



## Building identity through camping

By Chanan Tigay · March 7, 2006

NEW YORK, March 7 (JTA) — "Continuity" and "identity" long have been buzzwords in the Jewish community — and one essential component of establishing them as facts on the ground, advocates believe, is summer camp. More than 400 people got together Sunday and Monday in Jersey City, N.J., as the Foundation for Jewish Camping convened its National Leaders Assembly. It was the first conference bringing together leaders of camps from across the Jewish spectrum — from those run by the religious movements and JCCs to Zionist movement and unaffiliated camps. "The Jewish people today, we are in trouble — our demographics are in horrible condition," said Harold Grinspoon, principal of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy. "Jewish camps are one of the fundamental places we have to put our emphasis," he said during a conference panel of philanthropists who emphasize funding for Jewish camping. "If we're going to keep ourselves from dissipating in this marvelous democracy, it's going to be because we put our kids around the campfire." The meeting drew participants from across the country to hear from funders and from experts who addressed best practices. By bringing together leaders of diverse camps, organizers also were hoping to spur the launch of a unified Jewish camping movement that will work toward what individual camps can't achieve on their own. "It is extraordinarily important to create and support a national movement for Jewish camping," said Elisa Spungen Bildner, co-chair of the foundation's board along with her husband, Rob Bildner. "Unless it becomes part of the national agenda, we will not succeed in our goal of bettering Jewish camping." The foundation announced at the conference that it was launching the Executive Leadership Initiative to offer experienced camp professionals business, management and leadership skills. One foundation leader likened the program — which will include development seminars, on-on-one coaching and mentoring, in addition to other programming — to an MBA program for Jewish camp leaders. The initiative, known as ELI, will help to professionalize the field, one of four major areas where foundation officials believe the Jewish camping world needs to improve. "We have to be able to really invest in our people, to open their eyes to the wider marketplace," said Jerry Silverman, the foundation's executive director. This "has never been the culture in Jewish camping." In addition, Silverman said, the movement must boost its advocacy capabilities, including research, marketing and public relations; increase its capacity, both by upping the number of available beds and creating new camps in underserved areas; and working toward excellence by seeking out money for innovative programming. All of this, foundation leaders say, will cost somewhere in the vicinity of a half-billion dollars. Raising that money will mean convincing philanthropists that camping is an essential component for building Jewish identity and ensuring Jewish continuity. The foundation hopes to conduct a study on the effect the Jewish camping experience has on kids and their Jewishness. Such studies have been done in the past by individual camping movements like Ramah, the Conservative Movement's camping system, but haven't looked at the differential impact of various types of camps. There are more than 130 non-profit, overnight Jewish summer camps in North America serving some 60,000 campers. About 12,000 college students and 7,000 other Jewish adults staff these camps. The Ramah study found that college students raised in Conservative synagogues who had attended Camp Ramah were more observant of Jewish ritual than those who hadn't gone to the camp, more positive about Jewish and Zionist identity, more inclined to date and marry Jews and more active in Jewish life on campus. The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 also included some data on summer camps. More recently, the foundation commissioned a study on camping in the Los Angeles area, for which the raw data have just arrived. Silverman said he hopes the L.A. study will be a model for similar studies in other communities. But for Silverman, existing data just confirm what he's long known anecdotally. "I personally think that Jewish camp is the best insurance policy that we have within the Jewish menu of experiences that we can give Jewish children today in terms of Jewish identity and continuity over the long-haul," he said. The AVI CHAI Foundation, whose first and biggest foray into Jewish education was in the realm of day schools, sees things similarly. In 2002 the organization, then considering an expansion of its philanthropic agenda, published "Limud by the Lake: Fulfilling the Educational Potential of Jewish Summer Camps," a study of community-sponsored and private camping. Today, AVI CHAI funds a fellowship to retain and train returning third-year counselors at Jewish camps; backs a Jewish Agency for Israel program that encourages Israeli emissaries to return to American camps for more than one summer; has begun an interest-free loan program for construction and renovation at Jewish summer camps; and has partnered with the JCCs of North America on a training program for JCC camp directors. "Day schools reach a relatively small percentage of non-Orthodox

families," said Yossi Prager, the group's executive director. "We were looking for a way to reach out to a larger group. The combination of the fun aspect of camp coupled with the 24/7 environment really has the potential for shaping Jewish identities."