Whither Jewish camping?

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 with inclusion — 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 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 13 students in a rented 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 sought 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, student win science fairs and other competitions; some are National Merit scholars. Most impressive of all, they are successful young adults 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 DJS will continue to provide Judaism that is groovy, that incorporates Jewish values that will continue to redound to the benefit of our community and the graduates themselves. Forty years? Who wouldn’t believed it!