COVID-19 made summer 2021 one of the most difficult in Ramah’s history. Amid all the challenges of the summer, a major accomplishment was resuming vocational training for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities after a year off. Running these programs was not easy. Program staff had to find new job sites, and support participants through constantly changing pandemic guidelines.

But it was also a summer of great opportunity. New facilities allowed for the development of new job sites and skills training. Even with “podding” and social distancing requirements, program staff found ways for vocational participants to interact with their peers on staff. Participants performed essential work for camps in kitchens, mailrooms, and staff coffee shops, helping the camps function day in and day out. While the pandemic constraints were not ideal, lessons learned during COVID will shape the future of these programs for years to come.

This update includes short descriptions of what the vocational programs were able to accomplish in summer 2021, and how they plan to strengthen even further in coming years.

**Camp Ramah in California (Ojai)**

Camp Ramah in California’s new Ezra Moadon was tremendously beneficial for the program. Opening in 2021, the space helped the Ezra program strengthen in four key areas.

- Most jobs could be done from the new space, most notably Café Ezra, a coffee shop for staff. Because staff could not leave camp due to the pandemic, Café Ezra became a hub. Staff knew they could get well-made coffee and get to know the Ezra participants. As baristas, Ezra participants gained hard skills (e.g., how to brew a pot of coffee) and soft skills (e.g., how to interact with customers). It was especially helpful to have a large space to work as going in town to work was not an option this summer for the Ezra participants.

- Having the dedicated Moadon space allowed program coordinators to think bigger about what they could accomplish with participants during non-work times. They could do art, cooking, and laundry on their own time, in their own space, with
their own supplies, without having to worry about coordination with other parts of camp. This was important both to teach independent living skills and to run meaningful enrichment programs for the participants.

- The Moadon was a safe haven during a difficult summer at camp. Ezra participants could be inside without masks. While all meals for the rest of camp were eaten outside picnic-style on the ground, Ezra participants could eat their meals indoors at tables in their Moadon. Ezra coordinators could meet privately or in small groups with participants. They also had their own computer lounge, helpful for learning internet safety, but also to have a private space to connect with the outside world.

- Finally, the space validated their identity as a group. In previous summers, Ezra participants used many different spaces within camp without ever feeling at home. Having this Moadon allowed them to take pride in their specific space and to learn how to take care of it.

Program staff hope that in future, non-COVID summers, Ezra can use the space even more effectively, learning how to make more complex drinks, inviting staff in for joint activities, and thinking about how skills learned at camp can be applied to work opportunities during the off-season in Los Angeles.

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**Camp Ramah in Canada**

Over the past 3-4 summers, vocational participants at Ramah Canada worked in camp exclusively, so COVID did not affect jobs outside of camp. However, due to cohorting and podding, participants were limited to working in the Keepin' It Kosh Café and the office.

In the café, participants prepared the drinks, managed the lines, greeted the customers, cleaned up, and made special deliveries. Job skills included teamwork, punctuality, following instructions, organization, maintaining flexibility in case roles or days were changed, and literacy skills. Some new ideas were implemented to make things easier for the participants. For example, instead of
having to write out the orders, participants used pre-made labels to indicate what type of drink
the customer wanted, such as regular or decaf coffee, regular milk
or lactose free, hot or cold, or sugar or plain. Lines for the café were
consistently long, and camp wide staff greatly appreciated the
service offered by the voc-ed participants.

In the office, participants helped sort packages, sorted mail, and
assisted with photocopying. Again, the work completed by voc-ed
participants was greatly valued by office staff.

One Tikvah graduate worked full-time in the gan (child care center),
and the program supported her when required. Ramah Canada
anticipates hiring a second vocational alum for a full-time position
next summer.

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**Ramah Darom**

Ramah Darom’s vocational program grew to its
largest enrollment yet in 2021. There were nine
participants total, four who came for four weeks,
and five who came for the entire eight-week
summer. Two of these nine vocational participants
will return to camp as full staff in 2022.

Vocational participants lived in cabins along with
Tikvah-supported campers. These living quarters
included a washer and dryer, a lounge, and
spaces for learning. Staff used the space to teach
independent living skills like laundry, keeping tidy,
and social media safety.

Vocational participants held jobs in art, dance,
music, the childcare program, the waterfront
(organizing life jackets), *tzorchania* (sorting mail,
laundry, and lost and found), and the business
office (helping with mailings). Onsite job
placements were designed to to match the
interests of the participants and to meet a need
for camp. Ramah Darom is currently partnering
with the Tommy Nobis Center near Atlanta to
revamp its vocational curriculum, with the hope of
being able to hire more graduates of the
vocational program into a supported staff role
through its new Tzevet Tzmicha initiative, a program to support staff who need extra help for a
number of reasons (disability, mental health challenge, etc.).
Like nearly all of the Ramah camps with vocational programs, participants also ran Café Darom, a coffee shop for staff. Vocational participants worked on customer service, drink preparation, and teamwork. The whole staff loved the perk of daily fresh iced coffee.

Vocational participants were invited to all staff programming, although the late-night timing often made it difficult for them to attend. Participants did frequently join the staff oneg on Friday night, and participated in daytime day-off programming for staff.

Ramah Day Camp Greater DC

At the Ramah Day Camp Greater DC, three staff received support from the Tikvah Director to be able to do their jobs as effectively as possible. This experience led the camp to plan more intentionally for vocational support in summer 2022 and beyond. The camp is now launching a formal supported employment program to be piloted with five participants in 2022. They anticipate that some will need one-on-one job coaching while others will need just occasional check-ins. They hope to hire a dedicated staff member to oversee this program this summer.

Camp Ramah New England

The renovation of the chadar ochel (dining hall) at Ramah New England has been transformational for the vocational program. Making the chadar ochel exceed accessibility requirements has directly helped a small number of specific campers in dramatic ways, like making it possible to use the restroom during a meal without having to return to a cabin, and in smaller ways for many more.

More immediately significant for the vocational program was finally being able to use the chadar ochel for many more jobs. Prior to the renovation, the only work vocational participants could do in the chadar ochel was setting up tables in between meals, not food preparation. The renovation allowed for the creation of a job in food service, a longstanding desire of the Ramah New England Tikvah staff.

The willingness of the head of the kitchen to include vocational participants has been a multi-year evolutionary process—from not being permitted to work at all in the old, small, and run-down kitchen, to being able to work on set-up in the dining hall and doing some basic food-prep work just outside the kitchen, to now being fully embraced.
in the new kitchen and its designated work areas, intentionally built with accessibility in mind. Part of this evolution is attributed to the kitchen staff seeing the productive contributions of vocational participants throughout the years.

COVID also provided new job opportunities for vocational participants to be run out of the chadar ochel. They boxed snacks for campers this summer and like at many other Ramah camps, operated a coffee cart for staff. This was the first time that vocational participants at Ramah New England had the opportunity to practice customer service.

Next year, Ramah New England plans to build more housing for vocational participants and their staff, as well as a laundry facility that they plan to use as a new job site.

Camp Ramah in Northern California (Ramah Galim)

Prior to 2021, one of Ramah Galim’s Ezra job sites had been off campus, at a small animal farm within walking distance from camp. Due to COVID, this site was not available. Only job sites inside of camp could be used. For some participants, this would not be a challenge—they had been working as activity assistants in camp for a number of summers already. In 2021 those activity areas included art, photography, and sports.

Other participants would need new in-camp job sites. New jobs included packing morning and afternoon snack for campers and staff members and operating Café Ezra, a coffee and seltzer shop open 45 minutes each afternoon for staff.

Feedback on the coffee shop was generally positive. Shlichim (Israeli emissaries) in particular appreciated a more strongly brewed coffee, with some even calling Café Ezra the highlight of their days. The facilities manager at Monterey Bay Academy (MBA) was also a frequent customer of Café Ezra. Running this coffee shop built up a lot of good will between the camp and so many people: Mishlachat, MBA staff, hanhallah (camp leadership), and typical counselors. This aspect of the Ezra program will continue, even when it becomes possible to work at sites outside of camp again.

When COVID numbers were at their lowest, Ezra participants at Ramah Galim were also able to enjoy a safe day off outside of camp, giving them the
opportunity to do some masked independent shopping, to experience nature along the dramatic California coast, and to get ice cream in downtown Monterey.

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**Camp Ramah in the Poconos**

Ramah Poconos had originally planned to launch the Tochnit Avodah (work program) in 2020. They pivoted to an online format, in which participants organized birthday greetings to be sent out to campers in the coming year. Tochnit Avodah was able to open in 2021, with five participants living in a newly renovated staff housing building. The building has lounge space for socializing and a classroom for more formal learning.

Jobs in camp included the canteen, supply distribution, helping to lead song sessions, and working with staff children. The amount of time each participant worked per day varied between 1.5-4 hours. The goal was to find work opportunities that match participants’ interests and meet a need for camp.

During this initial in-person summer, the Tochnit Avodah participants spent most of their non-work time joining Yedidim (edah for campers with disabilities). In the future, when COVID is less of a concern, Ramah Poconos hopes to create a separate schedule for Tochnit Avodah focused more on independent living and social skills. They also hope to have participants work at the guest house, once short-term visitors are able to return to camp.

Ramah Poconos also offers pre-vocational opportunities to Yedidim campers in the Yedi-bean coffee shop, similar to other camps’ cafés for staff.

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**Camp Ramah in Wisconsin**

Ramah Wisconsin’s vocational program saw a dramatic change in 2021. In prior years, participants worked at job sites in Eagle River, Wisconsin. Because of COVID, program staff were required to identify brand new jobs in camp. While they reported feeling trepidation about finding these opportunities, they encountered cooperation and partnership from camp, and were able to find meaningful placements for all participants.

Half of the vocational participants (5 out of 10) worked in the kitchen preparing food. This was truly essential work for camp. Because non-Israeli international staff could not come to the US, Ramah Wisconsin relied on parent volunteers, staff with time off during the day, and the vocational participants to feed the entire camp. Throughout the summer, the kitchen had an atmosphere of camaraderie that the vocational participants both benefited from and contributed to. One participant who was new in 2021 started working at a restaurant this year and credits his time in the kitchen at camp for making this new job possible. Another will return to camp next summer as a full staff member working in the kitchen.
Other job sites included assisting in woodworking, the business office, and programming office, and, like at other camps, helping to run a staff cafe.

Not having to commute an hour to town every day also allowed the program to take greater advantage of camp activities. They participated in swimming, the arts, and fitness multiple times per week. Others in camp noticed their presence much more and program staff reported a greater feeling of belonging for vocational participants this year compared to previous summers.