

MITCHELL COHEN

The Impact of Camp Ramah on the Attitudes and Practices of Conservative Jewish College Students

Adapted from the foreword to Research Findings on the Impact of Camp Ramah: A Companion Study to the 2004 “Eight Up” Report, a report for the National Ramah Commission, Inc. of The Jewish Theological Seminary, by Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin, 2004.

THE NETWORK OF RAMAH CAMPS throughout North America (now serving over 6,500 campers and over 1,800 university-aged staff members) has been described as the “crown jewel” of the Conservative Movement, the most effective setting for inspiring Jewish identity and commitment to Jewish communal life and Israel. Ismar Schorsch, chancellor emeritus of The Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote: “I am firmly convinced that in terms of social import, in terms of lives affected, Ramah is the most important venture ever undertaken by the Seminary” (“An Emerging Vision of Ramah,” in *The Ramah Experience*, 1989).

Research studies written by Sheldon Dorph in 1976 (“A Model for Jewish Education in America”), Seymour Fox and William Novak in 1997 (“Vision at the Heart: Lessons from Camp Ramah on the Power of Ideas in Shaping Educational Institutions”), and Steven M. Cohen in 1998 (“Camp Ramah and Adult Jewish Identity: Long Term Influences”), and others all credit Ramah as having an incredibly powerful, positive impact on the development of Jewish identity.

Recent Research on the Influence of Ramah on Campers and Staff

I am pleased to summarize the findings of recent research on the impact of Ramah camping on the Jewish practices and attitudes of Conservative Jewish youth. Every now and then a research project is undertaken that attempts to

RABBI MITCHELL COHEN is the director of the National Ramah Commission. After working in law as a corporate litigator for five years, he served as director of Camp Ramah in Canada for eleven years and as founding principal of the Solomon Schechter High School of Westchester for three years. He also worked at Camp Ramah in California from 1979 to 1988.

quantify the influence of Jewish summer camping. While those of us deeply involved in camping instinctively know that these experiences are among the most powerful for developing Jewish identity, as well as for building self-esteem and moral character, quantitative analyses can add important perspective and provide a context from which to draw significant conclusions and develop policy implications for the future.

In a general study of the Conservative Movement published in 2004, Ariela Keysar and Barry Kosmin reported on their research of the attitudes and practices of college students who grew up in the Conservative Movement (*“Eight Up” — The College Years: The Jewish Engagement of Young Adults Raised in Conservative Synagogues, 1995–2003*, A Project of The Jewish Theological Seminary’s Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, Dr. Jack Wertheimer, Director). This project was funded by the Avi Chai Foundation, and the report is available online at http://www.jtsa.edu/Documents/pagedocs/fourup/eight_up.pdf.

Keysar and Kosmin first interviewed over 1,400 students who had recently become bar/bat mitzvah from a cross-section of Conservative synagogues in the mid-1990s. In 1999, they followed up and interviewed these same young people, who were then in high school. The researchers published their findings in *“Four Up” — The High School Years, 1995–1999*. In the 2004 *“Eight Up”* study, Keysar and Kosmin report on their findings for this same group of young people, most of whom by then were twenty-one-years old and university seniors.

Keysar and Kosmin were able to contact one thousand of the students they had surveyed both eight and four years earlier. Their research is therefore quite unique as a longitudinal study, one that finds trends in attitudes and changes in patterns of behavior over time, based upon the influence of various factors, such as high schools attended, Israel experiences, and youth group and camp experiences.

Companion Report Looking at the Impact of Camp Ramah

In their companion report to the 2004 *“Eight Up”* study, Keysar and Kosmin break down the raw data based upon Jewish camping experiences. Their analysis of this data, particularly the information about the impact of working as a staff member at a Ramah camp, is overwhelmingly positive. Keysar and Kosmin’s complete companion report is available online at http://campramah.org/news/keysar_kosmin_2004_research_findings.pdf.

As shown in the companion report to the *“Four Up”* study, students who attended Ramah as campers were more observant of Jewish ritual, more positive about Jewish and Zionist identity, more inclined to date and marry

Jews, and more active in Jewish life on campus. When the research was further refined in 2004 to test the practices and attitudes of Ramah campers who went on to work as staff members at Ramah (or in some cases, other Jewish camps), the results were even more impressive. The following are highlights of the companion report to the 2004 “*Eight Up*” study.

- **Synagogue Attendance.** Two-fifths (40%) of Ramah-trained counselors attend synagogue at least once a week, compared to just 11% of the “*Eight Up*” cohort overall and only 5% of those with no Jewish camping experience.

- **Jewish Marriage.** Over three-quarters (78%) of Ramah-trained counselors state that it is “very important” to them to marry a Jew, in contrast to just 52% of respondents overall and 39% of those with no Jewish camping experience.

- **Kashrut.** Only 17% of students with no Jewish camping experience and 29% of students overall state that they observe Kashrut outside the home. The figure jumps to 71% for Ramah-trained counselors.

- **Jewish Education as a Career.** Over one-third (40%) of Ramah-trained counselors state that they can see themselves becoming Jewish educators, nearly twice as many as the 22% of the overall “*Eight Up*” cohort and four times as many as the 10% of students with no Jewish camping experience.

- **Jewish Studies Courses.** While in college, Ramah-trained counselors are twice as likely as students with no Jewish camping experience to take a Jewish studies course, 63% compared to 31%.

- **Israel Advocacy on Campus.** Ramah-trained counselors are almost three times as likely to be engaged in Israel advocacy on campus (42%) as college students with no Jewish camping experience (15%).

- **Observing Shabbat.** Over a third of those with no Jewish camping experience (35%) say that they never do anything special on Friday night or Saturday to celebrate Shabbat. In contrast, *none* of the Ramah-trained counselors made this statement, and over a third of them (38%) *always* do something special to observe Shabbat, such as attend synagogue or a Friday night dinner. Further, a total of 60% of Ramah-trained counselors usually or always do something to celebrate Shabbat, compared to only 32% of other camps’ counselors.

- **Dating Practices.** Overall, only 18% of the “*Eight Up*” cohort states that they date only Jews, compared to almost half (47%) of Ramah-trained counselors. Ramah-trained counselors are almost five times as likely as students with no Jewish camping experience to say that they date only Jews (47% compared to 10%).

A Living Environment

The Ramah summer camp setting, in which campers and staff members live and eat together, study and pray together, play ball and learn theater arts together, and water ski and go mountain climbing together, influences young people in numerous ways on many levels. Ramah focuses on the development of each young person's self esteem, to the extent that every member of a Ramah camp is valued for who he or she is. Ramah camps, through their integrated systems of formal and informal Jewish educational experiences, inspire young people to become more committed to Judaism as a culture, a religion, and a way of life. Ramah camps, through their hiring of Israeli staff members, Zionist programming, and their networks of programs for North Americans to spend time in Israel, encourage a deep connection between each Ramah participant and the State of Israel.

The Crucial "University Years"

Perhaps most significantly, Ramah camps retain over 75% of their camper populations as members of the staff. When young Jewish adults ages seventeen to twenty-two spend their summers at our camps, they graduate from their university years with a greater love for Jewish life, a stronger connection to Israel, and more powerful leadership skills that can help with all of life's challenges.

"The Power of Ramah"

Keysar and Kosmin make it clear that it is difficult to know whether the Ramah figures cited previously are so high because more committed Jewish families send their children to Ramah, or whether the impact of the Ramah experience itself is the major factor. Their anecdotal evidence, however, indicates that many young people did report that their camping experience had a major impact upon their positive Jewish development. When asked, "What do you think is the most important thing that helped shape your Jewish identity?" a number of respondents chose Jewish camping. In the words of one student:

Camp Ramah helped me shape my Jewish identity more. Being involved in a two-month Judaism experience immersed with Judaism really placed me in a constantly Jewish environment. It taught me to enjoy the best parts of Judaism and see how special it is to have a spiritual aspect to life.

Another respondent said

[M]y Jewish summer camp experience probably had the greatest influence on me than any other single experience. Camp Ramah simply incorporates *all* aspects of Judaism: social values, religious values, spirituality, charity,

education. . . . Thus, one becomes part of a very complete setting of Judaism, and in this way, one can find what unifies Judaism in all these categories.

In the words of Keysar and Kosmin:

We have demonstrated with an array of statistics, tables and charts that Jewish summer camping is an important experience in the lives of many young people and that it is associated with an increase in Jewish involvement during the college years. *College students who participated in Jewish summer camps, either as campers or as counselors at Camp Ramah or any other Jewish summer camps, are by far more engaged Jewishly than those who never attended a Jewish summer camp* [emphasis added]. These findings with regard to the Jewish college students . . . ages 18–26 replicate those in the study of Jewish summer camps by Sales and Saxe (2004).

However, we go one step further. We have identified the *crème de la crème* among camp counselors. All the data presented here point to one remarkable group of young Jewish men and women, namely, those who attended Camp Ramah and later became counselors, either at Ramah or another Jewish summer camp. These Ramah-trained counselors lead the way and are far ahead of others in various markers of strong Jewish identity, intense Jewish practice and commitment to Judaism. Ramah-trained counselors are undoubtedly the elite of the elite.

From this body of research, we once again have an affirmation that among the many positive experiences that our young people might have, Ramah camping is among the most effective means of ensuring a high level of commitment to Jewish life and positive Jewish and Zionist identity.

ARIELA KEYSAR, *Ph.D.*, a demographer, is an associate research professor in public policy and law and the associate director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey 2008. Dr. Keysar was the study director of the American Jewish Identity Survey 2001 and the associate director of the landmark Longitudinal Study of American and Canadian Conservative Youth 1995–2003.

BARRY A. KOSMIN, *Ph.D.*, a sociologist, is research professor in public policy and law and the director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He has directed many large national social surveys and opinion polls in the United States, Europe, and Africa including the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and the American Religious Identification Survey series 1990–2008. He is the author of more than twenty books and research monographs and more than fifty scholarly articles in the fields of sociology, politics, philanthropy, and policy research.