



HEBREW IMMERSION IN CAMP

by A. CHIZHIK-GOLDSCHMIDT

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There's a small buzzing slice of Israeli culture right in the heart of Rockland County. Up the winding country roads of Nyack, on a sprawling green estate, it's 8:30 AM, and Israeli music is blasting. Hundreds of children in colorful T-shirts, shorts and sandals are running towards the central field to dance to Tel Aviv's latest hits.

Welcome to Sha'ar, Camp Ramah's Areivim Hebrew at Camp program: seven weeks designed to instill Hebrew language fluency in young children through full language immersion. Here, roughly half of the campers are from day school, half are from public school, and some are from charter schools. Their knowledge of Hebrew is varied: some come from Israeli homes, while others don't know a word of Hebrew when they first enter camp.

Camp Ramah is only the first of many summer day camps featuring the Hebrew immersion program, with camps in JCCs across North America, including Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit and Toronto. The immersion program at Ramah launched three years ago and began with 20 campers. This past summer it had 63 campers, and demand is only growing.

The camp schedule features a robust program: The day begins with *migrash* (a daily dance-off), and includes sports, art, cooking,

swimming twice a day and science, among other activities. In Ramah's immersion track, all activities are held and taught in Hebrew — regardless of the child's background in the language.

Along with the rest of the counselors, the Areivim Hebrew at Camp counselors — which include Israelis brought to America by The Jewish Agency as well as local fluent Hebrew speakers — have their own program, too, once the campers go home: learning sessions, social activities, bonfires. It's a dual program — as in all of Camp Ramah, the staffers are at once participants and counselors. "You come as a college kid and want to come back," said Gideon Levin, a teacher at Heschel and a Ramah administrator who has worked at Ramah for 16 years now.

Amy Skopp Cooper, Director of Ramah Nyack and National Associate Director for the Ramah movement, spent her first summer at Camp Ramah when she was 16 and has worked professionally for the movement for 19 years. "Sha'ar has inspired us and demonstrated that we can really create a Hebrew immersive experience in camp," she says, smiling widely. "It works in seven and a half weeks. Within the first three weeks, we hear kids experimenting with Hebrew, and after three years, we have kids who are really speaking Hebrew. The ease

and comfort they feel within our community allows for that.”

Guy Shachar, from Reut, Israel, has been working at Ramah for five years. Two summers ago he was a counselor in Sha’ar, and this past summer he oversaw Sha’ar counselors.

“Every time I’m here, there’s so much energy,” he says. “It takes you to your very edge, this work. But it doesn’t matter to me that the work is so hard, this is my second home. I fell in love with the project. It’s informal education, we teach Hebrew with fun. They absorb so much more when it’s fun for them, because it’s nice here.”

Guy works alongside Yael Cohen — the two make a smiling duo, whom the campers greet with enthusiasm. “When I came here, I didn’t understand why I did it,” said Yael. “But now I know — to see how kids love Hebrew, how parents are so happy that their kids are returning home speaking Hebrew. It’s not just fun. I’m also giving, through the Hebrew language.” Yael shows how the children learn new words and phrases in all activities — lunch, she says, while standing in the middle of a bustling cafeteria, “is one of the most key moments for learning, as the children are encouraged to ask for food and utensils entirely in Hebrew.”

The Areivim Hebrew at Camp program was designed by a team of linguistic professionals spearheaded by Vardit Ringvald, professor and director of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College, and who originally hails from Netanya, Israel. “I got involved with the charter schools first, because of my expertise in Hebrew language acquisition,” Ringvald explains. “Here, I was asked to conceptualize how Hebrew in camp can happen. There’s a difference between the charter schools and the camps, what can be used in both and what differs. Here, in the camp model, it was very interesting how they embedded the kids in Hebrew, what choices they made in language use, activities, etc. And it was very impressive to see the outcomes. The kids were



really able to communicate in Hebrew.”

The program at Ramah was launched by The Areivim Philanthropic Group with funding from The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life and The AVI CHAI Foundation. The Areivim Philanthropic Group now partners with the Foundation for Jewish Camp, which oversees the program across North America

Rabbi David Gedzelman, President and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, explains the thinking behind it: “One of the pillars for the Areivim Philanthropic Group, a consortium of nine foundations, is Hebrew education. Four years ago, we began exploring ideas for Hebrew in America. The group wanted to do more — to teach Hebrew in camp, to take the methodology from our Hebrew language charter schools and adapt it to a fun, informal setting. After doing initial

research, we understood that no previous models for Hebrew at camp were effective, and that we needed something new. In 2013, The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life and AVI CHAI funded Camp Ramah in Nyack, with 20 kids in the trial Hebrew immersion program. Every child was followed and assessed, and we saw a real change in the children. My six-year-old son, Ziv, who participated in the program this past summer, has 19- to 22-year-old male Israeli counselors, some just out of the Israeli army. In the fourth week of camp, he told me in Hebrew, “Abba, my children will be born in Israel and I will be a soldier.” Gedzelman’s voice grows emotional. “The kids’ cool Israeli counselors, Yuval and Ido, were idolized; their Israeliness is conveyed and transmitted in a more powerful way when they speak to children in Hebrew than when *shlichim* speak in heavily accented English to children.”

“We are excited to be collaborating on this transformational project,” said Jeremy Finger- man, Chief Executive Officer of the Foundation for Jewish Camp. “Our Foundation believes that Hebrew language experienced in a joyous, positive, fun-filled environment can be a powerful vehicle for Jewish engagement and for connecting with Israel.”

“We see serious potential here,” Gedzelman says. “In the next five years, we can be doing this in scores of camps. We see bringing Israeli Hebrew to North American Jews as a rich content piece for people’s Jewish lives, who may not necessarily be interested in religious experiences. It provides real, deep, intimate, tangible connection to Jewish civilization, that doesn’t require religious commitment, but nonetheless has substantive content for Jewish life. So we want to push Hebrew in a number of ways. We started with charter schools, now we’re working on this in camps but also exploring bringing Hebrew to public middle and high schools. There’s nothing like teaching culture and history through language. There’s nothing like it.” ■

