

# Where Consciousness Meets Community: Clues from Camp about Jewish Leadership

■ by **ALEX POMSON**

Building upon the articles in the winter *HaYidion*, Pomson looks at Camp Stone, which has a remarkable track record in cultivating Jewish leaders, to explore the principles of Jewish leadership as applied there.

Where might Jewish day school heads look for models to enrich and inform their understanding of the tasks of leadership? From what I've seen of their office bookshelves, it seems that Jim Collins's *Good to Great* and Boleman and Deal's *Reframing Organizations* have become primary references. Those books are on my bookshelf too; but because they address the challenges of leadership in multimillion dollar businesses and organizations, heavy intellectual work is needed to apply their conclusions to the day school sector.

In Erica Brown's important book *Inspired Jewish Leadership*, she takes a different tack. She turns to traditional Jewish texts so as to suggest some core principles for Jewish leadership. Her starting point is closer to home, but an imaginative leap is still required to derive lessons from the Babylonian Talmud or from the lives of Moses and King David to leadership of a Jewish day school in the twenty first century.

I would like to suggest another possibility. I turn to Jewish summer camp for models of leadership. I know that camp is not school, but given that Jewish

camp serve many of the children who populate Jewish schools, it's worth asking what the educational universes of camp and school might learn from one another in pursuit of a shared mission.

Recently, I was invited to spend time at Camp Stone, a Jewish summer camp that under the guidance of Yehuda Rothner, a



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remarkable Jewish educator, has gained a national reputation as an incubator of Jewish leadership. Over the last few years, former staff-members – “Stoners” they call themselves—have surfaced in all kinds of community settings (in day schools, welfare agencies, NGOs and synagogues) as emergent leaders exhibiting all manner of impressive qualities.

Returning to camp for the first time in many summers, I was tasked by the AVI CHAI Foundation with uncovering how young camp staff were learning to lead. To clarify: I was not asked to conduct a study of summer camp, but to look beyond the campers, as it were, so as to bring in to view the processes and expe-

riences that enable leadership to blossom in this special setting.

Here, then, are five things I learned at camp about leadership in general and about Jewish leadership in particular. My focus here is not on how certain leadership qualities come to be learned but rather on what these qualities are. These conclusions are framed with the special

intent of challenging some conventional assumptions about what leadership might and perhaps should look like in Jewish day schools.

## *Leadership as a verb; Jewish leadership as a subjective stance*

As a number of writers on leadership have put it, leadership is a verb not a noun. It is how people act and what they do; it is not the position they occupy. Understood in this way, people at every level of an organization can be leaders. At Camp Stone I found a subjective dimension to the expectation that leadership can occur throughout an organization. In these terms, *Jewish* leadership

involves not only acting in certain ways but also acting with certain kinds of self-awareness, whatever one's formal position. As will be seen below, this subjective stance—this consciousness—is derived in turn from particular assumptions about the nature of Jewish life and the sources of its vitality, assumptions that are rarely made explicit in Jewish institutions.

*IMPLICATIONS: Conceiving of Jewish leadership as acting with a certain kind of consciousness has profound repercussions for how future leaders are prepared. This is radically different from a conception of leadership focused on skills and capacities.*

#### **BEING A ROSH-GADOL—CONSCIOUS OF WHAT NEEDS TO GET DONE**

Leadership at Camp Stone involves being a “*rosh gadol*.” Not to be confused with the “big headedness” of colloquial English, this Hebrew term captures a number of qualities. It means taking responsibility if something needs doing; acting with initiative; and, most fundamentally, being conscious of a bigger picture at camp beyond oneself and one's specific role. By contrast, the “*rosh katan*” prefers to take a back seat, and claims inexperience, insufficient knowledge or a lack of familiarity with the broader context of camp.

*IMPLICATIONS:* The attributes of the rosh gadol privilege the skills of the generalist over the specialist. The person who feels “I can do this” without special training takes responsibility for the situation, but in getting the job done may not do the best possible job. This attribute is profoundly at odds with the culture of schools, where people's responsibilities are precisely delineated and where intruding in to someone else's professional space is often disapproved.

#### **CREATIVITY/YETZIRATIYUT**

Thinking and acting creatively are, in general terms, valuable leadership traits, but what if radical, genuinely divergent creativity is a necessary component of Jewish leadership? At Camp Stone, campers regularly re-enact historical events on an unimaginably epic scale. In a west Pennsylvania field, the staff has recreated, for example, the invasion of ancient Tyre by Alexander the Great, the dedication of the first Temple in Jerusalem, and the illegal entry of immigrants in to Mandate Palestine. The planning phases of programs often involve nailing an idea and then saying “that's good, but what if we...”. Interrupting the flow of program design, people are thus invited to think differently and to dream up new and creative ways to do things. As the camp's promotional literature indicates, there is an operating assumption at Camp Stone that “nothing is impossible.”

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**IMPLICATIONS:** *At Camp Stone, there is an implicit message that Jewish leadership and life is compromised by a lack of imagination. That's a message profoundly at odds with the world of schools (and not just Jewish ones) where fixed systems constrain conceptions of what is possible and ultimately of what is desirable. What if Jewish leaders were required to think and act outside the box, so that Jews and Judaism might thrive and not just survive?*

### **Beyond interpersonal intelligence to areyvut (collective responsibility)**

The rhythms and texture of camp life create an emotionally intense environment at the heart of which is the relationship between camper and counselor. Leadership in this environment is profoundly interpersonal. But the interpersonal relationships between counselors and campers are important not only because the staff must act in *loco parentis*, taking care of other people's children. These relationships are also rooted in a subjective sense that campers and counselors, the whole camp, is connected as Am Yisrael. The campers are not other people's children. Literally, they and their counselors share an identity as "the children of Israel"—a sense nurtured within the incubator-like environment inside the camp gate.

Nobody at the camp is moved more powerfully by this sense of shared identity than Rothner, the camp director, who regularly talks about the camp community as our "*am*" and of the "sacred" rela-

## **Being aware of making a contribution to the Jewish people seems a minimum requirement for all Jewish leaders wherever located.**

tionship between camper and counselor. This feeling of deep emotional connection to others comes from a powerful awareness of the ties that connect Jews with one another and it seems foundational to the fulfillment of the tasks of Jewish leadership.

**IMPLICATIONS:** *One wonders why (this) camp demands a more expansive sense of self than that called upon in other Jewish educational institutions. Ought not all Jewish leaders feel a sense of shared identity with the wider Jewish community and not just a sense of professional obligation to their clients or congregants?*

### **Jewish purposefulness/yi'ud**

One last characteristic of Camp Stone leaders is their sense of making a difference to the Jewish future. The senior staff (almost all of whom are only in their early twenties) explain that they come to camp because they've been encouraged to think about the contribution they're

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making to klal Yisrael. They see the potential in their jobs to "change people's lives."

Being aware of making a contribution to the Jewish people seems a minimum requirement for all Jewish leaders wherever located. But this same sense can become radically altered when one sees one's contribution not only in relation to the present Jewish moment but also in relation to the ancient Jewish past or at least to multiple generations of Jewish experience. In these terms the Jewish

leader carries the burden of Jewish history even when occupied by the seemingly mundane task of taking care of young American Jews for four weeks of their summer vacation, even if that only involves cutting salad in the kitchen. Thus, the camp director startles the staff, in his

last talk before camp starts, by suggesting that the first century rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai would be looking down on their work smiling, surprised that the Jewish people have survived so well. With an expanded sense of the context for one's acts, Jewish purposefulness has an almost cosmic scope.

**IMPLICATIONS:** *It is worth asking how leadership is changed by an expanded sense of mission. Does this expanded sense change the quality and intensity of leaders' practice?*

I submit that these five qualities are not peculiar features of the special circumstances at camp. They are readily seen in

the immersive environment of camp—and particularly at a special camp like Stone—but they can just as well compose what to look for in Jewish leaders in any number of institutions, not least in contemporary Jewish day schools.

Some of these characteristics are not peculiarly Jewish. Their Jewish force, I think, comes from the way that, together, they inform a way of being in the world. Jewish leadership in these terms means having a special sense of one's person, and also of one's place in Jewish history and among the Jewish people today. Jewish leadership means to be always in a self-aware and dynamic relationship with the Jewish past, present and future. It occurs where one's Jewish inner world meets the Jewish world outside. It is where consciousness meets community. ■

### **To learn more**

Pomson, Alex. *Summer Camp as an Incubator of Jewish Leadership: The Case of Camp Stone*. New York: AVI CHAI Foundation.