



The Radical Act of Presence: Why “Showing Up” is the Strongest Form of Shlichut

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Summer camp is often described as a ‘bubble’, to emphasize its existence as a unique parallel world. A sanctuary where time slows down and the noise of the “outside” finally fades. But in the world we live in today, that bubble has transformed from a nostalgic luxury into a radical educational necessity for creating and nurturing Jewish Peoplehood.

Every opening day, campers walk through the gates and hand over their electronics. In that moment, with this simple act, they are leaning into the ‘bubble’ and stepping away from the outside influence. The devices that make us more “connected” than ever before also create the biggest gaps between us. We carry the illusion that the world’s knowledge is in the palm of our hands, but in this digital reality, context is the first casualty and humility is the second.

The camp experience is the ultimate way to break this pattern. Camp restores that curiosity. By removing the distractions, we create a rare, tech-free sanctuary where we cultivate shared presence and experience. Drawing in everyone, from local campers and staff to international staff coming from far away like the *Shlichim* (Israeli staff), this bubble inspires a curiosity that breaks down barriers and has the ability to build empathy in every direction. It is a place where we can ask the difficult questions that the outside world has deemed “too complex” and challenge preconceptions. However, before those big ideas or difficult conversations can happen, there must be a foundation of belonging.

Building empathy isn’t a passive byproduct of the bubble. It is the result of the very human, very intentional act of showing up. In a world that demands we be “polished” and “on-brand,” coming in as a “whole human being” that is unpolished and real, feels incredibly vulnerable. This is especially true when you feel the world is watching you through a specific, often critical lens.

When a *shaliach* (Israeli staff member) first arrives, there is often a quiet, internal pressure to be the “perfect” representative of Israel. What we often forget is that as Israeli staff, we aren’t just international visitors at camp, we are stepping into our

extended global family. As these relationships form, the camp bubble stretches across the ocean to Israel, because that is now where their camp friends live. When I arrived at camp for my first summer, I remember carrying that exact weight and feeling like I needed to be an encyclopedia of facts and a flawless ambassador for my home. Yet, the unique magic of the camp environment is its demand for authenticity. Camps' one fundamental rule is simple: come as you are.

I realized that my impact wasn't about the facts I knew, but about the choice to be genuinely present. That is when the pressure comes off. It starts with small steps: participating in the different parts of camp, stepping into this discomfort, and choosing to belong even when you feel like an outsider. My philosophy became: *To be in anything is to be in everything*. I learned that only once I was able to lean into the daily rhythm of the community and commit fully, was I able to integrate Israel education in a way that actually suited the community.

I truly understood the weight of this presence years ago when I was a year-round *shlichah* in my camp community. When the Parkland shooting happened in 2018, a tragedy that struck the very heart of my camp community, I acted. I knew that in that moment, I first and foremost needed to be there - as a member of my community, for my campers, for the staff, and for myself. I simply showed up. I was there at campers' funerals, at vigils, and sat with my community through the shared grief. This moment signified for me that *shlichut* isn't about the Israel education pieces; it is about being present, especially as a pillar for my campers in their lives when their world felt like it was breaking.

Years later, the roles were reversed. I returned to camp in the summer of 2024 carrying the collective trauma of October 7th alongside the immense personal grief of losing my father. I walked back into camp with the intention to be an educational pillar in a time of chaos and uncertainty, thinking I needed to be the "strong leader" and create space for meaningful and complex conversation. However, I quickly realized my camp community was there to hold me, to restore pieces of my soul that were missing in this "home away from home".

It wasn't about them having the perfect words or comfort. It was about the simple, healing act of a community making space for my humanity. It was about the embrace of familiar rituals and the reminder of the impact of a strong, accepting community. They embraced me not as a symbol of a nation, but as a person who was hurting.

This is where the "Camp Bubble" becomes a safety net of mutual responsibility. Through this mutual willingness to simply "be there" - sweat through *Maccabiah*, participate in Shabbat rituals, and share meals - we design the architecture of trust. It is by earning

this trust through presence that we unlock the ability to have honest and vulnerable conversations.

My philosophy as an educator has always been to open questions and discuss, rather than to provide final answers. This is the radical alternative to the digital world. It is much easier for our brains to process reality when things are simplistic and black-and-white, the way things appear on social media, but the truth of peoplehood lives in the gray, in the nuance.

I see my role as a guide, helping campers and staff connect not to a place they read about in a history book, but to a place where they understand the *people*. When we find this mutual connection, we understand that there is something much bigger than a headline connecting us. When the outside world feels chaotic, or when someone in our community sees a one-dimensional post online, they don't turn to an algorithm for answers. They turn to the person they sat next to at the campfire.

At the end of the day, Jewish Peoplehood isn't something you can build through a screen. You have to actually be there. When we leave our phones behind and choose to just live, eat, dance, pray and be together, we stop talking about connection and actually build it. The strongest part of *Shlichut* isn't an awesome program or a lesson plan; It is simply the radical act of showing up for one another. By doing that, we transform the abstract idea of a homeland into a tangible reality of one global family.

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