



The DMC at Camp: Turning a Phenomenon into a Peoplehood Pedagogy

Benji Davis

It's Shabbat afternoon at camp, and a small group of *chanichim*-campers has settled into their spot. They're not talking about tomorrow's schedule or the latest camp gossip. They're going deep on the Jewish people. Many of us in Jewish camping are familiar with this moment. We call it "the DMC"—the Deep Meaningful Conversation—and it may be one of the most underappreciated pedagogies in Jewish education.

When formal programming asks campers to seriously consider substantive Jewish questions, those conversations don't end when the *peulah*-activity does. They spill into lunch, free time, during *chug*-elective, and in the time of waiting for or walking to the next *peulah*-activity. This is how camp cultivates Jewishly informed decision-making in terms of belonging and developing a sense of responsibility towards each other. This exercise is not just through a single experience, but the ongoing interplay between what educators facilitate and what campers experience and deliberate on their own.

Jewish camp socializes young Jews into what it might mean to "live Jewishly." Campers are invited to meaningfully participate in the ongoing project of collective Jewish living and to consider their place in the past, present, and future of that saga. The DMC plays an important pedagogic role in that process, creating space for the reflection and exploration through which Jewish peoplehood can transform from a consciousness to a lived reality.

It's in the DMC where this all comes alive. The unstructured conversation between friends on the tennis court or between a camper and a *madrich*-counselor before *Mifkad*-morning flagpole empowers campers to figure out the "if and why" of collective Jewish belonging. They test ideas. They push back. The DMC is an opportunity to move from "I learned and experienced this" to "I belong, I care, and here's why."

So what can educators and camp professionals do to cultivate DMCs? Based on my research and practice, I offer three pedagogic recommendations.

First, be a guide on the side. Learner-centered pedagogy means trusting campers to deliberate for themselves. Our job is to equip them with the knowledge and experience of navigating ethical dilemmas in facilitated settings. Then we trust them to continue that work independently. We recognize the most transformative moments at camp often happen outside structured *peulot*, and therefore design our activities with that reality in mind.

Second, design formal programming that gets *charif*-spicy on big Jewish questions. During a Shabbat *sicha*-talk, have *chanichim* wrestle with the tensions between a Torah text and a contemporary source that pulls in a different direction—and ask them to figure out where they stand. For example, at Camp Yavneh I have campers compare Exodus 19:6, where God tells Moses He will make the Jewish people “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” while they are standing at Sinai, with Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which states “the Land of Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish people.” So which is it? Did we become a people at Sinai, or did we become a people in the Land of Israel? Is there a contradiction between the texts? What do they think and believe? What are the implications of this for Judaism? What are the implications of this for Zionism?

I do another activity where I pose a question like “Should public buses run on Shabbat in Israel?” and let *chanichim*-campers deliberate what it means for a state to be both Jewish and democratic. But it’s camp. So I have the *chanichim* get up and physically decide by standing in one of three spots: yes, no, or somewhere in the middle. I let them deliberate and allow for movement (literally and figuratively).

These dilemmas don’t end with the activity. They follow campers to the *chadar ochel*-dining hall and the bunk because something gets activated — a sense that this means something, and they get to decide what it means.

Third, “be *bein*,” as I learned at Camp Ramah in California. Short for *bein hachanichim* -being among your campers, this means showing up not just for scheduled time but in the in-between moments. It also literally means sitting between our *chanichim* and not off on the side with adults.

When *tzevet*-staff are *bein hachanichim*, the DMCs flow naturally. We respond to a question at a meal. We sit with a camper who is wrestling with something hard. A conversation a *chanich* had in a *kita*-class about intermarriage and assimilation comes back three days later with a friend or a *madrich* who was there when the question first landed.

When we’re simply present and available, that is when we make our biggest impact. Not when we stand at the front, but when we walk beside our campers as they figure things out. Yes, I hope you’re singing this now in your head:

Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow; don't walk behind me, I may not lead; just walk beside me and be my friend, and together we will walk in the path of Hashem.

These words - and many of our nostalgic memories singing them - point to how Jewish camp's immersive environment makes the DMC possible in a particularly meaningful way. But the purpose of those conversations isn't to keep campers oriented toward camp. It's to prepare them for meaningful Jewish belonging when camp ends.

In camping we sometimes talk about a "10 for 2" culture—ten months of the year oriented toward two months at camp. The DMC, at its best, inverts that ratio. It creates a "2 for 10" dynamic. Two months of immersive Jewish living that equip a young person for a meaningful Jewish life — in the other ten, and beyond.

Our campers don't need to be told that belonging to the Jewish people matters. They need the opportunity to figure it out for themselves. Literally and figuratively they need to translate it into their own words to make sense of it.

When we get the formal programming right — when it gets *charif*-spicy, when *madrichim* are "bein" and immersed, when campers walk away feeling "oh, this means something" — the DMCs naturally follow. And it's in those DMCs where so many of us decided that taking responsibility for our people's future is our thing, when we can point back and say: that conversation with my now-best-friend, now-husband, or lifelong mentor changed my life. But it was not a coincidence. It was by design.

The DMC is where Jewish camping has created opportunities for generations of young Jews to discover for themselves if and why they find meaning and purpose in belonging to *Am Yisrael*. Now imagine how many more of these moments could happen if we were more deliberate about it. Designing meaningful content, trusting campers to deliberate on their own, and empowering *madrichim* to be guides on the side is one such approach — a way of bringing greater educational intentionality to a phenomenon inherent to the immersive nature of Jewish camping.

The DMC is not a bonus feature of Jewish camp. It is an essential pedagogy. And it is ours to cultivate.

Dr. Benji Davis is the Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, Yeshiva University, and Head of Israel Education, Camp Yavneh.