



Jewish Summer Camping

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[Religious School Principal Barbara Fink](#)'s D'var Torah during Camp Send-off Shabbat Services, June 2017.

Today we are sending our kids off to camp-some to sleep away camp and others to day camp. It is a time for kids to run and play and swim and forget about school. It is a time for kids to try new things, like archery or zip-lining or sailing. It is time where kids feel like they're not learning. But that is the secret of Jewish camp. Kids don't feel like they are learning. They don't know that they are growing and learning every single day.



In this week's parsha, Shelach lecha, God tells Moses to send spies into the Promised Land to find out if the land is barren or fertile, inhabited or empty and if it is inhabited will the people be welcoming or try to kill the Israelites. So, Moshe sends twelve spies to the Promised Land, one from each tribe. 40 days later they return with mixed news. On one hand, they say it is a paradise- it is ertz zavat,

chalav ud'vash- it is a land flowing of milk and honey. On the other hand, there are 10 spies who say the land is inhabited by giants and the Israelites are too weak to defeat them and have no chance of conquering the land. 2 of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, tell the Israelites not to worry that they can defeat the giants. The people don't listen and cry out in fear, begging not to go. God decides that the people don't deserve to go into the land of Israel. This causes them to wander in the dessert for 40 years. Enough time for a new generation to be born. A generation who were not slaves and therefore, would be confident enough to conquer the land.

I always learned that God was all knowing, which leads me to wonder, if God is all knowing why did he need the spies to go into the land to "check it out?" Why doesn't God just tell Moshe what is inside the land of Israel? The answer is simple, God doesn't give us all the answers today nor did he in ancient times. The Israelites had to figure it out on their own. The spies weren't really sent to find out about the land of Israel they were sent to find out about themselves. To find out whether or not they were ready for the land of Israel, if they were ready to see all the potential that it had for them. They needed to see if they had the leadership and ownership that it would take to earn the land. They had to see if they

deserved it and if they would fight for it. God doesn't just give, he teaches. He teaches the Israelites that they need to stand up for what they believe in and fight for it.

See, that is the great gift of camp, it is a time for kids to figure stuff out on their own. It is a time for kids to experience Judaism in every aspect of their lives without parents telling them how to think or act. Camp is the best place in the world. I should know, I have probably spent more summers in camp than not. It's my happy place. It's the place where I read Torah for the first time, the place I made my closest friends, the place I learned that there were lots of people like me. It was the place where I learned to play volleyball, where I learned silly Hebrew songs. It was the place I could be me.

Recently, Ben Platt won a Tony award for the play Dear Evan Hanson. It has been all over my Facebook wall because Ben is a Camp Ramah alum (Camp Ramah in California that is) He is very proud of his Judaism and makes note of it any chance he gets. He even sang in Hebrew on Late Night with Seth Myers this fall. He was quoted saying camp was "the first place I was allowed to decide for myself what kind of Jew I would be" how powerful is that? We teach and preach and talk and show until we are blue in the face to our kids about how important Judaism is. But it isn't until kids go to Jewish camp- sleep away camp in particular- that they actually get to LIVE it and breathe it. The research has shown that those who attended a Jewish sleep away camp are more likely to identify as Jewish adults and engage in the Jewish community than those who did not attend a Jewish camp. Because it is when children and teenagers have to figure things out on their own and when we as parents allow our kids the space to be their own person and figure it out on their own, like God did to the Israelites, that we see what kind of Jew they will be.

Jewish camp is the most wonderful gift that we, as parents, can give to our children because it is the most powerful educational tool we have.

I wish all our campers the most wonderful summer whether it is here in West Hartford or away at an overnight camp. May you try new things and learn to be your own Jew.

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I would like to read a prayer written by [Rabbi Phyllis Sommer](#)

A Mama's Prayer for Summer Camp

May you find learning and growth of all kinds.

May you gain independence and feel comfort in your Jewish identity.

May the mosquitoes be guided away from you, and may the raindrops not fall into your tent (too much).

May the food be delicious and the pool or lake the right temperature.

May you seek out new experiences and try new things (vegetables would be nice but I'm doubtful).

May you smile brilliantly for the camp photographer and show up daily in the online photo albums.

May you avoid the camp crud and may you never lose your socks.

May you take a shower and brush your teeth every day.

May you not send wet towels to the laundry, because the laundry is charged by weight.

May your arrows fly straight, your fishing line never get tangled, and your tetherball not whack you in the nose.

May you not fall off the top bunk.

May you not spend your whole canteen account on silly junk.

May you not lose your hat and water bottle in the first week.

May you not lose your way in the night to the outdoor bathroom.

May you write your parents at least one letter besides the mandatory first-day-letter.

May you create a life-long friendship (at least one, if not many).

May you renew old friendships, since they are the most precious.

May you learn more and more about yourself and your spirit and being.

*May you return home in one piece with all your belongings,
and may you ever yearn to return to the land of summer camp.*