

## Executive Summary

### THE ALUMNI OF RAMAH CAMPS: A LONG-TERM PORTRAIT OF JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

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#### *How Jewish are Ramah alumni, and how are they Jewishly engaged?*

The **key question** addressed in this research is: To what extent are the alumni of Ramah camps involved in Jewish life, years and decades after having attended a Ramah camp in North America? Specifically, to what extent do they:

- Feel committed to being Jewish
- Inmarry and maintain close ties with other Jews
- Engage in Jewish ritual observance
- Participate in Jewish communal and congregational life, and exercise liturgical leadership
- Identify with Conservative Judaism (or related identities)
- Maintain close ties with Israel

Throughout the analysis, we **compare Ramah alumni with other adult Jews with similar Jewish backgrounds**. For this purpose, we use two recent studies to provide sub-samples of contemporary Jewish adults who were raised by inmarried Conservative parents, as were the vast majority of Ramah alumni. These two studies are the [Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011](#) (“NY”) and the 2013 Pew study, [A Portrait of Jewish Americans](#) (“Pew”).

#### **Background**

##### **The Larger Context: Major Challenges to Religious and Ethnic Identities**

In undertaking this research, we need to bear in mind the larger context, one which presents considerable challenges to Jewish engagement today. Recent research on Americans demonstrates significant challenges to religious identification in America, with the sharp rise in numbers of the religious “nones” (those who report no religious identity) and sharp declines among Roman Catholics and Mainline Protestants. As for ethnicity, the other basis for Jewish identity, we observe that no US ethnic group is maintaining its identity and cohesiveness. This generalization is true even for Mexican Americans, who are both very numerous and fortified by continual ethnic replenishment from their neighboring homeland.

## **For Jews, A Shrinking “Middle”**

In line with these trends, recent research on American Jews reports that the “Jewish middle” (committed non-Orthodox Jews) is shrinking, while the numbers of Orthodox and episodically engaged Jews are growing. Of course, this larger trend is consistent with the long-term numerical decline in Conservative Jews since the 1960s.

## **The Good News**

The social scientific literature points to a positive long-term impact on Jewish identity from Jewish camping. So too does the literature specific to Camp Ramah. And all this is consistent with the wider finding: Jewish education—including camping—generally “works.”

## **The Survey: Over 5,000 Ramah Camp Alumni**

To assess the long-term impact of Ramah, we undertook a survey of alumni (and others associated with Ramah), fielded May 30 – July 28, 2016. We sent out over 45,000 invitations, of which about 28,000 went to former campers. In all, we received questionnaires from 9,553 respondents, suggesting an overall response rate of 21%.

Of respondents with usable completed surveys, 5,260 were from campers, of whom 72% had also served as staff. (The survey also reached staff who had never been campers, but their responses have been excluded from the current analysis, which focuses on camper alumni only.)

The respondents include sizable numbers from eight camps, in descending order: Wisconsin, Berkshires, California, New England, Poconos, Canada, Darom (Georgia), and Nyack, as well as small numbers from the recently established Ramah in the Rockies and other Ramah programs.

This sample seeks to represent the universe of Ramah camper alumni. However, **there may be an “upward” bias in the data**, as the sample may contain an unmeasurable overrepresentation of Ramah loyalists (and possibly “dissatisfied customers”).

## **Findings**

We start with some **preliminaries**:

- Respondents range in age from the teens through 65 and older, with about half between the ages of 25 and 49.
- Median age of starting Camp Ramah: 11 years old.
- Median number of years as a camper: 5.
- Median number of years as a staff member (for those who were previously campers): 2.

**Key Jewish engagement indicators:**

- **Being Jewish is important:** “How important is being Jewish in your life?” 83% say “very important,” compared with 60% for children of inmarried Conservative parents in New York (“NY”) and 54% in the country (“Pew”).

- **Many Jewish friends:** “How many of your close friends are Jewish?” 78% report all or most are Jewish, about the same as in NY (80%), but more than double the national rate (35%). Of those dating, 63% date only Jews.
- **Low intermarriage:** Of those married, just 7% are intermarried. This rate is far lower than the 35% for the comparison sample in the US (Pew) and slightly lower than the rate of 11% for those in NY.
- **High ritual observance:** Most Ramah alumni report participating in key markers of ritual observance. Over two-thirds use separate dishes for meat and dairy and usually light Shabbat candles; 9-in-10 fast on Yom Kippur. Differences with comparison groups in the US and NY can be quite large. For example, Ramah alumni are about 3 times as likely to light Shabbat candles.
- **High rates of synagogue attendance:** Over a third of alumni report attending services weekly and almost two-thirds attend at least monthly. Weekly attendance for Ramah alumni is double the rate for children of Conservative inmarried parents in NY and triple the US average (Pew).
- **Many liturgical leaders:** Large numbers take on liturgical leadership activities that demand a high level of religious expertise. A third have chanted Torah in the last year, and almost as many have led services as the cantor or shaliach tzibbur. Over a quarter have given a sermon or d’var Torah.
- **Highly affiliated and involved in Jewish community:** Ramah alumni have much higher rates of congregational affiliation (80%) than adult children of inmarried Conservative parents in NY (65%) and the US (49%). In addition, most have served as congregational or Jewish organizational lay leaders, and almost a third have worked for congregations or Jewish organizations.
- **Frequent visits to Israel:** Close to 100% of Ramah alumni have been to Israel. As many as 85% have visited twice or more, far more than the adult children of inmarried Conservative parents in NY and in the US.
- **Attached to Israel:** We find that 62% of Ramah alumni are “very attached” to Israel, making them more attached to Israel than those with inmarried Conservative parents in the NY study, and about twice as much as in the US (Pew). In addition, 76% of alumni have close friends or immediate family living in Israel and 18% have seriously considered living in Israel, both signs of strong connections to Israel.
- **Committed to raising Jewishly engaged children:** As many as 57% of Ramah alumni choose day schools for their children, surpassing the 43% who themselves went to day school. Another sign of their commitment to raising highly engaged Jewish children is that large majorities (over 9-in-10) think it is very important or essential for their children (when they become adults) to marry Jews, raise Jewish children, celebrate Jewish holidays, and feel attached to Israel. Majorities feel likewise about observing Shabbat. At the same time, they are split on keeping kosher, and most are not invested in their children regularly studying Jewish texts.

- **Long-term effects on friends and marriage:** Almost half report having at least three close friends whom they originally met at Ramah. Of those married, over a third are married to someone who went to Ramah (not necessarily the same camp), and just over 40% met their spouses through a Ramah connection.
- **Almost all have recommended Ramah to others.**

### Additional Findings

- **Some “leakage” from Conservative upbringing:** Almost 9-in-10 were raised Conservative (or Masorti or Traditional Egalitarian). Today, the comparable figure is just over 2-in-3, with gains for Orthodoxy, Reform and especially “other,” meaning generally “no denomination.”
- **Age trends:** Among the inmarried, younger alumni slightly trail the (high) Jewish engagement levels of their elders. Most differences by age are small, with the exception of Israel attachment, monthly service attendance, and liturgical leadership, where younger adults trail more definitively. In contrast, a higher percentage of younger alumni have Shabbat meals with friends.

For the sample as a whole, differences among the inmarried, intermarried, and non-married are critical, as they are for American Jews generally. As a rule, within the three marital groups, we see that the **younger generation (ages 25-39) displays levels of Jewish engagement equal to those who are middle-aged and in the older years.** The one exception is in Israel attachment, where the younger alumni trail their elders. In short, the principal reason for any overall old-young differences in Jewish engagement may be attributed to their differences in marital patterns. When as a group the young score lower, it is primarily because they are more often intermarried or non-married.

- **Serving as staff is key to long-term differences in Jewish engagement.** Among campers who went on to work as staff, Jewish engagement levels today are noticeably higher than among the campers who never became staff members. In fact, the number of years of camping, for those who never advanced to becoming staff, is not related to apparent long-term differences in Jewish engagement. In contrast, **the apparent impact of number of years serving as staff is quite pronounced.**
- Higher levels of adult Jewish identity are associated with **higher levels of Jewish upbringing** as indicated by parental ritual observance and attendance at a Jewish day school.

### Summing Up

#### **Ramah alumni exhibit high rates of Jewish engagement:**

- Years after the Camp Ramah experience, Ramah alumni **show high levels of Jewish engagement**, as evident in their ritual observance, congregational involvement, liturgical

leadership, Conservative identity, Israel attachment, and having Jewish friends and spouses.

- Rates of **Jewish involvement for Ramah alumni exceed** those of adults who are the children of inmarried Conservative parents. In general, the comparisons with the country at large (Pew) show larger gaps than those with the New York area. However, most gaps between Ramah alumni and the NY comparison are rather substantial.
- Ramah alumni are **highly connected** with each other, and with Ramah itself. They have numerous Ramah friends, spouses, and children. They recommend Ramah to others.

**In large part, high rates of Jewish engagement for Ramah alumni reflect years as a Ramah staff member:**

- While the duration of the **camper experience alone is unrelated** to adult Jewish engagement, eventually serving as a Ramah staff member is linked with higher levels of Jewish engagement.
- **Former Ramah staff members report higher Jewish engagement** levels than those who never served as staff members.
- The **number of years as a Ramah staff member** strongly predicts higher levels of adult Jewish engagement.

**Conclusions**

**We can infer that Camp Ramah has been critical to building a committed and connected core of Conservative and other Jews in North America and Israel.** The evidence of a long-term and substantial impact on Ramah alumni underscores the value of sustaining, strengthening, and expanding the Camp Ramah system throughout North America. At a time when North American Jews are contending with challenges to their numbers and commitment of the engaged “Jewish middle,” Ramah is critical to sustaining those numbers and fortifying that commitment.

Moreover, the apparent success of Ramah may bode well for other endeavors in American Jewry that are marked by intensive Jewish commitment and connection along with long-term education and ideological passion. In short, Ramah’s achievements may—and should—encourage support for a variety of similarly constructed attempts to produce intensive Jewish environments, be they at Ramah or under other auspices.

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