead of us.