

ARNOLD EISEN*We Need More Ramah*

KEYNOTE SPEECH

*“Ramah: Onward from 60” Conference and Celebration**The Jewish Theological Seminary, October 14, 2007**Excerpted and edited by Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, National Ramah Director*

IT'S BEEN SIXTY DAYS SINCE, thanks to Mitch, I had my first intensive exposure as chancellor to the wonders of Ramah—the wonders of Ramah that first came into being sixty years ago. Mitch Cohen and I were driving up to Palmer after a visit to Nyack, and we were almost prevented from arriving in time for Shabbat because of a defective windshield wiper on the rental car. I know that since the opening of Ramah Wisconsin and the subsequent expansion from one camp to two and then to many camps, that things along the way were, of course, almost prevented by obstacles far more serious than that windshield wiper.

But here we all are, sixty years later, to celebrate one of the finest accomplishments of The Jewish Theological Seminary and of the Conservative Movement, and I think it's fair to say, objectively, wearing my hat as a scholar of American Judaism, that Ramah is one of the finest accomplishments of American Judaism as a whole. I'm honored to be part of this occasion. In true Ramah fashion, going back to the founding principles, we are not here just to have a good time, but to learn something, to reflect on what we've done so as to prepare another generation of American Jews for informed and intelligent participation in Jewish life.

I am very happy to be able to devote time working on Ramah's growth, as I think Ramah is absolutely essential to the core mission of JTS. I'm doubly

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pleased that while I missed out on Ramah when I had the chance to be a camper, I get to make up for lost time by joining the senior staff now as chancellor. This, as is the case for every other Jewish endeavor, starts with Torah. So let's begin by looking at where we are in the Torah's cycle: the transition from *Noah* to *Lech Lecha*, which is the transition from creation to covenant, from the children of Adam to the children of Israel, from God's partnership with all humanity to the particular set of responsibilities and possibilities opened up to Jewish human beings through the covenant with Abraham while retaining those that we have as human beings as a whole by the covenant with Noah.

Why does the God of all humanity choose to benefit all humanity by means of a small portion of humanity—the children of Israel, which is the Jews? The key, I think, comes when you look at the end of chapter eight, right before the blessing for Noah and his children, which reminds us that as long as creation endures, God recognizes seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.

So land, space, and time are going to be specially apportioned here to a people specially gifted with God's presence and God's laws, and this people can produce a kind of society, a kind of a life with a capital *L* that, as Deuteronomy chapter four puts it, is going to cause the nations of the world to say, "how wise and understanding are the People of Israel; I wish we could have laws like they have, I wish we could enjoy God's presence as they do." I say all this because I think it's directly relevant to the educational mission that we have as Jews and certainly that we have at Camp Ramah.

We have to create human beings who are capable, by virtue of the agency they have, the wisdom they accumulate, the experiences they have, and the education they're given, to make use of God-given talents including mind, heart, soul, and body; to make use of knowledge gained through science and through historic experience; to make use of the capacity for distance and objectivity, as well as the capacity for relationship and love; to make use of all of this, to exercise responsibility for God's creatures and for the world in such a way that we can become successful partners of God.

If I think that this is Ramah's mission, then based on this I want camp to foster Jewish human beings. I want to foster Jewish human beings gifted with the sense of responsibility, agency, and partnership. I want to make them feel at home in the world, including the natural world. I want them to be confident of their individual talents, but aware that fulfilling themselves using these talents comes only when joined in partnership with the talents of others. I want them to take pride in the uniqueness of the Jewish way in the world, and I want them to be respectful of all the other children of Noah, determined to

work with them, no matter how complex, to fulfill the charge laid upon us all by the covenant with Noah.

One needs community to make plausible—and to make coherent and compelling—the claims that Jewish tradition offers. I have to gather together a community united by a time and space that are mine, surrounded by images and architecture that reflect my values and not somebody else's, before I can be persuaded that my tradition is worth carrying on. I hope you see where I'm going with this.

The need for a new kind of Jewish community in the modern world is the fundamental reason why I think the strengthening and the creation of more Ramah summer camps is not only a clear and present opportunity, the single best opportunity we have, but is a necessity, an absolute necessity for Jewish survival. Therefore, this is essential to the core mission of JTS, as JTS is dedicated to living fully in the modern world while at the same time being fully immersed in and authentic to our tradition.

Judaism cannot thrive in the modern period if we begin from a perspective of individualism without the creation of Jewish times and spaces. At Ramah, for once, Jewishness is essential to who an individual Jew is and not peripheral; for once, time and space are ours and not somebody else's, and we don't have to struggle to create a Jewish space in the midst of a larger Gentile space; for once, we don't have to try to find an hour or two for Jewish time amidst the larger time, but we have seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, in a situation that is ours, where we can build community. Camps do this better than any other opportunity we have. Day schools are second best. They are also indispensable, but camps and day schools together are indispensable if we are going to get Jews to regard Jewishness as central to who they are, now that the Jewish communities of the past—where Jewishness was taken for granted—no longer exist.

When I look at Ramah, I think of the precious opportunity it gives us to transmit content and meaning and substance to life, to Torah, in a Jewish environment. Along with the ability to control time and space, camp provides a Jewish language, as well as a Jewish calendar to enact what we might call the grammar of Jewish everyday existence. Ramah combines this with the advantages of summer and of outdoors, when young people feel vitality coursing through them, where Jewishness is equated with life in a very natural way. Our campers and staff form new relationships, and see themselves grow in the wholeness of being a Jew, perhaps here to a larger extent than anywhere else. The person playing sports is integrated with the person inside the study hall, or creating art, creating a whole person united with the person at prayer.

I think Jewish summer camps are an absolutely indispensable resource for all American Jews right now because nowhere else do we have the opportunity to create communities and to fill them with Jewish meaning.

We need Ramah more. We can do more with Ramah and, therefore, we need more Ramah, more camps, more campers, more exposure, more hours, more students, more leaders, more *mitzvot*, more study, and more prayer that's enlivened by the wholeness of self that comes about only in a camp setting. We need communities wherever we are. We need them in our day schools. We need them in our afternoon schools. We need them in our synagogues. We need them in our secular organizations. But for goodness sake, we can never find them as ready-made or as easily constructed as we can find them in camp.

Similarly, we need Jewish meaning wherever we can place it. We need revitalization. We need reinterpretation. We need a kind of Judaism that's going to speak to my eighteen-year-old son and my twenty-one-year-old daughter, but also a Judaism that speaks to me in my fifties now. We need a kind of Judaism at Ramah, right now in 2007, that's going to foster leaders of this community in 2030 and 2040 and, God willing, 2050. So we need to imbue a kind of authenticity, a kind of comfort in this tradition, a kind of depth to this tradition which gives people the ability to innovate and to change—confident that when they innovate and when they change, they are carrying on what they were given instead of disrupting it and leaving it behind for something new.

I'm proud that I get to lead JTS at this time, when we're all thinking about how we can take Ramah forward for another sixty years of growth. I'm proud that I can stand here today, when we have nothing to fear from history, making sure that Jewish young people are not taught to safely guard their Jewishness in a pocket, keeping it locked and hidden away lest it be tarnished or disrupted or destroyed by what they encounter in the larger world. No, on the contrary, at Ramah we teach them to be confident that their Jewishness, that this Torah that they're given, this covenant which they are the heirs to, is strong enough, durable enough, flexible enough—it has withstood 3,000 years of transformation—that it can take anything the modern world is going to throw at it. There is no new idea that they are going to study in their science class or their history class or their bible class of which they need to be afraid.

Ramah stands for a kind of possibility for wholeness when young people need that sense of wholeness most, when they're most fearful of the world, most insecure about their own abilities, and most afraid that their physical prowess is not going to be sufficient for what life has to throw at them. So this is a vision of education of Ramah, a vision of sport, as well as prayer, of the arts, as well as study, a vision of six days of the week that leads to Shabbat in a way they do not for many of us living in the larger world.

I think I have good reason to be optimistic about the future of our movement, and I know I have good reason to be even more optimistic about the future of Ramah.

My colleague Shuly Rubin Schwartz closes her article from twenty years ago on the early years of Ramah's history with this thought: "Ramah, as early as its initial six years, played a major role in restoring to the Conservative movement faith in its future."¹ If there is a need for such a restoration of confidence today, I think Ramah is well placed, uniquely well placed to provide it. This is my vision then: Jewish human beings raised in pride of who they are, confident in their unique talents, aware of their responsibility to join with others, Jewish and Gentile, to steward the world and improve the lot of their fellow human beings. The Jewish part of each self is not squeezed at Ramah by the human, or set off at a distance from it, but expansively reaches into every aspect of mind, heart, soul, and body.

I want to have more and more campers at more and more Ramahs who are involved with learning, who are attached to their community and their people, who are skilled at human relationships, who are practiced in the mitzvot. I want to have more and more human beings at Ramah who understand the gift that they have been given, the ability to develop answers for themselves to the eternal questions of why the Jews, why Judaism, how to live Torah, how to partner with God. And to do all of this inside of the Jewish time and space, of wholeness and of joy that are not easily available elsewhere. I want a Ramahnik at home in nature, at home in themselves, proud of who they are, at home and in love with the language of the Jewish people and the grammar of Jewish community.

Abraham had to leave his father behind and set out in a whole new direction in order to get the covenant. Finklestein, Davis, Ettenberg, et al., had some existing undertakings on which to build. But they, too, had to risk a new direction in order to get the unique Ramah model off the ground. We are luckier on both counts. This generation of Jews has so much going for it, so much already in place, and the Ramah model is a good one in need of another injection of energy, of thinking, and of support. We have a wealth of experience on our side. We have the Torah on our side and we have one another. May we inaugurate another sixty years of creativity and growth which will take us all the way to the ripe old age of 120 and beyond. Thank you very much.

Responses to Questions from the Audience

THE SUCCESS OF SYNAGOGUE SCHOOLS is very dependent on the success of partnership with Ramah because we can accomplish in an informal educational setting far more than one can accomplish in the afternoon and weekend setting;

I think the sum total of the product, the holistic nature of living Jewishly twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, is a far more powerful element of the experience than any particular thing we put into it. Ralph Simon said a long time ago that Ramah will put a child in a total Jewish environment and enable him to live the ideal Jewish life from the time he gets up until he goes to bed.

WHAT IMPRESSES AMERICAN JEWS more than anything else when they go to Israel, time after time, is that they are overwhelmed by the public Jewish time and space, by the sense that you're just Jewish there. They can't get over it. Similarly, I think what the Ramah experience has to offer is the sense of the naturalness of Jewishness, the totality of Jewishness, the release from the hyphenated character of Jewish identity that all of us carry with us all the time. Now the trick is going to be to enable Ramah camper graduates to leave the hyphenated life with as much harmony as possible as we all try to do out here in the real world. But it seems to me, this is the quintessential meaning of Ramah: this sense of wholeness.

TO THE DEGREE THAT AMERICAN JEWS feel connected to Israel, feel at home when they visit Israel, that is a function of their feeling of connection to the Hebrew language. And yet we Americans, we're provincial linguistically. We get by in a way the rest of the world doesn't have to, because English is the world language right now. All the more reason why, at Ramah, when we have the chance at a total Jewish time and space, when we can accustom Jewish young people to the language and grammar of Jewish living, when we know that Hebrew is possible in the situation emerging, that we not give up on Hebrew. The Jewish people right now cannot afford to give up on Hebrew language. We have all sorts of new technology literally coming online over the last few years for making language live in new ways for people. I'm hoping that Ramah can take advantage of that new technology to make Hebrew again a living force in American Jewish life.

Note

¹ Shuly Rubin Schwartz, "Camp Ramah: The Early Years, 1947–1952," *Conservative Judaism* 40, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 38.