

JEWISH SUMMER CAMP

by Anita Diamant and Karen Kushner

Summer camp is a place where children learn new skills and discover that they can thrive away from home, where they create deep friendships, some of which last a lifetime. If camp is also a place where being Jewish is easy and fun, all of these powerful experiences become part of a child's Jewish memory bank. Parents who went to Jewish summer camp themselves almost always want to give their children the experience, too.

Camps are run by a variety of organizations. Non-profit camps run by Jewish communal agencies specialize in summers that teach Jewish skills and values, foster Jewish community, create strong Jewish memories, and encourage religious growth (along with the full complement of sports, arts and crafts, hiking, etc). These include Jewish Community Centers, Zionist groups such as Young Judaea and Habonim Dror, which stress Israeli culture and Hebrew language.

There are also a few secular Jewish camps that stress social justice values, environmental issues, and Jewish culture.

The Reform and Conservative movements both sponsor large camping programs. Although different in many ways, Conservative movement camps and Reform movement camps incorporate Jewish learning into daily life, orient the weekly calendar around Shabbat observance, and foster a joyful sense of Jewish community.

Although a handful of private, for-profit operated camps offer meaningful Jewish programming, most private camps run by Jews for a largely Jewish clientele do not provide any Jewish content apart from a chicken dinner on Friday night.

Facilities at Jewish camps range from rustic to very comfortable. And while every camp is different, Jewish programming generally includes a focus on Israel (with lots of singing and dancing) and the connection between the environment and Judaism. Hebrew words and names are woven into daily life and Shabbat is a weekly highlight. In addition to Jewish content, camps provide a general summer experience with water sports, team sports, arts and crafts, singing and dancing, hiking, dramatics and games. There are only a few Jewish camps that specialize in a single skill or interest, such as tennis or drama.

CHOOSING A CAMP

Take your time and choose carefully because after one happy summer, most children won't even consider switching. Most families select a camp on the basis of word-of-mouth recommendations. Generally, children want to go where their friends go, or where their parents went. For other camp recommendations, consult your rabbi, cantor and educators, who will usually, though not exclusively, suggest camps sponsored by their own movements. Staff at local Bureaus of Jewish Education may also have suggestions.

Other resources include:

The American Camping Association, the primary industry-wide organization, provides an interactive database on its website: www.acacamps.org with links to many Jewish camp websites.

The Association of Jewish Sponsored Camps, a membership organization of over 40 camps, provides referrals, free of charge, to both sleep-away and day camps. 130 East 59th street, NY, NY 10022. 212-751-0477, www.jewishcamps.org.

Moment magazine publishes an annual guide to Jewish camps in its February issue.

There is no one-size-fits-all camp, so it's important to find a good match for your child. Don't depend on camp marketing tools such as brochures and videos. The best way to decide is to take your child to visit some camps while they are in session.

If you can't manage a visit, try to arrange a meeting with the camp director, and bring your son or daughter. Continuity and leadership are crucial indicators of a camp and directors are generally year-round staff, who, like a ship's captain, set the tone for the program. Ask about his/her tenure, and also about staff continuity. It's a good sign if many of the counselors "grew up" at the camp.

Other questions to ask a camp director:

How old are the counselors? (Older is generally better. Do you want 16-year-olds in charge of your 8-year-old?)

What is the staff-camper ratio? (A healthy number is 4-6 kids per counselor.)

How many campers return from one summer to the next?

What is the policy on visits and phone calls? Are homesick children permitted extra phone calls?

What kind of training/orientation does the staff receive?

Is there a social worker on staff?

Finally, there is the question of cost. Summer camp is expensive; some require a full 8-week commitment and several thousand dollars. Scholarships are available, however. Local federations provide financial aid for a list of approved camps, and some synagogues will find support for kids going to camps run by their own movement.

READINESS

How do you know when your child is ready for sleep-away camp? Generally, children who enjoy sleepovers at other children's homes indicate a readiness for camp, but even this rule of thumb is not foolproof. You can help set the stage for camp by talking about it as something to consider "in a few years" and by introducing your child to older children, cousins, or neighbors who love going to Jewish camps. Some residential camps run a short "mini-camp" to introduce young children to camping.

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