



A Camp Created on the Values of Spiritual Peoplehood

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Twenty-five years ago, I stood before the board of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation with what felt like a bold and somewhat risky idea: our movement needed its own summer camp. What I proposed that day was not simply the creation of a camp, but the creation of a community where Judaism could be lived every day and an opportunity for our movement to live for another generation.

The camp, originally known as Camp JRF and later renamed Camp Havaya, would be rooted in the philosophy of the founder of Reconstructionism, Mordecai Kaplan. Kaplan's central teaching is the idea of Jewish Peoplehood: that Judaism is not merely a religion defined by beliefs and rituals, rather, it is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. Judaism lives through the many ways Jews connect with one another—through family life, synagogues, community centers, culture, language, and shared history.

When I spoke to the board that day, I emphasized that a summer camp could become a powerful place to nurture that sense of Peoplehood. A camp environment allows young people to experience Jewish life not only through study but through daily living—through friendships, conversations, shared meals, and the rhythms of community life. From that original vision grew a framework that eventually guided our camp community: Belonging, Behaving, Believing, Becoming, and ultimately BEEing.

Everything begins with *belonging*. For any community to flourish, the people within it—campers and staff alike—must feel that they are part of something meaningful and larger than themselves. *Belonging* means knowing that your presence matters and that you are needed by the community around you. When that sense takes root, a true *Kehillah Kedoshah*, or holy community, begins to form.

Each summer we watched this process unfold in remarkable ways. At the start of the very first summer in 2002, staff then campers arrived in a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. As a North American movement, most of our participants did not yet know one another. Through singing, dancing, learning, sports, and laughing together and

all those wonderful camp activities, strangers slowly became friends and eventually a community. Belonging had taken root, and it became the foundation on which everything else was built. The sense of Jewish Peoplehood had been formed.

Once *belonging* is established, the next step is *behaving*—how we live responsibly within the community we share. At camp, this meant exploring Jewish ethical teachings and learning how those teachings could guide our interactions with one another. Much of this work drew on the wisdom of Pirkei Avot, a classic collection of rabbinic teachings about ethics, character, and community. Through discussions, activities, and everyday interactions, campers learned how important it is to behave in a particular way in a community.

The hope was that these conversations would not end when camp did. Instead, campers would carry the lessons—and the values behind them—back into their lives at home, school, synagogue and their community.

Only after *belonging* and *behaving* were firmly established did we begin to explore *believing*. At Camp JRF we intentionally waited until our third year before placing significant emphasis on this dimension. By then campers and staff had formed relationships strong enough to create a safe and trusting environment where people could discuss spiritual questions openly.

Believing did not mean insisting that everyone share the same views about God, prayer, or spirituality. In fact, the opposite was true. Each member of the community was encouraged to explore their own spiritual path and develop their own understanding of *kedushah*, or holiness. The goal was not conformity but discovery—helping young people find personal meaning within the larger Jewish tradition.

As the camp matured, another dimension began to emerge: *becoming*. It is a place where identities take shape. Over time we watched campers and staff grow into leaders, deepen friendships, and gain confidence in themselves and their values. They returned year after year not only because they felt they belonged, but because camp had become part of who they were becoming.

This insight brought us back to Kaplan's original ideas. He taught that Jews live in two civilizations—the broader society around us and the Jewish civilization that continues to evolve over time. He also taught that while the past has a vote in shaping our lives, it does not have a veto. These principles allowed the camp to grow and evolve along with the community it served.

Over the years, the camp itself evolved. In 2005 nearly ninety percent of campers came from Reconstructionist families. By 2025 that number had shifted to about sixty percent. What began as a movement-based camp gradually expanded into a broader Jewish community welcoming young people from many different backgrounds and paths into Jewish life. This value of inclusivity in Reconstructing Judaism is a central *ikar* principle that guides our understanding of Jewish Peoplehood.

Eventually we added one final “B” to our framework: *BEEing*. *BEEing* means putting our values into action. It asks not only what we believe, but how we live—how we treat others and how we carry the lessons of camp into the wider world.

That, in the fullest sense, is how we BEE at Camp Havaya: learning, growing, and living the evolving story of Jewish peoplehood together.

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