

THE
TOP 10

Jewish Summer Camps

by Gary Drevitch

FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, SLEEPAWAY CAMP HAS GIVEN JEWISH CHILDREN UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES. HERE ARE 10 GREAT CAMPS, PLUS ADVICE ON PICKING THE RIGHT ONE



SCROLL THROUGH WWW.RAMAH.ORG AND YOU'LL find the names of 300 married couples who met as campers or counselors at one of the seven Ramah camps in the United States. Similar lists decorate the dining hall walls of Jewish camps nationwide—evidence, says Jerry Silverman, president of the Foundation for Jewish Camping, that “Camp is the best insurance policy available for parents who care about their children’s Jewish identification.”

Here, *Jewish Living* presents 10 terrific Jewish sleep-away camps, those that best combine a summer of fun with

strong reinforcement of religious and cultural identity. We compiled the list (in alphabetical order) after consulting with camp professionals as well as youth group, Hebrew school, and synagogue leaders, plus camp alumni. Our sources directed us to far more than 10, but we went with these because they represent every region of the country (and Canada) and the full spectrum of Jewish denominations. Each offers what one expects from a summer camp: swimming, obstacle courses, camp songs, and Shabbat services. What sets them apart are their different philosophies and approaches to instilling a love of Judaism. »



1 BLUE STAR CAMPS

Hendersonville, N.C.
Affiliation: Independent; kosher

WHEN WE ASKED SYNAGOGUES AND HEBREW SCHOOLS IN the South and Southwest where their kids went to camp, one name came up every time: Blue Star, which has hosted campers on its 500-acre site in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina for more than 60 years. Blue Star welcomes as many as 600 children at a time—mostly from Florida—but is divided into six small, semi-independent camps for kids of different ages, each with its own staff, schedule, and sense of intimacy. Campers can choose from an array of electives taught by more than 100 specialists, from rock climbing to DJ-ing, horseback riding to video.

Unaffiliated and nondenominational, the camp teaches what it calls “Living Judaism”—a mix of Jewish values, culture, and traditions—but instead of in classrooms, learning happens on hikes around the massive waterfalls of a nearby state forest. “A lot of our kids come from day schools,” director Roger Popkin says, “so they like that there are no classes here.” Bar and bat mitzvah lessons are available to preteens prepping for the big day, and Shabbat services are led by campers. www.bluestarcamps.com (954) 963-4494



2 CAMP GEORGE

Parry Sound, Ontario, Canada
Affiliation: Reform
(www.urjcamp.org); kosher

NINE-YEAR-OLD CAMP GEORGE BLENDS REFORM TRADITIONS with “Ontario-style camping.” That means the center of camp life is a busy waterfront. There’s no pool—campers swim, sail, water-ski, wakeboard, and canoe on Maple Lake. They’re also tested by the now ubiquitous Ropes Challenge Course and take multiple-day canoe and hiking trips to local parks.

While there is Jewish education at George—it’s designed

as part of a year-round experience that includes Hebrew schools and youth groups—assistant director Karen Kollins reports that campers are unlikely to find any workbooks under their pillows.

The 300 youngsters are drawn largely from Ontario and around the Great Lakes, and many of the staffers here and at the Reform movement’s 11 other camps in the U.S. are teachers and group leaders from the campers’ hometowns. “Kids get to see these professionals from their synagogues in a new way. They live with them, they eat with them, they develop a very different relationship with them,” says Kollins. “And the rabbis and educators love coming here: It makes their jobs easier in attracting these kids to activities in the off-season.”

www.george.urjcamp.org
(416) 638-2635

3 CAMP INTERLAKEN

Eagle River, Wis.
Affiliation: Jewish Community Centers of North America (www.jcca.org); kosher

AT SUMMER’S END, WHAT DO INTERLAKEN CAMPERS SAY THEY liked best? Year in, year out, it’s the camp’s unique Shabbat ritual, which begins Friday at dusk with the staff gathered in front of the administration building. Led by a guitarist, they hold hands and walk through the camp as children assemble outside each bunk. As the group makes its way from cabin to cabin, each group joins in, greeting the next set of kids as they fall in. Finally they unite at the amphitheater to watch the sun set over Lake Finley before moving inside for services, dinner, songs, and Israeli dancing. “In the real world, Israeli dancing may not be that cool,” says interim director Toni Davison Levenberg, “but you should see them go on a Friday night here.”

Interlaken’s 200 to 250 campers—who come mostly from across the Midwest, but also from Texas, Arizona, Florida, and California—can windsurf, sail, canoe, and even hydro-bike on the lake, and generally have wide freedom to make their own schedules. Before the summer begins, campers request favorite activities: Upon arrival they’re given a personalized daily schedule, based on their preferences. “Our kids collect the skills they want to have,” Levenberg says. “It’s not like when I was at camp and we were told, ‘Okay, today you have to learn soccer.’”

www.campinterlaken.org (414) 967-8240

4 CAMP JRF

South Sterling, Pa.
Affiliation: Reconstructionist; kosher

THE SUMMER PROGRAM OF THE JEWISH RECONSTRUCTIONIST Federation is the little camp that could—and did. JRF took a gamble by opening in 2002 with 39 campers at a rented suburban Chicago site. This summer, it will welcome 330 at its Pocono Mountains location, including kids who’ve been there from the beginning and helped shape its culture.

“Believe it or not,” director Rabbi Jeffrey Eisenstat laughs, “early on, the kids thought we had too much davening.” But the staff wanted a daily service of some sort, so they now offer alternatives to traditional daily prayer meetings, including yoga, a nature walk, even drumming. “Kids get the chance to choose how they would like to enter into spirituality,” Eisenstat says.

Along with taking responsibility for services, JRF campers also take responsibility for the environment by composting and growing some of their own produce. Activities are drawn from a wide range of electives, including a Ropes Challenge Course, but there’s also a special emphasis on the arts, music, and dance. Many activities involve children of different ages, giving older kids the chance to mentor younger ones, sometimes at breakneck speed while tubing or powerboating. “Our young leadership is growing up at this camp,” Eisenstat says. www.campjrf.org (877) 226-7573

GETTING IN

As you begin thinking about camp, remember this: The top camps are typically 60 percent full for the next season even before the summer ends. Many returning families re-enroll their kids—and sign up younger siblings—before the last campfire has burned out. So if you’re thinking of sending your child away for the first time, or to a new place, start early. Here’s a timeline.

- **One year plus:** Start your research more than a year before your child will attend, so you can visit camps while they’re still in session. If a camp doesn’t allow visitors or is too far away, it probably can send you a DVD with information and highlights.
- **Early fall:** Find out your target camps’ application deadlines and send your paperwork in as early as possible. Ask about scholarships, which are widely available, thanks in part to philanthropies committed to making the sleepaway experience available to all.
- **Early spring:** Most camps send out acceptance letters so you have enough time to order name tags and all the other trappings. (Don’t worry, they’ll send you a detailed packing list too.)

What to Ask a Camp Director

A big part of the camp director’s job is convincing parents to entrust him with their kids. But to ensure that everyone has a great time, good directors are honest about their philosophies, and about which kinds of families tend to thrive within them.

Peg L. Smith, CEO of the American Camp Association, which compiled the list of questions at right, says that when parents complain about a camp experience, it’s rarely about the pool, the food, or the bunks. The problems are usually with

how their child was treated by counselors and fellow campers. So when you talk to directors, find out about their facilities, but keep the focus on their people and philosophy.



1. “What do you think my child will learn about himself here?”
2. “How do you handle discipline problems?”
3. “How do you deal with homesickness?”
4. “How are special needs handled?”
5. “What is your approach to competition?”
6. “What percentage of your counselors attended your camp—and how many are returning from last year?”
7. “What percentage of campers return each year?”



All smiles at Camp Neshar, above; all business at Camp Interlaken, right.



6 CAMP NESHER

Como, Pa.
Affiliation: Modern Orthodox; kosher

NESHER, WHICH HAS BEEN OPERATING IN THE Pocono Mountains for 13 years, welcomes about 350 Modern Orthodox kids at a time. They attend services three times a day—boys and girls sit separately—but there is ample opportunity for tennis, trampoline, and roller hockey, and a 65-acre lake for swimming, boating, and Jet Skis. Still, the emphasis is study, with Topic A being how people should treat one another. “It’s what we talk about every day, and it’s what we hope to achieve every day, on the basketball courts and in the bunks,” says director Jeff Braverman.

Practicing what it preaches, during its second session Neshar welcomes a number of developmentally disabled campers and their aides through a partnership with the National Jewish Council for the Disabled. Two bunks have been made handicapped-accessible, but other than that, these children are mainstreamed as much as possible. “Having them,” Braverman says, “definitely adds to that spirit of informal education for all of our campers.”

www.campnesher.org (973) 575-3333

5 CAMP MOSHAVA

Honesdale, Pa.
Affiliation: Modern Orthodox (Bnei Akivah); kosher

MOSHAVA IS PROBABLY THE LARGEST MODERN ORTHODOX summer camp in the U.S., with nearly 700 campers at each session and a staff of 400 that includes at least 100 Israelis. It’s also one of four camps affiliated with the Bnei Akivah “religious Zionist” movement. “We have all the things that make camp fun for kids—a waterfront, sports, the arts,” says director Alan Silverman. “But I think people send their kids to us because we have a mission.”

Silverman is based in Israel in the off-season, where he recruits staff and special guests. In 2001, on the 25th anniversary of the raid at Entebbe (when Israeli special forces freed 100 hostages held on a plane in Uganda), Silverman brought one of the mission’s pilots to camp. “We teach how Israel takes responsibility for Jews around the world. He represented that.” The Jewish state is a major part of everyday life at Moshava, even on its mini-golf course, which is laid out over a map of Israel, with each hole modeled and named after an Israeli town. In another program representative of a growing trend, Moshava has a guesthouse where the families of eight campers reside each week of the season, sharing in their children’s daily routine—but with nicer bathrooms.
www.moshava.org (212) 465-9021



Summers at Camp Ramah can get a little bit crazy.



Surf’s up at Camp Ramah, which is close to some gnarly Pacific waves.

7 CAMP RAMAH

Ojai, Calif.
Affiliation: Conservative; kosher

JEWISH CAMPS ORIGINATED IN THE NORTHEAST SO THE CHILDREN of city dwellers could see trees and lakes. But there are also several well-established camps in the West, and quite a few new ones. Ramah of California, one of seven residential camps officially affiliated with the Conservative movement, has welcomed campers to the hills of Ojai, about 60 miles north of Los Angeles, for more than 50 years.

As many as 600 campers spend at least an hour a day on Israel-centric activities, including Israeli Army training exercises, led by Israeli-born counselors. It’s no surprise that Hebrew is almost as common in camp as English. There is no lake, but Ramah is close to Pacific beaches, far better for the many campers who surf. Religious services are held daily, and the prayer habit sticks with some kids once they’re home: After a teen who attended camp last summer was severely injured in a car accident, many of his fellow campers organized and led services on his behalf.
www.ramah.org (888) 226-7726

Picking the *Right* Camp

“There is a camp for every child,” says Peg L. Smith, CEO of the American Camp Association, “but every camp is not for every child.” Besides the 10 terrific Jewish camps listed here, there are dozens more around the country. The challenge, of course, is finding the one best suited to your child.

The best resource is word of mouth, so talk to friends, neighbors, teachers, and youth group leaders to find out where your child’s peers go, then learn all you can about those places.

Check out camp Web sites: Many offer separate areas for campers and parents, with excellent lists of FAQs—frequently asked questions—for kids (“I never do laundry at home. How does it get done at camp?”; “My friends and I like to play cards. Can we play for small bets?”) and moms (“Is there a way to know how my child is doing at camp?”; “Why do we need to send so many towels?”).

These other resources can also help. **THE FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH CAMPING**, a New York-based foundation that supports camps nationwide, can search for you by region, affiliation, and cost. And while our list focuses on camps with a general range of programming, FJC can connect you with specialty camps in sports, arts, science, or for campers with special needs. www.jewishcamping.org **THE AMERICAN CAMP ASSOCIATION** offers accreditation to camps nationwide, and provides an array of general information for prospective parents. www.acacamps.org

THERE ARE VARIOUS CAMP REVIEW SITES online, which offer a mix of enthusiastic cheers and vicious flames from recent campers. For example, www.campratingz.com includes ratings for most of the camps on our list.

FOR AN IN-DEPTH LOOK at the role summer camps play in building Jewish identity and continuity, read *How Goodly Are Thy Tents: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* by Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe (UPNE, 2004).

8 CAMP TAWONGA

Groveland, Calif.
Affiliation: JCCs of North America
(www.jcca.org); kosher style

SITUATED IN THE HIGH SIERRA AT THE DOORSTEP OF Yosemite National Park, Tawonga offers unparalleled scenery, and its 260 campers make good use of the park's backcountry trails. The camp's philosophy is a bit against the grain, promoting community and group activity: Campers stay with their cabinmates all day after working together to choose electives—including swimming, tower climbing, archery, and Frisbee golf—that will satisfy the majority. "The goals we strive for are social and emotional. Everyone is going to get something they want," says interim executive director Ann Gonski, "but no one is going to get everything."

Campers come from across the West, with a large group of teens coming from Israel on a program sponsored by Bay Area Jewish philanthropies. "It's such a different experience from anything they have at home," Gonski says. "The Israelis come to this beautiful place and look up into the trees and skies, and God is all around them. You don't have to explain it. They have an awakening of a new way to be a spiritual Jew—and they form friendships that don't disappear." www.tawonga.org (415) 543-2267

There's a camp experience for every age, from a young kayaker at Camp JRF to bonding teens at Camp Tawonga.



The next class of leaders-in-training at Tel Yehudah, above, is committed to camping.



Is Your Child Ready?

THE AVERAGE AGE FOR STARTING CAMP is 9 or 10, according to Peg L. Smith of the American Camp Association. But many camps offer mini-sessions as short as six days, and for children as young as 6 or 7, so they can get a taste of the camp experience without being away from home for a month. Generally, kids from 8 to 10 who have already survived a number of sleep-away experiences without incident are probably ready for a short session away from home. And younger siblings of sleepaway campers tend to be ready sooner than other kids.

THE KEY TO PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR CAMP is involving her in the decision. Take your child with you on camp tours, let her help fill out the forms—the more ownership she feels, the more confident she'll be. According to Smith, kids who think that they've been "sent away" tend to be the least happy campers.

BUT FOR ALL OF OUR WORRYING about whether our kids are ready, it's often the parents who have the most difficulty separating. Sure, you may have time to read the newspaper again, but you also may feel the constant tug of your absent child. Remind yourself of the importance of raising kids who can succeed independently—then mail off a care package.

9 CAMP TEL YEHUDAH

Barryville, N.Y.
Affiliation: Young Judaea
(www.youngjudaea.org); kosher

TEL YEHUDAH IS THE NATIONAL SENIOR LEADERSHIP CAMP of Young Judaea, the Zionist youth movement of Hadassah. Its primary mission is to produce leaders with a commitment to Israel. Campers and alumni lead Hebrew schools, youth groups, and Jewish organizations nationwide, and are fiercely loyal to the camp that started them on their careers. Five junior camps across the country feed into Tel Yehudah, which serves about 450 teens at a time on the banks of the Delaware River.

A large foreign contingent, mostly from Israel, visits every year as well. "Israeli parents actually send their kids to our camp so they can learn about Judaism and Zionism," says new director David Weinstein. Committed to Jewish leadership as it is, Tel Yehudah never forgets that it's a camp, as investments in a new 5,500-square-foot pool and 12-foot climbing wall prove. "Our campers have a place here that belongs to them," says Weinstein. "For most teenagers these days, where else do you get that?" www.camptv.com (800) 970-2267



Camp George makes the most of its setting in the Ontario woods.

BOUNCING BACK

A few years ago, Jewish summer camps were in trouble. But between 2003 and 2007, enrollment rose 33 percent, to 64,000 kids, at some 140 camps nationwide. And there should be more expansion on the horizon, as camping has become a hot new Jewish cause, with recent reports of philanthropies investing nearly \$50 million, which will be used to upgrade old facilities, open new sites in formerly underserved regions like the West and Southwest, and vastly expand scholarship opportunities.

Plus, like camps everywhere, Jewish ones are offering the flexible scheduling that both parents and kids demand, as well as socially relevant activities. So for campers and their kin, options abound.

10 CAMP YAVNEH

Northwood, N.H.
Affiliation: Hebrew College; kosher

EVERY JEWISH CAMP PROMOTES ITS LEARNING COMPONENT—kids gathering under trees to debate ethics and values. But few camps put their classrooms where their mouths are like the 60-year-old summer program of Boston's "trans-denominational" Hebrew College, located in southern New Hampshire. Yavneh campers take one class each morning, then cut loose in the afternoon, when there's ample time for sports, sailing, climbing, swimming, or arts electives in the mostly new or renovated facilities.

Long a bastion of Boston Jews, the camp hosts 300 campers (ages 8 to 16) from throughout the Northeast and as far away as Texas and California who create an unusual community: roughly half Conservative, a quarter Orthodox, and a quarter Reform. Director Debbie Sussman hopes the different denominations will interact and help one another appreciate what they have in common. Separate services are offered for each denomination, and children are welcome to try the others out. "We tell parents their kids are allowed to go wherever they want" for services, Sussman says, "and we will not make a kid go to one service or another." The approach must work—98 percent of the counselors, not including the Israelis who come each season, are alumni. www.campyavneh.org (617) 559-8860 ●