

Putting God Second

How to Save the Jewish Community from Itself

Senior Sermon – October 27th, 2018

by David Reinhart

Rabbi Ron Klotz, the longtime director at Goldman Union Camp Institute, is a master storyteller. Every Shabbat, at the Friday night camp fire, he would share a story with the campers and staff. Usually, this story came from the Hasidic masters and, more often than not, it dealt with the Ba'al Shem Tov himself. These stories were fantastic and fantastical, larger than life, lifting up the miraculous and illuminating Jewish values. Legends and myths teaching us how to live, how to be better people, better Jews.

Yet, one evening Rabbi Klotz shared a different type of story, not a legend, not a myth, but a true story from his own past, some 40 years earlier in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.

Ron was a counselor at OSRUI, another URJ summer camp. That session Ron was in charge of a group of 10-year-olds, many of whom were new to camp. One of these new campers, let's call him Johnny, was a little bit different. He would disappear from time to time, but he wasn't a bad kid. He wasn't causing or getting into trouble. It turned out that Johnny just liked to hide. He was a small kid, so he could squeeze into some pretty creative spaces. You can imagine that the first few times this happened his counselors, Ron included would freak. But, after a while they got to know the boy's favorite hiding places. His favorite one was a cabinet behind the *Chadar Ochel*, the Dining Hall, which happened to latch from the outside, which meant he was stuck until his counselors came to find him. So, whenever he disappeared, his counselors would go behind the Dining Hall, unlatch the cabinet, and out would step Johnny. This happened nearly every day.

Then, one Shabbat morning, a few weeks into the session, as the camp gathered for services, Ron realized Johnny was missing. Unphased, Ron knew where to check. He walked behind the dining hall, unlatched the cabinet, opened the doors and ... no Johnny. Getting worried, Ron looked in the bathrooms, the cabins, all the favorite hiding spots and still no Johnny. Ron went back to services to report in just as they were arriving at the Torah service. The Rabbi asked everyone to rise, he began singing, turned to the Ark, opened the doors, and ... there, in the Ark, crouching next to the Torah, was Johnny. Whispers and laughter spread throughout the Beit T'fillah. But, the Rabbi, without missing a beat, offered his hand, helped Johnny down from the Ark, had the camper help undress the Torah and sent him to go sit down.

I love this story. It illustrates a warm, loving, strong Jewish community. It depicts a Jewish leader, a Rabbi, that puts people and his community before tradition and Torah. And, this story epitomizes the many wonderful, life enriching aspects of Jewish summer camp.

This past summer, I returned to Goldman Union Camp Institute, lovingly called GUCI, for my twenty-third summer. Every year I see the incredible impact GUCI has on its campers and staff, from the first-year camper to the Rabbi that has been coming for 60 years. These individuals quickly regain a deep sense of belonging to the GUCI community and leave with a strengthened sense of Jewish identity. For, if we know anything, camp is the best way to instill a strong Jewish identity. A recent study¹ of alumni from URJ camps and similar intensive teen programs revealed that alumni are twice as likely to view “Being Jewish” as “very important” (that’s 82%). If they are the children of an intermarried couple, they are nearly three times as likely to identify as very strongly Jewish (72%). Moreover, while only 39% of all individuals,

¹ <https://urjyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/URJ-Alumni-Impact-Study-Final-Report-by-Rosov-Consulting.pdf> and <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/creating-an-engaged-future-findings-from-the-urj-youth-alumni-impact-study/>

raised in a Reform household, give their children a Jewish education, **98%** of alumni give their children a Jewish education.

If Jewish community is our goal, then we know camp works, and we would be smart to try to replicate or, at least, learn from it.

In reality, many of our congregations do learn from and try to integrate aspects of camp into their community. Since the 1950s, with the founding of OSRUI in Oconomowoc, we have seen a number of changes in our synagogues which reflect the trends of the Reform Movement's camping system, particularly in worship and education.

The most evident of these changes is our synagogue music. The sing along, easier to learn melodies from camp have largely replaced grand cantorial pieces and choral singing. Likewise, the guitar, a staple at camps, has become a fixture in Reform worship, replacing the organ and complimenting the piano. A generation of songwriters, who grew up in the camping movement – Jeff Klepper, Dan Nichols, and, of course, Debbie Friedman – have embraced these trends and reshaped Jewish music.

Similarly, the worship space and style have been updated to imitate aspects of camp worship. Seating has been shifted to a semi-circular arrangement to facilitate a more communal feel, and the liturgy, particularly English translations and alternative readings, have taken on a more popular, less formal tone. These changes are meant to evoke accessibility and meaning-making, to encourage a greater connection to the worship experience.

In terms of Religious school, informal education developed from the style of camp has been adopted by many congregations, replacing more formal book-based classrooms. Therefore, students are taught through games and play, trying to make the learning informational and fun.

This too is reflected in the environment, with rows of desks being grouped into pods or fully replaced by communal tables. Some congregations have been more successful in this imitation than others, and it does seem to make the experience more enjoyable for the students.

These imitations, these aspects of camp brought into our year-round communities have helped. The music, the environment, the play and informality help to create a more open, inviting and meaningful experience for the members of our community, especially for those who attended camp. This is important and should not be overlooked, but only approximately 10% of affiliated Reform Jews across any age-range have attended a Jewish summer camp.² And, besides, we already know that these alumni are likely to be involved in a Jewish community. What about the other 90%? These Jews often continue to be disconnected, leading to the growing numbers of unaffiliated and, frankly, disinterested Jews. If the aforementioned aspects of camp do not reach these people, how do we engage them in Jewish community?

I still believe the answer is at camp. I just think we are getting distracted by the wrong aspects. The above-mentioned lessons from camp are about worship and Jewish education. These are intensely and explicitly Jewish endeavors, and they are two of the core activities of the synagogue as it has existed in the past and as it ought to exist in the future. They are important and essential, but they are not the reason people go to camp.

If you have ever heard a presentation about Jewish summer camp or talked to a director, then you know. Services, Jewish education, and Hebrew are the last things they mention, if they mention them at all. These sellers and directors of camp talk about all the activities campers have, the choices they get, the trips they take, the incredible community they build, and the

² Based on URJ enrollment numbers from Camp and Religious School

amazing staff that care for your children. If you ask the campers what they love about camp, they will say swimming, sports, drama, music, song session, free time, cabin bonding, ... friends, counselors, community. Sure, from the older campers you might get a few who mention services and Judaism, but there is good reason for this, which we will get to in a moment. People don't go to camp for services, education, and Hebrew, at least not at first; they go for the activities and the community. People don't go to GUCI, OSRUI or Livingston because it is Jewish; they go because it is summer camp, it just happens to be Jewish. Judaism is no longer enough to draw people in, and, to be honest, I'm not sure that it ever was. This is what we must learn from Jewish summer camp! If our goal is to create vibrant, living Jewish communities, then, perhaps, we need to put that second word, community, first.

Many congregations try to do this. Relational Judaism, as talked about by Ron Wolfson and others, focuses on building communities around Judaism, as does the chavurah movement. The URJ's obsession with audacious hospitality also comes from the desire to create warm, welcoming communities. These too are part of the answer. However, these campaigns typically have the greatest impact on people already involved in the community, and they are still aimed at encouraging people to come participate in the Jewish aspects of synagogue life: religious school, education, and worship. Even social justice initiatives and community organizing, which is more along the lines of what I will suggest, is still done and participated in because it is a meaningful Jewish activity, and rightfully so. These are great initiatives, I just want to push our focus on community even further.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman recently released a book with a controversial topic, *Putting God Second: How to save religion from itself*. In it, Rabbi Hartman claims, convincingly, that God's love has become a "zero-sum game." If I'm right and God loves me, then you're wrong and God

doesn't love you, which leads people to entrench themselves in their religion even at the detriment of Humanity and morality. He explains "While God obligates the good and calls us into its service, God simultaneously and inadvertently makes us morally blind," suggesting that the only way to be attune to the needs of humanity, of true morality, is to put God aside, to put God second.³

Today, I make a similar and, to some, an even more shocking claim. In order to save Jewish communities from themselves, I believe we need to put Judaism second. It seems that the Jewish – non-Jewish tension has become a zero-sum game. When we participate in Jewish life we miss out on "regular" life, and to participate in "regular" life we sacrifice our Jewish life. I propose we ignore this Jewish – non-Jewish dilemma all together and instead focus on people, on who they are and what they want to do, their interests, their goals, their hopes, their dreams. By encouraging them to be involved in their interests and pairing them with other like-minded or like-interested individuals, we will build community and avoid unnecessary stress to our peoples' Jewish identities.

Shocking as it may be, I am not the first Rabbi (or soon to be Rabbi) to make this claim, and for those of you who know me well, I bet you can guess who that was. Nearly a century ago, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan made a similar point.

"To expect worship to constitute the principle motive of social togetherness in the same way as professional or business interests, golf or gambling, is to put a strain upon average human nature. To make religion, in its commonly accepted sense, the aim of social cooperation is like organizing eating clubs for the purposes of having their members say grace together. The one

³ <https://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=442856>

unmistakable principle which emerges from the scientific study of religious phenomena is that in order to have religion in common, people must have other interests in common besides religion.”⁴

In other words, the community is primary. If we build community amongst Jews, through any interests, the Judaism will come, naturally. To paraphrase a review of Rabbi Hartman’s book, to put Judaism first, we need to put Judaism second.

Rabbi Kaplan used the example of meals and grace. In Judaism, the *motzi* and *birkat hamazon* are said because Jews come together to eat, not the other way around. This is exactly what camps do. When campers and staff say the *motzi* and *birkat hamazon* at meals, when they sing Jewish songs during song session, when they wake up and go to roll call, reciting *Modeh Ani*, *shema yisrael*, and the Na-na song, when they say the bed time *shema* and go to sleep, in all these times they don’t realize how intensely Jewish they are being. At first, these are simply things Jews do at a summer camp. This Judaism, these rituals happen naturally, as the result of a community built on shared interests and shared experiences. Then, and only then, can this Judaism become a shared interest as well.

This is seen in the older camper who includes services and Shabbat in their favorite parts of camp, for they have become fully integrated, fully committed to the camp community and have internalized this Jewishness. When people reach this level, they begin to consciously be aware of how these natural, Jewish elements enhance and frame their sense of self, their community, their entire life.

⁴ quoted in Mel Scult. “The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan.” pg. 96

Take the Friday night campfires at GUCI as another example. Campers and staff don't look forward to the campfire and story all week long because of its Jewishness. No! People look forward to the campfire and story because it is fun, because it is meaningful, because it builds community. The Judaism comes second. It **is** still important. These stories from our past and our tradition teach lessons and Jewish values, which enrich our lives and strengthen our communities. It **is** still essential, and, in order to create vibrant, living Jewish communities, Judaism may need to come second.

Camp exemplifies a community that puts Judaism first by putting Judaism second. Camp is a community which accepts people in their entirety, engaging their interests and developing self-identity. Camp is a community which does not take Judaism too seriously, allowing rituals to be integrated naturally and Jewishness to be internalized holistically. Camp is a vibrant, living Jewish community.

But, this sermon is not about camp. It's about Johnny, who climbed into that ark, and the Rabbi, who helped him down. Johnny found a community where he could do what he loved, hiding. He found a community where he wasn't pressured by the Jewishness yet learned what it meant, services and reading Torah on Saturday morning – after all he only hid in the ark on Shabbat. Amazing. And, he found a community that allowed and helped him to make Judaism his own, as exemplified by the Rabbi who, without scolding the boy, compassionately encouraged him to help bring the Torah from the Ark.

In this way, let us learn from camp. In this way, let us create vibrant, living Jewish communities. There are challenges, of course. We don't have the proximity, the intensity, nor the intimacy on which camp relies. Yet, we still have the people.

So, let us embrace our people for who they are and facilitate their interests, their goals, their hopes, their dreams. Let us allow our Judaism to happen naturally. Let us realize that Judaism is the result of our Jewishness, the result of our community. And, let us put Judaism first, by putting people first. Let us put Judaism first, by putting community first. Let us put Judaism first, by putting Judaism second.

When we do these things, more than Torah comes out of the ark, our people do.

Shabbat Shalom.