



## Camping Out for Jewish Meaning?

August 17, 2011 - [Deborah Hirsch, Staff Writer](#)

Inside the Broad Street Ministry in Center City, two wiggling therapy dogs basked in the center of attention. They visit regularly to cheer up the homeless, underemployed and others who come here to eat, shower, mend clothing, make an art project or socialize.

At this particular moment, however, a group of 10th graders from Camp Galil made up the majority of the dogs' admirers. They had trekked two hours from Ottsville, Pa., to see the facility they had deemed the most worthy recipient of an \$1,800 grant that the Jewish Teen Funders Network had empowered them to disburse.

The pilot project, designed to get young people thinking about charitable giving, is one more in a long list of innovative activities, specialized staff training, trips to Israel and guest artists that nonprofit overnight camps have added to keep kids engaged in Jewish life.

The question is whether all the energy and resources that have been poured into bolstering overnight Jewish camps in recent years actually correlate to a stronger Jewish identity.

Ask camp alumni, parents, directors and staff and you'll get a resounding yes. But you don't have to take their word for it. Spurred by communal interest in what it will take to retain the next generation, researchers have built up an arsenal of reports over the past decade on the long-term impact of Jewish camp.

Their conclusion: In the battle against assimilation, demographic shifts and the rise of intermarriage, camp is right up there with Jewish day school, home life and trips to Israel.

Camp is a way to "invest in Jews ahead of time," so we don't have to deal with repairing disengagement later on, said Steven M. Cohen, who has worked on several camp studies and also directs the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at New York University.

Though the Berman archives contain reports about camp dating back to 1914, it wasn't until Jewish camps started to emphasize identity-building in the late 1980s that researchers began systematic evaluations of their success.

Qualitative, multiyear studies such as "Limmud by the Lake," commissioned by the AVI CHAI Foundation in 2000, described how camps delivered memorable Jewish experiences and suggested recommendations for improvement. A "Limmud" update released in March found a dramatic increase in the level of Jewish activity and professionalism. Parents reported a mostly positive influence on their children's Jewish development.

The most comprehensive quantitative look at the long-term impact to date came out this spring. The study, "Camp Works," was sponsored by the Foundation for Jewish Camp, which supports the 155 Jewish nonprofit camps in North America.

Using regression analysis to control for influences other than Jewish camp, such as prior educational experiences and family background, researchers examined data from 25 community population studies as well as the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey.

In all 13 variables examined, they found former campers to be more Jewishly engaged as adults compared to those who had not gone to Jewish camp.

The highest impact was seen in four areas: Camp alumni were 55 percent more likely to say they were "very emotionally attached to Israel," 45 percent more likely to attend synagogue at least once a month, 37 percent more likely to "always/usually" light Shabbat candles and 30 percent more likely to have donated to Jewish federations.

Those are particularly significant findings because they show how "experiencing the joy of Judaism in a 24-7 environment" can "create a clear sense of belonging and identity to a larger community," Jeremy Fingerman, CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Camp, said during a media conference call when the report was released.

This "really does prove that Jewish camp is the major contributor, as we think it is, to a vibrant Jewish future," Fingerman continued. "You don't need to chase that next big idea because it's right here; it's Jewish camp."

Among the moderate- and low-impact findings, former campers were 26 percent more likely to be a member of a synagogue, 21 percent more likely to feel being Jewish is very important and 10 percent more likely to be married to a Jew.

Camp leads to these lifestyles because it's an experience; it's not just sitting and talking about Judaism, said Rabbi Isaac Saposnik, director of the Reconstructionist Camp JRF in South Sterling, Pa.

"It's the place where we can really help kids love being Jewish. They don't have to be taught, they can just do it."

As 9th grade JRF camper Abby Rubin explained it, "We're being Jewish all day every day."

"I like that there's Jewish stuff because where I live there's not a lot of Jewish people," said the 14-year-old from Chalfont, a Bucks County suburb. "When we do Jewish activities, it's just special because you're with friends."

Even the 10th grade philanthropy project at Galil, despite arguments over which charity was most deserving, brought the group together in a way that other activities hadn't, said Samantha Morrow, 15. Although the Broad Street Ministry's proposal to make ID cards for those who don't

have other forms of identification wasn't specifically Jewish, Morrow said, tikkun olam is helping the world and "we want to help everyone."

During a recent visit to camps in Northeast Pennsylvania, longtime campers and counselors almost uniformly said that it wasn't participating in a particular program that reinforced their roots, but simply building traditions with Jewish friends and enthusiastic staff members who emboldened them to take pride in their identity.

"I am my truest self here, I think, because of the people," said 16-year old Josh Moskow of Merion Station, a camper at the Conservative movement's Ramah in the Poconos. "It's so different from school. I can be a leader."

Fourteen-year-old Gili Fleekop, of Upper Dublin, said she purposefully chose Pinemere five years ago partly because it wasn't a "super-Jewish" environment. "I wanted camp, down to earth camp."

But, she said, just being at the Stroudsburg facility, helping lead services and having impromptu discussions on religious morals, for example, has helped her "become a better Jew in a way."

"You're surrounded by amazing Jewish people. When I come home, I say, 'Mom, let's try to go to services, let's light Shabbat candles.' We eat Shabbat dinner as a family."

Others came looking for Jewish solidarity. Lower Merion High School had plenty of Jewish students, but not so many who were Orthodox, so "camp really grounded me," said Bina Peltz, a second-year counselor at the Modern Orthodox Camp Moshava in Honesdale, Pa.,

"It's really powerful to be with a lot of young people empowering the youth," said the Bala Cynwyd 18-year-old, who will soon start her freshman year at Princeton University. Even services at camp seem more personal because they're geared toward youth, Peltz continued. "It makes it more real than sitting in synagogue and maybe hearing 40- year-olds pray."

Ramah friendships served Nomi Eve Saunders well later in life, when she needed couches to crash on during the seven years she spent working on a novel. She made a point of taking her husband there before they got married. "I had to let him know that this was a part of me," said Saunders, now back as a creative writing specialist while her three kids attend camp.

She said her favorite part of the day is seeing her kids "having fun in a place that means so much to me."

Campers resoundingly agree that compared to services at home, there's something special about Shabbat at camp. At Pinemere, everybody dresses up and looks forward to getting up to do their part of the service, said 9-year-old Alexa Ufberg.

"They're not just boring prayers, they're fun prayers," said Ufberg, of Wynnewood. "You get to sing a lot and you get to be with everybody. I like feeling like not only yourself is Jewish, like everybody around you is a Jew."

So how does camp stack up to other Jewish experiences, like trips to Israel or youth groups? That's still up for debate because researchers can't truly gauge the effectiveness of more recent efforts to maximize the identity-building power of camp until today's campers grow up. Some analyses of data from years past suggest that Jewish day schools have a more powerful impact than summer camps, Cohen, the sociologist, said, but much of the evidence is anecdotal.

So, he said, "if you're like 85 percent of non-Orthodox Jews and you're not going to send your kids to day school, I would say advice No. 1: Send your kid to a Jewish camp."

Even Cheryl Figlin-Brenner, an attorney from Allentown who sends her oldest son to Bryn Mawr to attend Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, agrees. If day school scholarships weren't available, Figlin-Brenner said, she'd put camp first.

"This is infusing Jewish identity," Figlin-Brenner said, waving at the chaotic dining hall at Moshava, where she was staying while her husband served a shift as the camp doctor.

Maybe their three kids don't "need" camp because their home life and day school instill enough love for Judaism that they would never think of intermarrying, Figlin-Brenner said, but "I'd like to put the odds in my favor."

Alex Gelman, 25, a supervisor in the Department of Jewish Life at the Reform movement's Camp Harlam in Kunkletown, Pa., recounted a former associate director who used to stand up randomly in the dining hall and yell, "I love being Jewish," to which all the kids would roar back the same phrase.

For more than 15 years as a camper and counselor, "this is where I felt OK being Jewish," said Gelman.

"I don't think I would've had any connection to Judaism if I hadn't come here," he said. "It's what I found here that gave me the passion and the drive to find it elsewhere. Judaism will always be a part of my life and I think I owe a lot of that to camp."

### **Serious Study in the Woods**

Elisheva Friedman leaned forward, straining to hear the girls gathered around her above the din of five other groups just like this, all crowded into the modest Beit Midrash, or "House of Learning," in the center of the Camp Moshava grounds.

Once a week, each bunk comes here for text-based Jewish studies. Instead of rabbis, they learn from the young adults who have chosen to immerse themselves in studying Torah, Talmud and other religious texts for the entire summer.

"It's supposed to be a model of what society could be," explained Friedman, a 20-year-old student pursuing an education degree from York University in Toronto. "It's like a mini city, boys and girls learning together."

Almost all the young adults in the Beit Midrash as well as the campers come from a Modern Orthodox upbringing; and many of them also attend Jewish day school -- so fostering Jewish identity isn't the issue here that it is at other Jewish camps. Instead, the camp aims to build a love of Israel and religion.

The young adults like Friedman who could have gotten summer jobs but opted instead for serious religious learning are held up as shining *dugma'im*, or role models, said camp director Alan Silverman.

The camp has invited young students to join them for the past dozen years, offering free room and board in exchange for sharing what they're learning with the younger children. That's a pretty good deal, considering that "we could be paying for some amazing learning program," said Friedman.

Still, the economy seems to have taken a toll on attendance. Friedman said there were more than 40 students when she first came three years ago. This summer there were only 20, presumably, Friedman said, because many of them had to find paying jobs.

While most of their time is spent studying with each other, campers also drop in on a regular basis for lessons or to help put together commentaries on the weekly Torah portion. Campers are also invited to join their early morning study session, which they've dubbed the "cocoa club."

Program staff have brought them into other camp activities, too, Friedman said, recounting how she helped some girls who came in looking for a book about prayer as part of a color war competition.

### **Environment Gets a Jewish Camp Twist**

Most people bound for camp pack a trunk full of clothes, shoes and bug spray.

Stacey Grossfeld loaded a pick-up truck with potted flowers.

Now in her third summer at Pinemere Camp, the master gardener and mother of two from the suburbs of Baltimore has established a popular environmental education program.

"I call myself the flower fairy, but you can call me the nature mom," Grossfeld joked, pointing out a flower bed in front of the main office where the kids, under her direction, have arranged a blanket of blooms to spell out "PC."

At first, Grossfeld had volunteered to help the camp with whatever was needed in exchange for a tuition break. With approval from the facilities manager, she took ownership of some groundskeeping duties, applying her background as an independent floral landscaper to brighten up the campsite.

By the following year, she was teaching her craft, using donated plants that the wholesalers she worked with would otherwise throw out at the end of the season.

While Grossfeld's addition to Pinemere is part happy accident, the environment has become a major programming focus at many Jewish camps. Harlam campers planted their first vegetable garden this summer. JRF, the national Reconstructionist movement camp, has plans in motion to build an "eco-village" bunk expansion using recycled materials. Galil, which has always intermingled environmental education and agriculture with kibbutz-style living, took a "waste-busters" challenge to a new level last summer, having campers weigh their food waste at the end of every meal and keeping track of the numbers on a chart.

And 50 miles north of New York City, a two-year-old speciality camp in Putnam Valley is all about Mother Nature. Eden Village Camp, part of a national "incubator" pilot, combines wilderness trips, organic farming, natural service projects, art, music, sports and spirituality.

At Pinemere, Grossfeld shows her charges how to make birdfeeders and artfully turn old shoes into flowerpots to decorate the doorway of every cabin. This summer, she even brought dumpster-bound purses to repurpose as hanging containers.

"You have to have a pocketbook to go with your shoes," she quipped. The soil and water will eventually degrade the bag, but "it's better than going to a landfill," she said.

Plus, she continued, it's an opportunity to talk about the mitzvah of cutting back on "psolet," or waste.

Investing the time to actually grow vegetables and herbs also gives the campers more appreciation for the food they often take for granted, Grossfeld said. Their small crop is far from yielding enough produce to replace purchased products, but Grossfeld does build a Friday cooking lesson around the fresh ingredients.

The campers also bundle satchels of fresh herbs to make "Shabbat smellies." Like a traditional spice box, Grossfeld said, the "smellies" remind them how Shabbat measures the spice and sweetness of time passing.

"I'm not super-Jew or anything," Grossfeld said, laughing. But, she continued, she'll try to connect things to Jewish education whenever possible. As an example, she held up a half-finished wreath shaped like a Jewish star, fashioned from sticks that the campers gathered.

"There's so much potential here."

Grossfeld said it's been refreshing to see the kids -- especially her 14-year-old son -- leave cell phones and computers behind and still find enjoyment in sharing a summer camp experience.

"It is the most infectious, fabulous cult you could ever belong to," said Grossfeld.

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