

Between the Bunk Beds: Learning Jewish at Camp

By Adrienne Sanders

NEW YORK (JTA) - Remember sleep-away camp? Sunny afternoons of splashing and swimming in cool lakes, singing campfire songs while roasting marshmallows, and whispering to bunkmates late into the night — all are common camp memories.

For many campers, living an actively Jewish life is part of those memories - and often becomes an integral part of their future.

Jewish youth across the country go annually to camp, and with them goes the promise of a stronger Jewish identity.

A positive correlation exists between attending Jewish camp and maintaining a positive Jewish identity, Jewish affiliation, observance, contribution to Jewish causes and "in-marriage," according to the Brandeis University Institute for Community and Religion, which has completed three demographic studies on the subject since 1990.

Each summer in the United States 100 Jewish, non-profit sleep-away camps host about 35,000 kids from all Jewish denominations and organizations.

A strong Jewish identity - even at camps with minimal Jewish practices - develops through many aspects of the camp experience. Social cohesion with other Jewish campers, practicing Jewish traditions in a fun environment and enthusiastic role models all contribute to enhancing a positive interest in Judaism.

"Being Jewish is a common bond I have with my camp friends that I don't have with my other friends," says Laura Aimsman, a 15-year old who has attended Pittsburgh's Jewish Community Center sleep-away camp for eight years.

"I like water-skiing and the lake-front activities, but my favorite part is being with my friends," she says.

For kids from small towns with tiny Jewish populations, sharing the summer with Jewish bunkmates and swim buddies is in easy entry into the Jewish world and a great way to form lasting friendships.

Though JCC camps are non-denominational and vary in their level of Jewish content, most offer some Jewish activities. For unaffiliated children, camp can be an important entry into Judaism.

When youngsters see their friends studying for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, some become interested in having their own. For more religious campers, camp becomes an extension of the values and traditions they practice at home.

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For Aimsman, observing Jewish traditions, including learning prayers and keeping Shabbat, is part of the bond she shares with her camp cohorts.

"I love the fact that we all get dressed up and sing together on Shabbat," she says.

Jewish camping experts say that the controlled and communal camp environment itself allows for a real immersion into experiential Judaism.

At the Barney Goodman Camp of the JCC of Greater Kansas City, KS, groups of youth, at the beginning of each session, make a Shabbat kit of a challah cover, kiddush cup and placemats.

At the Reform movement's Camp Eisner in Massachusetts, campers hold nightly services under the stars and enjoy Israeli dances later in the evening.

For many, the spiritual environment is quite different from the secular one they are used to the rest of the year.

Services in camp aren't "boring" like services at shul, says Aaron Soffin, 15, who has attended Eisner for five summers. "It's full and religious."

The counselors who guide campers through the summer become important role models for their charges, say camp experts.

Spending 24 hours a day with a hip college kid who loves being Jewish sends a very powerful message to impressionable youngsters, they say.

"When you're young, the fact that counselors are into it really affects you," says Soffin.

He says that while all of his camp friends are now interested in Judaism, that wasn't the case when they started. Many became more involved in their Jewishness by spending their summers at camp.

"Camp reconnects, connects or advances" Judaism for campers, says Lenny Silberman, a veteran camp director who heads the JCC Association's camp services department.

"The beauty of JCC camps is that a good percentage of the campers are unaffiliated. After camping, many of the kids bring their Judaism home," he says.

Some teens with a strong Jewish curiosity choose to spend the summer at camps designed to enhance their Jewish knowledge.

For instance, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations camp, Olin-Sang-Ruby camp in Northbrook, IL provides intensive Hebrew and Torah study courses.

Sara Isaacson, whose 15-year-old daughter Rachel attends Olin-Sang-Ruby, says that camp has been "critically important" to her daughter's experience as a young Jewish woman.

"They take a real look at texts, in small groups; it's not a dumbing-down. It has helped empower Rachel that she has her ideas about Torah, too," says Isaacson. "The two most important factors in Rachel's Jewish life have been her home life and Jewish camp."

Indeed, many Jewish professionals acknowledge that supplemental Jewish education needs all the help it can get.

Camps are especially important in the Reform movement, many say, where the fight to keep kids Jewish is often fraught with the familiar threats of non-affiliation and intermarriage.

"If you want your children to live, know and understand our Jewish heritage, camps are an absolutely essential part of their experience," Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the UAHC, said in a recent speech.

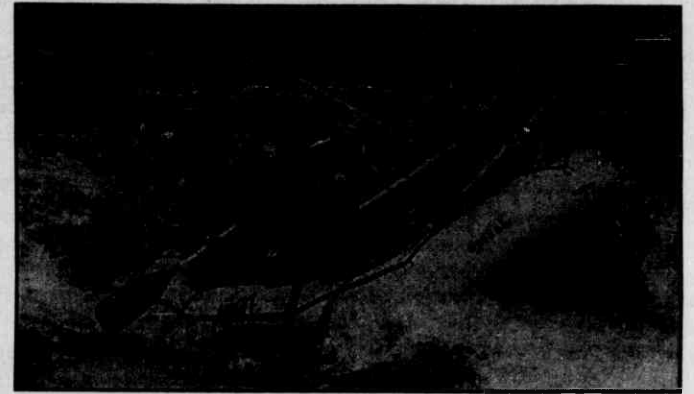
And most importantly, from the kids' perspective - camp is fun. As Laura Aimsman's mother, Merrill, put it:

"Laura waits eleven months of the year to go back to camp." ☆

Camp Barney Medintz Sets Open House in Charlotte

Camp Barney Medintz, summer resident camp of the Atlanta Jewish Community Center, will present an exciting new musical slide production in Charlotte on Thursday, December 10th at the Charlotte Jewish Community Center, beginning at 7:00 PM. Jim Mittenthal, Camp Director, will

has created "a unique community that is all about adventure and self discovery, exhilarating activities and exciting events, being in a strong culturally Jewish environment with special friends, all under the supervision of a carefully selected group of mature, talented, loving and enthusiastic



Whitewater rafting is among the many fun activities available at Camp Barney.

meet with new and returning families, answer questions pertaining to the 1999 summer camp season, and provide applications for registration.

Camp Barney Medintz is located in the North Georgia mountains on over 500 acres of forest, lakes and streams just 75 miles north of Atlanta. According to Mr. Mittenthal, the setting facilitates dozens of "exciting and unusual activities, including water-skiing, hydro-tubing, sailing, canoeing, leaping off the "Blob" or soaring down the 80-foot slide, horseback riding, campouts, whitewater rafting, theater, tennis, all land/court sports, videography, crafts, music, Israeli culture, mountain biking, swimming, climbing the adjacent Appalachian Trail and a series of high adventure rock climbing, rappelling and ropes courses.

Camp Barney Medintz, celebrating its 37th summer season,

staff," said Mr. Mittenthal. Camp Barney Medintz continues to develop new construction projects throughout its large and magnificent mountain facility. After entirely renovating cabins and bathrooms last season, the focus this year is the new Brill Equestrian Center, a sports complex and ski beach, re-doing the Halpern Center gymnasium and amphitheater, a new Nature Center, an organic vegetable garden and additional work on cabins.

Inquiries about the 1999 summer season are far exceeding previous years and each of the two-and four-week sessions are likely to fill to capacity in the coming weeks. For more information, call the camp office at (770) 396-3250 ext. 154, or Camp Barney Medintz Charlotte parent representative Susan Jacobs at (704) 364-1922. ☆

"Who finds a faithful friend, finds a treasure."

Apocrypha: Ben Sirra 6:14

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