

Marc's Journal Entry #5 Koli Kulanu

Camp Ramah

At our upcoming Kol Nidre service, I'll speak about the challenges facing Kol Shalom, and indeed facing all of Conservative Judaism, and my view on what our congregation must do to meet these challenges. In all the thinking, discussion and reading I've done to prepare, a basic thought keeps coming to mind: what's the point? Why is all this Jewish stuff so important to me?

I'll tell you the bottom line up front: My involvement in Kol Shalom is a direct continuation of my experience at [Camp Ramah](#), which inspired and informed my entire Jewish journey. Most importantly, Ramah gave me the motivation and spiritual impetus that fueled my Jewish journey. Ramah taught me a lot – Hebrew, prayer skills, Torah – but far more important, Ramah motivated me to pursue a fully integrated Jewish life, to make Jewish prayer, study and observance a proud part of my life, my schedule, my thinking.

My parents met and married in Los Angeles, and moved to Redondo Beach, California. My parents joined the only Jewish institution around. Temple Menorah was solidly Reform. Kippot (yarmulkes) were optional. Much of the service was in English. We used an organ and sometimes had a choir. Services were stiff and formal.

Growing up, our family not only had a Shabbat meal every Friday night, we also attended services at Temple Menorah after dinner each Friday (I think services started at 8 pm!).

Despite this heavy synagogue attendance, I literally did not know that Jews had Shabbat services on Saturday mornings. I can't recall a single Saturday morning service growing up; they may have existed, but I never heard of it in my child-world.

When I was eight my mother sent both my brother and me to Ramah. I don't know how she heard of this Conservative movement camp.

Camp Ramah was not just a camp, it was an entirely new world to me. There was Hebrew and Jewish stuff everywhere, all the time. Prayer services each morning. Counselors singing *Sh'ma* to us at lights out/bedtime. *Hamotzi* before each meal and *birkat hamazon* after each meal. Each meal! *Havdalah* every Saturday night, and of course Shabbat services on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Boys and counselors wearing kippot all the time, not just while praying.

Ramah had amazing learning in Jewish subjects and Hebrew. Ramah was established by the Jewish Theological Seminary. The camp directors were scholars. Rabbis such as Elliot Dorff and Jacob Milgrom were on staff, teaching the counselors. There were Hebrew classes every day, usually taught at benches under trees (this was California, after all). There were discussions on the weekly Torah portion every Shabbat. There was Jewish learning everywhere, and a huge emphasis on Hebrew. Announcements at every meal were made in Hebrew. At many meals, the musical director led joyful, boisterous singing, all in Hebrew. Each grade-level unit performed a play, usually a musical, in Hebrew. I appeared in *My Fair Lady*, *South Pacific*, and many others all in Hebrew, and sat in the audience for *West Side Story* and dozens of others, all in Hebrew. And not for a moment was anything boring or negative, in fact the opposite: everything was fun, joyful, and enriching.

Second, Ramah exposed me to positive Jewish role models. Counselors were 19 and 20 years old, knew Hebrew, went to good colleges, and were good looking, funny, and good at sports. My same counselor who sang me *Sh'ma* at bedtime and led morning prayer services was also an excellent baseball and basketball player. One of my most memorable counselors was all of the above and played the violin beautifully (he went on to become a physician). Counselors were talented, some were musicians, some dancers. There were arts specialists (usually not counselors) who were amazing in visual arts and music. They were outdoorsy, knowing lots about hiking, camping, building campfires.

There is no question in my mind that my Camp Ramah experience is singular in my Jewish journey. I cannot overstate its influence. As I think about it, Ramah influenced me in four significant ways.

First, I learned that traditional Jewish practice can and should be integrated into my life. Observing Jewish traditions does not stop me from being an artist, going to a good college, having a terrific profession, having a healthy, loving family. And, in fact, I learned that traditional Jewish practice might even enhance my life and help me to have a more meaningful, joyous life.

Second, I learned that Jewish learning, observance, and prayer could be joyful, fun, exhilarating, challenging, and stimulating. I fear that I never would have learned this had I gone through afternoon Hebrew schools and attended services regularly at Temple Menorah.

Third, I experienced example after example of what it means to be in a sacred community, a *kehillah K'dosha*.. I saw example after example of grounded people who were modest, intellectually curious, and attentive to acts of merciful justice and loving kindness. A moral outlook grounded in Jewish tradition was central to their world view. Closeness to other Jews and to Israel were important.

The fourth and most important thing that Ramah impressed upon me: Ramah taught me that I am personally responsible for my Jewish involvement, and that my personal actions can make an impact on the Jewish community and the world. We kids were in charge. Prayer services were under the trees in a beautiful environment, led by young campers or 19-year old counselors. We learned songs in Hebrew, both for prayers and for just singing, and once learned, the music enhanced and inspired. We learned Torah and other Jewish texts, and this learning made holidays and prayers come alive.

As you can tell, Ramah was a huge motivator for me. It's true that I learned Hebrew, learned how to lead prayer services, and learned a bunch of Torah and Jewish tradition. But it wasn't the cognitive learning that was the key. It was the spirit, the motivation, the soul. Ramah fed my Jewish soul. Ramah convinced me that I had the power to make Jewish tradition my own. I realized that I had the power to integrate a fully Jewish life into a life as a student, an athlete, a professional, a family. That sticks with me even today.

I remember distinctly that, as a young person, I asked myself and my parents why Temple Menorah can't be more like camp, and why our home observances can't be more like camp. I told myself when I was young that, one day when I grow up, I will be part of a community that is more like Camp Ramah. We will have beautiful music in our services. We will have lots of interesting Jewish learning. We will have a close connection with Israel and Hebrew, especially in music/arts/food/history. Jewish observance will be fun, and we'll have lots of close friends around to be a community of Jews.

Fast forward to 2001, when Kol Shalom was founded. A large part of the excitement for me was when I realized that now is the time for that youthful dream to become reality. I am a grown-up. I have the opportunity to remake my Jewish observance to be more like Camp Ramah.

In so many ways, this is what we have accomplished at Kol Shalom. We have created a synagogue, and a community, that has some of what we loved at camp. Beautiful prayer services. Beautiful music. Stimulating learning. A close community of friends.

I was so gratified to participate in our recent rabbi search discussion sessions over the summer. I was pleasantly surprised to hear much of the discussion was not only about what we seek in the next rabbi, but what we seek as a congregation and in ourselves. This is a beautiful, special community. The coming months and years offer us an opportunity to continue building, adapting, evolving.

I do still harbor the sentiments of my youth, only with the evolved sensibilities of an adult. I still want beautiful prayer services, and although we aren't under the trees outdoors, we can make beauty and meaning in dozens of ways. I still want stimulating Jewish learning, and we can make it happen through so many ways including lay-led study, teaching by our rabbi, and teaching by the wealth of teachers in the DC area and beyond; indeed, technology offers the opportunity to learn from anyone, virtually. I still want a close connection with Israel and Hebrew, and we have many resources available to us to appreciate Israeli culture/ music/arts/food/history/wine/archaeology, develop closer connections with Israelis, and improve our Hebrew skills. And I still want to be part of a bunch of close friends in a community of Jews, and to collaboratively advance our *kehillah k'dosha*, our sacred community, along our individual and collective Jewish journey.

I want to be in dialogue with you. You can click [here](#) to send me a message, or you can email me at mplieber@ymail.com. I am thrilled to hear from you, to get to know you better, and to hear your suggestions on continuing Kol Shalom's growth and value to you.

Thank you for your help and for your part in our *kehillah k'dosha*, our sacred community!

Marc Lieber, President