

Camping in the 1980's: A Decade of Change*

Asher Melzer

*Social Planning Consultant for Resident Camps, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, and
Executive Director, Association of Jewish Sponsored Camps of New York*

... We are the heirs of a long tradition involving the operation and control of thousands of acres of land, millions of dollars worth of buildings, facilities and equipment and . . . we are the guardians of that heritage which provides one means through which the Jewish community can be strengthened and be assured a continuity of generations.

In preparation for this discussion, the author reviewed the information submitted by more than 36 day and resident camps from outside the New York area. Through his own direct experience there was also available detailed information on 35 resident camps under various Jewish sponsorships and some 30 days camps conducted by Jewish community centers and YM-YWHAs in the New York area.

Jewish people throughout history have been future-directed, maintaining hopeful and positive views of life. Therefore, while we currently face serious problems, we can look ahead with some confidence, for camps under Jewish auspices surely will survive, certainly in lesser numbers and perhaps in different ways. This confidence is reflected in the comments of colleagues in camping, a select few of which are:

I feel (the future of Jewish camping) will go hand-in-hand with Jewish survival in the United States.

Arie Gluck, *Director of Camp and Youth Activities*
UAHC Camp Institute,
Philadelphia

I feel most optimistic for the future. I feel there is a new plateau of Jewish awareness among our Jewish families and a need to reinforce their awareness by more depth for their children. I feel that they will seek out camping as the instrument to sharpen this awareness. Both religious and secular camps will benefit from this momentum. The quality of programming, and I emphasize Jewish programming, will determine the success of the camp's enrollment . . . it is incumbent upon all of us in camp leadership in the Jewish field to raise the quality of our Jewish content. The role of the Holocaust in our program is of special significance in consciousness-raising and should be an integral part of camp life. Of course, Israel and communal life as well. We must not lose the special quality of cultural pluralism in our country and our ethnic role as Jews. I feel optimistic about the future of Jewish camping if we have meaningful programs, if we can instill in our campers a love for *yiddishkeit* and a pride in our ethnicity. Without these, there is no need for our existence.

Elsie Suller, *Director*
Camp Kinderland, New York

I am optimistic about the future of Jewish camping with the possibility of more family camping programs and, hopefully, more opportunities for teens, college students, and singles.

Bob Litvak, *Assistant Executive Director*
Jewish Community Center,
Indianapolis

* Presented at the National Conference on Jewish Day and Resident Camping, Grossinger, New York, January 4-8, 1981.

Jewish camping, as we know it, will continue. In many times and places, this is the only connection to religion which children can and do receive. The service we provide and the sense of identity are worth everything we can do as teachers and educators in a Jewish atmosphere.

Judy Seigel, Director
Camp Interlaken, Milwaukee

As people search for "identity" and "sense of belonging" Jewish camping will become more important. We have the opportunity to provide a positive Jewish experience, thereby creating and strengthening a person's identity as a Jew.

Todd Kobernick, Director
Camp JayCee
Jewish Community Center,
San Diego

Jewish social movements, organizations, and social agencies were among the pioneers of the camping movement. Our predecessors saw the value of this experience early. Day and resident camps, within their insulated settings, provided the dynamics for positive Jewish learning and living experiences. The Jewish community can continue therefore to look to camps to accomplish Jewish communal goals concerned with continuity, with strengthening Jewish identification, and with providing educational and socialization opportunities for its participants.

What Are Our Concerns?

For several years now, the state and status of Jewish communal resident camps, have caused us great concern. Some of our oldest, better-known camps have closed down and others show drops in enrollment. There seems to be a waning of interest in our traditional kinds of camping programs.

The day camps have also leveled off in enrollment, except in communities developing in certain suburbs and regions of the country. Everywhere, parents use alternatives for summer vacations and expectations are rising in regard to program, facilities, and services requested.

On Enrollment

Half of the camps, both day and resident, reported increased enrollment and half reported a downtrend in registration. Camps in large urban areas seem to be having difficulties filling beds and places. Some of our colleagues feel that the cause is the lesser number of children available for camp. The limited statistics available on Jewish population trends indicate that the Jewish child population is shrinking—its growth rate is now at zero and below. The senior adult population, meanwhile, is increasing.

Professor Abraham Monk of Columbia University in New York who, in 1979, with Mr. Bernard Warach of JASA presented a study on "The Status of the Jewish Elderly in NYC," indicated that the Jewish community is becoming "an aged community." Dr. Steven Cohen, a sociologist at Queens College, New York, also speaks of a shrinking youth population.

Recent U.S. Census Bureau predictions, reported in the *New York Times* on September 1, 1980, indicated that there may be a slight increase in the general child population in the near future. Expectations are that, "There will be more than 3.5 million births this year, almost 2 percent more than in 1979." Now that war babies are in child-bearing years, this phenomenon will go on for a while; there will be more children in absolute numbers even while the number per family goes down. Those increases are predicted for the State of California, cities like Chicago and Houston, with reductions or "same as" figures for New York City. However, this study reflects the general population and projects a larger birth population in other than Jewish minority groups.

The author believes, however, that the decline in Jewish child population is not a major reason for declining use of camps. The concern over lower enrollment and the future fate of camping in the collective

opinions of our colleagues are related to: (1) The quality of our programs and facilities; (2) our inability to attract qualified staff, and (3) the limited financial means available to Jewish camping.

Of the future of Jewish camping and its correlation with quality, our colleagues had this to say:

The future of Jewish camping depends on the *quality* of Jewish camping. I believe that we have to be much more accountable for what goes on in our camps. I feel that *substance* has to be addressed and not merely numbers. It is crucial that camps look at the optimum which they should be doing and to find the specific methods by which they could accomplish these ends.

Debra Hirschman Green,
Director
Camp Ramah, New England

On the future: If we can present a good program, the community will back it.

Herbert Rosengard,
Executive Director
Canton (Ohio) Jewish
Community Center

As a camp under the auspices of the Jewish community, we must not lose sight of our commitment to that part of our reason for being that says "Jewish." As professionals, we constantly have an obligation to ourselves as well as to the camps that we run to re-enforce the idea that camp is an extension of the community at home and that through the camping experience we have an opportunity to influence and strengthen Jewish life. It is only in recent years that community center camps have become much more conscious of the Jewish piece in their program.

Michael Hyman,
Assistant Director
Camp Lakeland, Jewish Center
of Greater Buffalo, New York

Jewish camping in my opinion can survive and flourish if it becomes more Jewish. Parents and campers are becoming sophisticated shoppers and as the cost increases they are

looking for their money's worth. They want more than a physical experience out of a long and expensive summer program.

Zvi Reich, *Director*
Camp Morasha, Penna.

It is our quality, our group work process, our involvement with individuals, and our Jewishness that people appreciate and must continue to support. The education of our membership to these facts is as essential as any fund-raising project. Without commitment, there is no future for Jewish camping.

Ester Birnbaum, *Camp Director*
Jewish Community Center,
Scranton, Pa.

The question of staffing brought forth the following comments: "Perhaps the greatest problem we face in Jewish camping is putting together a staff which is personally committed to Judaism. The only resistance we seem to face in creating Jewish programs is on the part of the staff."

David L. Jacobs, *Camp Director*
Jewish Community Center,
Hartford, Conn.

The future of Jewish camping rests on our ability to attract and pay for quality staff, not just the camp counselors and specialists, but including the pros who are running our program. *Our priority continues to be investing a great emphasis on our Judaic program as a unique alternative to the various competitive summer programs currently being offered.*

Marvin Friedman, *Executive*
Director
Jewish Community Center of
Central Florida

I expect it to survive, even thrive. Jewish camping does not exist without Jewish counselors and as much as I am concerned about staffing difficulties, I am concerned about the future of Jewish camping.

Arna Meyer Mickelson,
Director JCC Day Camps,
Jewish Community Center of
Greater Washington, D.C.

In regard to the limited financial means at our disposal, our colleagues said: Survival problems I see mainly in terms of finances. With a greater number of single-parent families and unemployment situations we have seen an increase in the number of scholarships. Our wealthier Jewish support is free to choose private camp and overnight camp which leaves our day camp holding more scholarship cases.

Michael Greenblatt, Director
Camp Veritans, YM-YWHA of North Jersey

The need for camping will not change. The means to pay for it is changing. Funding will be the deciding factor.

Russ Rosen, Administrator
Camp Livingston, Ohio

... we (professionals) must act as *lobbyists on behalf of camping*. The onus of the Jewish community not recognizing camping for what it is, falls on us. We should present to the organized community various statistics—that our combined clientele is within the thousands, that for many, the camping experience is their initial (and for some, their exclusive) contact with Judaism.

Jerry Shapiro, Camp Director
Camp Young Judea, California

The problem of camps surviving is part of the *larger problem of kids surviving as Jews*. Funds for camps and children's programs always seem to be at the bottom of the list. While it sounds paradoxical, we need more graphically to demonstrate our worth to justify support which does not presently exist for us. *We also need influential lay support on our boards.*

Edward Korsch, Executive Director
Jewish Community Center, Staten Island, New York

We have not persuaded the Jewish community that camping is a vital service, a priority service, an effective service, a necessary service—and more, that it is an instrument which can aid in the continuity and the strengthening of the Jewish community.

Our camps are out there in the community doing a hard sell, that is necessary now to fill beds and places, but we should reach the

point where Jews will flock to our camps because of what the camps do and provide. There are sufficient Jewish children in our communities to fill each one of our places and camper beds. That number will increase with more mothers going into the labor force, thus requiring child care, and with the increase of single-parent families who indeed require their children to be taken care of during the summer. An additional source is campers who attend the expensive private camps and whose families will begin to look at our services as viable alternatives. Furthermore, as young families wish to rediscover their roots, for their own and for their children's sakes, they will want to turn to Jewish camps for assistance.

On Camp Sites

A major area of concern is with camps (both day and resident) located on older sites which have serious problems with buildings, facilities, utilities, water supply, sewage, electrical systems, lakes and pools. Delayed maintenance has been a major contributor to this deterioration and we are not catching up. In New York, we have had to relocate three camps due to the serious deterioration of their former sites. Camps on newer sites need continual maintenance as well, the cost of which is rising at a phenomenal rate. Also, new regulations coming forth daily add to our problems, but safety and health concerns cannot be neglected.

On Staff

Most camps indicate problems with staffing such as their retention, their completing full seasons, their lack of commitment to work, negative responses to camp philosophy and policies, complaints about work hours and camps' expectations. We obviously do not meet the needs of staff and their expectations. How can we address ourselves to this serious problem? Higher salaries are only one aspect of a solution.

On Special Programming

Many camps have established and look to develop special programs *within*, not outside of, their existing program structure. Specialities such as tennis, dance, travel, waterfront, crafts, and so forth, seem to help in retaining older campers and attracting new ones. This would seem to be an area for expansion as a way of responding to what campers and parents like and want.

On Costs

All of the camps are concerned with the rapid rise in operating costs and many fear that these costs and the inability to keep up with them in regard to fees and subsidies or support from Federations and/or outside organizations will put them at risk and may force some to close down.

On Fees

Camps are raising fees, but not enough to meet all costs. There is great concern that our families will not be able to continue to meet these fees and will opt for other choices in summer vacation plans. In order to ease payout, some camps accept credit cards. This provides better cash flow and eliminates dunning calls for payments. Camps use a variety of incentives such as "early bird" fees, sibling discounts, referral discounts and credit for prepayment of full fee to make fees and payments more attractive.

On Jewish Programs

Most camps indicate an increased emphasis on quality Jewish programming. Many indicate success with the Israeli *schlichim* program and use of Jewish cultural specialists. Many indicate that families will pay for camp if they feel they are receiving quality services and that campers participate in programs which are Jewishly oriented, which provide opportunities for healthy Jewish socialization, as well as a sound recreational component for

the camper's life experience. This is obviously an area on which we need to concentrate. This, I believe, is the lifeblood of our being and the hope for the future.

One-Parent Families

There is an increasing number of one-parent families who look to camping programs to provide child-care services for most, or a large part, of the summer. Such families seem to require substantial subsidies which strain the scholarship budgets of the camps and supporting agencies. This will, no doubt, continue and will create further difficulties for both families and camps.

On Support

While Jewish communal support for camping services has increased, it has not kept up with the inflationary spiral nor with the increasing need for funds for operation, maintenance, scholarships, renovations, or the acquisition of new sites. Shrinking support from government-funding sources is also reflected in programs such as that of surplus food, grants under the Child Nutrition Act, work study grants, milk programs, CETA programs, energy subsidies; all these are very much at risk. Camps are becoming subject to various forms of taxation such as that on real estate and to regulations like minimum wage laws. Increasingly, the rules and regulations for the health, safety, sanitation, fire and security procedures add costs to the maintenance of our camps. No support from outside sources is indicated for these purposes other than some rare special grants earmarked for these.

On Energy Shortage

In a larger context, we are beginning to worry about the earth's resources such as land, oil, coal, water, electricity, food, all of which are at risk; to preserve and conserve them will require all of humanity's efforts to reconsider needs, uses, and lifestyles.

This will force us to consider change, creative change, and require us to look at the ways we operate camps and provide our services.

The Challenge

In view of all these concerns, it is our task to reevaluate our service, to set goals and objectives which are consonant with those of the Jewish community we wish to serve, to use our skills to interpret our purposes to our supportive agencies and systems, to develop outreach programs using the best marketing methods, selecting the best staff to work with us, providing the best facilities, equipment, and programs in order to perform our tasks.

Not all of our camps will be able to meet these expectations. Some camps will fall by the wayside since they will not have the capacity in leadership, in support, in physical facilities, or by virtue of their history and designated purposes, to take up the challenge. Those who have the capacity to respond, to lead, to grow, and to gain support, will indeed survive.

Greater cooperation among camps and agencies is in order. Regionalization of camps, mergers, consolidations, consortia among agencies and new partnerships should be seriously explored.

Strong leadership, both professional and lay, is a key element in all of this. To paraphrase Dr. Donald Feldstein,** camps should be seen as "builders of communities." He indicates that we should understand this term to include areas of personal development, the raising of ethnic consciousness, providing service to the total Jewish community, building communal leadership, strengthening Jewish identity, and developing healthy personalities. Camping has the capacity to contribute to all of these goals.

The thrust of our work then, in this decade, must be a concern for how we

develop the quality and content of our program; how we build Jewish and personal identity; how we serve Jews in a Jewish way and use ethnicity as a tool in mental health; how we contribute to the survival of the Jewish community.

Overriding all must be a personal credo which asks: "How do I as a professional and as a lay person meet my Jewish responsibilities?"

I am convinced of one thing: "Camping as usual" is no longer valid. Profound societal changes are already underway. We must study and understand them so that our camps may be adaptive. Creative camp directors and boards and innovative planning techniques are needed to confront the major issues in this decade which are:

1. Is there still a mission in Jewish camping? What are the Jewish social, ethical, and moral values which our camps engender? How do we identify these? How can Jewish camping foster and strengthen these? In this regard, our goals, objectives, and expectations need to be reviewed and re-defined.

2. Camping must become a high priority on the Jewish organizational and communal calendar. Community building through camps will aid in that process. Strong lay and professional leaders must speak for the field, for if financial support continues only on the same level, Jewish communal camps cannot continue to serve those in need of subsidies. We will become camps for *only* those who can afford our services. This will not meet the requirements of the Jewish community.

3. Camping programs—is there a need for changes? Have the expectations for camping changed? What needs to be changed? Can we specialize more and become more Jewish concurrently?

4. We have lost some of our campers. How can we find them again, and new ones? How can we develop better recruiting procedures? There is a role here for lay leaders, for parents, and for the community. How do we involve Jews for the good of

** Executive Director of Community Service, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

Klal Yisrael? We have some models in other fields.

Summary

We can take advantage of our opportunities for ongoing processes of evaluation. The seasonal cycle of our workload gives us time to do some planning. Each year, we have the opportunity to reflect on the summer's experience and to plan for the next summer. But we seldom look beyond and if we do, it is only fragmentarily. We must take the time for longer-term future planning. The very dramatic social changes are no longer slow in coming, and no longer slight in effect. We need to respond to the needs of the single-parent family, the fiscal strain of the middle class, the senior adult in our community, and those with special problems, whether child, young adult, or senior adult.

We must determine whether the services can be provided in other ways or forms, in other settings, in cooperative relationships, and/or in different time spans.

We must look seriously at the staff people we attract, the training methods we use, and the focus and content of this

training. We need to review our programming, the rationale for the way we program and how the camp setting is being used and can further be used to fulfill Jewish communal goals. We need to look at the functions that camp directors need to perform and the skill, knowledge, and experience required to operate a modern camp. We must learn to apply modern management methods and utilize updated knowledge in administration and in the technology which could help bring about further efficiency in the fiscal operation of the camp and in the management of the physical plant and the human services.

We are the heirs of a long tradition involving the operation and control of thousands of acres of land, millions of dollars' worth of buildings, facilities and equipment and we are the guardians of that heritage which provides one means through which the Jewish community can be strengthened and be assured a continuity of generations. It is in this light that we must continue to be future-directed and evaluate issues not only to meet immediate concerns but to anticipate these for the generations to come.