



The Revolution of Belonging: Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood at Camp Be'chol Lashon

Jonah Tobin, Claude Lewis, Satya Sheftel-Gomes and Ella Damaser

Every summer, a quiet but profound transformation unfolds in the hills of California where Camp Be'chol Lashon (CBL) calls home. Traveling from across America and the globe, campers carry with them a mosaic of languages, cultural traditions, family histories, and racial identities. On the surface, they may seem to have little in common. Yet, they are bound by a shared connection to Jewish life and a persistent, often unspoken question: Where do I belong within it?

For eighteen years, Camp Be'chol Lashon has provided the answer. In doing so, it has moved the concept of "Jewish Peoplehood" out of the realm of abstract theology and into the living and breathing reality of a new generation. At camp, Peoplehood is the act of sharing a bunk. It is the sound of voices from different continents blending during morning prayers. It is the late-night cabin conversation illuminated by flashlights, where a camper from a multiracial family in Oakland realizes their story mirrors that of a camper from Uganda or Ethiopia.

A Sanctuary for the "Outlier"

To understand the necessity of this space, one must look at the journey of Jonah Tobin. Now a head counselor at age 28, Jonah was once one of the original campers. An African American man adopted into a white Jewish family in San Francisco, Jonah grew up attending Jewish day school where he was frequently the only Black student in his class.

"I was often the outlier," Jonah recalls. "Sometimes the black sheep in my communities. It made me long for a place where I could go and feel like I truly belonged."

In most Jewish spaces, Jonah was defined by his difference. At camp, that difference was the norm. This shift allowed him to move past the exhaustion of being an "exception" and instead focus on becoming a leader. Today, Jonah works alongside fellow head counselors Claude Lewis, Ella Damaser, and Satya Sheftel-Gomes, mentoring younger campers through the same exploration that shaped their own childhoods.

The freedom found at CBL has a powerful ripple effect. In many Jewish settings, Jews of Color are met with “the question”—Are you really Jewish? At CBL, those questions are retired. In their place is a radical freedom.

“At Camp Be’chol Lashon, those routine questions simply don’t come up,” says Ella Damaser. “There are no strange looks when you recite prayers or tell someone you keep kosher. It is a place where you can just be yourself.”

This allows campers to return to their home communities with a “global toolkit.” They no longer feel like anomalies because they know—from lived experience—about the diversity of the Jewish world. They realize they are not alone.

A Mirror to a Changing World

The mission of Camp Be’chol Lashon is a direct response to a massive demographic shift. Data from the Pew Research Center and the U.S. Census Bureau confirms that multiracial Americans are the fastest-growing youth population in the country. Nearly one-third of Americans under eighteen now identify with more than one racial group.

These shifts are not external forces acting upon the Jewish community; they are internal realities. Judaism has always been a global civilization. For millennia, Jewish hearts beat in the mountains of Morocco, the plains of India, and the highlands of Ethiopia long before the modern American Jewish narrative was written.

Claude Lewis notes that acknowledging this diversity is a matter of communal survival. “When communities feel ostracized and marginalized, when people feel alone in a lonely way, that community dies,” Lewis explains. “Camp Be’chol Lashon doesn’t create segregation. It creates belonging. It shows kids that Judaism does not have one look or one story.”

A Strength for the Future

Over the past 18 years, Be’chol Lashon has seen their vision come full circle. The children who once arrived seeking a place to fit in are now running the program. Josiah Spencer, who spent every summer of his life at CBL before becoming a counselor, views his background as a superpower. “Camp helped me see my multiple identities as an asset,” he says.

This is the “quiet revolution” of Be’chol Lashon. It isn’t found in loud proclamations but in small, sacred moments. Like when a camper sees a leader with hair just like theirs leading Shabbat services. Or a counselor shares a family recipe from a Sephardic or

Mizrahi lineage. It can even be seen in a child realizing that being “different” is what connects them to the ancient story of the Jewish people.

Sarah Weinberg and Kenny Kahn, the camp’s first co-directors, understood that when you give young people a space where they don’t have to choose between their various identities, they will grow into the leaders the Jewish world needs. Today, that belief has become a reality. As the Jewish community grapples with questions of inclusion, Camp Be’chol Lashon offers a blueprint. It reminds us that diversity is not a “problem” to be managed, but one of the greatest strengths of the Jewish people.

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