

Shalom Ramah Families,

This afternoon I sat in a fascinating senior counselor workshop. The counselors were asked to consider this: which elements in a camper's upbringing and background might lead them to feel excluded at camp? What kinds of situations at camp might lead campers to feel excluded?

Here's the back story. Our campers come from over fifty communities. Each camper has a personal story. They all share a basic Jewish identity and year-round Jewish involvement.

If you stand in front of the Hadar Ochel and watch the campers gather for lunch, you'll see the faces of American Jewry – racially, ethnically and socially diverse. Their family names have worldwide origins. When a camper is called to the Torah for an aliyah, you'll hear a variety of Biblical and modern Jewish names.

We are working with our counselors to be good listeners and to be sensitive to the language they use.

I joined one of the discussion groups of the staff session. One of the counselors shared that he first attended Ramah as a youngster three years after his entire family converted to Judaism. His parents had friends who were familiar with Ramah. Since that time, this counselor was a camper for five summers, visited Israel, and intensified his Jewish studies through high school and during his first years of college. He remembers coming to camp quite concerned that he would not fit in - that he would not know enough, that he would not be able to share his own story. Yet he made friends, had a ton of fun and found a summer home at Ramah. He turned to the others in the group and said, "Be good listeners. Value each camper, and get to know each person as best you can. Legitimate sharing relevant real life stories and be available to guide and teach. Use language like 'some' instead of 'all,' and 'sometimes' instead of 'always.'"

A staff member told of a camper who shared that she was adopted, another about a camper whose parents were in the middle of a divorce, another who moved from the USA to Israel, another who moved from Europe to the States.

Just in the first ten days of camp, counselors already have experienced stories about campers being surrounded with Jewish life in day schools and others who are the only Jews in their entire community.

Ramah Wisconsin is a great summer camp.

Peel away the layers of sports, arts and drama and you can get closer to the soul of the camp- campers and staff building a summer community together - a wonderfully rich Jewish community. The kids love what they do during each day. They are having so much fun! They grow to cherish the relationships, the friendships, the sense of being part of this Jewish neighborhood.

It all begins with counselors listening to campers, having fun with them, planning programs for and together with campers. The job of counselor is a real job, a complex job. The work day begins a 7:45 a.m. and often extends past 10:30 p.m. (The work day never ends!)

The workshop I described is one of many that take place two or three times per week through out the entire season. Behind the many images on the website of our campers enjoying camp, there is an amazing staff of over 200 dedicated souls.

We look forward to campers enjoying each summer and then, when their time comes, taking their places as members of the staff of Ramah Wisconsin.

In Pirkei Avot, Chapter 1, Mishneh 6 we learn:

Joshua ben Perahyah taught - Select a master teacher for yourself; acquire a colleague for study. When you assess people, tip the balance in their favor.

Camp is all about finding a mentor, developing quality friendships, and being open to new people. The counselors try hard to model this behavior for all our children.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi David Soloff, Director