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Foundation for Jewish Camp Launches Affordability Initiative

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Ask any Jewish family that sends their children to both a private Jewish day school and a Jewish summer camp about the affordability of such endeavors and they'll use words such as "sacrifice," "hardship" and "priorities." With the cost of Jewish day school tuition for one child varying from \$10,000 all the way up to \$40,000 per year, more Jewish families who desire a day school Jewish education for their children are finding it cost prohibitive even with financial aid.

Add to those rising costs, the additional expense of a month or two at a Jewish summer camp and families are having to just say "no" to their kids. In the new economy, the Jewish middle class has virtually vanished. Many families who once would be considered upper middle class are forking over their tax returns hoping for subsidies to make day school and camp tuition affordable. New organizations like the [Affordable Jewish Education Project \(AJEP\)](#) are sprouting up seeking to imagine alternative solutions to the economic crisis. Plain and simple it's becoming cost prohibitive to raise a Jewish family according to the values of day school and summer camp.

While Jewish day schools continue to solicit large endowment gifts to offset the tuition costs, the [Foundation for Jewish Camp \(FJC\)](#) has announced a new affordability initiative. In an effort to put a Jewish summer camp experience in financial reach for most families, FJC has launched [BunkConnect](#), a new program that matches eligible families with high-quality nonprofit Jewish summer camps at a more affordable price. This philanthropic business venture has been developed in collaboration with forward-thinking business executives and leading philanthropists.

What Sheldon Adelson, founder of the Las Vegas Sands Corp., has done for Birthright Israel with his largesse, the president and COO of the same corporation is now doing for Jewish camping. A former camper and counselor himself, Michael Leven, president and COO of the Las Vegas Sands Corp., is the program's key funder.

"BunkConnect marries best practices from the business world, new technologies and learnings from the hospitality industry, and takes a fresh approach to addressing affordability in Jewish life," said Leven. "I am excited for what this can achieve in getting more kids to have an experience that was so meaningful to me many years ago."

Studies have shown that Jewish overnight camp offers Jewish children the opportunity to build connections to the Jewish future. The Jewish summer camp experience is widely viewed as an essential part of fostering Jewish identity in children and creating a stronger Jewish community in the Diaspora of North America.

The program's process is simple. After income-eligible families of all Jewish backgrounds supply some basic, confidential information into the new online tool, BunkConnect matches them with available camp sessions at low introductory rates. This initiative is modeled after the success of FJC's One Happy Camper program – a need-blind grant initiative for first-time campers.

“Families want to send their children to Jewish camp. By matching their desire with available summer experiences, we are opening new avenues of access,” said Jeremy J. Fingerman, CEO of FJC. “BunkConnect has the power to change how we look at scholarship, affordability, and capacity for Jewish camp and beyond.”

Len Leader, former president of the Venture Group of AOL Time Warner Investments and BunkConnect funder, said, “By using sound economic principles and leveraging market dynamics, we are seeing in BunkConnect an exciting new philanthropic business form. This is a model designed to be ‘the gift that keeps giving’ to all parties involved, especially the campers.”

BunkConnect is already set to pilot this month in the Northeast, New England, and Mid-Atlantic regions with 35 participating camps, representing various movements and denominations. The program is for first-time campers only and bases eligibility on a family's adjusted gross income, number of dependent children, and place of legal residency. For example, through BunkConnect, a family with two children living in Pennsylvania with a maximum adjusted gross income of \$142,000 can realize the dream of Jewish camp. Jewish day school families are welcome.

BunkConnect is a collaborative program between the Foundation for Jewish Camp with The Center for Entrepreneurial Jewish Philanthropy (CEJP). In addition to the Michael and Andrea Leven Family Foundation, significant gifts were made by The AVI CHAI Foundation, The Leader Family Foundation and The Jack and Goldie Wolfe Miller Fund. What's unique about this new project is the business approach that was used, which is a new philanthropic giving model.

“The philanthropists we advise challenged us to create an outcome-driven business approach that capitalizes on the enormous impact of Jewish camping,” said Joseph Hyman, president and founder, CEJP. “BunkConnect is potentially a game-changing initiative that sets a standard for other philanthropists and organizations to follow.”

Many Jewish families who spend close to six figures a year on the combination of Jewish day school education and a summer camp experience for their children may begin to see that burden ease a bit with this new initiative. While there will still be sacrifice (less vacations and waiting another year to remodel the kitchen), fewer families will have to forgo a meaningful summer experience for their children.

Rabbi Jason Miller served in several capacities for the Ramah Camping Movement and was the year-round rabbi of Tamarack Camps in Michigan. He is an entrepreneurial rabbi and technologist, who serves as president of [Access Computer Technology](#) in Detroit, Michigan. Follow him on [Facebook](#) and Twitter at [@RabbiJason](#).

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