

Shalom Chaverim,

These are exciting times for Camp Ramah in New England, a period of historic growth and opportunity. As we plan for the coming years, the Board of Directors and I feel that now is an appropriate time to share our vision of the type of community we believe Camp Ramah should be. There are many values that are important to us, but the concepts of community, inclusion and the ideal that every human is created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in God's image) represent the central forces that drive the practical decisions we make about running camp. Naturally, we view these values through the lens of being a Conservative Movement Jewish camp committed to core practices like observing *Shabbat* and *Kashrut*. This letter is meant to explain our inclusive philosophy, outline where we expect our inclusiveness to expand, and brief you on the related education and training we will provide to campers and staff.

The book of *Bereishit* relates a famous story about Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent as he recovers from his circumcision. He is looking for travelers along the road to whom he can provide hospitality. His tent is legendarily open on all four sides to symbolize that all are welcome. In this story, he actually cuts short a conversation with God in order to run out to the road to greet three strangers!

At Camp Ramah, we believe in a big and welcoming tent. It is part of our heritage. We see this in our wonderful *Tikvah* programs for children and young adults with disabilities. We are proud of our legacy as pioneers in expanding inclusiveness, even when it was controversial. When the *Tikvah* program was founded over forty years ago, there was pushback based on fear that the typical camper experience would be diminished and it would ruin camp. This fear proved unfounded, and in fact, the *Tikvah* program has strengthened our community greatly. Over the years, we have greatly expanded *Tikvah* to include a vocational program and to support campers in typical bunks.

However, inclusion does not stop there. We believe that we have fostered an inclusive community by helping provide meaningful access to Ramah for those with financial limitations, for children with an array of food allergies and special dietary needs, and, more generally, for any child that we feel we have the resources and expertise to support. We are also proud that we have many campers and staff who are members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community, and that they feel safe in and embraced by our community. Our overarching goal is to ever widen the tent so more and more people feel comfortable being who they are in the place they love.

Being an inclusive community certainly has its challenges. There are limits to what we can do. Limitations include areas where we do not have the expertise or staff to reasonably expect that we can help a child have a successful summer. Additionally, we need to balance the needs of individuals with how they impact the larger group. There are also financial restraints and limits based on staffing and housing. As we have done for other issues that have arisen requiring special attention, our approach is to understand each situation from multiple perspectives (e.g., Jewish, practical, emotional). Doing so will enable us to think flexibly and responsibly about how we can best meet the needs of our community. Within this process, we strive our best to say "yes" as much as we can.

To do this well, we realize that one of our critical roles is to effectively teach the values of inclusion and community along with the idea that everyone is created in God's image. To that end, our goal is to

provide programming and training every session to campers of all ages, as well as to staff, on how we expect them to act towards one another. These programs will include opportunities to interact with our *Tikvah* program, special programs developed by our staff, and bringing in outside educators who are experts in the fields on bullying, hazing, and how to treat each other when in relationships. Over the past several years we have partnered with Facing History and Ourselves, JCADA (Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse) and an anti-bullying organization called No Sticks and Stones. Our inclusion specialists have worked with individual bunks, teaching about differences and how to interact with each other. We have several programs where typical campers have the opportunity to work with our Amitzim campers, and our *Hinuch* and programming staff has also presented programs on this topic. Our goal this year is to systemize what we do so that there is a clear progression and breadth of curriculum as campers grow up at camp. We will strive to update you on more details of our plan in the spring and alert you to these specific programs as they occur throughout the summer.

As time progresses it is reasonable to expect that our campers and staff will reflect all the different types of people that are part of our broader Conservative Jewish family. We know that it will take much work and compassion to be successful. However, all of us feel that this process is worthwhile because it truly reflects the ideals upon which Ramah is founded.

All of us, board members and me, welcome any questions or discussion on these topics as we move forward.

*Kol tuv,*

Rabbi Ed Gelb  
Director