

Jewish Outreach Goes to Camp Ramah

eJewish Philanthropy

May 21, 2015

By Rabbi Abigail Treu

Jewish outreach on college campuses and through synagogues has, over the past two decades, become the norm. We are no longer surprised to hear that freshmen who never self-identified as Jews were invited to a *Shabbat* dinner on campus, or that synagogues are revamping their schools to accommodate competition from soccer practice and the plethora of activities many families choose over their children's Jewish education.

One area of Jewish education has, however, only begun to venture into the Jewish outreach arena: Jewish camping. As a new program of the National Ramah Commission demonstrates, the field of Jewish camping is fertile ground for reaching unaffiliated families.

Ramah's OpenDoor program was launched in the summer of 2013, funded by grants from the Zell Family Foundation and the AVI CHAI Foundation. The vision was to go beyond the traditional scope of recruitment efforts, which typically take place through synagogues and day schools. The idea was not driven by need; Ramah camps have been relatively full for many years, boasting enrollment at between 95 and 100% capacity. It was driven rather by a sense that Ramah's leading role in building strong Jewish identity in a joyful manner needed to be brought to more families – and precisely the ones on the margins of Jewish communal life, who might need it most.

Ramah is of course not the only camping movement trying to engage unaffiliated families, and some unaffiliated families find their way to Ramah camps organically every year. But with the OpenDoor initiative, Ramah has begun to focus on active recruitment of this segment of the community. This summer 42 children will attend five Ramah camps through OpenDoor, and next year two more Ramah camps – Camp Ramah in California and Camp Ramah Darom – will join the program as well.

Selling a religious camp to unaffiliated families is not easy. “This is not about watering anything down to accommodate a different demographic,” notes Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, National Director. “It is about marketing the Ramah product to a different population and trying to reach people who would not know to put Ramah on the list of options for their children.”

We've learned a few things along the way during these first two years of the program. Initially the hope was to focus on recruitment for the overnight camps; but it turned out that the entry point of the day camps has been an easier one. Of course, day campers grow up into sleepaway campers, so the pipeline of recruitment becomes another on-ramp for these families through that first step.

Another adjustment was to enable each camp to tailor its own recruitment efforts to meet its own community's needs. Rabbi Joel Seltzer, Director of Camp Ramah in the Poconos, used OpenDoor funding to advertise in *Metro Kids* and *Philadelphia Family Network*, secular media outlets the camp had never tried before. "From that we reached families who started to call about our open house," he said. At the Ramah Day Camps in Nyack and Chicago, *Bim Bom Shabbat* was held in partnership with PJ Library on three Fridays over the summer, when camp was in full swing. Preschool children were invited to come to the camp for free stories, songs, *challah*-baking, and crafts. Because it was free and catered to families with babies and toddlers, the program helped reach new families as people invited friends the camp would not have otherwise been able to access.

Beyond the recruitment effort, there is also a deep sensitivity to the need to help unaffiliated campers and their parents feel comfortable in the religious and Hebrew-laden Ramah environment. Attending Camp Ramah is likely the first encounter unaffiliated families have with Hebrew, with *tefillot*, with *Shabbat*; and as much effort as goes into recruitment has gone into making Ramah a welcoming environment for these new campers. This year, OpenDoor funding will underwrite the production of a magazine for all new Ramah families, featuring Hebrew vocabulary lists in translations and transliteration, games for campers to play to familiarize themselves with camp lingo so they know the difference between the "*chadar ohel*" and the "*beit kneset*" before they get to camp, and articles for parents to read to familiarize themselves with the terms they might hear from their children or camp director. Ultimately these efforts benefit the entire camp community.

Ramah camps have for nearly 70 years inspired children from all levels of Jewish backgrounds. As the Jewish community continues to grapple with unaffiliation and the disinterest of so many Jews in Jewish life, the OpenDoor program is about consciously working to make the Ramah experience part of the Jewish outreach effort so that all children can access the kinds of summer camp experiences that, we know, produce Jewish joy and connection for a lifetime.

Rabbi Abigail Treu is Director of Community Outreach and Young Adult Engagement at National Ramah Commission.