



# Joseph Reimer: Making Shabbat: Celebrating and Learning at American Jewish Summer Camps

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“The most effective kind of education,” opined Plato, “is that a child should play amongst lovely things” (Fitzhenry 1987: 113). This sentiment underscores the idea that learning should be enjoyable and engaging to the point that people may not even realize they are learning because they are so immersed in the experience. The idea of pleasure in experiential learning dovetails with Durkheim’s “collective effervescence,” the heightened state of emotion and solidarity experienced by people participating in communal activities such as religious practices (Durkheim 1995). This concept is central to Durkheim’s understanding of the role of religion in enhancing social cohesion and integrating individuals into a shared moral community. Both Plato and Durkheim highlight the importance of curating environments and experiences that are inherently engaging for learners, thereby fostering natural curiosity and involvement. Jewish camping is certainly such an experience: children leaving their homes over the summer to spend substantial periods of time in pastoral settings where they are treated to immersive experiential Jewish learning, living in ways that are often strikingly different from their non-camp lives.

According to the Pew Research Center’s Jewish Americans in 2020 (2021), more than a third (38%) of US Jews attended a Jewish camp (half of those attending for 1–3 years and one-quarter attending for 4–6 or 7+ years, respectively). Jewish camping is a distinguishing feature in a significant minority of American Jewish childhoods, with 40% raised Reform, 49% raised Conservative, and 80% raised Orthodox having attended a Jewish camp. There also appears to be an association between attending a Jewish camp and marking Shabbat. While just over one-third (39%) of US Jews mark Shabbat in a way that is meaningful to them, almost half (49%) of US Jews who attended a Jewish camp growing up are marking Shabbat in adulthood. Jewish camping and attending Jewish religious services also appear to be associated. While 20% of US Jews attend Jewish religious services monthly or more often, 29%

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of those who attended a Jewish camp attend Jewish religious services with the same regularity. What is it about Jewish camping that may be exercising this small but noteworthy long-term behavioral effect?

In *Making Shabbat: Celebrating and learning at American Jewish summer camps*, Joseph Reimer sets out to describe Jewish camping in the North American context and how three residential (or “sleepaway”) camps facilitate the learning about, marking, and celebrating of Shabbat. As Reimer observes, “celebrating a lively Shabbat became a way to showcase the camp’s commitment to... Jewish vitality” (p. 61). The book focuses on the creative ways in which Shabbat preparation and celebration has supported campers in developing skills, knowledge, and values that enable their immersive engagement. Reimer’s reflection that he “had missed how powerful the simple gathering each week must be for campers” (p. 114) was an important contextualizing frame for those readers fortunate to have experienced Shabbat and Jewish camps growing up, who may not have found the ethnographic descriptions of camp Shabbat to reveal anything which was—for them—new or striking.

The book is divided into three main parts that focus on creating, celebrating, and learning from Shabbat at camp. Creating Shabbat at camp, the first part, synthesizes a series of historical accounts of the development of Jewish camping and makes the case for the learning about and celebrating of Shabbat as emblematic of the success of Jewish camps as sites of informal Jewish education. The second part, celebrating Shabbat, presents an ethnographic study of Shabbat at three camps—URJ Eisner Camp in Western Massachusetts, Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, and Camp Yavneh in New Hampshire. URJ falls under the banner of Reform Judaism, Ramah under the banner of the Conservative movement, and Camp Yavneh does not officially fall under any denominational banner, but is “guided by Orthodox halakha” (p. 80). The camps were selected not because they are representative of the wider American Jewish camping landscape, but because they boast celebrations of Shabbat that are religiously distinct and have “stable sponsorship” and “cooperative leadership” (p. 63). The final part of the book focuses more deeply on questions of how camps engage the interests of their campers, and what insights other educators may derive about how to create comparably memorable experiences within the walls of their organizations.

The purpose of the book is to “give readers an in-depth view of how Shabbat is celebrated at camp and how campers of different ages learn to participate in that celebration” (p. 19). The author identifies two of the book’s intended audiences: “camp people and alumni who are eager to reflect on their camp experiences and... educational leaders and scholars who would like to learn from what camps do well” (p. 23). In this latter aim, the book presents a certain *contradictio in adiecto*, since substantial emphasis is placed on describing the “seamless counter world” (p. 12) of Jewish camps where an especially thoughtful, immersive, and empowering Judaism is experienced “living full time in a Jewish environment” (p. 12), while also suggesting that other Jewish educational institutions may use Jewish camping as a guide for improving their programs. It makes more sense that the Jewish summer camp creates an inner golden standard for peak Jewish ethnoreligious experiences, not only serving as a “model for an emotionally and spiritually satisfying Jewish

experience[s]” (p. 2), but also as an appetizer for similarly nourishing engagement in post-camp adult life.

The book synthesizes and extends Reimer’s earlier scholarship on Jewish camping, in particular his studies on Ramah summer camps (Reimer 2010, 2012) and Shabbat at camp (Kress and Reimer 2009; Reimer 2018). The book dovetails with Sales and Saxe’s (2003) study of Jewish camps/retreats, disagreeing that a camp’s impact lies in its socialization effect; rather, Reimer maintains, it is the camps’ deliberate strategy of “shared learning... [where] educational staff and campers work together to produce that learning” (p. 13). David Perkins’ (2009) notion of shared learning and Rogoff’s (2003) theory of guided participation contextualize the author’s observations of how American youth, irrespective of background, are supported to the point of being able to participate and invest that participation with their creativity and personalities. Ironically, unlike Van Slyck’s notion of the “manufactured wilderness” (2006) as the idyllic site for informal learning, the wilderness surrounding the three described camps appears very real, and it is the Shabbat experience that is so carefully and thoughtfully manufactured for maximum impact.

Several memorable expressions in the book come to mind. The idea that camp builds “a spiritual ecstasy” (p. 17) resonates with Durkheim’s collective effervescence, especially in the descriptions of Mishmar, the singing and learning evenings at Camp Ramah. The oldest campers are described as the “symbolic fulcrum” (p. 141), highlighting their role as the camp’s connective tissue, linking the professional staff and the youngest campers they mentor. *Ruach*, or spiritedness, is the leitmotif of the book, with pre-Shabbat programs, such as “*Ruach Lifnei Shabbat*” (p. 102), the “ruach rousers” (p. 117), and the camp that “lives by its ruach” (p. 182), all indicating that the primary educational objective of Jewish camping is to nurture and enthrall the Jewish spirit. Also salient is that “participation is the royal road to active learning” (p. 185), uncovering the pedagogical strategy of Jewish camping: active youth involvement.

The campers were not interviewed in the research conducted for this book. This was regrettable. Their perspectives during their youth and in subsequent years would have made an important contribution to the book. In addition, while a historical overview of camping was provided, no demographic backdrop was outlined to provide important context regarding the proportion of American Jews who participated in camping growing up. Given that the counselors at some camps could “count on many of these campers having learned ... at school” (p. 90), there are also the unexamined perspective of school educators and families. Finally, there is the much-cited but uninvestigated role of Hebrew. A basic understanding of Hebrew makes accessible an inordinate amount of Jewish heritage, culture, ritual, and values. Hebrew terms were used by all three camps. There would have been some benefit in understanding the effects of connecting American youth to the Hebrew language.

The title *Making Shabbat: Celebrating and learning at American Jewish summer camps* aptly captures the foci of the book. It is highly readable for both lay and scholarly audiences, offering a detailed exploration of the camping experiences of American Jews, as well as the substantial thought and resources invested in realizing those aims. I am skeptical about research that focuses only on the impact of a single variable, especially since young people spend a longer and more immersive period of their formative

years in the interconnected milieu of their homes, schools, and peer groups (Bankier-Karp 2022, 2023). Nonetheless, since Jewish camping is a notable socialization experience for a significant minority of American Jews, Reimer's work prompts reflection on the enduring influence of these formative experiences and the need for all Jewish educational programs to be comparably thoughtful and filled with *ruach*.

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