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RAMAH at 70



Celebrating seven decades of fun summers
and lasting impact on Jewish lives

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By George Castle

Special to Chicago Jewish News

Little slices of magic are witnessed at Camp Ramah.

"The most satisfying thing is to see kids smile and discover something new about themselves," said Rabbi David Soloff, director of Camp Ramah from 1975 to 2009, and now its CEO. "We had a softball league, and there was this kid who was not popular and kind of shy. In the last inning with a man on base, the kid is at-bat. Remarkably he gets a hit, and he scores and he gets on his teammates' shoulders. He had broken through."

Just multiply stories like that a thousand times or more.

"People discover talent that was hidden," said Soloff. "The same thing happens on stage in a (camp) play or in a show. These kinds of things build up in the course of the summer, and put the personal (strictures) of the school year aside."

A small encyclopedia would be required to record all the positive anecdotes of youths blooming physically and emotionally over seven decades at the 150-acre Camp Ramah, so far from Chicago in rural Vilas County, Wisconsin, and yet so close to the heart of Judaism for a camper's experience.

Many of those proverbial campfire stories will be re-told at a special 70th anniversary celebration of Camp Ramah, at 8 p.m. on Saturday night, Feb. 11, at Morgan Manufacturing, 401 N. Morgan St. in Chicago.

"It'll be schmoozing and socializing," said Neera Kaufman, Camp Ramah's 70th anniversary event chairperson. "We want people who haven't seen each

other in 20, 30 or 40 years to meet again. It will be a short program with music and food, video and highlights.

"We started (planning) last March and called around to get a sense of what people would envision. It sounds like so much of a cliché, but it really is a labor of love. It is an easy thing to take on. I am surrounded by people who have dedicated their lives to Camp Ramah."

And that's the predominant feeling of anyone who has ever been a camper, a counselor or parent at Camp Ramah. Ramah offers far more than just typical summer activities like sports, swimming and boating on Upper Lake Buckatabon, and overall socializing. The most important precepts of Judaism, including the ability to learn Hebrew in an everyday conversational fashion, are taught in a low-pressure environment.

The belief is if a camper can't learn to love Judaism at Camp Ramah, he probably can't learn it anywhere else. And the most important concept an attendee can take from programs running up to eight weeks was verbalized by two campers-turned parents.

"It's real-life on-the-ground training. It's being Jewish and (learning) to be a mensch," said Kaufman, once a camper and now a parent of campers Benji, 13, Sophie, 15, and Eliana, 17.

"All my kids have been campers since they were old enough. My cousins went, then I went one summer. It's who we are, the values we have, the right fit for our family. In the back of our head, it's the best fit in observance level, and the focus they put on Jewish identity and the community they build."

Diane Halivni learned the same concepts as a mid-1980s camper at Ramah, mentioning the same Yiddish word defining a well-grounded good person.

"It's about a value system where kids learn empathy and stretch a bit out of their comfort zone," Halivni said. "Kids are learning to be a mensch."

More than 10,000 have attended Camp Ramah since 1947, which can accommodate 500 campers each summer in a session lasting from June to August. Attracting campers from throughout the Midwest, the campers are all far from the distractions of their urban environ-



The camp's choir group in the 1950s.

ments.

Camp Ramah, converted from a former fishing lodge, is the better part of a full day's drive from Chicago with interstates going only half the distance. The nearest community of any note is the county seat of Eagle River, population 1,398. The state line dividing Wisconsin and Upper Michigan is also the northern Vilas County line.

So the old-fashioned concepts of creating your own summer fun and making friends person-to-person and not via social media are alive and well at Camp Ramah.

"The impact of the camp has been to build very vibrant Jewish communities all over the Midwest," said Soloff. "Everyone has a commitment to their continuing Jewish journey. In summer, they can not only meet (new) neighbors, but also meet staff from Jewish communities from around the world. It's part of an energized Jewish community."

At the overnight camp, out of 200 staff members, between 10 and 15 percent are students from Israel.

Camp Ramah features Jewish education, but not the type defined in the classic sense.

"In the camping field, the term education doesn't refer to schooling," Soloff said. "Education is a way of looking at experiences. Summer camp is a wonderful setting to be immersed in sport, theater, on the trail, swimming, every hobby you can think of. Everyone is in it to-

gether. You can become a tennis jock and learn to chant Torah. You can broadcast a basketball game on an FM station and learn Hebrew poems.

"You study spoken Hebrew 45 minutes a day. There are 45 minutes for discussion. It's a chance to play in Hebrew. Do pop songs in Hebrew."

Ramah opened with 100 campers in 1947 after a visionary group of lay and rabbinic leaders from Chicago partnered with leaders from the Jewish Theological Seminary to found the camp. Their goal was to weave Jewish values into a high-quality camp experience, in which Hebrew would be the spoken language and Torah prayer would be central to daily life.

"Rabbi Ralph Simon of Rodfei Zedek synagogue on the South Side wanted to have more opportunities for youths to experience a Jewish summer camp," said Soloff. "It would be a full recreational program, but also immerse campers in the Hebrew language and experience Jewish life in the north woods. This local effort involved finding lay people who linked to resources to develop the site."

Eventually the concept was copied in different parts of the country, near Toronto and in Israel. A national Ramah network of similarly-programmed camps grew up, all inspired by the original Wisconsin facility.

Camp Ramah in the Ponconos followed in 1950, then New England in 1953, California (Ojai) in 1956, Canada in 1960,

the Berkshires in 1961, Georgia in 1997, a specialty camp in Deckers, Colo., in 2010 and northern California last summer. A second specialty camp, Ramah Sports Academy, is scheduled to open somewhere in the Northeast in 2018.

In addition to a Wheeling day camp begun in 1999 affiliated with the Wisconsin camp, day camps operate in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and Jerusalem. Overall, some 11,000 campers and staff are involved in the entire Ramah operation. Presidents of each of the camps are part of the National Ramah Commission, but each are run separately.

"When they began in Wisconsin, it was not just another summer camp," said New York-based Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, director of the National Ramah Commission. "It was a very carefully-structured educational program replicated in many ways by other camps. Wisconsin continued to lead the way in many ways."

In 1973, Camp Ramah began its Tikvah programs for campers with special needs. Then, in 1999, Ramah Day Camp began in Wheeling, now hosting some 350 campers and staff each summer.

No camp history, though, would be complete without the testimony of both campers and counselors saying they are better for their time communing with nature away from home.



Rabbi David Soloff

Ramah

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Eliana Halivni, 12, Diane Halivni's youngest child, is a second-generation Ramah camper. Her mother attended the Wisconsin camp with two sisters and a brother, while father Shai Halivni was a camper/staffer at the Ramah outpost in the Berkshires. Older brother Avidan, 20, is now a Wisconsin counselor, while sister Hadar, 16, is a veteran camper.

"We get up in the morning, and you have no idea what will happen," Eliana said. "You could have a camping trip, play basketball, hang out with friends. Evening activities are really fun. You could be doing a scavenger hunt. You have a certain schedule, but you'll never do exactly the same thing."

The campers are allowed to sleep in...sort of. It is not a military boot camp with up-and-down reveille. Eliana said wakeup time is 7:45 a.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. Their late morning is Wednesday at 9 a.m. Shabbat is a semi-break at 8:30 a.m. Bed times range from 9:30 to 11 p.m., depending on the age group. Counselors try to dampen down post-lights out bunk talk. But try totally extinguishing that teenage tradition.

"One of things that is really nice is everyone knows each other," Eliana said. "Counselors are like your friends."

Each age group has to put on a play during their stay in camp. That plays right into Eliana's interests.

"I'm into drama. I'm a drama queen," she said with a laugh.

"It's just a great environment. Kids look forward to be unplugged for the summer."

Meanwhile, former camper and counselor Isaac Katz, a Skokie native, still has Ramah in his blood even after graduating from the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business in 2015, then landing a job at Rosetta Consulting in New York after his final Ramah summer.

"I cherished all my summers as a staff member at camp," Katz said. "Looking back on it now, I find that my summers as a counselor were far more valuable and shaping of who I am today than my summers as a camper. As a counselor I learned how to lead through example, manage a personal/professional dynamic, work in close proximity with others, and execute a top-down mission. And that's only the tip of the iceberg."

Katz was a camper for four summers at camp before spending the summer of 2014 in Israel with Ramah Seminar. He was a junior counselor, then senior counselor in successive summers (2011-12) for ninth graders. In

2013, he was counselor for 11th graders. He wrapped up his Ramah years as "Rosh Eidah" (unit head) for 10th graders in 2015.

"The challenges were mostly around working with and navigating differing personalities and opinions," Katz said. "It was also often an exhausting job to constantly be 'on,' but I could feed off the campers' energy to keep me going."

"The great joy of the job was building relationships with campers and embracing the role of a mentor and positive Jewish role model for them."

Slots are still open for camp staffers for summer 2017.

"We are actively recruiting current high-school seniors and college students to serve on staff this summer," said a camp spokesperson.

For campers, attendance options are five days for those entering third grade, 12 days (entering fourth grade), four weeks (entering fifth and sixth grades) and the full eight weeks (seventh through 11th grades). Cost ranges from \$175 for the five-day season to \$7,995 for the full season.

For Ramah alumni 21 and over, the Morgan Manufacturing event costs \$180 for attendees 36 and older, and \$54 for those 21 to 35. Visit www.Ramahat70.com for more information.

The mentoring and networking begun at Ramah will surely continue at the anniversary event.

"The main thing is it gives campers a network for life," said Diane Halivni. "They meet other Jewish kids from across the Midwest. There are lifelong lasting relationships. We all stood up for each other's weddings. There were some element of cliques, but it fades away. Jewish values are woven into this."

The Ramah national web site touts a series of recent marriages of campers who met during the summer. Personal and professional lives get a boost in the environment.

"Many of our alumni go on to be leaders in the Jewish community," said national Ramah director Cohen. "Ninety percent of our alumni nationally report they have a very strong connection to Israel. Compare that to diminishing numbers of young Jews (non-campers) who feel a connection to Israel."

Better yet, the campers come out with a firmer connection to Judaism as a whole.

"There's been a lot of research speaking to the power of summer camps, specifically in the Jewish world," Soloff said. "Ramah has been on the leading edge nationally, providing a mixture of recreational opportunities and at the same time a larger sense of being Jewish in a thriving, optimistic world."

Saturday

January 21

Congregation Beth Shalom hosts "**Havdallah, Dinner and a Movie**" showing film **The Band's Visit**. 5:30-10 p.m., 3433 Walters, Northbrook. \$18 members, \$25 non-members. RSVP dfriedman@bethshalombn.org or (847) 498-4100 ex. 46.

Jewish War Veterans Post 710 holds meeting to discuss **Vet-Tec program** listing military training eligible for college credit. 7 p.m., Temple Shalom, 3480 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago. RSVP: jerrychicago710@gmail.com or (773) 327-5362.

Sunday

January 22

"Genealogy is Easy, Fascinating, and Fun: How I Found the Feldmans" will be the topic of a presentation by amateur genealogist Steven Flack at a meeting of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois. His presentation will begin at 2 p.m. at Temple Beth-El, 3610 Dundee Road, Northbrook. For more information, visit <http://tinyurl.com/z4kk3gm> or phone (312) 666-0100.

Thursday

January 26

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center and Chicago Shakespeare Theater present "**The Book of Joseph**" 6:30 -8 p.m. For location, costs and more information: ilholocaustmuseum.org or (847) 967-4800.

Debbie Goodman presents "**An Evening of Comedy, Music and Spoken Word.**" 8 p.m. Rock House, 1742 Glenview Road, Glenview. (224) 616-3062.

Saturday

January 28

Beth Hillel Congregation Bnai Emunah holds "**Camp Shabbat 2017**" service followed by Kiddush lunch. 9:30 a.m.; also 9 a.m., Sunday, January 29. 3220 Big Tree Lane, Wilmette. Rabbi@bhcb.org or (847) 258-1213.

Community Calendar

SPOTLIGHT

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum will host two public programs celebrating the book launch of 'Why?' by local scholar and historian Peter Hayes. 'Why?' is an accessible summary of how and why the Holocaust happened. Consisting of eight chapters, each chapter asks and answers a question related to the Holocaust. Why were Jews the primary victims? Why were Germans the instigators? Why did murder become the "Final Solution"? Why didn't the international community do more to help? Monday, Jan. 23 at 7 p.m. at North Shore Congregation Israel, 1185 Sheridan Road, Glencoe; and Tuesday, Jan. 24 at noon at Harold Washington Library Center, Cindy Pritzker Auditorium, 400 S. State Street, Chicago. Both events are free and open to the public, but registration is required. Register by contacting the Museum's Midwest Office at (847) 433-8099.

Beth Hillel Congregation Bnai Emunah holds "**Inclusion Shabbat**" followed by Kiddush lunch. 11 a.m.-noon. 3220 Big Tree Lane, Wilmette. (847) 258-1213.

North Suburban Synagogue Beth El presents "**Perfect Pitch 2: America's Greatest Jewish Collegiate A Capella Groups**" featuring Staam, Jewop, Ketzev, MeshugaNotes and Kaske-set. 7:30 p.m., 1175 Sheridan Road, Highland Park. \$18, \$10 students. Tickets: <http://perfectpitch2.bptme.org> or (847) 432-8900.

Sunday

January 29

Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob Synagogue and Kol

Sasson Congregation hold **blood drive**. 8 a.m.-2 p.m., 8825 East Prairie Road, Skokie. LifeSource (877) 543-3768, group code: SK30. Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership shows historical drama "**Finding Babel**" followed by post-show discussion with Andrei Malaev-Babel. 2 p.m., 610 S. Michigan, Chicago. \$18, \$10 Spertus members, \$8 students and alumni. Spertus.edu or (312) 322-1773.

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center shows film documentary "**Defiant Requiem**. 2-4 p.m. For location, costs and more information: ilholocaustmuseum.org or (847) 967-4800.

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