

Editorial

Whither Jewish camping?

Lest the reader come away with the wrong impression from this editorial, let it be stated up front that members of the **IJN** staff attended Jewish summer camps in their youth and loved them. We also credit them with enhancing our Jewish identity and love for all things Jewish. We also freely acknowledge that nice facilities at a camp are a good thing. Nothing below is meant to take away from that.

We ran a feature last week that tells of the Jewish summer camps of the present — or, at least, of many of them. It seems that Jewish parents, or the camps themselves, or the Jewish kids (or all of the above) demand much more of the Jewish camp experience than in the past — more materially — and equate material upgrade with an enhanced Jewish experience. It is no longer good enough to have nice facilities. They must be ultra-luxurious.

We differ. To see why, it is pertinent to cite the cost of the Jewish summer camp upgrades. Suffice to say that, in the aggregate, they total in the many millions of dollars. The dimension of these upgrades teach the wrong values — namely, that a Jewish experience has to be rich and over the top in order to be worthwhile. This calls into question the long-term Jewish benefit of the Jewish camp experience. If the idea is that a nice Shabbat atmosphere can't be a nice Shabbat atmosphere unless it is surrounded with

expensive facilities, there is no Shabbos lesson here, none that will last, anyway.

Examples:

- A \$90,000 campus-wide generator system to make sure that the brisket is always ready on time for Shabbat.
- \$100,000 to revamp the kitchens this year for a new culinary institute.
- A \$350,000 trapeze center and multi-purpose outdoor sports arena.
- A \$1 million pool and a \$1 million gymnasium.
- An \$8 million fundraising drive — this, merely for improvements to a camp that is already built and up and running.
- A \$30 million overhaul replacing a majority of the housing, adding conference and reception space, a new health center, a multipurpose dining hall and performing arts center.
- A \$500,000 expenditure *annually* for sailboats, an upgraded infirmary or unexpected expenses.
- The cost of climate-controlled cabins and private baths.
- The cost of sending 10th-graders

from a camp in the East to, alternatively, California, Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, China or Thailand.

One camp director is quoted in the JTA report as saying that all these types of enhancements are “essential” not only to satisfy summer-camp parents, “who basically said, ‘you need to upgrade your facilities or we’re not sending our kids,’” but also to bolster the camp’s mission to provide an immersive Jewish experience.

We have come full circle — as in circularity. The rationale for summer camp, besides plain old having a good time, which is just great, is to make Judaism seem compelling and natural. But if the definition of “immersive” Judaism is over-the-top luxury — a jaunt to Hawaii, for example — the Judaism becomes a thin veneer of Judaism overlaid by “affluenza.” This isn’t Judaism. This is overindulgence.

It is also a misuse of funds in the name of Judaism — the best argument we have met for the prioritization of expenditures for a nine-month-a-year day school over a seven-week summer camp, or at least over the many camps that need to expend gargantuan sums each year on an “improvement” in order to keep the campers coming. As we say: circularity. *We need to indulge the campers to keep them coming, in order to give them immersive*

Judaism, which, however, isn’t really Judaism.

Jewish summer camps already labor under an occupational hazard: the feeling that it’s groovy to be Jewish at camp when everyone around you is doing Jewish, but hard to sustain this Jewish feeling when the environment radically changes, back in public school. This is the challenge built into Jewish camp life. Which doesn’t mean that Jewish camps are not valuable. It does mean that the Jewish experience at camp has to be as pure as possible in order to sustain. When the focus is on extravagance, the Judaism dissipates.

The recent specialization at Jewish camps can go in either direction. If outdoor and business camps — such as the two newest camps in Colorado — follow their mission while stressing Judaism rather than extravagance, they will do well. By all accounts, they have been doing well. But for the specialized camps, the same as for all other Jewish camps today, the temptation seems to be to overlay the camp mission with excessive fees to rationalize excessive capital improvements.

Summarizes the JTA report: “For-profits and nonprofits alike say they are always looking at the next capital improvement.” If so, this isn’t Jewish camping. This is something else.

David Bram 1927-2016

The **INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS** interviewed David Bram at his home in Colorado Springs in the early 1990s. A successful commercial real estate developer, his unpretentious ego contrasted with his professional status. Bram welcomed the new **IJN** freelancer as if they had been fast friends for years. When Zita, his beloved wife, brought out tea, he looked at her with sparkling eyes. It wasn’t until the middle of the interview that Bram mentioned that he had survived the Holocaust. This man, who had lost and suffered so much, did not drop his gaze. If anything, he seemed more concerned about the reporter’s comfort than his own.

Bram, who died Feb. 20, 2016, at the age of 88, loved life despite all the horrors it threw at him. Born in 1927 in Rusiec, Poland, he was the oldest son of six children born to Mendel and Leah Bram. In 1939, he started working in forced labor camps, and was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942.

The Nazis abandoned a sub-camp of Mauthausen, where Bram toiled after Auschwitz, in the middle of the night on March 3, 1945. The US Army liberated the camp two days later.

Bram immigrated to New York City in 1945, moved to Omaha,

where he married his wife Zita, and relocated with their family to Colorado Springs in 1954. Together with his wife, Bram developed numerous businesses in the Springs and Woodland Park: shopping centers, furniture stores, campgrounds, hotels and motels, and houses of worship representing all denominations.

A driving force behind the construction of Temple Shalom in Colorado Springs, Bram spoke tirelessly about the Holocaust to students and groups. He supported JNF, American Jewish World Service, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), UJA, Hillel and others. Whatever sustained Jewish faith and a love of Israel, he embraced. He had seen how easy it was to destroy Jewish life.

Bram was a giant of a man, and our condolences go out to his daughters Renee Rockford and Linda Bram, his many grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Some stories evaporate over time. Not so with David Bram. Years after he gently smiled and waved goodbye, we still see him — proud, joyful, determined and loving, in spite of everything. In a way, that is the story of Jewry after the Holocaust. David Bram embodied that remarkable story. May his memory be a blessing.

Denver JDS at 40

Forty years ago in August, 1975, Denver’s Jewish community received a gift. Not a gift in the form of a cash donation or a bequest of land. It was a modest gift filled with hope and values; it would forever change the lives of its recipients.

That was when a handful of families — some rabbis included — founded Theodor Herzl Jewish Day School as a pluralistic day school for grades 1-5 with the mission of imparting intensive Jewish studies on an equal footing with a superior secular education. For the previous 24 years, the Denver Jewish community had been ably served by Hillel Academy, an Orthodox Jewish day school. The founding families of Herzl desired such a day school experience for their children with a nod to the non-Orthodox movements in Judaism, and even the unaffiliated.

Herzl started out small with only 14 students in a one-room school house. The students learned both prayerbook and modern Hebrew, Jewish history and thought, including an emphasis on Israel. This, alongside the latest innovations in teaching secular subjects, soon earned Herzl a reputation as a cutting edge school.

Meanwhile, four years later, a group of parents founded the Rocky Mountain Hebrew Academy as a modern Orthodox high school —

RMHA — also college-prep oriented. As Herzl students graduated from elementary school, parents found RMHA a suitable way to continue their vision. RMHA started with 10 students in grades 9-12. Ultimately, RMHA added the middle school grades, 6-8 and became a pluralistic school, too.

Both schools were nomadic until Herzl secured a building on a large parcel of land in southeast Denver. In 1998, the trustees of both Herzl and RMHA voted to form the first merged K-12 Jewish day school in the country. After several name changes, the school is now Denver Jewish Day School.

Today, 350 students fill the halls of two buildings on a bustling campus complete with athletic fields. Athletic teams do quite well; students win science fairs and other competitions; some are National Merit scholars. Most impressive of all, alumni have gone on to careers in law, medicine, the rabbinate, business and technology. They are raising Jewish families; many in Denver, and many as community leaders.

On the school’s 40th anniversary, we hope that DJDS will continue to give Jewish kids a big boost in Jewish values that will continue to redound to the benefit of our community and the graduates themselves. Forty years? Who woulda believed!