

## Looking to the Summer to Find Our Priorities Parashat Mattot-Massei

By Rabbi Jason Miller

I'd like to begin with a riddle. Try to guess what place I am thinking of. It is where many experienced their first kiss. It's also where many read Torah for the first time. Where many learned to swim, to play baseball, to keep kosher, to canoe and pitch a tent, to turn dirty underwear inside out for one more day of wear. Have you guessed it? Of course, I am talking about summer camp. Jewish summer camp to be precise.

In the Torah, there is precedent for Jewish camping. In Genesis, we learn that our patriarch Jacob must have attended sleep-away camp for it says: "Jacob slept at camp" (*v'hu lan balilah hahu bamachaneh*) (Gen. 32:22). And in Exodus, when the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, the Torah teaches that Moses returned to the camp (*v'shav el hamachaneh*) (Ex. 33:11). And then, in the book of Numbers, we are told that all of the Levites go to camp (*v'halevi'im yachanu*) (Num. 1:53). And finally, in Deuteronomy the Torah even tells us "the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp" (*ki Adonai Eloheicha mithalech b'kerev machaneicha*) (Deut. 23:15). So there is clearly a long-standing tradition of Jews and summer camp.

Today, as we know, thousands of Jewish children attend summer camps like Camp Hiawatha, Camp Tomahawk, Camp Tamaqua, Camp Al-Gon-Quin, and the like. A comedian once noted the humor of all these Jewish kids going to camps with Indian-sounding names. He surmised that somewhere there are American-Indian children spending their summers at Camp Oy-Vey-Ismier.

But seriously, Jewish summer camping is a very important topic for us in the Jewish community. Jewish summer camps have had a very strong impact on my life, and on my religious journey toward becoming a rabbi; and, for that reason, I am very passionate about their role when it comes to creating serious Jews.

The statistics show that the Jewish summer camp experience has tremendous effect on children. A [Moment Magazine](#) study suggests "that children who go to Jewish camps come home with a much stronger sense of their Jewish selves. Community-based studies across the United States show that Jewish campers consistently marry Jews more often and belong to shuls in greater numbers than non-campers. Most Jewish professionals—whether at the pulpit, in the classroom, or in the community-at-large—say they discovered or consolidated their Jewish identity at summer camp." If you don't believe this article, just ask my colleagues at the [Seminary](#). A quick poll asking rabbinical, cantorial, and education students why they chose these professions yields the same one-word response over and over again – Camp! In the rabbinical school, we have a requirement to spend at least one summer at Camp Ramah. Most of us find it funny that such a requirement exists, for we would be there anyway – mandatory or not.

Summer camp is fun. Kids love it. And it works. It creates the types of Jews our community desperately needs. But it is also a very expensive commodity. In the first of our two Torah portions this morning, Parashat Mattot, we can learn something about our priorities when it comes to our children.

The tribes of Gad and Reuben, we are told, were very wealthy. They had great possessions of livestock, and they proposed to Moses that rather than moving forward and crossing the Jordan with the rest of the nation en route to the Promised Land, they would remain where they were to take advantage of the land so suitable for their cattle. Moses admonishes them for their chutzpa, asking, "Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land that the Lord has given them?" Moses even compares the Gadites and Reubenites to the spies sent to survey the land who returned with great lies and exaggerations.

After Moses' rejection, the leaders of these two tribes re-approach him trying to change his mind. They say, "We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children." The Midrash in Numbers

Rabbah takes exception to the order of their priorities: building first for their possessions and second for their children. The midrash teaches “The Reubenites and Gadites... cherished their property more than human life, saying to Moses: ‘We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children’ (v. 16). Moses said to them: That is not right! Rather do the more important thing first. ‘Build towns for your children’ (v. 24) and afterward ‘sheepfolds for your flocks’ (v. 24)... the Holy One Blessed be God said to them: ‘Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.’”

Most of us, unlike the Gadites and Reubenites, do put our children ahead of our possessions. We do make sacrifices for our youth – the future of the Jewish community. We do send our children to good Jewish summer camps, places where their Jewish neshamas will be touched with the spark that is so necessary for our people. But it is not enough to send only your children to Jewish summer camp. We need to make it our priority that any Jewish child who wants to have that Jewish summer camping experience will not be turned away for lack of space, or financial reasons, or a disability.

Today, our non-profit Jewish camps need our support more than ever. Camps like [Ramah](#) are enrolled to capacity by Thanksgiving. The facilities cannot hold all the children who want to come to these Jewish summer camps. And in many cases, the camps cannot hire enough qualified and dedicated staff. This leaves many to attend secular camps – camps where the children will have fun, but the “Jewish experience” will not be part of their camp memories. In fact, of the 750,000 Jewish youths of camping age in our country, only 30,000, or four percent, attend Jewish camps. The majority of these Jewish camps are non-profits, and their accommodations often leave much to be desired. The non-profit Jewish camps simply cannot compete with the lavish facilities and stellar sports program as the privately owned, profitable camps. We want our children to experience everything our Jewish camps provide, but we also want our children to be comfortable and to have an abundance of resources. It should be a top goal to get our Jewish summer camps up to the same physical quality as the best secular, for-profit camps, offering specialized activities in the arts, sports, and outdoor adventure; and, with a spectacular professional staff that is second-to-none. It should be a top goal for scholarships to be made available to any family who needs assistance in sending their children to camp.

Major Jewish philanthropists give to Israel programs like birthright Israel – the program that sends any Jewish young person to Israel for free. And the major Jewish philanthropists give to Jewish day schools. These are both important programs for our youth. I am a strong proponent of both Israel activities and of our day schools. But when it comes to supporting our camps, we need more people to step up for the cause. You can’t find a better investment in the Jewish future than with Jewish camps.

A few years ago, while teaching Hebrew School in Montclair, I met a couple that firmly believes this. Elisa and Robert Bildner, parents of two of my students, recognized that Jewish summer camps might just be the answer to the question of Jewish identity, and they decided to do something about it. They believe that Jewish summer camps can rise to the challenge if they are provided with the necessary resources. So, they set up the [Foundation for Jewish Camping](#) and several years later, thanks to their foundation, many Jewish camps are increasing the specialized programs they can offer their campers, bringing more staff to camp (including Israeli emissaries), and enlarging their campuses to accommodate more Jewish children.

To Jewish educators like me, Jewish camps are the canvas with which we can create just about anything we set our minds to. A few years ago, I was charged with running a high ropes course at a Ramah day camp. Most people wondered aloud what business a rabbinical student had being anchored by a rope and harness to seven-year-olds as they ascended a twenty-foot wall. To be honest, I wondered the same thing. But, I answer these critics each day of the summer. Whether it is through reciting the Shehechyanu blessing with the campers after their first climb of the summer, or through the curriculum we have implemented – a curriculum that integrates Jewish values with the outdoor challenge course – we consistently demonstrate that Judaism can be granted equal weight in any camp activity. You’ll be convinced of this after seeing fifth graders cross a cable suspended thirty feet in the air as they role-play being part of the exodus from Egypt. Or after you hear campers cheer on their basketball team from the

sidelines – in Hebrew. Or after witnessing 600 Jewish young people welcome in the Sabbath while sitting under the pink sky next to the lake. All of these images are real – they happen each summer at Jewish camps throughout North America.

Let us not be like the tribes of Gad and Reuben. Let us have our priorities in order from the start. For some of us, this might mean sending our kids to a camp where Judaism is taken seriously. For others, it might mean telling our Federation to allocate more money to Jewish camping. For yet others, it might mean volunteering at a camp as a doctor or an artist. Or maybe, you can send a child to camp from a family who cannot afford it this year.

Summer camp may only be two months out of the year, but the experience is for a lifetime. No longer can we keep our eyes closed to the importance of Jewish summer camps. For the sake of Judaism, let us strengthen our camps so we can strengthen the Jewish people. To paraphrase the midrash: we will show great love for our children and our life will have great blessing in it.

Shabbat Shalom.