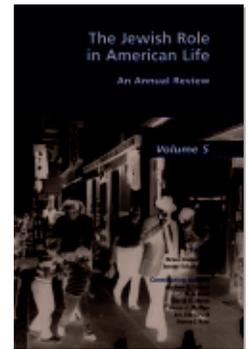




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Education

Summer Camp, Postwar American Jewish Youth and the Redemption of Judaism

By Riv-Ellen Prell

One of the least studied, documented, or discussed aspects of Jewish education is educational summer camps. Until recently, the rapid growth of these camps in the 1940s and continuing into the 1950s was little remarked upon.¹ Nonetheless, summer camping has had an enormous impact on American Judaism. Indeed, a closer look at these camps, those who led them and those who attended them, provides clues to understanding some significant changes in American Jewish religious and cultural life that began in the late 1960s. These changes include, among others, the recruitment of men and women to the American rabbinate, the appearance of a generation of American graduate students who created the contemporary field of Jewish studies, alterations of synagogue liturgy and styles of worship across denominations, and demands for equality in Judaism.²

Summer camps are easy to overlook as a significant feature of Jewish culture and communal life. The activities associated with camp—canoeing, romances, songs, and cabin life, for example—hardly seem to constitute the essential elements of religious transformation. However, summer camping, like youth groups, while rarely viewed as part of formal Jewish education, has been more recently understood to be an example of “informal education” (Chazan). Rather than defining education as something that happens exclusively in classrooms, it may be better understood to take many forms.

Informal learning in the setting of summer camp can often be especially effective—both in terms of what is taught and how it is taught. In camp, values, attitudes, and larger principles tend to be more strongly stressed than the sort of “discrete knowledge” one associates with classroom-based education. Most importantly, in a camp environment one is encouraged to learn with and from one’s peers, as well as from adults who tend to function somewhat outside of the normal trappings of authority. Leaders and counselors who have the most contact with campers are usually only slightly older than their charges. Camp is also removed from daily life and has the advantage of offering freedom within the constraints of daily schedules and the boundaries of its physical space, which makes it particularly appealing for pre- and early teens.

Jewish children in America have attended summer camps since the late nineteenth century. Poor children attended “fresh air camps,” which were designed to improve their diets and give them the opportunity to spend time in nature. Children of more affluent communities also were encouraged to enjoy the pleasures of the outdoors. Over time, Jewish Community Centers and Federations therefore developed camps that served a variety of social classes (Isaacman 247–248; Joselit 16–17).

Middle-class Jews, early in the twentieth century, established the predominant pattern for summer camping for their children. They sent them to private summer camps with other Jewish children for ostensibly social rather than religious reasons. Such camps had little or no Jewish “content” as their main concern. Instead, like most summer camps, they focused on the outdoors and crafts. They evoked Native American traditions, took Native American names, and solidified Jewish socializing without overt efforts to reinforce a religious agenda.³

However, throughout the 1920s and 1930s a small number of educators developed camps whose mission was to teach, in one way or another, about Jewish life and, for some, Judaism. Camp Boiberik (founded in 1928), for example, offered children a complete Yiddish environment outside of the city during the summer months. These campers were often pupils of Yiddish supplementary schools such as the Sholem Aleichem Folk Shul (a Yiddish school movement).⁴ The Zionist Camp Kvtza (founded in 1935 under the umbrella of the Habonim youth movement of Labor Zionism) created a socialist Zionist environment in camp for children that included collective work projects and Hebrew language instruction.⁵ Jewish educators in New York also built camps to provide both education and summer leisure for city children.⁶

These innovative camps were unique because of their commitments to education. In the 1940s, however, Jewish educational camping picked up momentum and the sheer number of camps, as well as the intensity of their education, set them apart, to some extent, from those that preceded them. Zionist camps, in particular, featured more intensive Hebrew language instruction and continued earlier camps’ interests in Jewish history, music and dance. After World War II, Jewish denominations established their own camps for the first time and recruited synagogues to encourage children to participate.

Educational Jewish summer camps often differed in their respective visions of

what the future of American and World Jewry should be. What they *did* share, however, was their leaders' yearning to socialize Jewish children in a manner that they believed was often lacking at home. They saw the long months of summer as an extraordinary opportunity to shape a new generation of Jews.

This essay reflects, in particular, on the context of Jewish summer camps in the 1950s. That culture took root amidst dramatic changes that American Jews experienced in their lives. These experiences led to lively debates about how to raise the new Baby Boom children. As professionals, rabbis and other Jewish leaders created various schools, camps, and youth groups, they reflected on what lay ahead for the Jewish people and the role that young Jews would play in a new era. Their concerns shaped the groups and institutions that sought to help socialize a new generation of American Jews.

The aim of this essay is neither to catalogue all of the important summer camps that Jewish children attended, nor to specifically evaluate the curricula used in the camps. Rather, I wish to examine the cultural currents of the period that refocused the era on a "child-centered Judaism." In that context, summer camps not only occupied the time of a new and more affluent generation of Jewish children, but responded to a sense of crisis concerning the future of Jewish life. In the shadow of the Holocaust, how to make Jewish children Jews began to emerge as a different, more compelling and urgent task.

The story I wish to tell does not include as much of the texture of camp life as would be ideal for a general history of Jewish summer camping. Such discussion would best include the personal experiences of the children who flourished and the ones who were miserable, the counselors and leaders who were charismatic and the ones who failed. In addition, it would give intimate details of the romances, sex, tears, food, and pranks that were so integral to the camp experience. While I have collected accounts of all of these experiences, my purpose is considerably different in this essay. I am more concerned here with the manner in which summer camps were envisioned as a means to create a new, postwar Judaism. Hence, the voices that help to shape the narrative of summer camping in this essay are of those who created and embraced that vision. The aim of this discussion is therefore not so much to consider what Jewish summer camps were in their mundane, day-to-day realities, but rather more to get a sense of the visions for a new American Judaism embodied in them.

There has been remarkably little systematic research conducted until very recently regarding the impact of Jewish summer camps on the broader Jewish American culture. Quantitative measures of strong Jewish identity routinely focus on membership in Jewish organizations, including synagogues, participation in Jewish communal life, observance of Jewish rituals, and marriage and friendships to and with other Jews. Men and women who attended Jewish schools, including day schools and yeshivas, usually score the highest on such measures. A recent analysis of the 2000/2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) demonstrated that men and women who attended Jewish summer camps, participated in Jewish youth activities and continued

a supplementary Jewish education scored just as “high” on these quantitative measures as those who had only attended Jewish schools.⁷ This interesting finding underlines the power of informal education in relationship to other, more formal settings for Jewish education. It also suggests that the totality of camp experience in terms of peer relationships, alternative authority and the media of learning is a successful form of socialization in Jewish culture.

POSTWAR AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

At the end of World War II American life changed dramatically, and Jews participated in that radical transformation.⁸ In the first half of the twentieth century Jewish life unfolded to a great degree in the urban Northeast, with another center in the Midwest. It then gradually began to shift, not only to the West and the South, but, most notably, to the suburbs of all of these regions as well. The majority of American Jews were native-born following the War, while at the same time the cultural markers of Jewishness were quickly disappearing, e.g., Yiddish as a shared language, dense urban, ethnic neighborhoods, and a strong tradition of secularism and political radicalism.

During this period American Jews participated in what commentators of the time called “religious revival,” which was concretely manifest in a building boom of new synagogues and synagogue schools in the suburbs. Not only did they join synagogues, they also supported all types of Jewish organizations devoted to philanthropy, especially in support of Israel. Cousins clubs and labor groups of an earlier era gave way to women’s organizations and synagogue sponsored young-married associations for many younger adults and new parents.⁹

As had been the case in the 1940s, Jews of the 1950s continued to show concern for refugees and the establishment of the State of Israel. But what took center stage was the creation of a new type of American Jewish life focused on synagogues, philanthropies, and organizations. These institutional foundations served as the basis for a shift of focus: Jews now worked to define America as a nation accepting and “tolerant” of religious and racial difference (Svonkin 8).

One of the most important transformations of the postwar era was the extent to which Jewish America perceived itself as “child centered.”¹⁰ A significant portion of Jewish life, particularly religion, began to center upon the new generation of Baby Boom children. As a result, the growth in Jewish education for children was truly dynamic. Religious education became one way to socialize Jewish children. While formal religious instruction had always been a part of communal Jewish life, the proliferation of synagogue schools and the number of children served by them constituted a transformation of truly historic proportions (Wertheimer). These new synagogue schools had the potential to solve two problems. They provided an experience for Jewish children who were being raised in suburbs parallel to that of their Christian friends and playmates, who attended Sunday schools. They also aimed to teach children about Jewish history, culture and practices.

Historian Lucy Dawidowicz characterized the generation of the parents of Baby Boomers as one of the least knowledgeable in modern Jewish history (97–99).¹¹ Immigrant parents of earlier generations often did not have the resources or opportunities to provide their children with effective formal Jewish educations; in turn, their children struggled to break free of what they saw as an Old World, unattractive and parochial religion and world-view. During the Depression, when anti-Semitism was at an all time high in the United States, and the horrors of Nazi fascism made the future seem all the more precarious and terrifying, Jewish life was often perceived by Jews to be an unattractive and oppressive burden. But as Jews emerged from the War and out of the tragedy of the Holocaust, they spoke about the need to help raise their children to be proud and knowledgeable about their heritage. They believed that their children's Jewish educations would help in that task.¹²

Postwar religious education was, nevertheless, anything but a simple or straightforward matter. Early sociological studies of synagogues, as well as contemporary journalistic accounts, make note of conflicts between educators and parents over not only what was to be taught, but how it was to be taught (Gans; Sklare and Greenblum). Some suburban parents emphasized the importance of teaching about Judaism in ways that would place no expectations on (largely secular) parents to practice what their children were learning. Educators often perceived families as unsupportive of their efforts, and a tug of war frequently ensued between families and the schools.

The paradox of the era is that Jews were growing both more and less religious at the same time, and doing both in new types of institutions and relationships. Membership in synagogues increased, but observance of Jewish rituals waned. The Day School movement in both Conservative and Orthodox Judaism created a strong cadre of committed and educated young Jews. However, the same era was marked by a rise in intermarriage, a social change that appeared to many Jewish community leaders to be an alarming problem.

A FOCUS ON YOUTH

As noted above, Jewish culture at this time focused attention on its youth, which was a social category that underwent something of a redefinition. Just as the new American category of “teenager” would become significant in the larger American culture during this period, for Jews, “youth” as an age-category took on a new prominence that necessitated organizational and ideological changes.¹³

For example, the youth movement of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Young Folks' Temple League, began at Temple Emanuel of New York City in 1928 and defined its target membership group as people between the ages 18 and 28. In 1948, this same group, now renamed the National Federation of Temple Youth, met for its Biennial Convention in Boston and undertook a major reorganization. One key element in making those changes was to define their target age group as “strictly teenagers.” Though the decision was controversial among the members, the

winning faction succeeded in convincing the membership that, in contrast with the past, youth now ended with the teen years (Goldman 20).

In synagogues and urban Jewish youth councils, “youth,” prior to and during the War, appeared to be equated to unmarried, young adults. It also connoted a period of apprenticeship, referring to people who were waiting in the wings for the opportunity to exercise full, adult leadership. The Brooklyn Jewish Youth Council, for example, in the late 1940s counted among its members college graduates employed professionally. They engaged in activities that paralleled those typically associated with “adults,” such as combating anti-Semitism and promoting “brotherhood.” These “youths” impatiently anticipated the time when they would join Jewish Community Relations Councils as “adults” (Brooklyn Jewish Youth Council).

Of the many changes wrought by widespread postwar Jewish suburbanization, the redefinition of youth was among the most important. Jewish organizations in the suburbs were new and outside the control of an established elite in large urban centers. They were run by a highly homogeneous group of adults: the parents of young children. At the same time, suburbanization signaled a change in the organization of family life. Children as a rule were no longer expected to contribute to the household economically. Families anticipated lengthy educations for their sons, and, to a lesser but growing extent, for their daughters. While the range of age for youth was therefore defined more narrowly, it also assumed economic and social dependence on the family for a longer period of time as the best means to greater economic and social success.

The explosion in synagogue membership was linked to strengthening denominations, particularly Conservative Judaism and to a lesser extent Reform Judaism. As Jewish denominations expanded their building programs, they likewise expanded youth programming, Jewish education, and camping and summer institutes in order to meet and shape the needs of American teens and preteens. In a very real sense, how Jewish parents defined the needs of their children drove the expansion of American Judaism, and a small number of Jewish leaders made the education and even reshaping of children their highest priority.

A REDEEMER GENERATION

Many rabbis and Jewish professionals were interested in youth because they were conscious of the need to build future leaders of the Jewish people. Historians Shuly Rubin Schwartz and Deborah Dash Moore both have argued that those men and women who were most active in the American Jewish community in the years immediately following World War II were beset by anxiety about their ability to lead. They feared that the Jewish people no longer had institutions or leaders comparable to those wiped out in Europe during the Holocaust (Moore 2; Schwartz 13–14). Robert Gordis, the editor of the new journal *Conservative Judaism*, observed in its first issue in January, 1945, “It is a commonplace that the destruction of the great centers of cultural and religious vitality in Europe has catapulted American Jewry into a position of leadership

and responsibility undreamt of twenty-five years ago, for which, incidentally, we are far from adequately prepared" ("Editorial" 33).

Gordis noted that Mordecai Kaplan, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, "graphically outlined the waste of human resources involved in our failure to save at least a minority of our children for intensive Jewish training and intelligent leadership." Gordis further noted that at a gathering of Conservative rabbis, "following [Kaplan's] moving address, the Rabbinical Assembly voted to set up a Committee on Leadership Personnel, which will seek to stimulate each rabbi to give personal attention to promising youngsters in his congregational school, so that the 'saving remnant' may be redeemed from the apathy and ignorance prevailing in most communities" ("Editorial" 33).

In that same speech, Kaplan also emphasized the importance of public school education for American democracy. His insistence on Jewish children attending secular schools, as opposed to day schools or *yeshivot*, suggested that it was Jewish supplementary schools and especially youth organizations that would bear the burden of creating a redeemer generation. Mordecai Kaplan drew on a long theological tradition in Judaism when he referred to the postwar generation as a saving remnant. He laid claim to the significance of Jewish youth when he suggested that they were the most important Jews who remained following the near-destruction of European Jewry. They were the remnant of the People Israel on whom the future of the Jewish people rested. In turn, it was the responsibility of rabbis and educators to "redeem" them from their parents' world, which Kaplan characterized as apathetic and ignorant. As they must be redeemed, so children would redeem the Jewish people. Kaplan's theological language was potent. Just as Gordis evoked the burden of responsibility for his generation in light of the Holocaust, Kaplan and others looked to the next generation to redeem those losses.

Although leaders of Reform Judaism in parallel publications mentioned neither the Holocaust nor the anxious necessity for a replacement generation, they developed an aggressive youth program. Eugene Borowitz, the noted Reform rabbi, theologian and educator, explained in an interview that his generation of young, postwar rabbis was committed above all to the importance of democracy as a continuing American ideal and goal.¹⁴ In this patriotic context they believed in the younger generation and were enthusiastic about their potential to become a new type of American Jew.

VULNERABLE REDEEMERS

Still, these same educators, rabbis, and Jewish denominational leaders were anything but sanguine about how to turn American teens from the "saving remnant" into Jewish "redeemers." Ironically, their discourse about highly "vulnerable" suburban teenagers resonated with a much earlier concern, namely social workers' and Jewish leaders' anxieties about the children of immigrants—but in an almost reciprocal manner. Granted, there was agreement on the main point: The primary source of youth's vulnerability in both eras was perceived to be their Jewish parents, and in both eras experts saw these parents as wholly inadequate to the task at hand. However, on the one hand, immigrant

parents were viewed as deficient because they were foreign-born and thus out of step with their American children. On the other hand, the new generation of Baby Boomer parents was considered deficient precisely because it was *more* familiar with America than Judaism.¹⁵

Popular Jewish magazines published after the War dealt consistently with the problem of Jewish children's identities and parental inadequacies. For example, writing for the *United Synagogue Review*, the magazine of the Conservative laity's organization, Earl X. Free, a clinical psychologist, discussed the problem of Jewish identity in children. He wrote that the "problem of the Jewish child" was not the "fact of his or her Jewishness," but the problem of his or her Jewish parents:

In the vast majority of cases, Jewish parents encounter little difficulty in helping the children to identify themselves as boys or girls, as students, or law-abiding citizens. Why? Because in each of these areas the parents are certain of their own identity and therefore can play the role of model for the child. But is this true when it comes to the problem of Jewish identification. They ask, "How can I help my Jewish child in his search for an identity?" What they mean is "How can I give my child a Jewish identity?" Is it possible that this problem stems from the fact that parents are not too sure of their own Jewish role? They have experienced prejudice, ostracism, perhaps outright persecution solely because they are Jews, and they are fearful that by giving this identity to their children they are exposing them to similar grief. (Free 10–11)

Other articles and experts focused on the problem of Jewish families celebrating Christmas. As one 1955 article explained, Christmas is a "parental problem," not a problem for children. If Jewish parents were comfortable with saying "no," there would be no problem. The message of the article was that Baby Boom parents were not comfortable, and hence they, and not their children, created the crisis in maintaining boundaries between Jews and the larger society (Gordon 1–5).

For some, the failure of Jewish parents to be Jewish and to teach their children to be Jews was not a small matter. The absence of Jewish values, many feared, was creating a troubled generation. In the United States in this period, anxiety about "juvenile delinquency" was so great that in 1954 and 1955 the United States Senate's Kefauver Committee convened hearings on the topic of addressing comic book and television violence and its effects on youth (Nyberg). Middle class Jews were similarly concerned. For example, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (part of the Reform Movement) convened a national committee on juvenile delinquency in 1955 (Central Conference of American Rabbis 73–84). These rabbis were worried that Jewish youth were not only troubled, but that the reason for this was because they were also lacking in requisite Jewish values. The committee found little to report; apparently Jewish teens did not seem to be as much in crisis as was originally thought.

Louis Finkelstein, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, directed his staff in 1954 to keep a scrapbook of all of the media reports of a crime committed on August 19, 1954, in Brooklyn, in which four Jewish boys were responsible for the grizzly beating and drowning of an African American vagrant. This postwar event was a media sensation. The ringleader turned out to be a severely disturbed young man. The father of his co-defendant and friend told the press that his son had his own television in his room, wanted for nothing and had no reason to do such a thing. The senselessness of the criminal act rocked the Jewish community's confidence about its future.

Clearly, this was precisely what Finkelstein feared when he wrote that "we Jews have produced a 'lost generation' with all its evils of juvenile delinquency and gangsterism."¹⁶ He did not explain why he wanted to collect press clippings on this crime, but his instructions seem less motivated by fears of wide spread anti-Semitic reactions and rather more in terms of the question then popularized in the Jewish print media: "where have we gone wrong?"¹⁷ Despite the advantages of education, the comforts of the middle class, and the freedom of American Jews, how could such horrifying behavior take place? Jewish parents questioned whether they were successfully guiding their children toward proper values and a healthy identity, and whether the freedom and comforts of the American middle class were sufficient to properly raise Jewish children.

Inadequate parenting and the erosion of Jewish values were both linked to a third anxiety of the time—the impact of suburbanization on Jewish life. A lively debate ensued in the 1950s over the effect of this residential revolution on the lives of Jews and their children. There was a strong consensus on the part of some writers, analysts, and rabbis that the suburbs created "a drive for Jewish belongingness" that necessitated communal organizations. As one commentator put it, "the Christians have their church; the Jews have their synagogues. These same individuals, were they to have remained in the Bronx, Brooklyn or the Lower East Side, would never have dreamed of doing many of these things they now do through social pressure and the desire to conform" (Fleischman 24).

This need among suburban Jews for "belongingness" was treated by many commentators of the time, both inside and outside the Jewish community, with deep suspicion. To be sure, a highly secular generation of Jewish parents embraced their Jewish identity after the War, for a variety of reasons. Some writers and rabbis focused on the Holocaust as the source for this surge in Jewish identity. Others wrote about both Marxism and science failing to provide answers for all of life's problems. Others pointed to the desire of parents for their children to "fit in."¹⁸ However, there were also quite a number of Jews who were deeply distrustful of the suburban mode of Jewishness that departed so dramatically from the urban, immigrant, Orthodox world they knew so well (despite the fact that they had largely rejected this "Old World Judaism"). Suburban life was accused of being "artificial," "inauthentic," and "conformist."¹⁹ In every way it contrasted with urban Jewish life, which had been the norm for American Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It lacked cultural density as

manifest in an array of Jewish institutions, and it made Jews a minority in their neighborhoods, instead of the majority they had always been in their urban districts. For this reason many Jewish writers, professionals and rabbis sometimes took a hard look at suburban Jews' motivations for belonging to synagogues.

One example of how this suspicion was expressed focused on Jewish education for children. Theodore Frankel, for example, wrote for *Commentary* on a "Suburban Jewish Sunday School" in 1958. He quotes Dr. L. H. Grunnebaum, chairman of the Temple religious school committee, who had become increasingly pessimistic about religious school education during the 1950s. Dr. Grunnebaum's report suggested that for eighty percent of the adult Temple members from Scarsdale and White Plains (New York suburbs) the motivation to join the synagogue was lack of access to a Christian social life:

If he wants his child to become a soundly and smoothly integrated participant in suburban life, he had better join a congregation and send his [child] to Sunday School. No wonder the children suffer from a kind of mild schizophrenia. Here are the rabbi, director, cantor and teachers; there are the parents. Here is supernaturalism, prayer, the Ten Commandments, Jewish customs . . . There is science, atomic facts, sex and American ways and values. So it comes about that the attempt to make children more secure as members of the Jewish community has in many cases the opposite result. Uncertainty and insecurity are increased and the children's suspicion of adult hypocrisy is strengthened.²⁰

Overall, the body of writing about Jewish suburbia that I have surveyed presents both hope and disappointment. In particular, it reveals an anxiety that what might have been a real opportunity for Jewish community building and socialization either had been squandered because of "conformism" or had created the kind of "schizophrenia" about which Theodore Frankel hyperbolically wrote. For many, there was a persistent concern that the suburbs were hardly the ideal environment in which to raise the future leaders of the Jewish world. In short, the Baby Boom generation was viewed as both redeemer and suburban stranger; the only hope for the Jewish people and unable to serve as a "saving remnant" due to their parents' inadequacies.

One of the central solutions that emerged to resolve the problems of inadequate parents, suburbanization, and the loss of Jewish values was to find ways to foster in children a Jewish identity that could be nurtured in a venue independent of their home environment. Because of the inadequacies of the suburban Jewish home, Jewish schools, youth groups and camps were conceptualized by their founders and leaders as incubators of a more authentic Judaism. One could no longer count on Jews being Jewish simply due to the normal circumstances of their lives. In the minds of many Jewish leaders and scholars of the time, one had to become Jewish by achievement rather than by ascription.

POSTWAR SUMMER CAMPS

Jewish summer camps, like other youth-oriented activities, flourished after the War. Conservative Judaism's first camp began in 1947. Reform Judaism developed its first summer camp (referred to as an "institute") in 1951. While the Orthodox Movement did not sponsor a specific camp, Camp Moshava, affiliated with an Orthodox-Zionist movement, B'nai Akiba, drew Orthodox campers who often were part of the Orthodox Union youth movement as well.²¹

The inter-relationship between Jewish educational summer camps was complex. Some leaders claimed to have no knowledge of what others were doing. As one Reform rabbi told me when I asked him if he knew that Camp Ramah, affiliated with the Conservative Movement, was grappling with similar issues to the ones at the Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute, a Wisconsin Reform camp, he responded, "Camp Ramah was about Hebrew. That was all we knew."²²

Habonim-Dror camps of the Labor Zionist movement claimed to have pioneered many of the programs that were later taken up by more popular denominational camps (Goldberg and King 263). Similarly, the highly successful Ramah camps of the Conservative Movement were begun and staffed by men and women who had been part of Camp Massad, committed to educating campers in Hebrew and normalizing it as the language of the camp. Although Ramah's organizers rejected much of what they deemed "ideological" about Massad, its influence was nonetheless pervasive (Schwartz 18–20).²³

Through the collection of the American Jewish Archives, which includes the records of several camps, one can trace the same men and women who worked in a variety of different camps in the 1940s and 1950s. Similarly, music and other forms of art and dance moved from camp to camp via counselors and specialists.²⁴

Despite many striking differences among camps that were denominational and those committed to different movements within Zionism, Jewish summer camping shared an approach to Jewish life and had broader implications for the practice of Judaism. Camping emphasized the importance of "experience" and the power of deriving "personal meaning" from that experience. Summer camps' modes of educating were able to span the significant divides among Reform and Orthodox Judaism, Zionist and even anti-Zionist campers, and through the camp experience Baby Boomers learned to expect Judaism to speak to them powerfully and personally. These ideas were clearly influenced, in part, by John Dewey's concept that education was of central importance to democracy as well as his focus on enrichment through the educational experience.

Denominational and Zionist camps also shared a commitment to year-round, informal education. Virtually all of the camps were connected to national movements of youth groups and institutes that kept campers in contact with one another throughout the year. Regional conclaves and boards reinforced not only the ties of friendship and relationships with adult leaders, but reiterated the ideas and goals of the movement or denomination beyond the summer months.

THE NOVEL AND THE EXPERIENTIAL

The leaders of postwar Jewish summer camping were committed to the principle that Judaism could flourish in America. Long past the period of Jewish immigration at the end of the nineteenth century, the issue of who were the true custodians of Jewish identity remained a live and passionate concern—still hotly debated in the mid-twentieth century (Prell, “Community”). Indeed, an even more basic concern was inevitably tied to this point: Could an authentic Judaism ever truly flourish in America? Obviously, American Jewish denominations claimed that was and had to be the case.

Still, an anxiety about authenticity persisted. American rabbis sought to convince their native-born congregants that Judaism was not merely concerned with obligation and the heritage of a tragic history, nor was it mired in the Old World of their parents. Rather, Judaism belonged in an open society where Jews had a choice about their behavior and beliefs. The educational Jewish summer camps took as their mission to make Judaism, Jewish life and/or Zionism a “normal” and integrated part of American life for children. Everything that happened in summer camp followed from this principle that the founders and leaders of the camps believed was at odds with the world outside of camp, especially the secular, Jewish family (Reimer).

Following the War, most camps tended to stress that Judaism was pleasurable, and joyful, and at the same time must be taken as exceptionally serious. Their leaders presented Judaism in contrast to the worldview of elderly men whom children saw at their Conservative or Orthodox synagogues; Judaism could and should also engage youngsters. Deborah Dash Moore coined the term “spiritual recreation” to describe Brandeis Camp, which flourished in Southern California during this period (123–152). A number of camps, Zionist and denominational, drew on similar methods—if not always the same educational principles—in their transmission of Judaism.

Summer camps constructed a Judaism apart from synagogue, home, and normal life. The Judaism of summer camp was often experienced by campers as novel, entirely different from anything else that they had ever experienced, although it was never presented as some sort of new “invention.” Instead, camp leaders depicted their efforts in terms of a new fusion in which Judaism, and in some cases Zionism, united with the American ideals of freedom. What stands out as particularly compelling about the camps was the importance of the modes of constructing this alternative Judaism. Emphasis was placed on the experiential and experimental—new aesthetics, role-playing (see below), and efforts to create “meaningfulness,” among others.

These new experiences not only served as a means to critically examine postwar American Judaism, but even more served as a catalyst for a redefinition of Jewish culture by the late 1970s. These Jewish educational pioneers turned out to be cultural pioneers as well, shaping a counter-cultural Judaism for the Baby Boom generation. Whether or not they had the foresight to understand precisely the implications for the future of what they were doing is quite another question.

Zionist camps’ major focus was the remaking of Zion in America. Habonim

campers, for example, created *kibbutzim*, building their facilities with their own hands.²⁵ They also disallowed private property in camp, creating instead a common fund of all campers' money. The campers were also required to share all "care packages" that were sent to them from home. By abolishing "private property" and becoming "pioneers" through physical labor, they emulated the building of the then new nation of Israel in camps throughout the United States. They further solemnized the ideals of Zionism by celebrating Zionist holidays such as the birthdays of Theodore Herzl and Hayyim Bialik,

Denominational camps offered a religious variation on a new way of experiencing Jewish life. They drew, for example, on what were in the late 1940s and early 1950s relatively unfamiliar rituals and holidays—*Havdalah* (the ritual that completes the observance of the Sabbath) and *Tisha B'av* (the one summer holiday that marks the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem). The camps also created innovative ways to celebrate familiar observances, particularly *Shabbat* (the Sabbath).²⁶ The camps emphasized the drama, beauty, and uniqueness of each of these celebrations. In the end, each camp created an approach and an aesthetic to the experience of Judaism that was readily recognizable to other campers.

The letters of one camper who attended the Wisconsin campus of Camp Ramah provides a snapshot of how this approach to the transmission of Judaism at camp actually operated. Her letters began in 1958 when she was twelve and concluded in 1962. In her first summer at camp she reported to her parents that "this is the week before Tisha B'av and we aren't supposed to eat any meat. We don't have to be that religious if we don't want to, but I'm going to since I decided to be as religious as possible."²⁷ She described to her parents how they observed *Tisha B'av*:

It started after maarive [evening service] when we walked down to the lake and saw aycha [Hebrew title of the biblical book of Lamentations] burning. It was written and hung on the raft and we sang as we watched it burn. Then we walked silently in single file to the Bate Am [assembly hall]. Torches held on both side of bate Am [sic] marked the way. We all sat in circles srife [cabin] by srife and sang aycha. The only light was a large light in the center dimly aluminating [sic] the huge room. Murals portraying [the prophet] Jeremiah were hung on the walls.²⁸

The following year she wrote to her parents that they had a "typical Tisha B'av." She added, however:

Last night they didn't burn Acha on the raft. We went right from the Hador Ochel [dining hall] to the Bet Am in between a path of torches. It was solemn, but not as impressive as last year. I guess they felt we were making too much ado about a minor holiday (supposedly) and that all we remember is the burning and not the prayers. Also Acha is holy from the Bible and it's sort of showing disrespect for it.²⁹

In 1962, now in the oldest group at the Canada Ramah campus, she wrote to her parents again:

I took part in a modern dance during a Tisha B'Av presentation today. We just learned it yesterday and we were a little shaky, but we set the tone for a serious discussion which followed. Last night was very dramatic and typically Ramah-ish with the burning of the word AYCh (in hebrew)—Lamentations—across the lake, and a procession to the Bet Am Gadol [large assembly hall] along a torch lit road; to sit on the concrete floor and read (in Hebrew) aycha. Today we also had discussions and lectures within the framework of Tisha B'av.³⁰

Over these four years, this young woman captured the emotional, experimental, and serious nature of the Judaism she learned about. She was impressed by the emotional power of a new ritual, its spectacle, the debates over its appropriateness, and her own participation in it. By her last year, she could identify the experiential and aesthetic combination as “Ramah-ish.” What she wrote about the celebration of *Tisha B'av* is a simple example that could be multiplied many times over.

An Orthodox Zionist camp, Moshava, allowed and encouraged campers to approach observance differently from home and school. One former camper from the 1960s told me, “religion was not debatable, but in certain ways it was very flexible. You could come to prayers in shorts. In the morning long pants, but at Mincha [the afternoon service] shorts. At the time it felt like flexibility. It wasn't anything goes. [But] some things were more important and some things less.”³¹ Paradoxically, it was that flexibility, in combination with greater religious observance, that created for him an experience of Judaism that contrasted with both home and his yeshiva high school. For example, he was unaccustomed to praying three times a day, nor was this the custom of his father. However, at camp, more stringent—if somewhat more casual—observance was the norm.

All summer camps create “cultures,” built on songs, athletic events such as color wars, banquets, and a host of other traditions. These Jewish educational camps built their camp cultures on articulations of Judaism or Zionism, or both. They created camps, therefore, that were not simply special places and experiences, but also an alternative form of Jewish practice to be recreated and emulated outside of camp.

ROLE-PLAYS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In many of the camps, the experiential, typically embodied in role-playing, was a crucial element of pedagogy. Enacting alternative realities allowed campers to learn something by experiencing it. This method offered an approach to learning lessons of history, ethics, morality, and social responsibility. In addition, the role-play, like other camp activities, joined the medium and the message. How one learned was as important as what one learned.

Role-playing reflected a broader desire on the part of educators to make camp activities meaningful. In liberal denominations, how to get campers to experience and appreciate prayer as more than an empty, rote repetition was, for example, a subject of multiple role-playing programs. Counselors roused their campers at sunrise and urged them to emulate the great rabbis of the past by taking to heart the power of prayer to “renew the world each morning” (Ramah Archive folder 32). One camper from the early 1960s remembered his counselors’ approach to prayer:

“Attention” was a key word. We were taught *Birkat Ha Mazon* [grace after meals] that way. They taught us that the Kotsker Rebbe used to say “do it each time as though it were the first.” The *madrachim* [counselors], “wanted everything to be an EXPERIENCE” as though I did it for the first time.³²

In role-plays such as this, the focus on meaning coupled with experience was central to Jewish educational camp life.

Programming for the Union Institute in Oconomowac, Wisconsin, the Reform movement’s first summer camp, was summarized and evaluated in the camp’s program books. These provide many examples of role-playing as a key medium of informal education. Campers depicted life in the sweat-shops and the rise of the unions in early twentieth-century, immigrant New York.³³ They were asked to portray slaves who were forced to build Pharaoh’s pyramids in order to experience the oppression of slavery in a unit titled “Exodus in Jewish History, an Adventure toward Freedom.” A camper wrote in the camp newspaper, “we were at Sang Hall when some Egyptians attacked us. They made us march [missing word] build a pyramid for the pharaoh. We also carried hay. We crossed the sea and went to Mt. Sinai.”³⁴

In 1961 campers engaged in experiments in creating “oppressor” and “oppressed” classes for a period of days in order to experience both sides of racism and anti-Semitism. The staff named the dominant group WASPS (White Anglo Saxon Protestants) and gave the acronym BLIKS to the oppressed group. Later the campers learned that BLIKS stood for Black Kikes, a double racial slur. Campers came to the dining hall one day to find the WASPS seated at tables with tablecloths while the BLIKS’ tables had none. The next day the process was reversed. A camper sermonized about the experience at the conclusion of the experiment. He said, “dear God, give us the wisdom to know that we are all God’s children and that we should all be treated the same regardless of race, color or creed. Give us the ability to honor these differences and to respect each individual for himself.”³⁵

One group put the Reform Movement on trial for changing Judaism and conducted a mock trial over a week. Reform Judaism was accused of “1. Modifying worship practices so as to make them less ‘Jewish’. 2. Undermining faith in the bible. 3. Substituting a Messianic age for a personal Messiah and thus distorting Judaism. 4. Making changes in Jewish religion for the sake of making religion easy.” A jury of twenty-four campers was selected and asked to be seated in the jury box. Four teams of

campers with two counselors acted as defense attorneys, with each team taking one of the accusations. A counselor was prosecutor. Three judges, two campers and one counselor, asked questions. The vote was 'not guilty' on three counts and 'guilty' on the fourth, that Reform Judaism had made religion easy.³⁶

The staff undertook to teach their campers the "meaning" of the Psalms by having them portray experiences to which its sentiments might be applied. They included such familiar moments as being accepted to Harvard University ("I will give thanks unto the Lord with my whole heart"), and taking an exam ("God is my refuge and strength"). A member of the staff reflected on the role plays as follows: "They present plays to show that the Psalms have something significant to say on every occasion of great emotional stress or joy. The scenes depicted illustrate doubt, despair, and exaltation."³⁷

In 1960, a Habonim camper described the "extra added attractions" of "Dictator Day" (a take-off on George Orwell's novel *1984*) and a day devoted to "revolution" (Fineman). Herzl Camp, a Midwestern independent camp, staged a "Communist invasion" in the 1950s, telling campers that the country had been taken over and then urging them to think about how to respond.³⁸ Each of these role-plays asked the campers to experience historical, political and religious events personally, in order to heighten the "experiential" dimension of Jewish life.

This experiential dimension of learning was linked to the use of Hebrew language in educational camps in interesting ways. Children who attended these camps not only received formal instruction in Modern and Biblical Hebrew, they also encountered the language in myriad settings.³⁹ They learned to canoe and play baseball, for example, using Hebrew words for all of the required skills, vocabulary that was circulated among camps over the years. Every building and activity was given a Hebrew name in even the least intensively Hebrew camps. In this manner, Hebrew became integrated into the cultural experience of campers and, to varying degrees, became the norm of experience, which was the intention of camp educators.

Role-plays and other experiential learning techniques, then, ranged from the fun and engaging to the difficult and disturbing. These educational techniques served as a critical medium for teaching children and heightening their sense of engagement and involvement in what was defined for them as Jewish life.

THE ROLE MODEL

What tends to make summer camps especially memorable for adolescents is that camps transform their relationship to authority. The life of camp exists outside of the structures of school and home, and hence, relationships with adults take on new and different meanings. Adults, whether they are a few decades or a few years older than campers, tend to become models to admire precisely because their relationships to teenagers are more playful and relaxed, and so less ostensibly authoritarian. Often, campers recall being taken very seriously by adults in a way that was especially powerful for youngsters unused to being treated in a more egalitarian fashion.

Different camps offered different adult models and different relationships to authority. For example, a Moshava camper recalled his counselors as the first people in his life “with whom he could identify.” Thirty years later he still marveled at what it meant to him to study Talmud at 10:00 a.m. with a person he had played basketball with at 9:00 a.m. He contrasted this positive memory of learning with a bitter one. He recalled an encounter with his Yeshiva principal in his senior year of high school. Despite being an excellent student, he was called to the office for inappropriate behavior. The teenager retorted angrily, “I identify more with Peter Fonda (the star of the popular counter cultural film of the time *Easy Rider*) than the Talmud teacher.” While his school provided no useful models for his life, Camp Moshava served to do precisely the opposite.⁴⁰

In the Reform institutes, the camp rabbi seemed to most exemplify what the camp represented. One late 1950s camper recalled leaving his summer camp wanting only to become a rabbi like the one he encountered that year.⁴¹ Many former campers commented on how wonderful it was to have a rabbi to talk to and spend time with in a relaxed and casual environment. Many marveled at seeing a rabbi in swimming trunks.

Marc Lee Raphael, a distinguished scholar of American Jewish history and a rabbi reflected on his experience at Saratoga Camp in California in 1957 that led to his decision to become a rabbi in his “Diary of a Los Angeles Jew”:

When I heard that there would be a Saturday afternoon campers vs. staff softball game...I assumed (correctly) that I would pitch. And I assumed as well that rabbis (and rabbinical students) would be relatively poor batters, especially immigrant rabbis. This was mostly true, but Alfred Gottschalk, a 27 year old German-born immigrant who had been ordained as a rabbi at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati that June, was an exception. I already knew him at camp as an inspiring teacher, but was surprised to discover that he was also a fearsome hitter, and his home run off my blazing windmill windup fastball not only won the game for the staff but led to my career decision. I had a feeling during the camp session that I wanted to be like the rabbi teachers with whom I was studying, but when one of them blasted that home run I knew for sure that one could be a rabbi and a normal person at the same time.

At Conservative Camp Ramah, the scholar or professor in residence, often a faculty member from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was the most highly regarded role model for campers. The ideal of study and the centrality of traditional texts were core concepts of the educational vision of the Ramah movement that he, or in later years, she embodied. Campers took classes with and participated in discussions led by the scholar. The relationship to the scholar was, however, neither intimate nor playful. Seymour Fox, an early architect of the educational philosophy of Camp Ramah, also served as Dean of the Teachers’ Institute of the Jewish Theological

Seminary of America from 1959 to 1966. In combination with other faculty, he envisioned an environment that was both supportive and challenging. For example, the cabin, with its young counselors, was envisioned as the “home/heaven,” where campers would feel appreciated, unconditionally cared for and comfortable. Outside the cabin, during classes, sports, and arts, campers were called upon to achieve and to act within more conventional relationships of authority.⁴²

This “philosophy of the bunk” was evident in a report written by then head counselor (*Rosh Mahon*), Chaim Potok, later to become a famous American novelist. In 1963 he wrote about the camp staff’s training seminar prior to the opening of the camp season. Their goal was to learn how to engage campers in the cabins in “emotional” conversations based on “self-discovery” and “self-realization.” This approach to communication became known as “Schwab talk,” named for Joseph Schwab, the philosopher of education at the University of Chicago whose theories influenced the leadership of Camp Ramah. They believed that the cabin was an important place to build trust with a positive alternative to parents, i.e., the counselor, and also could serve as the place to encourage campers to open up and express their fears and hopes.⁴³ Building on that confidence they could then undertake the intensive activities such as classes, dance or sports aimed to cultivate and develop excellence and leadership.

At Tel Yehuda, the camp of Young Judea (a pan-Zionist American youth movement), it was the teacher, giving children the story of the Jews, who was most often viewed as a charismatic figure. One former counselor and teacher whom I interviewed described ending each summer by telling the campers that none of their time together really mattered. “You will all assimilate anyway,” he predicted darkly. Each summer he orchestrated this ending, during which the campers would deny that inevitability and struggle to convince him he was wrong, and then he would dramatically relent, agreeing that they would make a difference. To him, it was an excellent gauge of how well they internalized the Jewish history he had taught them and also served to emphasize how his role as their teacher had become so important to them.⁴⁴

Alternative role models were especially important for camps that conceived of their work as more than providing a summer of fun. Their visions included creating new leaders and fostering new ways of being Jewish. Some Zionist camps encouraged immigration to Israel, while others simply hoped to teach campers to value Israel as of central importance to the Jewish people. Role models embodied the message of the camps just as role-playing did. Emulating a counselor or teacher meant rethinking one’s future.

TRANSFORMING ORDINARY LIFE

The medium of experience was only one side of the construction of a new Judaism. Its other face was the capacity of Judaism to transform American experience. Camp Ramah’s idealized approach to sports provides an example. Because sports and athletic competence persisted as a source of anxiety associated with Jewish masculinity well

into the late twentieth century, the presence of sports at camp was particularly important. In fact, one man, a long-time camper and staffer, recalled success at baseball, in combination with excellent Torah reading skills, as the quotidian required for attracting young women.⁴⁵

For more than fifty years of men describing and recounting what was unique about Camp Ramah, sports stories repeatedly emerged in their narratives. Gerson Cohen, first a camper and then counselor, who later became an important scholar and faculty member and finally Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, recalled being chastised by Shalom Spiegel, a professor in residence at the camp, for violating the strictures of Talmudic law (*halakha*). Because Cohen refereed a game in which his wife was a participant, he violated a prohibition against judging a group in which one has a relative. The rules of the game involved Jewish law, in addition to those required by the sport (Cohen 41).

Rabbi Neil Gilman, a former counselor and later faculty member of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, recalled urging his campers to play aggressively and then being called aside during his first summer at Ramah. His rabbi-supervisor admonished him that this behavior was unacceptable. Gilman asked, “do you play to lose?” He was told, “yes. That [i.e., winning] is not what we value.”⁴⁶ These examples from Ramah’s earliest years suggest that the Jewish version of American sports transformed play to make it conform to Jewish ethical standards, even while athletics still remained a critical portal through which to affirm the “Americanness” of young Jewish men.

Zionist camps were, for ideological reasons, even bolder in their vision of challenging American norms as the sole model for campers’ values. Habonim’s communal camper property was a good example of living an alternative to American life. Indeed, one former camper who attended both Habonim and Ramah in the early 1960s explained that Ramah made its campers good Americans while Habonim explicitly challenged American values.⁴⁷

INCUBATOR JUDAISM

In role-playing, “aestheticized” ritual, role models and alternatives to the larger world, Judaism or Zionism (or both) was presented as a highly desirable goal for the lives of campers. Founders of camps, particularly in their early years, emphasized that the camp environment created an ideal—even a utopian—space. Gilman, a staff member in the 1950s, described Ramah as creating an “eschatological moment in the Conservative movement.” He believed that, upon leaving camp, the campers “returned to history,” by which he meant that they not only went home, but re-entered ordinary time.⁴⁸ In ordinary time, they encountered not the ideal Jewish world of camp, but the mundane world of non-observant families, suburbs that personified crass conformism and Americanism, and synagogues with an uninspiring educational agenda.

The Reform institutes struggled with the same problems of reentry into ordinary life—even though the earliest sessions lasted a mere twelve days in contrast to Ramah’s

eight weeks. In both Conservative and Reform settings, the Judaism presented in camps challenged the assumptions of ordinary life in Jewish communities. This was a challenge that worked both ways, for the returning camper was also challenged as he or she compared the vision of Judaism fostered in the camps with Judaism at home.

Counselors and campers alike referred to visitors' day as "invasions" and the return home as a "loss." The 14-year-old camper whose letters were cited above wrote to her parents about a visitors' day that they did not attend: "The parents have started to invade—last night at Kabbalat Shabbat already. We feel like animals in a cage or something. Someone cracked, 'Throw them a peanut, maybe they'll go away.'"⁴⁹

A former 1960s camper from the Orthodox-Zionist Camp Moshava explained to me that virtually every summer his Holocaust-survivor parents traveled to Israel to see family members, and he was often asked to accompany them. He explained his reluctance to do so: "Camp Moshava was my Israel. I had Israeli counselors and a world that felt more Israel to me than the real Israel. After one summer there [in Israel] I never went again during the years I attended Moshava."⁵⁰

When she was fifteen, one Ramah camper wrote in her 1968 diary at the beginning of the school year, "Only 276 days until camp."⁵¹ These adolescent sentiments about summer camp may be typical, given camp's intense peer culture and the pleasure of separation from home. Still, something special seems to have promoted the intensity of attachment that many Jewish campers felt about their summer experiences.

To evoke the imagery found in the work of the distinguished anthropologist Victor Turner, the world of camp was "really real"; in contrast, ordinary life was its mere imitation. Turner defined the "liminal" as a dimension of social life "betwixt and between" ordinary social structures. In ritual, the liminal period is often the occasion for cultural inversions such as masquerading or rule breaking that, for example, precedes and follows the coronations of monarchs or the movement from autumn to winter. However, liminal periods or spaces can exist in society as well. Summer vacations, journeys, and summer camp can also be understood as liminal periods. They are always distinguished by relationships, activities, and experiences that are the opposite of normal life, that undermine normal relationships of authority, and that allow novel ways of experiencing reality.

Indeed, the 1968 diarist penned an alternative creation story in early September, which she copied over into her diary in an entry that appeared in early April. She wrote in part, "in the beginning, G-d created Ramah. On the first day, He created the nature. He made the rocks, the boating short cut, the beautiful overnight valley, the mosquitoes, the wasps, the lake . . . On the third day, G-d created the mood—a special feeling that would set in, so that everything would be perfect." She did note that on the fourth day God created the classes, which she wrote "were not all so good."⁵² But her entry makes the point clearly. Ramah, for her, created an alternative world that was the product of a second creation. The Moshava camper, cited above, similarly viewed his Zionist camp as the "real" Israel, despite the fact that he remained in the United States. In the

liminal space of summer camp, reality meant the opposite of the ordinary.

Camping, then, served as a powerful educational tool for transforming those campers and counselors who came year after year to live in their alternative world. Perhaps all alternative environments serve as critiques of the world(s) they leave behind. To be sure, Jewish educational summer camps not only offered the freedom and pleasure associated with summer camping; they also enforced religious obligations and conducted classes, and some gave and graded examinations. Zionist camps involved not only hard physical labor, but required campers to promote the collective welfare. All of these elements were designed to transform the Baby Boom generation.

Moshe Davis, a founder of Camp Ramah and a counselor at Camp Massad, summarized the philosophy of many camps: “The whole day was now under our supervision. Until then you would come to a [prayer] service and you would come to [afternoon] school, but you didn’t live as a Jew in a civilization” (cited in Joselit 18–19). The totality and unity of experience—whether a given camp was integrating prayer, study and canoeing or building a cabin, learning Jewish history, and imagining immigration to Israel—inculcated the child into an alternative world whose aim was nothing less than creating a new generation of transformed Jews.

CITIZENS AND JEWS

While a meaningful engagement with Judaism was clearly important for denominational camps and Zionism was a major goal for camps founded under that banner, another set of questions concerning Jews and America was also central to the leaders of Jewish summer camping. Walter Ackerman, a long-time director of the California campus of Camp Ramah, offered an interesting perspective on this point. He commented, “what should be the relationship between America and what we are doing was the key question for us. All major Jewish educational issues were tied to this.”⁵³ Ackerman, himself the product of socialist Zionism, explained that, following World War II, this question preoccupied all camps—Zionist, religious and non-denominational. In response to America’s defeat of Nazism, loyalty to America was very high on American Jewry’s agenda. The question of how American Jews showed their national loyalties was a central concern for those who created summer camping in the postwar period.

Most Jewish educational camps, though not all, were, in one way or another, deeply committed to promoting American democracy and its superiority over communism among campers. Camp staffs had students plan programs and bunk activities, develop projects and in many other ways see themselves as active, independent young men and women who espoused American democratic ideals and practice. While most camps did have a structure imposed hierarchically, particularly concerning observance and educational goals, campers were still involved in many forms of decision making—the experiential was linked to the democratic. Ackerman called Camp Ramah an offshoot of the “progressive vision of the child saving movements” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dorph 5–6). Camp Ramah was more self-conscious

about this aim than other camps, but the vision was widely shared.⁵⁴

In light of this, the place of gender roles in summer camping is quite interesting. The immediate postwar years are thought of as highly gender-differentiated, a repressive last gasp before Second Wave Feminism, a period that historians define from the late 1960s to the present, in contrast to the first wave of feminism, the period that culminated in the passage of suffrage for women (Evans). However, denominational summer camps, in particular, were settings where gender equality was promoted long before it entered the mainstream of congregational life. The Reform movement was self-conscious about recruiting the first generation of women rabbis from among its campers, and almost all of those women rabbis were products of its summer institutes.

In the Conservative Camp Ramah movement, girls were allowed to lead the grace after meals and to sit with boys during prayer services long before these changes were adopted by the Rabbinical Assembly of the movement (B. Cohen 62). There were still many differences between girls and boys in terms of Jewish life, and boys continued to have higher status because of the assumptions of traditional Jewish law coupled with the values of 1950s American culture. Nevertheless, camps must be seen also as liberal settings that challenged gender hierarchy.

What is particularly notable about many of the Jewish educational camps of the 1950s and 1960s is the extent to which they integrated American politics into the life of the camp. A number of recent histories of American Jews challenge how extensively they actually shared a liberal consensus (see Dollinger; Staub). No such question can be raised about Conservative and Reform camps as well as some Zionist camps in this respect. These camps were important sites for developing ideas about what it meant to be a Jew in the United States, as well as Israel (in the case of Zionist camps). Civil rights, communism, the Cold War, presidential politics, mock trials, presidential elections and, somewhat later, the war in Viet Nam were pervasive concerns in Jewish educational summer camps.

The role-plays, described above, consistently dealt with issues of prejudice and identification with the Civil Rights movement of African Americans. For example, Camp Ramah featured a Civil Rights Opera, "The Circus of Life," in Hebrew, that was written by one camp's director of drama and music, Rabbi Effry Spectre. The written script of the play distributed to campers included Hebrew vocabulary sheets (a practice in all dramatic productions). The word list included Hebrew translations of "ghettos," "the brotherhood of man," "the color of your skin," "the real estate value of the neighborhood," "to terrify," and other terms especially applicable to the lesson being taught.⁵⁵

In 1963, at a Ramah camp in the Poconos, another counselor of the oldest age group staged a re-creation of the powerful events related to Civil Rights that occurred that summer. In the space of a few days in June of that year, African American students had integrated the University of Alabama, President John F. Kennedy had given his strongest Civil Rights speech, laying out a program of integration, and shortly there-

after, Civil Rights worker Medger Evers had been killed in cold blood. Campers re-enacted these events in an English language staging. They played the roles of Mrs. Evers, of the students integrating the university, of Governor George Wallace as he stood in the doorway staging a symbolic protest to integration, and finally of John Kennedy delivering his speech. Rabbi Shalom Podwal, their counselor, reflected back on his work with campers on this performance:

We were doing something that they realized was going to have very lasting significance. They were involved in these historical events that were going to have very lasting historical significance—through this as a way of identifying with these historical individuals. We had discussions through the summer in the bunk on Shabbat afternoon and during rest periods. We would mention Hebrew prophets and that this is the right thing to do, and we the Jewish people have to identify strongly with what the Negroes are going through. No one challenged that. They accepted that.⁵⁶

Although American Jews in the 1960s voted overwhelmingly Democratic and were generally supportive of Civil Rights, issues raised at camp were still controversial. Rabbinic support for Civil Rights in mainstream America was hardly universal. Debates over the responsibilities of Southern Jews, tactics for social change, and the integration of schools divided the organized Jewish community (Diner 268–74; Staub 76–111). In the midst of this internal debate, Reform and Conservative camps not only took progressive stands, more significantly, they gave these issues Jewish content. They situated the struggle for Civil Rights within a Jewish context and linked it to Jewish texts and imperatives. In doing so, camp leadership asserted the Jewishness of liberal, political activism.

Postwar educational Jewish camps created citizens, as summer camping has in the United States for more than a century. Though Zionist and non-Zionist camps idealized quite different relationships to America for their campers, they shared other views of American Jews as citizens. Above all, many of these camps asserted a powerful relationship between Judaism and politics. Put more precisely, the camps suggested that Judaism had a unique perspective on African American Civil Rights and, by the 1970s, on the war in Viet Nam. They asserted that Judaism demanded active intervention in the events of the day.

THE POSTWAR JEWISH YOUTH CULTURE

This story of postwar Judaism and its redemptive generation is, of course, a familiar one. Generational struggle—among Jews and among other ethnic and cultural groups—did not begin or end with the Jews of the 1950s. But what was unique in this era was the hope that the members of this generation could and would redeem society by changing their families and synagogues.

It is no accident that the immigrant literature and films of the 1920s either begin

with orphaned children or end with them. The literary deaths of older generations stand in for the creation of new worlds. However, the effort to create a redeemer generation in the 1950s differed in some interesting ways from the well-worn narrative that begins transformation by celebrating the end of the generation of unredeemable parents. Rabbi Gilman put it eloquently when he described the child-saving mission of Camp Ramah. They believed—naively he says in retrospect—that at Camp Ramah “we would change the child, the child would change the family, the family the synagogue, the synagogue the community, and eventually we would usher in the Messianic era.”⁵⁷

More than imagining the ability to sow seeds of change, what visionaries might not have foreseen is the extent to which their campers would take them seriously. Many camp attendees set about transforming American Judaism as well as participating in the student movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. And many did immigrate to Israel. As one woman told me wryly, “our parents sent us to the most inexpensive camp they could find, and it made Zionists of us” (Goldberg and King 263).

A loosely defined movement committed to the transformation of the American synagogue that began at the end of the 1960s and continues into the twenty-first century, draws powerfully on a vision of conduct and culture that its partisans encountered in summer camps. The call to end the formality and hierarchy of synagogue services, the aim to create non-unison praying, the promotion of communal singing over classical, cantorial music, the advocacy of greater democracy in the leadership of services and the desire for discussions of weekly Torah portions over sermons—all of these reflect values that came out of the summer camp experience (see Aron for an example of the “movement for synagogue transformation”; Prell). Moreover, the aesthetics of summer camps both anticipated and matched exceptionally well the aesthetics of the 1960s counterculture.

What young Jewish leaders of the counterculture, a period normally defined as the decade from 1965 to 1975, sought was not nostalgia, but an alternative vision for American Judaism that they had originally embraced in camping, particularly, but not exclusively, in the Conservative Movement. Indeed, the importance of education, the serious intention to make a modern form of Judaism all it could be, a liberal view of America as more embracing of difference rather than demanding cultural homogeneity: these became the values of a rising counterculture of ever increasing influence whose impact is all the more clear as the twenty-first century begins. What is less recognized is that the origins of this counterculture were deeply rooted in the 1950s’ summer camp experiences that were shared by men and women who pioneered Jewish feminism as rabbis, theologians and teachers, who became the first scholars hired to teach in newly created Jewish Studies departments, and who led many other examples of innovation in Jewish life in Israel and America.⁵⁸

Notes

- ¹ Sarna, “The Crucial Decade,” includes the following dates for the founding of these camps: Brandeis Camp Institute (1941), Massad (1941), Ramah in Wisconsin (1947), Ramah in the Poconos (1950) and what later became known as Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute (1951–1952). All were founded between 1941 and 1951–1952, as were a range of lesser known but still influential camps, including Camps Aguda (1941), Avodah (1943), Yavneh (1944), Galil (1944), Lown (1946), and Sharon (1946?). The 1940s and early 1950s also marked a turning point in the character of the whole Jewish camping movement.
- ² Isaacman produced the most complete survey of Jewish summer camping in the 1960s, including a useful historical discussion of the various types of camps sponsored by Jewish organizations. See also, Joselit and Mittleman. This publication is a catalogue of an exhibition on Jewish summer camping. Camp Ramah of the Conservative Movement has been the subject of a number of dissertations. A review of that scholarship may be found in Shargel.
- ³ See Sarna, “The Crucial Decade,” who details the variations in summer camps attended by Jewish children in the twentieth century. For a reflection on this phenomenon see Berkson (7). On Native American themes in Jewish camp see Kaplan (6–7).
- ⁴ A history of Camp Boiberik may be found in Lehrer. Differences among Yiddish camps often reflected political orientations as well.
- ⁵ Zionist camps were committed to creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine. They were usually associated with various Zionist movements that reflected different political visions of a Jewish state. Habonim was an affiliate of the Labor Zionist movement. See Goldberg and King.
- ⁶ For example, one of the founders of American Jewish education, Sampson Benderly, developed and guided Camp Achvah. Camp Cejwin (founded in 1919) was affiliated with The Central Jewish Institute. For Camp Achvah see Gannes (61–69). On Camp Cejwin see Berkson (7–8).
- ⁷ Steven M. Cohen discussed these findings in “Jewish Education and Its Differential Impact on Adult Jewish Identity.”
- ⁸ The best recent histories of American Jewish life and culture are: Diner; and Sarna, *American Judaism*. The best recent histories of the postwar period are Moore; and Shapiro. This essay draws on these works, among others, for a discussion of the period.
- ⁹ See the books cited above on postwar American Jewry. For a scholarly discussion of “religious revival,” see Ellwood; Lederhendler (93–109) reviews this debate. For popular discussions of religious revival in the American Jewish press of the period see Gordis, “Toward a Renaissance”; Rosenberg and Segal (14–16); and Kaplan, “The Meaning of the Current Religious Upsurge” (12–16).
- ¹⁰ The sociologist Herbert Gans coined the term “child centered.”
- ¹¹ She states that three quarters of Jewish parents failed to give their children Jewish educations during the Depression years.
- ¹² Research in the period that included these findings was conducted by Gans.
- ¹³ The notion of a “youth culture” in the United States can be traced back as early as the

nineteenth century; however, the separation of young adults from family and workplace that marks the emergence of youth increased beginning in the 1920s with increased high school and college attendance. Teenager as a term, as well as a connection to youth culture, emerged after World War II. See Grabner (13–16). See Modell (217–233) for a discussion of the link between the postwar teenager and growing affluence.

¹⁴ Interviewed by the author in New York City, March 2001.

¹⁵ Examples of criticisms of parents in both eras may be found in Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans* (145–63) and Prell, “Family Economy/Family Relations.”

¹⁶ Louis Finkelstein, “The Seminary’s Ten-Year Plan to Reclaim Jewish Youth to Religious and Ethical Life” 3. Thanks to Michael Greenbaum for sharing a copy of this document with me which is in his personal collection.

¹⁷ The scrapbook and the clippings from the press are among the Finkelstein papers in the archive of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism in America, Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

¹⁸ Ellwood addresses some of these issues for Christians in *The 1950s Spiritual Marketplace*. Jewish writers in *Commentary*, for example, reflected on these issues. See Gersh (211–12); Rossman; Howe (555, 558).

¹⁹ See discussion of suburbanization below.

²⁰ This passage is excerpted from a report that Frankel includes in his article.

²¹ There is no extant written source on the history of this camp according to a number of historians I have consulted who are experts on Orthodox Judaism in America. The general consensus is that the camp began after World War II during the 1940s.

²² Author interview with Eugene Borowitz, New York City, March 2001.

²³ See also, author interview with Sylvia Ettenberg, New York City, March 2001.

²⁴ The American Jewish Archives are located in Cincinnati, Ohio at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

²⁵ The best discussion of Habonim camping appears in Goldberg and King (263–86). The discussion of Habonim camps that follows is derived from this work.

²⁶ Eugene Borowitz recounted how he began introducing *Havdalah* at Reform institutes after the War, a custom he experienced in shul with his father (interview with author, New York City, March 2001).

²⁷ Letter of Phyllis Weisbard to her parents, 21 July 1958, given to the author.

²⁸ Letter, 27 July 1958, given to the author.

²⁹ Letter, 13 August 1959, given to the author.

³⁰ Letter, 9 August 1962, given to the author.

³¹ Anonymous interview with author, Philadelphia, September 2003.

³² Anonymous interview with author, Jerusalem, May 2001. The reference is to Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk.

³³ Program Book of the Union Institute, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, 22 July 1961. These documents were unprocessed at the American Jewish Archive at the time of my research in 2001.

³⁴ Program Book of the Union Institute, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, Junior Session, 1961. These documents were unprocessed at the American Jewish Archive at the time of my research in 2001.

- ³⁵ The sermon and the details of the experiment were included in the Program Book of the Union Institute, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, 14 July 1961, Intermediate Session I, 11–23 July 1961. These documents were unprocessed at the American Jewish Archive at the time of my research in 2001.
- ³⁶ Program Book, Union Institute, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, 1962, Junior session of Intermediate Session I. These papers were unprocessed at the American Jewish Archive at the time of my research in 2001.
- ³⁷ “Program Review for High School Session.” Union Institute at Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, July 1961. These papers were unprocessed at the American Jewish Archive when I worked there in 2001.
- ³⁸ Anonymous interview with author, New York City, September 2000.
- ³⁹ Camp Masaad pioneered the use of intensive Hebrew instruction.
- ⁴⁰ Anonymous interview with author, Philadelphia, September 2003.
- ⁴¹ Anonymous interview with author, Washington, DC, March 2001.
- ⁴² For an overview of the early years of Camp Ramah see Brown (836–38); Fox (19–38); and Schwartz.
- ⁴³ Camp Ramah Archives, Ramah Nayack, 1963, pp. 3–5.
- ⁴⁴ Anonymous interview with author, Philadelphia, April, 2004.
- ⁴⁵ Anonymous interview with author, New York City, September 2000.
- ⁴⁶ Rabbi Neil Gilman interview with author, New York City, March 2001.
- ⁴⁷ Anonymous interview with author, Philadelphia, April 2004.
- ⁴⁸ Rabbi Neil Gilman interview with author, New York City, March 2001.
- ⁴⁹ Letter of Phyllis Weisbard, 7 July 1960, given to author; anonymous interview with author, New York City, September 2000.
- ⁵⁰ Anonymous interview with author, Philadelphia, September 2003.
- ⁵¹ Anonymous diary from 1968 given to author.
- ⁵² Anonymous 1968 diary given to the author.
- ⁵³ Author interview with Walter Ackerman, Jerusalem, May 2001.
- ⁵⁴ To this point no scholars have systematically studied Jewish summer camps other than Camp Ramah, hence one cannot be definitive on this point. However, interviews cited above about other camps suggest these issues were of importance to other camps as well.
- ⁵⁵ “The Circus of Life,” Rabbi Effry Spectre. Translated and adapted by Mr. Stuart Kelman and Rabbi Jack Bloom. Hebrew and English manuscript in author’s files.
- ⁵⁶ Telephone interview with Rabbi Shalom Podwell, Chicago, 7 November 2000.
- ⁵⁷ Neil Gilman interview with author, New York City, March 2001.
- ⁵⁸ The author wishes to thank the following institutions for funding this research: University of Minnesota, Lucius Littauer Foundation, Hadassah International Jewish Women’s Research Center, American Jewish Archives, and especially the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

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