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Romance at Ramah: Six Decades of Ramah Marriages

THE RAMAH LEADERSHIP has always known that there are hundreds of married couples who met at Ramah. For years, individual Ramah camps have reached out to couples who met at camp. One of the walls in the *hadar oebel* at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires is covered with plaques inscribed with the names of the couples who met at camp. Similarly, Ramah Poconos has a *gazebo zugot* (couples gazebo). Convinced of the commonalities of the emotions and factors that lead to Ramah marriages, the leadership of the National Ramah Commission (NRC) began the first national outreach effort in the spring of 2005 to document the stories of these Ramah couples. We created a website at www.ramahmarriages.org and sent e-mail messages requesting that couples register and “spread the word” to other Ramah couples. At that time, we had no idea how much interest this project would generate.

As of this writing, 312 couples have registered on the Ramah marriages website. Although we believe that these 312 couples represent only a small fraction of the total number of Ramah marriages, the fact that so many couples have registered indicates the strong interest in this project as a movement-wide effort. The Ramah marriages webpage on the NRC website receives by far the most hits of any page on the site. As we conducted our e-mail publicity for the Ramah sixtieth anniversary celebration in 2007, we were amazed to see how many couples registered after each wave of publicity. This national project has supported the alumni outreach efforts of the individual camps. In fact, many alumni first reconnect with Ramah by registering on the Ramah marriages website; after a couple registers, the National Ramah office forwards alumni contact information to the couple’s home camp(s).

The Ramah marriages project has captured the attention of Ramah alumni and staff across all camps and Ramah programs. We are fascinated by

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how excited people become when they talk about Ramah marriages, and by how much they enjoy reading these stories. Why is it that the Ramah marriages project has become such a hot topic within the Ramah Camping Movement? We believe that the excitement is generated by a sense that these marriages represent an important contribution to the future of the Jewish people. Jewish camping is known to be one of the most powerful means of strengthening Jewish identity.¹ Further, researchers have documented the effect of Ramah's approach to informal Jewish education on the Jewish practices and attitudes of Conservative Jewish youth.² Given that Jewish marriage is viewed as one of the most important indicators of Jewish continuity, the large number of marriages that have grown out of shared Ramah experiences is additional evidence of the impact of the Ramah Camping Movement on generations to come.

An Overview of Ramah Couples

Couples have met at all of the Ramah overnight camps; they have met at Ramah Israel programs, at National Ramah staff training programs, and at alumni reunions. Marriage partners who met through Ramah friends or connections write to us, requesting to be included as a Ramah couple, even though they technically did not meet at a Ramah program. Ramah marriages have taken place in every decade following the establishment of Camp Ramah in 1947. The following table lists the number of marriages reported in each of these decades.

Marriages reported, by decades

DECADE MARRIED	NUMBER OF COUPLES REGISTERED ON RAMAH MARRIAGES WEBSITE
1950s	15
1960s	36
1970s	54
1980s	53
1990s	74
2000s	80
Total	312

Of the 301 couples who reported how many years the spouses spent at Ramah as campers or staff members, there were 159 couples in which at least one spouse had been at a Ramah camp for ten or more years and sixty-seven couples in which both spouses spent ten or more years at Ramah. Of the 301 couples who reported how the spouses met, 187 met when both were on staff,

with an average of 4.3 years from the year they met until the year they married. Eighty-three couples met when both were campers, with an average of 10.9 years from the time they met to the time they married; and twenty-eight first met when one was a camper and one was on staff, with an average 7.5 years from the year they met until the year they married.

Shared Values and Jewish Identity

Many Ramah couples speak of the importance of the values the spouses share and of the role of shared values in creating a strong foundation for marriage. Jeffrey Tigay got to know his wife, Helene Zubkoff Tigay, at Ramah Poconos in 1963 after they had briefly met as students at The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). He writes, “the shared values that brought us [to Ramah] enabled our relationship to blossom much more rapidly than would have been possible in a different environment. It is one of the many things for which we are eternally grateful to Camp Ramah.” The Tigays were married in 1965.

Jonathan Kremer and Ellen Helfman Kremer first met on Israel Seminar in 1970, then lost touch until meeting again years later. Jonathan writes, “Ramah in Wisconsin, Ontario, the Berkshires, and on Seminar gave me a love for Shabbat, Israeli dancing, and the best [that] Conservative Judaism has to offer. I knew that I wanted to live Ramah 24/7. When I re-met [Ellen] while Israeli dancing at MIT, shared values and experience led to love and marriage.” The Kremers have been married since 1980.

Not only do couples describe the shared values that brought them to Ramah, but they also describe the influence of Ramah on shaping their Jewish identities. Richard Gavatin met his future wife, Linda Spitzer Gavatin, on Israel Seminar “in the magical summer of 1968,” when they were both fifteen. Richard writes that his Ramah summer played a critical role in determining his sense of self as a Jew:

There were two kids from Sweden. I was one of them. I met the girl who became my wife then. . . . How important for my sense of belonging was Camp Ramah? Immeasurable. No words can adequately describe the role of that summer in my commitment to Judaism. It was the turning point for me and without that summer at Camp Ramah, I would most likely have gone the way most young European Jews go: into assimilation. . . . Thanks to Camp Ramah I survived as a Jewish person!

David Cutler met Rachel Fish at Ramah New England. They were married in 2004 and write:

Ramah helped shape both of our Jewish identities and solidified our relationships to Judaism. The Ramah experience fostered an environment of

Jewish learning, questioning, growth, and love of Zionism, all of which play a major role in our lives as individuals and as a married couple. [We are] confident that our Ramah “upbringing” will influence our lives for years to come.

Shari Berman Kalter and Noah Kalter met at Ramah Day Camp in Nyack in 1998. Shari writes about experiencing Judaism with Noah at Ramah and the impact that Ramah has had on her life:

Camp gave us a chance to be together in a unique Jewish environment and have an amazing summer at the same time. . . . Camp Ramah was/is a large Jewish influence in my life and meeting my husband and my friends there only adds to that amazing camp experience.

Another common theme of Ramah marriage stories is that couples developed strong friendships as a basis for their connections prior to developing romantic relationships. Guy Alberg and Beverley Moskovic Alberg met as staff members at Camp Ramah in Canada in 1981 but did not marry until a decade later. Guy writes:

Bev and I became good friends while teaching swimming together over two wonderful summers. While we never dated at camp, when we finally decided to get together we had so much in common through our experience at Ramah and knew so many of the same people that we never had to struggle through that awkward first date. In fact, it was more like old friends rekindling a friendship. Our Ramah experience brought us closer together.

Jami Datnow Rosenthal and Adam Rosenthal first met at Ramah California in 1988 when they were nine years old. They write that they were long-time friends and pen pals, “and had crushes on each other off and on. . . . Years later, when we were in college, we returned to camp as Tikvah (now Amitzim) counselors, fell in love, and have not been apart since.”

Jeff Blum and Cindy Goldfarb Blum of Camp Ramah in the Poconos tell a similar story. They met in 1966 and were married in 1975. They write:

The camp environment fostered natural and comfortable friendships across genders. This allowed us to become friends first—then, many years later—lovers, all within the context of Jewish values, living as respectful and moral people. Our relationship is built on this foundation and has sustained us for over thirty years of marriage. Not only as best friends to each other, we have retained our camp friends and other Ramahniks as the people we feel most connected to in our lives.

Of course, it doesn't necessarily take a decade for friendships to lead to marriage. Vanessa Ivey and Jonathan Stein met at Camp Ramah Darom in 2002 and were married in 2006. According to Vanessa:

I became friends with Jonathan (a year older) because his younger sister was going to be a camper in my edah. . . . Our friendship grew once the campers arrived because Jonathan came to see his sister a lot. The first Shabbat evening, he asked me to spend some time with him. We sat at the campfire circle and talked all night. From there, our friendship grew into dating.

Ramah Couples in Israel

At Ramah, Israel programming and the presence of the *mishlahat* are designed to encourage Zionism and strengthen campers' and staff members' connections to Israel. Twenty-five of the couples registered on the Ramah marriages website now live in Israel. Jonathan Rimon (formerly David Milgram) and Wendy Wolman Rimon write, "Our summers in Ramah provided our shared foundation of Jewish values and planted the Zionist seeds." They met as staff children at Ramah Poconos in 1961. Jonathan's family made aliyah in 1971, and Wendy made aliyah in 1974; the couple was married in 1975.

Josh Kulp and Julie Zuckerman began dating in Israel during the summer of 1995 when they were both group leaders for Ramah Seminar. They write:

We had led fairly parallel Ramah and USY "careers" until then, both serving as *rashei edah* at our respective camps (New England—Julie; Poconos and then, Canada—Josh). We spent a lot of time together during the staff Shabbaton before Seminar and went out on our first official date on that *motza'ei Shabbat*. By the time Seminar officially started, we were already an item, and despite being in different *hativot* [groups], we managed to see plenty of each other. The campers only found out in the last week or so. We got engaged a few months later, and we've been living happily in Israel ever since!

Jewish Continuity and the Multi-Generational Ramah Family

The positive impact that Ramah has had on Jewish continuity and future generations of Jews is another universal theme of Ramah marriage stories. Michael Katz and Betsy Dolgin Katz met as staff members at Ramah Wisconsin in 1960. They, too, speak of the powerful effect that Ramah had on the Jewish life of their family:

In camp we shared our love of Judaism and of children. We imagined together the kind of life we wanted to lead. . . . Jewish living, Jewish learning, and Israel remain an important part of our life and that of our children up until today.

We have received many stories from those who consider themselves to be "true Ramah families" with two generations—and in some cases, three

generations—of Ramahniks attending multiple Ramah camps. Stanley Platek and Celia Silverstein Platek met at Camp Ramah in Connecticut in 1954 and married in 1957. Celia writes,

We were staff members in Ramah Connecticut, Poconos, Nyack, and Berkshires for eighteen consecutive years. All of our children went to Ramah from infancy until they were staff members themselves. Now our grandchildren go to Ramah Berkshires. We are truly a Ramah family.

Happiness shines through the words of Ramah couples who send their own children to Ramah. Larry Pepper and Dana Yugend-Pepper met at Ramah Wisconsin in 1974 and were married in 1983. Larry writes that he and Dana

had our favorite spots around camp where we would walk and talk. There was a tree on Nivonim hill that had a hollowed-out spot in it where we used to leave love notes for each other. . . . Now, going back to camp as parents, and seeing our daughter so happy there, where we were so happy, is very powerful.

Jon Gutstein and Susan Mack Gutstein also met at Ramah Wisconsin. They were friends throughout high school and college and married in 1992, sixteen years after they first met. Susan writes:

Ramah has always held a special place in our hearts and the fact that we can say that we originally met there makes it even more special. We have two kids who have been going to Ramah Day Camp, and now my son is in his first summer at Ramah in Wisconsin. Hopefully, next summer my daughter will enjoy her first summer there. Another very special fact is that my son is now a third-generation camper at Ramah in Wisconsin, as my dad went there as a camper the first year the camp started.

Some of the more recently married Ramah couples, looking toward the future, eagerly anticipate the time for their own children to go to Ramah. Jeffrey Arnowitz and Tamar Brendzel Arnowitz met at Ramah Berkshires in 1995 and wed in 1999. They write, “The ideals and values that brought us to Ramah provided a great starting point for a marriage that lives with those same values. We love Ramah and can’t wait to send our children.” Like Jeffrey and Tamar, Matthew Seltzer and Stacy Lipschutz Seltzer, who met at Ramah Poconos in 2002, want to continue the Ramah tradition for their families:

The Ramah community fostered our relationship by allowing us to discover just how many core values we share and opened our eyes to what our lives together could create. We could not have met at a more magical place than Ramah, and we look forward to sending our future children to this wonderful place.

Engagements, Weddings, and *Sheva Berachot*

Several of the most touching Ramah marriage stories are from Ramahniks who became engaged “on location” at their Ramah camps. Eric Weinstein and Sarah Klagsbrun met as staff members at Ramah Berkshires in 1987 but did not begin dating until years later. Six months after their first official date, they went to an alumni event at camp. Eric reports that on that day:

[W]e were engaged at camp. . . . I asked my old waterfront buddy, Mark Neustadt, to park a boat with the ring in it by “the rock” across the lake. I nervously swam out with Sarah, we got into the boat, and I returned home with my fiancée.

Michael Small and Sheila Berk Small met at Ramah Wisconsin in 1985 and became engaged there in 1988:

Being at camp let us discover that we had similar values, interests, and a love for Jewish life. . . . Three years after we met, we became engaged on the *mirpeset* [porch] of the *sifriyyah* [library], looking at the stars reflected on the mirror-smooth surface of Lake Buckatabon.

Numerous couples describe with delight the Ramah *ruach* (spirit) that was present at their weddings and tell of the numerous Ramah alumni who attended their weddings as officiants, guests, and members of the wedding party. When reading these stories, one can imagine the Ramah feel of these weddings, as well as the emotional connection that Ramah couples have with Ramah. Jennie Goldress and Andrew Eisenberger, who attended Ramah Berkshires and were married in 1996, write, “We sang *Rad hayom* at the end of our wedding with all of our camp friends linked arm in arm.”

Jonas Goldberg and Chelly Gilgore Goldberg, who spent their summers at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, were married in 1963. They report, “We even made a ‘deal’ with David Mogilner, *z”l*, that we would move our wedding date up to the beginning of June in order to spend the summer of 1963 at camp. David [Mogilner] and Alex Shapiro, *z”l*, were two of the rabbis under our *huppah*.”

Alan Kaell and Diana Schachter Kaell met while they were on Israel Seminar in 1970 and then worked as counselors at Ramah Wisconsin during the summer of 1972. They were married in 1975 by Rabbi Burton Cohen, who had been the director of Ramah Wisconsin when they were counselors. And Jami and Adam Rosenthal of Ramah California describe how “Rabbi Reuven Taff, whom we have known for years from Ramah (he was *rosh musikah*), officiated at our wedding and there were many fellow Ramahniks there to celebrate with us.”

Although hundreds of marriages are listed on the Ramah website, to date the list includes only two weddings that actually took place at a Ramah camp. In 1957, Moshe Tutnauer and Margie Weingarden Tutnauer were married at Ramah Wisconsin. They report that:

Jerry Abrams, [Wisconsin] Ramah director, was our *mesadder kiddushin* [officiant]. . . . Our wedding was followed by the closing banquet/wedding dinner attended by 500 campers and 200 staff. The singing and dancing in the *hadar ochel* were not to be believed!

More than three decades later, in 2001, Daniel and Ronna Mink were married at Camp Ramah in Canada. This description of their wedding, told in the third person, paints a vivid picture of the setting in the woods of Muskoka in Ontario:

They had a shtetl-like wedding in the woods, where the groom harvested young maple saplings for *huppah* poles and used his great-grandfather's *tallit* as a canopy. . . . The bride hand-lettered two traditionally composed *ketubbot* (just in case of breakage) on clay tablets and fired them in a kiln. She also hand-built two clay wine goblets (to be placed on the table) and glazed them with the words *dodi li*. . . . [The] glass that was broken was the light bulb from the woodshop, wrapped in a beautiful piece of silk. More than a dozen [members of the] *misblabat* [joined in] on the way to the woods site, and staff members sang Israeli songs as everyone rejoiced.

Although only a small number of weddings have actually taken place at camp, there are numerous couples who have celebrated an *ofruf* or sheva berachot at camp. For couples with late summer weddings, Ramah was the ideal place for an ofruf. Bruce Bromberg Seltzer and Deborah Bromberg Seltzer, New England Ramahniks, “got married at the end of August [1995], our wedding date set so we could spend that summer at camp. . . . We had an ofruf at camp and got married the weekend after camp ended.” David Krohn and Risa Rosenbaum Krohn believe that they were fated to meet in 1971 at Ramah Glen Spey after their original summer plans fell through. David reports:

We had made plans separately to be [on] staff at Palmer. When Palmer closed [for one summer] that year, we were both arbitrarily assigned to Glen Spey. (Who believes in “arbitrary”? We both believe it was the hand of God directing us to each other.) We met staff week and decided within two weeks that we would marry. We attended Palmer together the following year where I had my *ofruf* the last Shabbat of the camp year.

And, of course, there are those Ramah couples who visit camp right after getting married. Ralph Dalin and Hedy Loeb Dalin met at Ramah California in 1965 at the age of twelve and were married in 1972. They write, “On the

Shabbat following our wedding, we celebrated sheva berachot back at Ramah in Ojai.” Around the same time, Leora Weinstein Isaacs and Ron Isaacs met as counselors at Camp Ramah in Glen Spey, and they celebrated sheva berachot there after their 1971 wedding.

“Double and Triple” Ramah Marriage Families

Ivan Marcus and Judy Lefkowitz Marcus met at Camp Ramah in Connecticut and are one of several multi-generational Ramah families registered on the website in which both parents and children are in Ramah marriages. Judy, a long-time Ramah Berkshires board member, has worked at the Ramah camps in Connecticut, Berkshires, Glen Spey, and Poconos. She writes with great pride:

How wonderful to be claimed by more than one Ramah! Ivan and I spent our camping years at Connecticut where we were in the same edah but went out with others. We started going out together in Nyack the year it opened in 1961 and continued to see each other in Connecticut in 1962 before getting married in 1964. . . . All four of our children went to Nyack and Berkshires. Two of our children met . . . their spouses at Berkshires. Yuval, our oldest, met his wife Liz at one of the Berkshires Alumni Labor Day Weekends. They have three children, two of whom have already attended Nyack.

There are at least two other families that can claim three Ramah marriages. Wendy Wish Rosenthal, a staff member at Ramah California for more than thirty-five years, first met her husband Allan Rosenthal in 1965. They married in 1973. They are the parents of Adam Rosenthal (Jamie Datnow), whose story appears earlier in this chapter. In addition, Wendy and Allan’s son Jeremy met his wife, Gwen Sheldon, in 1998 when they were both *rashei edah* at Ramah California. Hal Spevack and his wife, Harriet Greenfader Spevack, met at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires in 1966. After getting married, they worked as staff members at Ramah Nyack, where their son Daniel was a camper at the same time as his future wife, Liz Arnold Spevack. Daniel and Liz, following in Hal and Harriet’s footsteps, fell in love at Ramah Berkshires; they were married in 1996. In addition, Hal’s cousin, Judy Spevack Marpet, met her husband, Mark Marpet, at Ramah Nyack.

The list of multi-generational Ramah marriages is a lengthy one. Norman Beitner and Ruth Lipnik Beitner met at Camp Ramah in Canada and got married in 1977; their son, Aaron, met his future wife, Marci Orman, at Ramah Canada in 1995. Steven Glazer met his wife, Andrea Soff Glazer, at Ramah Connecticut in 1962. After a two-day honeymoon in 1965, the Glazers spent the summer on staff at Camp Ramah in New England, where

three decades later, their son, Ari, met his wife, Stephanie Goldberg Glazer. Ari leads off his own Ramah marriage story with the words, “I am a second-generation Ramah marriage.”

Shira Milgrom and David Elcott met as staff members at Camp Ramah in California and married in 1973. According to Shira, “We shared the values of Camp Ramah about what Jewish life can be—and gave that to our children who also experienced Camp Ramah and other similar Jewish experiences. In fact, Yaron met his wife, Miriam [Sheinbein], at Camp Ramah and married exactly thirty years later.”

Conclusion

We hope that this chapter inspires readers to visit www.ramahmarriages.org to enjoy the wonderful stories of Ramah couples throughout the world and to encourage other Ramah couples to register. The number of campers and staff members in the Ramah Camping Movement continues to grow annually, so it is certain that there will be many more Ramah marriages in the future.

As we enter the next decade and prepare for the opening of Ramah in the Rockies, we are reminded that each camp has its very own “first Ramah marriage.” There is only one such marriage clearly documented on our website, from Camp Ramah Darom. Jason Cathcart and Vicki Sykes Cathcart met at Ramah Darom when the camp first opened in 1997 and were married in 2000. Jason and Vicki write, “We are both happy that Ramah decided to open a camp in the South. We will always be known as Darom’s first married couple. We are grateful for the friendships, knowledge, and support Ramah has given us over the past years.”

We look forward to posting many more Ramah marriages on our website in the years to come.

Notes

¹ A. L. Sales and L. Saxe, *How Goodly Are Thy Tents: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

² A. Keysar and B. Kosmin, *The Camping Experience 1995–1999: The Impact of Jewish Summer Camping on the Conservative High School Seniors of the “Four Up” Study* (New York: National Ramah Commission, 2001).