

Jewish Summer Camp Vital to Maintaining Commitment

By Jane Ullman

ENCINO, CA (JTA) - The Central Jewish Institute in New York sponsored the first American Jewish summer camp in 1919.

Since that time, Jewish mothers have been conscientiously sewing name tags on dozens of socks, shorts and T-shirts - most of which they never see again - and receiving adoring and affectionate messages from their children that read, "If I want dinner, I have to write this letter."

For Jewish parents, overnight

camp is a respite from driving car pools and making lunches. It's also an opportunity to practice Tamagotchi resuscitation skills.

For three of my four sons, it is a time to enthusiastically leave behind their Nintendo 64, their favorite fast-food hangouts and their central air-conditioning for accommodations that make Motel 6 look like the Ritz-Carlton.

Two of them are off to Camp Alonim, nestled in the Santa Susanna Mountains in Brandeis, Calif., just north of Los Angeles. The other is off to Camp JCA Shalom in the Santa Monica Mountains in Malibu.

These, like all Jewish camps, are survivalist experiences.

But Jewish overnight camp is not about surviving the hairy chicken, the shortage of hot water or the meddlesome mosquitoes.

And it's not about surviving as a Jewish commando - building underground shelters and stockpiling Uzis and cans of Manischewitz matzah ball soup.

No, Jewish summer camp signifies nothing less than the survival of American Jewry. It helps ensure that my children will resist a 52 percent intermarriage rate; the temptations of cults, missionaries and Eastern religions; and the allure of an assimilated society.

Our grandparents and great-grandparents didn't need Jewish summer camp. Rather, in the isolated shtetls of Eastern Europe, the men studied in year-round cheders where knuckle-rapping rabbis made sure they adhered to Jewish

law and advanced their Jewish lineage. Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers were taught to be balabustas and to graciously accept arranged marriages.

But life in America is different. Here Jews live in a more integrated and secularly seductive environment. As a result, Jewish children need more than traditional Hebrew schools to maintain their affinity for Judaism; they need exhilarating, experiential Jewish activities.

And that's exactly what Jewish overnight camp provides - a joyous, invigorating and uplifting few weeks of total immersion in Judaism, with memories powerful enough to last the entire year. This is what Shlomo Bardin, a Chasidic educator from Ukraine and the founder of Camp Alonim, referred to as "an adventure in curing alienation."

Alienation is one of the biggest problems facing today's Jewish children. And non-formal Jewish education - including Jewish overnight camp, day camp, youth groups and trips to Israel - is a powerful antidote.

At camp my sons experience Judaism with their heads, their

hearts and their hands. On Bunk Night Out, for example, a special after-curfew adventure, my 9-year-old does not merely go on a treasure hunt. He and his bunkmates are Israeli soldiers on a dangerous mission, cutting through treacherous enemy territory to find the hidden candy.

My 14-year-old engages in a serious discussion about animals and nature. No one talks in amorphous, self-serving platitudes. Rather, my son and his friends learn about the mitzvot of preserving the earth and of being kind to animals. They learn about obligations, commanded by God, that are absolute and enduring.

Traditional observances also take place.

On Friday evenings, my son worships with campers, counselors and staff, all dressed in white, at Shabbat services. On Saturday mornings, they attend Torah readings and discussions. They are spiritually nourished as they pray, and they are compassionately connected as they sing "Hinei Mah Tov": "How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters are together."

My husband, Larry, and I send

our sons to Jewish overnight camp because we are deeply rooted in our more-than-5,000-year-old history. Our sense of right and wrong and our sense of moral and ethical responsibilities emanate from our religion.

Well-grounded and comfortable in our Judaism, we are better prepared to meet the world's challenges. We want the same for our sons. We also want Jewish grandchildren at our Passover seder.

The Talmud tells us that we must teach our children how to swim; their lives may depend on it.

At Jewish camp, there are swimming lessons for beginners as well as advanced swimmers. And these lessons don't all take place at the swimming pool. They occur during Israeli dancing and before each meal when the Motzi is recited. They also occur on horseback rides, in drama groups and at the tetherball court.

What the Talmud neglects to tell us, however, is that swimming lessons are not enough. We must also teach our children how to sew and how to write detailed and enthusiastic letters home. ☆

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(Continued from page 24)

Habanim (blessing of the children) and showed how parents place their hands on their children's head and bestow a blessing. "I suggested the families try it and thought it would last about 30 seconds. The families were so touched by the moment that their blessings lasted five minutes," said Cahan. "It was amazing how everyone realized at that moment how Jewish traditions could add depth and meaning to their family life." The mock wedding the fol-

lowing night ended the camp week with another eye-opening Jewish family experience.

"Often we are overwhelmed by the enormous difficulties in the world around us and feel helpless," says Melissa Polen, coordinator of the Jewish Service Corps. "What Josh's experience in the Jewish Service Corps shows us is how one person can make a huge difference."

After his year-long experience, Cahan feels he has forged lasting ties with the Jewish community in Ykaterinburg. This coming year he will make several return trips back to help with high holiday celebrations and again for Chanukah.

Six adult couples have asked him if he will help organize real weddings for them under a chuppah. What amazed Cahan most about his time in Ykaterinburg was "that even when irreparable damage is done to Jewish communities, somehow there's an indelibility to the Jewish spirit." JDC is currently selecting individuals to serve in the 1999 Jewish Service Corps. For more information call (212) 687-6200, write to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017 or check out the JDC Web Site at www.jdc.org. ☆

Learn About UAHC Camp Coleman on December 4

Bobby Harris, Director of UAHC Camp Coleman, will pay a visit to Temple Beth El on Friday evening, December 4. Following services, Bobby will present a videotape of camp life and answer questions regarding the camping experience at Camp Coleman, located in the mountains of northeast Georgia.

Many children from the Charlotte community have attended Camp Coleman in the past few years and our numbers are growing.

"Camp was cool," says twelve-year-old Dan Montoni. "The activities were fun. There was

sports, socials, day trips, swimming, and daily *tefillah*. I want to go back and become a *madrich* and go to Israel."

Campers entering grades three and four can become *Bonim* for two, four, or eight weeks. Two, four and eight week sessions are also available to campers entering grades five and six, as *cochavim*. *Sophim* are campers entering grades seven and eight, and they

can come to Camp Coleman for four or eight weeks. The oldest group is the campers entering ninth and tenth grades, the *chalutzim*.

As an annual incentive to encourage Jewish summer camping for Reform Jews, Sisterhood will again be making a small campership available to first-time campers. In addition, any family who needs additional scholarship assistance can contact Rabbi Morris for funds which will be supplemented by the Sisterhood treasury. ☆

Jewish Community Center Welcomes New Teen Director

The Jewish Community Center of Charlotte recently welcomed a Teen Services Director to its staff. Neil Popish joined the JCC staff on October 1, 1998. Neil comes to Charlotte from Long Island, via Boca Raton, Florida. He was the Assistant Director of Teen Services and the Adult Sports Coordinator at the Adolph and Rose Levis Jewish Community Center in Boca Raton, Florida. Neil lived in Boca Raton for eleven years and is a graduate of Florida Atlantic University, where he has a degree in history, with certification to teach middle and high school.

"I have never felt so welcome anywhere before in my life," says Neil. "Everyone has been so wonderful to me, which inspires me to

work even harder, because I can truly see I will make a difference here in Charlotte." "I have basically made the JCC my second home in recent years, because of the variety of programs offered. I am already participating in the men's softball and basketball leagues here at the JCC."

Look forward to many exciting and challenging teen programs in the very near future. Neil will be traveling with the new Teen Travel Camp next summer, which will include teens entering 7th through 10th grades. In addition, the Teen Services Department will offer leadership training, SAT prep classes, and Saturday evening programs in the near future. ☆

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