



Two Canoes: On the Jewish Tribe

Joel Seltzer

A couple of dozen seasoned Jewish summer camp directors gathered at the Poeh Cultural Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We knew we were in for an exciting journey of learning about Native American culture and art, but what we did not expect was that we would also rediscover the importance of Jewish summer camp in the process.

Our guide that afternoon was Stephen Fadden, a master educator, storyteller, and the center's Program Director. He led us room by room, uncovering the history of the Poeh people while also introducing us to contemporary Native American art and culture. The afternoon concluded with a local troupe of young people who performed a ritual dance alongside an elder.

Nearly ten years later, that visit still remains in my memory and, indeed, in my pedagogy as an educator, especially because of something Stephen said at the very beginning of the tour. "Being a Native American," he told us, "Means we must always stand in two canoes, balancing our Native cultures with the American culture that surrounds us." He continued, "The Jewish people understand what it means to be part of a tribe. They tell their story. They have not forgotten who they are."

Suddenly, my entire camp experience – as a camper, counselor, and division head – flashed before my eyes. The hours spent in *rikkud* (Israeli folk dance), learning with the playfully nicknamed "Judi Rikkudi" as she called out the steps over the crackle of a cassette player: "*Temani Yamin—Temani S'mol*."¹ *Shirah* (song) sessions where we belted out Israeli classics from a bygone era, or Beatles songs translated into Hebrew. Camp plays that transformed Broadway or Disney shows into Hebrew lessons, creating generations of American Jews who can still quietly sing the Hebrew version while joining in the original: "*Eizeh Yofi!*" — "I Feel Pretty!"

In that moment at the Poeh Cultural Center I realized that every element – programming, staff hiring, staff training – was, at its core, aimed at one simple goal: telling the story

¹ Needless to say, the historical significance of centuries of Yemenite Jewish culture on Israeli Folk Dance was completely lost on me as a camper.

of the Jewish people in a way that inspires the next generation to find meaning in balancing their lives between our own two canoes. Reflecting on my decade as a camp director, at the very same camp in which I grew up, I learned some deep and complex lessons about the power and importance of cultural storytelling as the core of the Jewish summer camp experience.

The first lesson is the most difficult to accept: the inevitability of entropy; and Jewish education and cultural transmission are not immune to it. As much as we like to imagine camps as perfectly insulated cultural bubbles, immune to the pressures of modern society, the truth is that camps are made up of human beings who are born, raised, and shaped by that same world. And, as it turns out, one canoe often wields more influence than the other. When Jewish cultural literacy wanes due to the pull of assimilation, cultural literacy within our camps is affected as well.

The second lesson offers a hopeful antidote to the sobering pragmatism of the first. Jewish summer camp is built on powerful pedagogical tools that allow it to withstand the inevitability of educational entropy. First among these is near-peer mentorship. The counselor vis-à-vis the camper; the division head vis-à-vis the counselor; the director vis-à-vis the division heads—all are classic examples of educational and professional mentorship. Each represents something that a young person aspires to internalize.

The counselor who models a love of Jewish spirituality; the Israeli lifeguard who teaches Hebrew alongside the butterfly stroke; the rabbi, cantor, or educator who, while playing basketball or guitar, quietly demonstrates what it might mean to live a Jewish life year-round. These are all expressions of a “lived Judaism,” inviting others to consider where their own Jewish canoe fits into the balance of their lives.

During my tenure, I watched the constant push and pull of these lessons from a perfectly situated *mirpeset* (porch), of the camp director’s house. Elevated above a camp road, it allowed me to quietly observe the “real world” of the camp experience. There were moments I overheard that troubled me: words, language, or cultural references that did not reflect the intentional Jewish community we were trying to build. I did my best to address them, hoping that the corrections themselves became moments of reflection for young people as they considered their choices, actions, and behaviors. More often, though, I witnessed the very best of camp: quiet, supportive conversations between best friends; a counselor leading a bunk activity inspired by the Jewish value of reciting one hundred blessings a day; a budding romance between American and Israeli staff members; the camp rabbi encouraging a college student to consider keeping Shabbat on campus; and a counselor who led his bunk of ninth-grade boys in an impromptu Israeli *Hora* dance in the rain as Jewish wedding music blared from his stereo. It might

seem ridiculous, but when they were singing a Jewish wedding dance in the rain at a summer camp in the Pocono mountains, something profound was happening. They were experiencing embodied joy of dancing without caring if the world was watching. In the moment I could see cultural transmission.

This is what Stephen Fadden was urging us to understand about our work as camp professionals. These are not simply camps filled with campers, staff, schedules, and activities. Jewish summer camps are powerful cultural, artistic, and educational centers of Jewish storytelling. They are among our strongest antidotes to educational entropy. They are engines of inspiration, helping past, present, and future generations of North American Jews find balance between the two canoes of our existence.

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