

Summer Camp

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AT THE JEWISH summer camp I attended in my youth, we created a sacred moment for our closing-night ritual. After we finished our campfire singing, we'd look up at the stars. The only sound was from the cicadas chirping in the live oaks. The stars were the same ones we'd see the next night, from our homes. We'd locate the North Star to guide us to the Big Dipper, and with the intentionality of a biblical covenant, we'd pinky-swear with our friends to repeat the ritual once we got home. It kept us connected in a time when mail was slow and long-distance calls were expensive. Simply looking up made us feel connected.

Campers today live very different lives. In a post-pandemic world, they have endured screen overload: Zoom school, tablets and phones (often handed to them by parents needing a break), texting instead of talking, and ubiquitous social-media platforms, which create connections but also enable cyberbullying and so many other dangerous behaviors. All of this has made a profound impact on the hearts, souls, and minds of young people.

Camp offers kids a break from all that, fostering in-person connections in screen-free, immersive spaces. Young people need us to help them make the most out of this radical departure from daily life — a countercultural experience that can help them reset, rejuvenate, and build the kinds of human-to-human skills that give life meaning. As a Jewish community, we need to embrace this invaluable opportunity, learn from it, and share its lessons widely.

At camp, we're giving kids and adolescents the opportunity to grow and develop simply by looking up: raising their heads away from their screens and into the eyes of peers, mentors, coaches, role models, and leaders who will help them develop and shape their identity. We teach kids that patience matters and that valuable things take time. Apps and the internet provide instant gratification, but real life and real people move at a different pace. We acknowledge and celebrate that real life is challenging, that people are imperfect, and that growth, connection, and meaning require serious effort and provide immense reward.

The activities we create at camp build skills for conflict resolution, foster resilience and grit, and create communities that value teamwork and belonging. We share in one another's joy and offer support when one of us is in distress. We encourage sacred conversations about Jewish experiences, such as when young people learn to write an original commentary or blessing for *tefillah* (prayer), rather than turning to ChatGPT to write it for them. We create holy spaces. "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly," the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote, "God is the electricity that surges between them."

Yet we're not afraid of technology, nor are we creating insular spaces that ignore real-world experiences and emotions. The challenges young people grapple with at home don't fade when they come to camp. We tackle them head-on. For example, we devote tremendous

attention and resources to MESSH — the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health of every person in our community. Developing and honing our staff’s MESSH skills can help protect children from high-risk behaviors and tendencies that are often the result of distress in other areas of their lives, including from their use and abuse of technology. Campers arrive with more baggage than simply their duffels. As adolescent development has become more complex, we’ve become more attuned to campers’ needs and more nimble in how we prepare to meet and exceed them. Sometimes prioritizing MESSH means that we need to use screens to support well-being—whether it’s by providing movies to kids spending a night in the infirmary, or using Zoom to facilitate weekly calls with their therapist.

We don’t reflexively reject the benefits of technology at camp — we just use our values and educational goals to guide our choices about how it’s used, with the goal of enhancing connection and meaning. The summer I was the education director at that same camp with the live oak trees, we brought “Torah Cam” to Shabbat-morning worship. While some campers and staff chanted from one Torah scroll, another team filmed a hand holding a *yad* (pointer), following along with the reader of a second Torah. I will never forget the sound of sheer wonder, the gasps of awe as the image came onto the screens in the *beit tefillah*—the Torah reading had come to life, more accessible, relatable, and exciting than before. Torah Cam became part of camp culture that summer, increasing interest in preparing to read Torah and participating on the Torah Cam team.



I’ve yet to meet a camper who didn’t think her camp was the most beautiful place in the world. The true impact of these places is not

measured by the quality of the food or the heat of the summer. It's measured in the engagement of all of our senses—the beauty of the land, the authenticity of real relationships, the familiar smells of a spice box at Havdalah and chlorine at the pool, the sounds and rhythmic beats of song session and Israeli dance, the taste of s'mores at the campfire, the touch of a celebratory high-five or holding hands on a Shabbat walk, and the sense of safety and belonging that comes from knowing that all campers are affirmed for who they are. This is all enhanced by being immersed in a community that celebrates the joy of being Jewish. Camp is real life.

Study after study has demonstrated that Jewish summer camp has more impact on adolescents than any other peer-based Jewish activity. The fact that it now has the added benefit of being a largely screen-free place will only amplify this impact, if we lean into it. Community leaders and educators of all kinds should take lessons from the camp experience and apply them to other areas of Jewish communal life: lessons such as prioritizing time for outdoor play and independent free time; encouraging young people to explore new hobbies and activities that challenge their minds and bodies; practicing gratitude daily through journaling or meditation; and finding time simply to be together in undistracted conversation.

At camp we talk about “everyone” and “every one.” “Everyone” is the whole group; and “every one” of us is a unique, holy, irreplaceable member of our camp community, the most important person in the world to someone. We encourage every one of them to take the time to look up—to look at their parents, peers, and friends in the eyes, to gaze at the stars in the sky, to make unfiltered connections wherever and whenever they can. *