

Date: June 19, 2014

To: Camper Parents (with copy to staff)

Subject: Diversity at Camp JRF



Dear Parents,

Last summer, we were proud to be profiled in *The Jewish Daily Forward* in an [article](#) on transgender inclusion in Jewish summer camps. We said then what we really believe: being inclusive of every member of our community is important and, if we're really going to live the values that are so central to our work here at Camp JRF, we need to be inclusive of everyone regardless of their gender identity or expression or, frankly, any other part of who they are or where they come from. Camp JRF has always been a place where we strive to live our values and teach our community "How We Be." **Our Camp community is made up of all kinds of children and adults, all kinds of families, and all kinds of congregations from all kinds of places.** We've worked hard to make Camp a place where kids of different races, cultures, family compositions, and practices are not only included but welcomed.

We are proud of this commitment to diversity and aim to set the standard for creating a Jewish camp culture that is open and inclusive of the full spectrum of the Jewish community. We have been lucky to do this work in conjunction with a number of partners:

- Over the course of many years, we have worked closely with [Keshet](#) and with Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the LGBTQ synagogue in New York City, to ensure that our program and community are welcoming and inclusive of campers and staff of all sexual orientations, as well as those from **LGBTQ** families.
- When Sheira joined our team, she brought two decades of experience working with children with a variety of **special needs**. With her expertise and guidance, we seamlessly integrate campers of various needs and levels into one high quality program.
- This summer, we will welcome [InterfaithFamily.com](#) to train our staff in how to be cognizant about the ways in which campers from **interfaith** families may experience Camp and how, in addition to supporting them, we must be equally aware of their parents' varying experiences and expectations.
- We are in the beginning stages of a partnership with [Be'chol Lashon](#), an organization that advocates "for the growth and diversity of the Jewish people" by placing a focus on multi-cultural Judaism. Based on materials they have used in classroom settings, we will be piloting a camp curriculum this summer that looks at issues of identity and how the Jewish community can be inclusive of **people of color** (both here and around the world).

- In conjunction with the [Foundation for Jewish Camp](#), we are working to make Camp affordable for families in all **socio-economic** situations. We are proud to be among the most successful camps in their new BunkConnect program, showing our commitment to lowering the cost barrier to the powerful experience of Jewish summer camp.

For many of you, we expect that these areas of diversity are not only obvious and comfortable but, in many cases, may be part of your own personal experience. When we think back to last summer's article in the *The Forward*, however, we realize that, for many of our families, the issues of gender identity and expression, and of **transgender and gender non-conforming** people, will likely be a "learning zone." With this in mind, and with the knowledge that we are a community made up of many different sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, we wanted to provide you with some resources to discuss these issues with your children.

First, some simple definitions may be helpful:

- Sex (male, female, intersex) refers to the biology you were born with.
- Gender (boy/man, girl/woman) is your emotional or intellectual identity. This is developed at an age-appropriate point in life (which, for many, is 3 or 4 years old).
 - Some people develop a sense of gender identity that does not align with their biological sex; we call that "transgender." Some trans people decide to change their bodies through hormones or surgery to align their biological body with their gender identity and others do not make that choice.
- Sexual orientation (straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer) tells who you are attracted to.
 - Being transgender doesn't mean that someone is straight or gay (just like being "cisgender" – with a sex and gender that align – doesn't). People of all gender identities and all sexual orientations fall in love with people of all gender identities and all sexual orientations. Trans people might fall in love with someone of the same biology or different, of the same gender identity or different.
- Gender expression (masculine, feminine) is how you present yourself in the world.
 - Just because people express themselves differently than the stereotype doesn't mean they are trans; they might be gender non-conforming or they might just have their own style. We suggest steering clear of phrases like "girls don't wear" or "boys don't do" because people of all genders wear nail polish, or suits, or have short or long hair, or like the colors pink and blue, or play sports, or knit, or sing, or

Some people have a lot of questions about being transgender and get nervous about what to ask and what language to use. Here are a couple of basic guidelines:

- It's *never* okay to ask another person about which body parts they have – that's always private. (At Camp, where campers live in a communal setting, this means that privacy and modesty are particularly important.)
- It's *never* okay to ask someone who identifies as transgender what their name "used to be." The way they introduce themselves to you is the name they want to be called.

- It's *always* okay to ask someone what pronouns ("he/him," "she/her," "they/them") they prefer to use. If you aren't sure and can't ask, just use the person's name.

Most importantly, campers (and adults!) should think about how they would feel if someone asked them a similar question. Put differently, we all have something about ourselves that others might want to discuss and we might not. This concept that we all have special parts of our identity is a particularly good one for discussing transgender issues with your kids:

- Have you ever felt different or like you don't fit in?
- Has someone ask you a personal question that made you feel uncomfortable?
- How did it feel? What would have made you more comfortable?
- How can we help make our community (at Camp and at home) a place where everyone can feel comfortable to be who they are?

As you and your kids prepare for the summer, we encourage you to take some time out from packing to discuss the importance of diversity and being an active part in creating a truly welcoming community. Please feel free to reach out to us now, during the summer, and when your children return home if we can be helpful with this conversation or if you want to talk more about our values and "how we be." We're always here and look forward to speaking with you!

Thanks for being our partners in setting the standard for inclusion in the Jewish camping community as we create this joyful and welcoming Jewish youth community that, we know, will continue to transform the lives of our campers, staff, families, and – we hope – the world.

Kol tuv (all the best),



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Feel free to contact us if you'd like to discuss further!

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