

**JOSHUA CAHAN**

## *Reclaiming Piety*

**O**VER THE LAST DECADE, Ramah Wisconsin has strengthened its tradition of excellence in Jewish study and programming significantly. An essential component of this revitalization has been the presence of the Beit Midrash Program (BMP) and the Northwoods Kollel. Over the past eight years, these programs have transformed the religious culture of the camp, inspiring a whole generation of campers through yeshiva-style Torah study and intense religious living within a context of thoughtfulness and open-mindedness.

The effect has been profound. Through these experiences, more campers have come to value the religious, as well as the social opportunities camp offers. Through Jewish study and spirituality, they have discovered exciting ways to express their Jewishness. And the impact stretches beyond the summer: more of our alumni are organizing study groups and Shabbat activities at home during the year; studying Torah in Israel after high school; and playing leadership roles in campus religious life. The following are a few examples: (a) Our Shabbat afternoon singing has become enormously popular—the slow and emotional melodies of *se'udah shelishit* (the third meal)—drawing almost 200 people, campers as well as staff every Shabbat. Numerous campers have described that hour of song as the spiritual highlight of their week. And that energy has had a ripple effect. In the last few years, many Ramah Seminar and USY Pilgrimage groups have made *se'udah shelishit* a regular part of their Shabbat programs, mostly at the urging of Ramah Wisconsin alumni. I also am aware of at least seven campuses and six synagogues where alumni have been involved in organizing *se'udah shelishit* programs. (b) An alumna of our program, a student at an Orthodox day school, found in the *beit midrash* a community with which to talk through her struggles and concerns about how to fit her desire for gender equality into her ideas of traditional Judaism. Three years of challenging study at

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camp led her to study at the Conservative Yeshiva through the Nativ program and ultimately led her to a more mature and positive relationship to Torah study and observance and to a deepened commitment to egalitarian study and prayer. (c) Another alumnus recently returned from Israel and is beginning college. He reports that he had many wonderful and inspiring experiences in Israel and learned and grew a great deal. But in many ways, he still sees the openness and excitement of his religious experience at camp to be the ideal. He will head to campus (a small campus where Chabad is the best option for Shabbat) with a certainty that no matter what community he finds himself in temporarily, the values he learned at Ramah will remain central to his ultimate vision of his religious identity.

Conservative institutions and programs often exert a lot of effort in outreach, making Jewish experiences accessible to the less knowledgeable, but sometimes forgetting that the key to building a secure future is in-reach—creating frameworks that foster the continued religious growth of young people who want more of what we have given them. They are asking for the resources to continue to grow and learn within a context that reinforces the values of equality, social justice, and halachic development that are so central to our worldview. Our experience suggests that reclaiming key aspects of yeshiva culture—like Talmud study and beit midrash-oriented learning and creating shared spiritual experiences through song and ritual—is crucial to shaping religiously committed Jews who will retain these values.

### **The Beit Midrash Program**

I founded the BMP in 2000 together with camp alumnus Aryeh Bernstein. We were invited by the camp director, Rabbi David Soloff, to structure a Talmud-study experience that would utilize both beit midrash and classroom study to engage students directly with Talmudic texts and ideas. The initiative responded to a sense that we were not meeting the educational needs of many of our campers. There was a growing subgroup of campers who were asking for opportunities to study Talmud and engage more directly with Jewish texts, many of whom saw Talmud study as part of their religious growth process. We wanted to engage and encourage their exploration while helping them to approach Talmud and notions of tradition and halachah in a thoughtful and open-minded way. Also, some of our brightest and most engaged campers were finding formal study at camp intellectually unsatisfying. We wanted to offer an intensive, self-directed study environment that would challenge them and deepen their thinking about their Jewish selves.

In our first summer, we attracted about twenty students. In recent years, approximately fifty-five campers from three *edot* (divisions), one-quarter of all

those eligible, have signed up each summer for the program, committing one and a half hours daily to Talmud study. The core of the program is intensive Talmud study, offered as an alternative to standard camp classes in Judaica and Hebrew, focusing on developing the skills to understand and think critically about rabbinic texts. We use original texts without translation, providing glossaries and guiding questions to help students navigate the unfamiliar terrain. Study time is divided evenly between work in *havruta* (study pairs) and class discussion, allowing participants the freedom to develop their own ideas while trying to keep the sense of challenge from turning into frustration.

At the same time, we always work to connect the texts and ideas to contemporary, real-world problems, to ask how the tradition speaks to us, and to learn how our world forces us to reexamine elements of our tradition. We encourage students to struggle with texts and ideas, which means asking serious questions that both embrace and challenge the tradition. We also developed informal groups outside the classroom where religious questions can be discussed openly. We push campers to articulate and explain their own views about Judaism and to listen to their peers. This has challenged many of their preconceptions, encouraged self-awareness, and taught them to listen seriously and respectfully to differing viewpoints. This may be the most important lesson we teach—after they learn to dialogue with reflection and respect, our more outspoken campers discover that their most rewarding relationships are with those who see religion very differently.

The beit midrash concept met with significant skepticism from several sources. Some feared that the program would lower the level of the Judaic text classes outside of the BMP because the strongest students would opt for the BMP, leaving the original program and its teachers with less motivated students. There was also a fear that having a separate Talmud track would be a cause for polarization among campers; being in Talmud track either would be seen as a social stigma to be avoided or as a badge for anyone who wanted to be seen as a “serious Jew.”

We tried to be very conscious of these concerns in publicizing the program, talking about alternative learning models and avoiding language that suggested that one model was better than another. We emphasized the focus on Talmudic methodology and skills and on independent study. In practice, there was some impact on regular text classes, but this was greatly offset by a marked improvement in the organization and quality of the entire text program. In recent years, many campers have actually felt torn because of the attractiveness of both the Beit Midrash and the text programs. We sense that more campers now have a positive view of their Jewish study experience because of these choices.

We have seen no evidence that participation in the BMP creates divisions beyond the classroom. There has been a balance of male and female participants, of students from traditional or observant Jewish backgrounds and of those from alternative traditional backgrounds, and from day schools and public schools. Strong and religiously involved students also have chosen the main text program, thus avoiding any serious problems of imbalance.

Another implication of this new program is that all campers from an *edah* no longer study the same material. Some view this as a loss, as campers might miss a key component of the edah curriculum and the progression through material from summer to summer. Yet, the growth of the BMP has paralleled the recognition among the camp senior educators that it is unrealistic to expect that the camp curriculum will have significant continuity from one summer to the next, given the ten intervening months. Instead, we have begun to focus on creating powerful learning experiences that resonate positively with students, exploring a wider range of topics for younger campers, and offering a range of electives for the three oldest edot. The BMP fits much more comfortably into this mindset than into earlier educational models. It is now one of a range of different learning experiences that enable campers to find their comfort zone.

There also has been skepticism about whether Conservative kids would be interested in studying Talmud in a yeshiva-like setting and that such interest perhaps indicated a first step toward Orthodox Judaism. It is indeed a challenge to get teenagers involved in the complexities of rabbinic thought, but this is true of kids from all backgrounds. On the other hand, many of our kids are turned on by the religious energy that pervades the BMP study environment and are searching for the keys that enable them to fully share in it, while others find the intellectual challenge a good entry into appreciating Jewish tradition.

### **Singing and Spirituality**

Spiritual expression also has become more important at camp. Our Thursday night singing and study program (an optional program open to the older age groups), called *mishmar*—after the traditional yeshiva late-night study session—draws campers from all backgrounds. It has grown in popularity to the point that this summer our library could barely hold the 150 participants. The singing is intense, the *divrei torah* are simple and provocative, the atmosphere is one of deep connectedness to God and to each other. Mishmar offers an experience that many participants didn't know they were seeking but has become the highlight of their camp week. It has fostered the kind of powerful spiritual awakening that we have long sought and is illustrated by the following phenomenon. We were worried this summer because junior counselors (JCs), who were *mishmar* stalwarts as campers, have their day off on Thursdays and would therefore miss

it. As 10:15 p.m. rolled around, a stream of JCs filed into the beit midrash for mishmar, full of stories about how they had organized mishmar themselves on Ramah Seminar and had waited a year to return to our sacred space.

Our Shabbat afternoon singing after se'udah shelishit has expanded similarly. A program that once consisted of a small group of staff now brings together almost 200 participants each week as edah staff, responding to camper interest, have reworked their programming to enable more campers to participate. The whole camp has learned many of these beautiful songs, and campers participate by giving divrei torah and leading the singing.

Many BMP participants have come to see camp as a place of serious intellectual and religious growth and the program faculty as mentors beyond their summers at camp. During the year, faculty send out weekly divrei torah to campers, parents, and community members. These are collected on the camp website<sup>1</sup> and have contributed to the organization of year-long study programs in Minneapolis and Chicago. Thus, camp has become an avenue for increasing the presence and the level of Torah study not only in the Northwoods but in our feeder cities as well. And our students leave with a personal commitment to continuing their religious journey beyond camp. They carry away from Ramah a deep desire for spiritual engagement and a sense that this engagement is fully compatible with critical thought.

### **The Northwoods Kollel**

The Northwoods Kollel began in 2001 and helps to shape the atmosphere of Torah study for the entire camp. Each year six college students come to spend the summer studying in the camp's beit midrash with a faculty of high-level scholars that has included Rabbi Jane Kanarek of Hebrew College of Boston, Dr. Rebecca Schorsch of Chicagoland Jewish High School, and Rabbi Ben Hollander, z"l, of the Hebrew University. They spend eight hours each day immersed in Jewish texts and also teach classes, live and eat with campers, serve as *tefillah* advisors, and participate in a range of informal programming around camp.

The Kollel students are passionate and thoughtful young people, deeply committed to being both students and role models. They set a tone of intense study and of egalitarian *frumkeit* that is felt throughout camp. They come from around North America seeking an intensive, advanced learning experience in a non-Orthodox setting. Some are graduates of Solomon Schechter or community day schools looking to develop their skills and to probe their personal beliefs. Others are Modern Orthodox students looking for a more scientific approach to study. Still others encounter Jewish text study first during college and, having taken the first steps on their own, need a framework to go further. All come in

search of a community of like-minded people who share their deep commitment to integrating Torah study with the full range of human wisdom. For many, the Kollel is the first religious setting in which they feel truly at home. In the words of alumna Sigal Samuel, “Kollel for me meant not only a place where I could learn an incredible amount in a short period of time, but also a place where I could live, become, and grow into a more refined self through the company of peers and teachers alike.”

The Northwoods Kollel program is modeled on a traditional yeshiva curriculum, emphasizing the study of Talmud and halachah and also exploring Midrash, Hasidic thought, and philosophy. But although the topics are traditional, the approach is decidedly modern. We look at the sources and development of each text alongside its later interpretations. We argue about halachic questions with deep respect for both the pull of tradition and the need for critique. We explore how Torah study and mitzvah observance can bring together Jews who espouse radically different theologies. These students, through their encounters with texts, teachers, and peers are preparing to be the spokespeople for a new kind of traditional Judaism. They are committed to a modern vision of religious truth and driven by a powerful spirituality that is not threatened by, but embraces, all sources of knowledge.

In the first summers of its existence, some staff resented the presence of the Kollel, feeling that it was a poor use of camp resources—students were being paid to study while others were paid to work. These attitudes have changed as it has become clear over seven years that the Kollel, while offering an important opportunity for its students, also has been a crucial element in the religious growth of campers and staff. Each summer, we have a group of enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and accessible staff members in camp who model for both campers and staff a compelling vision for religious life. During the summer, Kollel students have myriad opportunities to draw kids to religious experiences and to bring Torah to every corner of camp. The Kollel and BMP also have been part of a flowering of advanced programming throughout the camp, from more serious study in regular text classes to professional-like opportunities in the performing and visual arts.

Perhaps the most important impact of the Kollel is long term. Many Kollel participants, most of whom would not otherwise be in this or any Ramah camp, return as teachers, counselors, and even *rashai edot* (division heads). And they bring their love of Torah to everything they do. For years now, the BMP has been taught mainly by graduates of the Kollel program, including one who began his formal learning in the Kollel and is now working on his Ph.D. in Talmud, and another who began his Talmud study as an entering tenth grader in the first summer of our BMP! One former Kollel student has sworn every

summer that he would not be back. Yet after three summers as a counselor, he served in 2007 as the first *rosh edah* for Garinim, a new division at Ramah Wisconsin for campers entering fifth grade.

The program also has led some alumni toward careers in Jewish education. One student, who had considered pursuing a doctorate in Classics, instead decided after college to spend a year teaching high school rabbinics and is now studying at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. Another wrote that “[The kollel] led me down the Jewish education path by giving me the opportunity to improve my text skills that summer but [even] more by giving me the connection to camp that allowed me to work on my teaching skills in subsequent summers.”

### **Reclaiming Piety: A Challenge to the Conservative Movement**

Some aspects of our work evoked discomfort among some members of the camp community, which gets to the heart of both the great opportunity and the looming questions in this project. Although singing, dancing, and divrei torah certainly have been standard parts of the camp program since its inception, we introduced programs that were intentionally modeled on the religious environment of Orthodox *yeshivot*. It was feared by some that by embracing this culture, we would encourage more campers to join Orthodox communities in college and beyond.

Those of us involved in the BMP believe that the opposite is true. For decades, some of Ramah’s most committed kids were drawn to join Orthodox communities after high school precisely because egalitarian settings did not offer the same compelling and inspiring models of religious expression. They discovered an intensity of devotion and of study in such communities that was new to them and powerfully attractive. They may have concluded that liberal methodologies and gender equality are less important than, or not compatible with, spiritual engagement. The response must be to demonstrate that such religious expression and Torah study are equally at home in communities that embrace the fullness of their values. We have tried to do just that—our campers arrive on college campuses already comfortable with these experiences and feeling ownership over them, and they are not alienated by them. Most leave feeling confident that devotion to Torah does not require abandoning critical thought. And with stronger religious role models, many are leaving high school on a path to look for or create strong Conservative communities.

There is indeed a major challenge here. As has been the case throughout the history of Ramah, our teens leave Ramah looking for and demanding a kind of religious culture that most of our synagogues do not provide. Kids who are exposed to these experiences at camp often find the return home to be a letdown and a disappointment. Part of this is natural—there is no way that any

community can replicate the intensity and excitement of the camp setting. But part of this disappointment should serve as a kind of warning. We must find ways of encouraging kids who want to take on more mitzvot, of engaging them in conversation about Torah, and of making it a priority to create opportunities for any camper looking for more Torah study.

The response to the BMP and Kollel programs of Ramah Wisconsin has revealed a hunger for a new kind of intensity and spirituality that demands a response in our camps and across the institutions of our movement. It demonstrates the power of what I would call “shared expressions of piety,” a kind of religious expression not always embraced by the Conservative Movement, which excites our teenagers about Jewish study and observance and sparks a desire for spiritual engagement. This active and outward religious expressiveness is manifested in specific behaviors, such as energetic and impassioned singing and prayer, a deepening engagement with Torah study, talking openly about belief and spirituality, and taking on new ritual observances. Together, they build a deep engagement with Judaism—in study, observance, and faith—that has the potential to powerfully energize our communities.

Specifically, I want to emphasize three crucial messages:

First, when Ramah campers get excited about religious life and are interested in study and mitzvot, when Jewish texts and ideas help them to feel the beauty in the world, when rituals and songs awaken a sense of passion and excitement that is asleep within their own souls, we must create more opportunities for them within the Conservative Movement. Today, with more and more people moving freely between spiritual communities, Conservative Jews should be much more comfortable with *niggunim*, *tzitzit*, yeshiva study, and other expressive forms of piety without fearing that these forms will “make us Orthodox.” And so we need to embrace these signs of piety as natural and essential elements of the religious experience that we want to offer to campers. And we must find ways to make them more a part of our synagogue culture as well.

Second, we have found that our students are not looking for answers but for a language in which to engage with the real challenges of life in authentic and sophisticated ways. They respond to the challenge and intensity of engaging with Talmud and other rabbinic texts but also expect their own views of the world to be taken seriously. Many are just beginning to ask serious questions about Judaism, about identity, and about self; they need opportunities to incorporate Jewish concepts as they explore their own self-understanding. It is not true that progressive theology can speak only to theologians, whereas only fundamentalist theology can inspire the masses. We encourage each of our campers to articulate his or her own ideas, confident that the appealing



religious environment in which we guide that process ensures that the spiritual community remains at its core.

Finally, the experience of the power of religious involvement is solidified by being part of a religious community. Shared rituals—the intense joy of singing, of praying, and of creating Shabbat together, of a communal holy space—help each of its members to experience life’s beauty more deeply. If religion is about the awareness of a meaning that transcends the self, these shared settings are the spaces where we can tangibly feel transcendence. This is true beyond camp: I would suggest that many or most people from a secular background, who choose observance, do so because they experience the power of shared ritual in observant communities and are elated by it. Those seeking spiritual engagement are drawn to communities that step beyond Shabbat services to eat together, sing together, and study together. By creating opportunities for shared *deveikut* (intense connection to God), we draw more and more campers to the power of that experience. We instill in more campers the desire to look for those communities outside of camp as well. And we create the potential for these teenagers to be the foundation of engaged, spiritually connected, and thoughtful communities in college and beyond.

**Note**

<sup>1</sup><http://www.ramahwisconsin.com/divreitorah.htm>.