

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Cheryl Magen transports us to the Poconos Mountains, where we experience the excitement in the air as Israeli superstar David Broza performs his music for hundreds of summer campers. This article will stimulate your thinking about how to expand Israel education beyond the Israel trip.

More Than *Yom Yisrael*

CHERYL MAGEN

After 45 years of sending large groups of teens and families to Israel, the planes were only partially filled. One of the major tenets of the Camp Ramah movement¹ is Zionism and at the core of its educational philosophy is sponsoring trips to Israel. Beginning in 1962, the Ramah Israel Seminar has touched the lives of over 6,000 teenagers from all seven of the Ramah residential camps who come together for the Israel experience after 11th grade. In later years, the Ramah Israel Programs expanded to also include 8th grade trips, 10th grade confirmation trips, family and adult programs through the Ramah Israel Institute, semester-long high school programs, day camps for Israelis and a summer day camp for Americans spending time in Israel.

In 2000, when the *matzav* (literally “situation”) in Israel reached a crisis point, the number of families willing to send their children to Israel dropped significantly. Family trips were cancelled by the dozens and 8th graders were disappointed when their school administrations made the near impossible decision to postpone this adventure to a time when security concerns made risks more tenable. Although Ramah Seminar has never cancelled its trip and some campers from each camp attended each summer, the impact of the *matzav* on these trips was noteworthy.

By the year 2003, Jewish educators who see Israel as a central part of their missions, had to confront a situation never before experienced. After three years of devastatingly small numbers visiting Israel, the Zionist mission was vulnerable. Strong Israel programming was always a focus at the Ramah camps but somehow the

matzav made it imperative to reach to a new level. The bunk counselors and specialists had little or no personal experience with Israel and therefore could not effectively and passionately pass on the love of Israel and a charge to their campers that they must visit Israel as part of the natural progression of their Ramah education.

While the *mishlach* (literally “delegation”), Israeli staff selected and trained by the *Sochnut*, the Jewish Agency, who come to the Ramah camps each summer to serve as teachers and specialists was still present, their impact was lessened. The cadre of American staff who had spent time in Israel was fewer and their desire to re-connect to Israel through interactions with the *mishlach*, was absent. The Israelis became foreign staff rather than those who could provide a special link to Hebrew, the land and people of Israel and the connectors to the Jewish homeland. The Israelis were always the ones to bring the Israel mission of the Ramah education alive and now it was an uphill battle.

For the summer of 2003 a new approach was desperately needed. With no end in sight to the *matzav*, and the numbers of visitors still low, Ramah, as an essential venue for Israel education could not wait any longer. If we could not bring our teens to Israel then we had to bring Israel to the teens. A systemic approach to Israel education was considered at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. As the director, I felt strongly that the three goals which needed to be addressed were: Infusion of Israeli culture, a sense of *Klal Yisrael* and a celebration of Israel as a State. There was a concerted effort to to seize many programming opportunities throughout the summer and the *mishlach* was directly involved in

the integration of as much Israel education as possible on a daily basis throughout the summer.

In order to truly reach our educational goals, however, one major program became the focal point of the summer. We hosted a *Festival Yisrael: A Celebration of Music and Culture*. In conjunction with four other local Jewish camps, we invited David Broza to guest star at an outdoor concert. The camps that participated with us were Camps Morasha, Moshava, Nesher, and Lavi, all sponsored by some facet of the Orthodox Movement. The cross-denominational aspect of this program was an outstanding achievement as well.

Each camp was asked to set-up two booths with artwork and displays created by the 15-year-old campers who were the target group for this event. The booths were a wonderful combination of solidarity slogans, information about different Israeli service organizations and magnificent artwork depicting the beauty of the State of Israel. Each camp utilized the weeks before the concert to teach the music of David Broza and the message of his songs, so that by the time the event culminated, 2,000 teenagers and staff were singing in full voice along with Broza.

In just a few short hours, the grassy hill of our boy's campus was transformed into an outdoor *Binyanei Haooma* (a popular concert hall in Jerusalem). The booths were set up, Israeli snacks were sold, Israeli music played over the loud speakers and teenagers of different religious, Zionist and political ideologies came together to fulfill the goals of *Klal Yisrael* and to celebrate the State of Israel. The excitement built as David Broza helped concretize the third goal: Infusion of Israeli culture into a summer camp community.

As the sun set and thousands of Jewish teens traded t-shirts with their new friends, sang *Hatikvah* and stood together in solidarity celebrating Israel, our goals for Israel education that summer were realized. Our hope is that the next time these teens see each other and sing along with David Broza, it will be in Israel.

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¹ Camp Ramah is a national network of camps affiliated with the Conservative movement and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Magen identifies three goals for Israel education at Camp Ramah: Infusion of Israeli culture, a sense of *Klal Yisrael* and a celebration of Israel as a State. How appropriate and relevant are these educational goals for other educational venues, including those with which you are involved? Authors of other articles in this issue of *Agenda* state other priorities. Is there a need or a way to address these diverse goals?
- This article describes an ambitious Israel

education undertaking that requires innovative funding in addition to creative programming. Where can the financial resources come from to support such innovation? What partnerships can be forged or mobilized to access these necessary financial resources?

- What are some of the other ways that educational institutions and communities can “go beyond the Israel trip” (and beyond the classroom) to personalize and intensify Israel educational experiences?