

What Adults Can Learn from Jacobs Camp

July 5, 2019

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Last month, I received a spread sheet from the Union for Reform Judaism Youth Department, detailing our young people's engagement with Reform Movement programs – above all, Jacobs Camp and NFTY's Southern Region. At the very bottom of the document, I found our congregation's list of counselors and supervisory staff, as well as faculty, meaning that I was on that list. Next to the names of William Cohen, age 19, counselor and archery specialist at Jacobs; and Robert Block, also 19, a counselor at URJ Greene Family Camp in Texas, was the word "adult." The designation "adult" did not appear next to my name. I'm not sure exactly how to take that. Perry Cohen suggested, "If the shoe fits, ..."

There is, of course, a difference. My status as an adult may be taken for granted. William and Robert, on the other hand, along with Jacobs Camp counselors Brock and Larry Jacobs, are emerging adults. I have always believed that URJ camping is just as much for those young adults as it is for the campers. Although paid to be at camp and expected to fulfill significant professional duties, serving these college-age staff members lies at the heart of the camp's mission.

We all know that the college years, and the years immediately thereafter, are the time of life when most people are at their lowest level of Jewish engagement. Away from their parents and home synagogues, and not yet establishing their own families, tremendous numbers of Jewish young adults rarely attend any Jewish program or service.

Meanwhile, these young adult years are the time when many set the course for the rest of their lives. They may meet a life partner. They contemplate career paths. They find new homes, often far from the place where they were raised. In short, the Jewish future requires that we provide attractive opportunities for our young adults to be engaged in Jewish life.

A summer, or several summers, as a staff member at Jacobs Camp does much more than that. Camp is an immersive Jewish environment, meaning that our young people eat, sleep, and breathe Judaism and Jewish community for the eight of nine weeks that they commit to the camp staff. They are surrounded by Jewish friends, including a large group of Israelis, and they are immersed in Jewish culture. Time is counted from Shabbat to Shabbat. Despite themselves, these young adults may even enjoy singing and reciting Jewish prayers.

And there's more.

Under the leadership of Anna Herman, Jacobs Camp has done an outstanding job of articulating “the value proposition” of working at camp for these young adults’ future: “Camp offers so many valuable experiences and transferable skills that can be used for a wide range of...careers in different industries.”ⁱ Speaking to prospective staff, Jacobs Camp affirms: “Many of the situations you will encounter as a camp counselor teach...skills which are appealing to recruiters.”ⁱⁱ As they get more specific, Jacobs Camp leaders detail the qualities required of camp staff which will be valued by prospective future employers: “Self-discipline...Multi-tasking...Good communication...Being supervised...Leadership development...Conflict resolution...Self-directed teamwork...Flexibility...[and, last by not least,] Ability to have fun.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This summer, in a week at Jacobs Camp, I witnessed as staff members from Congregation B’nai Israel demonstrated characteristics that any future employer would treasure.

Early in the summer, the director of a brand new URJ camp in California, Six-Points Sci-Tech West, reached out to colleagues. Since camp staffs are heavily populated by former alumni, staffing a brand-new camp is challenging. A week before opening, Sci-Tech West needed male counselors for its first session. Anna Herman asked our own Larry Jacobs if he might take on the challenge. Larry left Jacobs Camp for about a month, learning the ropes at a new camp and skillfully helping to open it for the very first time. He demonstrated tremendous flexibility and eagerness to work with a new team. Now, with new friends in his directory and new experiences under his belt, he's back home at Jacobs Camp for second session.

Two of our oldest high school students, Jordan Collins and Hallie Pingel, are participants in Jacobs’ *Solelim* counselor-in-training program, like Daniel Block at the Texas camp. This summer, Jacobs Camp is placing a particular emphasis on expressions of gratitude. Every member of the community is given a gratitude journal, and significant intention is devoted to public expressions of thanks. The *Solelim* have the assignment, one at a time, to stand in front of the entire camp during a meal to expound their own gratitude to the camp community. Jordan Collins was the very first volunteer to do so. I know Jordan well, so I knew that she could speak articulately; but I was surprised that she volunteered first. She is in the 99th percentile when it comes to intelligence and reliability, but not as eager to take the spotlight. Taking that risk, she not only did a beautiful job, she inspired

the entire community. Jordan proved to herself and others that she's prepared to step out of her comfort zone and into leadership.

William Cohen, that 19-year-old counselor and archery specialist I mentioned earlier, had a particularly challenging bunk first session, by which I only mean that 13- and 14-year-old boys are often rowdy. William is particularly protective of Jacobs Camp traditions that he saw some of his campers disrespecting. William would be the first to admit that he was just like them when he was their age, putting him in an outstanding position to rein in their behavior. William can be loud; and he was, when necessary. He can be firm; and he was, when appropriate. He can also be fun and relaxed and even silly, which his campers appreciated. Now, mind you, William was doing all that while running an archery program in which safety is priority one. Archery was one of the most popular activities at camp this summer, and not just because of the bows, arrows, and targets on bales of hay. William's seriousness about his job, his flexibility, and his ability to multitask will benefit him for a lifetime.

This summer, of the young people from our congregation who were in Kindergarten through grade twelve this past school year, thirty are spending the summer in URJ programs – the overwhelming majority, at Jacobs Camp. That's nearly half of our young people in that age group. Study after study has found, "The influence of summer camp on the ways in which adult Jews choose to engage with the community and the degree to which they associate with other Jews ... is striking, especially when compared to their peers who did not spend their summer months at Jewish camp."^{iv} Our young adults who work at Jacobs Camp are the ones who make that magic happen. All the while, that magic is being worked on them in return.

Yes, Jacobs Camp is for its campers. And yes, too, Jacobs Camp is for the adults, the staff, who are perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of all.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://jacobscamp.org/summer-staff/>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Steven M. Cohen, Ira M. Sheshkin, Berna Torr, Ron Miller, "2010a CAMP WORKS: The Long-Term Impact of Jewish Overnight Camp," 2010, found at <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/566>.