

Social Justice at Camp: Principles, Tools and Places to Start

It's essential that all justice work come from a place of respect. Consider this quote by Australian aboriginal activist Lila Watson: "If you have come here to help me, then you are wasting your time...But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." In an environment already (in many ways) privileged, it's important that *tikkun olam* work not become another way of dividing "us" and "them" – whether those divisions have to do with class, race or role in camp.

- Think beyond getting your campers to say thank you to the kitchen staff, although that's a very important step. Make sure that you and your campers know the names of the people who help to maintain the camp facility -- and if it's appropriate, create some time to get to know more about who they are. If any of the staff live on camp property, find out if it's appropriate to invite them and/or their families to join an activity with your bunk (not necessarily to do Q&A with them but to do an activity together).
- If you're able to do programming with people and organizations from the towns surrounding your camp, be aware of the power dynamic. Try to find projects and activities you can do together – meet for a day of games at the park, or work on a service project in the town with local members of the community. Whatever the projects are, start by reaching out to the organizations to find out what they actually most need and how your camp population can be most helpful. Maybe a staff member from that organization can come to present to your staff or older campers about the key issues that town or region is dealing with.

Think about who's in the "room" and what they bring:

- You: What are your passions and perspectives? How can you draw on them to determine which topics or issues to focus your programs on?
- Your camp community:
 - Find out what issues matter most to the other members of your staff. Work with them on storytelling -- how can they teach or give a *dvar Torah* or in some other way share about their connection to this issue?
 - How much have justice issues been a part of your camp programming and conversation before? Make sure to meet your community where they're at -- build up a base of engagement and understanding before jumping to more complex activities. Make sure that your anti-oppression ideas and frameworks inform those more introductory activities as well, even if you don't explicitly speak about or learn about those ideas until farther along the way.
 - What do you know about the diversity of your community and their personal connections to and experiences of injustice? Be sure not to assume that everyone comes from the same experiences or identities -- there's likely far more diversity than you might know about. Make sure that activities and language don't create an "us" and "them" -- all justice issues intersect with and impact members of the Jewish community, so make sure your approach to the topic reflects that understanding and sensitivity.
- Your camp administration: Some of these issues could potentially be sensitive to bring up with the camp administration. While I hope this isn't the case, you may find out that your camp's decisions about environmental impact or food or worker policy don't line up with justice-minded values. If this turns out to be the case, approach the administration from a place of respect and a genuine desire to create change together. It's quite likely that they'll be happy to hear your thoughts and open to trying new things – but that's much less likely if you put them in a defensive position. Avoid starting with petitions or

other forms of massing campers or staff “behind their back.” Start by asking for a personal meeting or asking for their advice on the programs you’re planning.

Work from and towards a justice learning path:

- An inciting experience leads to new awareness of an issue...
- That awareness creates productive discomfort...
- That discomfort prompts deep learning about the issue and what’s being done about it...
- That learning helps you find your way towards sustained and effective engagement.

Balance action and education:

- In terms of social justice, camp is primarily more effective as place of education than a place of action. Take the opportunity that an ongoing and intensive educational environment provides to build in ongoing learning on a particular issue. Build the learning into unconventional places in the camp schedule: for example, make a daily ritual in morning services to learn a new fact or to hear a quick story about a real-life person and how the issue you’re learning about impacts them. Help campers gain a sense of where these issues come from and how they play out – take it out of the abstract and into the concrete “people like me are dealing with these difficulties” and “the choices we all make affect this issue.”
- Make sure that our social justice programs have links to the real-life issues going on – look for ways to educate about root causes and to bring that understanding into an action opportunity. For example, if you’re going to make PB+J sandwiches for a local homeless shelter, spend part of the program learning about some of the causes of food insecurity. If you’re doing a workshop on special needs awareness, find out what special needs advocacy groups are lobbying for in your area and make time to write letters to the government or organizations they’re trying to change.
- Use the camp environment as a place to ground your learning. For example, choose an upcoming meal and see how far back you can trace each item of food that will be a part of that meal. Find out the brands that are used, where those brands come from, what we know about them. Was the food prepared in a way that reflects consciousness of the environmental impact? Of workers’ rights? How many different places does an average camp meal come from? How much gas did it take to get the food from the ground to the table? Look up information on carbon footprints – see if there are things that can happen at camp to balance camp’s environmental impact.
- Make sure to help campers identify action steps they can take at home. Are there organizations who are organizing on this issue that they can get involved with? Are there ways they can change some of their household choices?