



Episodic Immersive Jewish Peoplehood

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Growing up, I kept kosher for a few weeks each year. Not because my family did, and not as some Lent-style exercise in giving up *treif*-non-kosher food. I kept kosher because I went to Jewish summer camp.

I'm what you might call a "camp Jew." Most of my formative Jewish moments happened in the woods or by the lake and usually involved a circle of people I loved, sitting on the grass in the summer sun, while someone played guitar.

Jewish camp is often described as the gold standard of what educators call episodic immersive Judaism. These are short-term experiences (summer camps, Israel trips, retreats) that immerse participants in Jewish life for a defined period of time. Instead of asking individuals to bring Jewish practice into their everyday routines, these programs create temporary environments where joyful Jewish life can be lived.

Each summer, camp becomes a fully Jewish ecosystem. Thousands of Jews who may not observe traditional and modern Jewish rituals in their everyday lives, nevertheless live them fully, and authentically at Jewish camp. They bang on the tables while reciting *Birkat HaMazon* – the blessing after meals. They sway together under the stars each Saturday night at *Havdallah* to mark the end of *Shabbat*. Hebrew words that they may not totally understand become cultural shorthand that signals belonging. The experience is not symbolic or superficial. It is real Jewish practice lived in community and an exercise in Jewish peoplehood. Through these rituals, camp creates something rare: a joyful Jewish environment in which community is not simply discussed but lived.

And then the summer ends.

When I leave camp, most of those practices naturally fade from my daily routine. Rather than seeing that as a loss, I understand it as part of a broader and enduring pattern within Jewish life. Jewish peoplehood has never depended on constant intensity or daily practice. Instead, it thrives through rhythm and renewal. There are moments - Shabbat, holidays, lifecycle events - when Jewish practice fills communal life, and other moments

when it recedes. Jewish camp is another expression of that rhythm – an episodic, immersive, Jewish experience that leaves a lasting and lifelong impact.

For many, Jewish camp inspires daily Jewish practice all year round. For me, and I believe many others, Jewish camp taught me that Jewish rituals and traditions are powerful tools for building community, when I need them – at any time, and any stage of my life. In that way, camp didn't just shape what I do Jewishly, it deepened my sense of belonging to the Jewish people, showing me that peoplehood is built through shared experiences as much as shared obligations. Jewish camp taught me how to create my own DIY Jewish experiences with friends, to facilitate my family's Passover seder, and to design powerful lifecycle events like my own wedding ceremony. Rituals and traditions help me bring friends and family together to create a world that feels distinctly Jewish - not because everyone is motivated by halachic obligation, but because everyone is participating together.

My Jewish practice is not defined by what I do or do not do every day. Instead, my Jewish practice is built on the notion that Jewish rituals are not only obligations to perform, but tools for building worlds. For a few weeks each summer, we build one together.

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