

Ramah Is My Pulpit...

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TO MY (OR ANY JEWISH) MOTHER

Immediately upon being ordained by the Seminary, I accepted an appointment as a Ramah Director. My mother was upset; what could tell her friends when they asked about me and the pulpit I didn't accept. She found it difficult to say that I was a camp director. After all those years of study and preparation, it didn't sound like a "job for a nice Jewish Rabbi". She didn't think to say I was a Jewish educator—there was no formal school building involved. She chose rather to say, "He works with youth."

She really was right; Ramah was my pulpit and my constituency was young people. As sons will, I never did get around to telling here "what I did in the winter time" and more important, why I chose Ramah as a career (it's fifteen years now). I write them (now) for "my folks," and for all folks.

Through the years whenever I would speak to a group of parents about Ramah, I would define Ramah as a "Jewish, educational institution in a camp setting". I would talk about Ramah and not Camp Ramah. I was very careful about the words that I chose and I wasn't playing semantic games. Yes, the "Ramah experience" takes place in a camp setting, but the notion of Ramah as "just a camp" does injustice to it as the major force that it is in Jewish life.

When we think of educational institutions, we think of many things; of buildings, of schools, of principals, of teachers, of curricula, of classrooms, of books, of formality. Any educational institution should have many, if not most, of the above; but education need not be limited to the formal school. As a matter of fact, any institution that exposes its participants to carefully structured experiences, be it on the formal or informal

level, is an educational institution. Any institution that presents its participants with opportunities to experience Jewishly, with opportunities to broaden the options of one's Jewish choice; such an institution is a Jewish educational institution.

So, Ma, Ramah is a Jewish educational institution. It is conceived of as a place where young people are carefully exposed to a Jewish life style and grow as a result of the experience.

Ramah makes a number of sociological, religious and educational assumptions and structures the institution according to these assumptions. Let us examine some of them.

Ramah assumes that the best 3 day a week Jewish school on the North American continent, with the richest curriculum possible, taught by the best teachers available, does not adequately meet the total Jewish needs of today's young people. How much can a young person learn in 5 1/2 to 6 hours weekly—beyond the mastering of minimal basic Hebrew skills? How many Jewish ideas and values in depth can a young person confront, cope with and assimilate, given the present structures of our formal 3 day a week schools?

Ramah then, complements our formal schools in this realm; the realm of knowledge, of ideas, of intellect. Committed as it is to the Jewish tradition and viewing that tradition as being in major part as intellectual tradition, everyone at Ramah studies. Every Ramah director is the director of a "*Heder* under the elms"—which provides Hebrew language studies for everyone; Jewish ideas for everyone; each according to his own level, her own background and intellectual maturity.

Older and veteran Ramahniks cope with Isaiah or with Rabbinic materials in the original Hebrew and Aramaic; younger ones may use the latest audio-lingual methods for the study of Hebrew as a language, counselors may be involved in classes dealing with the place of women in Jewish life or with ecology and the Jewish tradition. We have been told that a youngster often learns more in a summer at Ramah than in a year at Hebrew school. The above, of course, does not hold for youngsters who attend a Solomon Schechter Day School or its equivalent. Such schools do prepare youngsters very adequately in the areas of Hebrew language and Jewish texts. But even a day school youngster benefits greatly from Ramah as a supplement to his Jewish education.

For, as important as the formal study of subject matter may be, the setting in which that study takes place is almost as crucial. Time is available—time to examine, to think out, to test out, to argue, to analyze, to reject, to accept. People are available; teachers who don't check in at 4:00 p.m. and leave at 6:00 p.m., teachers who live in the “neighborhood” and are always available—as resource people, as people to talk to, as exemplars of the intellectual. But teachers at Ramah are not only people who teach Hebrew, Judaic materials and Jewish ideas, but also people who eat with you, who swim with you, and who play volley ball with you; some of them even live with you. The relevance of Jewish ideas in the current world is a complicated notion; at Ramah the relevance of the Jewish tradition is in part a function of its being integral to a total comprehensive community.

A further assumption that Ramah makes about the youngster who participates in its program concerns the relative paucity of “his natural Jewish experiential background”. There was a time in the Jewish past when the home was an adjunct of the Jewish school. A youngster studied about *Kashruth* in school and then went back to a kosher home. He learned about the *Kiddush* in the context of a home where *Kiddush* was part of a pattern of traditional Jewish Sabbath observance. This is no longer true in many cases. Most youngsters in “Jewish schools” come from culturally deprived Jewish homes; they need a “head start” program; an experientially enriching or nourishing program that provides the natural environment for Jewish living that is usually missing.

So, youngsters at Ramah learn Hebrew language by living it, or they taste Shabbat by experiencing it. It is no longer an abstract—a chapter in a book or just a correct answer on a quiz. Shabbat is something that has been experienced, felt, cherished, and then examined in retrospect. Shabbat at Ramah is a lingering memory that will mold life styles for the future. Or, to put it another way, five class hours on the subject of *Havdala* do not hold a candle to the experience of one *Havdala* service.

The notion of experiencing Jewish life is basic to Ramah in a *bona fide* “real” living situation that is natural and not formal. Ramah does not need (as a school must) to “model” Jewish life—it lives it. There is no need to model a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service on Thursday afternoon.

This is just as true in the realm of interpersonal relationships as it is for the areas of Jewish prayer, Shabbat, *Kashruth*, etc. Young people at

Ramah live with other young people in groups and have to relate to each other at routine, normal and special occasions. Where else can the “ethical” demands of Judaism be confronted in non-abstract, experience demanding terms? What better natural laboratory could be structured for “dealing with Jewish values”; for raising the level of “*mitzva*” one’s relation to his fellow man? Thus, the interpersonal aspect of the Jewish tradition, so relevant to today’s world, comes alive as part of Ramah tradition and practice. It may sound trite, but baseball at Ramah is played Jewishly not because balls and strikes may be called in Hebrew, but because of the way team mates and opponents talk to and treat each other before, during and after the games. “Kill the umpire,” is *treife*: at Ramah Jewish ethical as well as dietary laws are observed.

Another key factor in the Ramah way of doing things revolves around the fact that young people generally operate in groups. “Peer culture” is a pervasive influence. Ramah has been able to create a peer culture deeply rooted in a Jewish life style that is as pervasive as any other competing youth culture. In a certain sense Ramah is a “Jewish commune”.

Moshe studies because everyone at Ramah studies. *Tefila* is something that everyone at Ramah does. Loving your neighbor is also your neighbor’s concern. Involvement in the problems of Israel and of Russian Jewry are part of the demands made upon young people by *other* young people. This, together with the fact that older Ramahniks are deeply involved in the making of major programmatic decisions and take an integral part of the implementation of programs creates a youth culture that is with it—alive, vibrant and intensely Jewish. As such, Ramah is again inherently relevant, it is a summer-long “happening”.

Staff members at Ramah can be described in the main as “accessible models to the young”. Most have been through Ramah as campers themselves and to quote one, “want to give to younger kids the kind of things I got from Ramah”. They try very hard to give of themselves, to be Jewish models to the young. A Ramah counselor can be type cast by his constant effort to seek Jewish meaning not only for himself, but for the youngsters in his charge. Discussing, evaluating, accepting, rejecting, Ramah staff members are deeply committed to the intellectual ferment that is part and parcel of the issue-oriented youth culture. Coping with ideas is part of the Ramah routine—yet dynamically so.

All of this takes place in the camp setting. Youngsters swim, play ball, do dramatics (“Man of La Mancha” was done in Hebrew in three camps last summer), arts and crafts, go on canoe trips, overnights, cookouts, have a camp radio station broadcasting in Hebrew, build walkie-talkies and many of the myriad other activities that are part of camp. They also collect petitions for Soviet Jewry, visit the Lower East Side on a three day trip to New York, give several hours a week to volunteer work in hospitals, run two day sessions on the role of women in Jewish life, run a three day program simulating the building of a new town in Israel. Camp is fun, Jewishness is fun, Ramah is fun.

Ramah which has just celebrated its 25th summer, started with one camp and 88 campers that first year. There are now seven Ramah camps, each serving a distinct geographical area of the country. In addition, the Ramah Seminar in Israel provided for close to 500 youngsters last year who went to Israel as the concluding highlight of their Ramah experience. Each summer Ramah operates its own experimental day camp (300 young people) and its own staff training institute (Mador). A new profession has been created in Jewish education—that of Ramah director. Last year alone, 6,000 young people between the ages of 10-19 experienced Ramah as staff members or participants.

It takes 11 full-time professional people other than myself to set this up, plan it, and execute it. Close to three million dollars a year is involved. Hours of educational energy are poured into Ramah by untold numbers of “part time people”. Why? So that when a Jewish youngster grows up he will have had the Ramah experience as part of his upbringing—the experience that will enable him to choose Jewishly when he chooses his life style, and will equip him with the Jewish know how to do so.

Next time they ask you, Ma, tell them what I do, tell them why I do it. Tell them I have a job that befits a “nice Jewish Rabbi”. Tell them I wouldn’t have done it differently if I had to start over again. But, most important of all, Ma, tell them “Ramah makes Jews”.