

BEST PRACTICES MANUAL



A Guide in Recruitment, Engagement and Retention
of Russian Speaking Jewish Campers

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Foundation for Jewish Camp's Russian Speaking Jewish Outreach and Engagement Initiative has been made possible with the generous support of Genesis Philanthropy Group.



INTRODUCTION

This Best Practice Manual is designed to support camp implementation of recruitment, engagement, and retention strategies for Russian Speaking Jews (RSJs) involved in Foundation for Jewish Camp's RSJ Outreach and Engagement Initiative (RSJ Initiative) in addition to prospective camps seeking guidance on supporting RSJ campers.

The RSJ Initiative launched in 2013 with the goal of expanding outreach and opportunities for North American RSJs to attend Jewish camp in order to strengthen their Jewish identities. Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC) would like to thank the Genesis Philanthropy Group for their support in developing and implementing this initiative.

By honoring the specific nuances of the RSJ community, FJC has been successful in helping camps effectively engage RSJ families. This manual describes the best practices by camps throughout the years, in the hope it will prove useful to past, current, and prospective participants of the RSJ Initiative, future funders, community lay leaders and anyone else who is looking to bring RSJs to Jewish camp.

This manual may at times generalize the RSJ community, their culture, and their identity. Information in this manual is derived from FJC's learning through working with the RSJ population at Jewish summer camps, as well as research conducted by Informing Change, a strategic learning firm that worked in partnership with FJC and Genesis Philanthropy group to evaluate the effectiveness of the RSJ Initiative.



FJC LAUNCHED THE RSJ INITIATIVE IN 2013.

GOAL:

Expanding outreach and opportunities for North American RSJs to attend Jewish camp in order to strengthen their Jewish identities.

BACKGROUND ON THE RSJ COMMUNITY IN A SUMMER CAMP CONTEXT

For many RSJs living in the Diaspora today, growing up in the Former Soviet Union meant separation from Jewish life, tradition, and culture. Those that expressed themselves Jewishly did so in private, but for many it eventually led to assimilation and a loss of Jewish culture and identity.

According to the Informing Change evaluation, “Expanding the Circle of Jewish Camp: An Evaluation of the RSJ Camper Outreach Initiative”:

“ The typical RSJ family in America has roots in Eastern Europe, reports a wide range of incomes, and are minimally engaged in Jewish activities outside of the home... Children whose parents are the most recent RSJ immigrants and even children who are the first generation born in North America may face the most difficult pathway to a summer at a Jewish camp, from financial need and family trust issues to narrow views of summer options and lack of familiarity with families whose children attend camp.

The idea of sending a child to overnight camp is not a “culturally familiar” concept for RSJ families. American Jewish parents acquire a positive impression of Jewish overnight camp from the media, their friends, or through their own experiences and upbringing, whereas RSJ parents often have negative, and/or neutral feelings about overnight camp because they did not experience it or do not see the value of it.

A professional working in the RSJ community and guest speaker at the RSJ counselor webinar series offers the following explanation of the RSJ connection to Judaism:

“ For Russian Speaking Jews, often times culture and arts is a Jewish value. For example, studying who Chagall was, for many of us, is what it means to be Jewish. It doesn't necessarily need to be a Shabbat ceremony to feel Jewish. Our job at camp is to create a meaningful platform for the campers, that relates to their personal stories so that they will be more inclined to think about the question, ‘*What does it mean to be Jewish?*’... and then later introduce the “classic Jewish practices” so that they feel more comfortable.

Each RSJ family has a unique story and a particular connection to their Jewish identity. FJC's experience in the field has shown that there are overarching similarities in strategies utilized by camps that have benefitted the most from the RSJ Initiative, such as the importance of building trust or the highlighting of learning and skills development as a selling point.

GROWING ENROLLMENT AND IMPACT

While participating in the Initiative requires an initial investment from camps in terms of hiring a recruiter and putting resources toward engaging this community, the long-term benefits impact camps and the campers. Participating camps have grown RSJ enrollment as a result of this initiative, and campers are impacted beyond their camper years.

While an increase in RSJ enrollment has boosted overall camp enrollment numbers, the impact of having more RSJ campers extends to an overall identity shaping experience. An RSJ Unit Head at Camp Livingston, reflects on her time as a camper, saying:

“ It would've been great to grow up with other Russian Speaking Jews at camp. I didn't have that opportunity; I was always more connected to my Jewish life than my Russian life, and now I'm getting older and wish I had the evenness of a Russian and Jewish connection. I think having more RSJs at camp can mend that gap... Adding a level of diversity within the community will help [participants] grow as campers and as people.

FACT:

Participating camps have grown RSJ enrollment as a result of this initiative, and campers are impacted beyond their camper years.

RECRUITMENT



This section will address overall RSJ recruitment, how FJC has understood the needs of this community, and strategies that have been effective for recruiting this population.

While working with the RSJ community to promote Jewish camp, it's important to focus on a couple key areas, including building trust and "selling" the value of camp.

KEY FOCUS AREAS

BUILDING TRUST

Recruiters have identified that trust is a major factor that has made RSJ parents hesitant to send their children to camp. Culturally speaking, RSJ parents are worried about sending their child away for the summer without initial trust in the camp director or an external relationship with another family attending camp. Jewish overnight camp is an unfamiliar idea for many families from former Soviet Union countries, so it is important for families to feel they can trust summer camps with their children.

Communication is a critical component to developing this trust. RSJ families that attend Camp Young Judaea Midwest have shown a general need for more frequent communication with the camp director. They want more information about their children while at camp than other families, including phone calls at least two times a week if not more. Being flexible with the needs of the parents will help to build trust and partnership with them.

An experienced recruiter working with Camp Judaea explained her experience with a particular family:

“ I have known this family for 5 years now. Every year, they come to the open houses that I organize and they ask questions. They call me during the summer to ask questions and I send them photos of camp but they have been too worried to send their children away for a whole summer. Finally, this year they are ready and have asked me to hold their hand through the process.

Trust is an important piece of developing a relationship with an RSJ family. They must trust the source in order for families to feel that this is something they want to learn about and invest in.

“SELLING” THE VALUE OF CAMP

Relative to other North American Jewish populations, there is a lower level of engagement with the Jewish community and a lack of Jewish knowledge among RSJ parents. When Judaism plays a minimal or nonexistent role in the lives of RSJ parents, it is difficult for them to see the value of what Jewish camp can provide for their children.

The time and effort that it takes to “sell” the value of camp – coupled with the tendency for RSJ families to resist or reject the concept of camp – should be taken into consideration when planning to recruit from this population. When “selling the value” of camp, be sure to highlight all that camp has to offer to potential camp families.

The Informing Change Evaluation explains: “the typical RSJ parents overall are less interested in recreational activities, rather prefer building on knowledge and furthering their children’s education.”

Many camps have amenities such as; a lake, pool, water skiing, canoeing, horseback riding, archery etc. When explaining the added value that camp can bring into their children’s lives, highlighting learning and skill development is useful in the recruitment process.

When explaining the day to day schedule at camp, give examples that can yield tangible results.

- 1. A typical conversation** might look like, “we offer free swim at camp every day” while for an RSJ parent it should be reframed as, “Throughout the summer, your child will have the option to develop their swimming skills and take a swim test which will allow them to swim in the lake. If they choose to do so and are proficient, we can offer them a course in lifeguard certification.”
- 2. Discuss camp clubs** they can join to develop their skills in Hebrew, musical instruments, sports, the arts, etc.
- 3. Camp can provide opportunities** for Bar and Bat Mitzvah practice or a summer reading club.

Like most parents, RSJ parents need to be sure that their investment in summer camp will yield outcomes that they believe will benefit their child best, such as expanding their knowledge and building new skills.

RSJ DEDICATED RECRUITMENT STAFF

Directors of past and current RSJ Initiative camps have agreed upon the importance of having an RSJ point person to help with recruitment, someone who understands the nuances that are specific to the RSJ community. It's helpful for this person to be someone who speaks the same "language" and can understand the mentality of the RSJ experience.

HIRE A RECRUITER

An RSJ recruiter is someone who is hired by the camp director to source potential new campers. RSJ Initiative participating camp directors recommend finding a recruiter who understands camp, and already has contacts within the RSJ community. Having a designated, trained person who is well versed in camp life will help build and maintain relationships with RSJ families, and make them feel at ease sending children to camp for the first time.

The current recruiter for Camp JCA Shalom had utilized multiple strategies since she was hired as a recruiter. She conducted many in-house visits, made numerous phone calls to potential families, and attended camp fairs and events targeted to the Russian Jewish community.

For RSJ families, having a face-to-face conversation with a "camp expert" that speaks their language is instrumental.

The camp director explains,

“ Our recruiter is deeply involved with the Russian Jewish community in Southern California. Her knowledge of the culture and ability to explain camping to Russian speaking households is invaluable.

The current recruiter for CBB Montreal says,

“ When I first started this job, my target was to show people what camp is. I brought people to the camp to discover this place and to show them all the activities available for their kids. Open house, a summer day in the camp, family weekend and Russian Shabbaton were some of the events where people got to drive up to camp and explore the place. I organize information sessions that explain more about the camp and give deeper explanations about topics like, the day life of a camper, camp activities, Jewish life, food, etc..

PARENT AMBASSADORS

Parent Ambassadors are parents of RSJ campers who have a network of RSJs and/or are connected to the Jewish community. They can be instrumental in helping to identify potential new RSJ campers, organize camp visits, host open houses at camp, and conduct follow up calls and meetings with prospective families.

Parents of returning campers can create a “group” of ambassadors, also referred to as “Ambassador Groups”. These are camp parents, selected by the camp recruitment team, who work together to identify prospective families, alternate organizing house parties for new families, accompany them on camp visits, and follow up on meetings. These groups should contain camp advocates who are interested in helping with outreach. Successful ambassador groups typically include families with dedicated camp parents that have connections to other RSJ parents in the community and can work together to recruit more campers.

It can be daunting for a child to go to camp for the first-time without knowing anyone. Having a parent ambassador group will help not only the parents feel comfortable sending their child to camp, but also give a first-time camper a connection to other campers.



Ambassador groups can help prospective campers navigate through the day to day at camp, explain what to expect, and share experiences which will excite them about how their summer will be. This model will require more attention from camp dedicated professional/s to ensure continuous open lines of communication with parent ambassadors. It is crucial to have someone from the camp staff act as a liaison to bridge the gap between them. This will ensure a smooth transition of knowledge and action items for both the recruiting group and the camp staff.

This group can also serve as a support system for the parents. Parents will be able to connect with each other and share stories and experiences. Parents who are less familiar with the camp structure will have a group to lean on which will help them to become more comfortable with the idea of sending their kids to camp, rippling out towards an increase in camper retention.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

MARKETING MATERIALS

According to the Informing Change report and reflections from recruiters, certain marketing materials have proven effective, such as:

- Brochures
- Promotional videos
- Websites in Russian
- Advertisements in Russian
- Open houses
- Social media posts
- Facebook groups for Russian speakers
- Home hosted parties and informal gatherings
- On-site presence at local community events
- On-premise advertising at partner organizations
- Peer-to-peer grassroots efforts (Parlor meetings, referrals, etc...)

While each community has their own unique needs, an experienced recruiter for Camp B'nai Brith of Montreal, explains his successes with using social media as an effective tool in spreading the word about camp. He explains,

“ The best way to share information about CBB was by social media. Last year, a new Facebook group was created: RSJ initiative of Montreal. This group combined other Jewish Facebook groups with different missions. It has more than 700 members, mostly Russian speaking Jews. Therefore, this was the best way to share information about the camp.

Utilizing social media helped bring awareness to organized activities, and in this case, a Shabbaton. He explains,

“ In Fall of 2018, a Shabbaton was organized at CBB, where we found many new RSJ clients. This year, we'll do a second Shabbaton where 170 people will come together to see the camp and participate in different activities. During this weekend, new potential clients can socialize with current CBB campers and parents to know more about the camp life.

Host an Open House at Camp

A recruiter may also utilize the time during the summer while camp is in session to host an open house. Bringing families in to see and experience camp for themselves gives them a new perspective on what camp life looks like and helps them envision what this experience could be for their children. Building trust with the recruiter helps parents trust the idea of camp in general.

Expanding Targeted Outreach

In order to expand their targeted outreach to the RSJ population, Pinemere Camp used a social media specialist's services to create targeted ads, camp staff made a number of trips to NYC (both Manhattan and Brooklyn), D.C. area, Northern N.J., and various locations around Philadelphia. As a result of all those efforts, they were able to recruit 15 new RSJ campers, bringing the total RSJ camp population to 33.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The importance of building personal relationships with families should not be overlooked when working on recruiting RSJ campers. Participating in events together, sharing meals, and conducting personalized tours of the campsite will help RSJ families feel comfortable with the camp staff (who will be responsible for their children) and in turn feel more comfortable with camp as a concept as well.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

One Happy Camper® and Scholarship

For most RSJ families, summer camp is a foreign concept as well as a luxury. Since RSJ parents are unfamiliar with camp, educating RSJs about camp's impact has been a priority effort to date. This effort includes connecting families to a one-time up to \$1,000 incentive grant through FJC's signature One Happy Camper® program, designed to encourage families to attend Jewish camp for the first time.

One Happy Camper incentives and camp scholarships enable a large majority of RSJ campers to attend camp. OHC is a one-time only grant. However, many RSJ families will need continued financial support through camp scholarship as well. Many camps offer RSJ families subsidies at a different rate than other families, as this is critical to camper retention as camp develops a long-term relationship with the family and continues to demonstrate the value of the camp experience. It should be noted that some RSJ families may have the means to pay for camp, but do not yet understand or believe in the full value of the experience. On the other hand, other RSJ families are dependent on scholarships and cannot afford camp without support. Continued support of these recruitment tools is essential to maintaining participation by RSJ campers.

Partner Communities

Communities that partner with camps to help provide financial incentives to families play an important role in camp enrollment. Organizations that are already working in the RSJ family engagement space can be excellent partners in organizing events, spreading awareness of camp initiatives, and/or being thought partners.

Examples of partner communities include:

Local JCCs, Local Synagogues, Local organizations, i.e Jookender in Boston, RAJMN in Minnesota, JUF Chicago, COJECO, Jewish Family Services, Jewish Federations, Jewish Schools

Possible collaboration methods include:

- Offer your camp's facilities for RSJ community events
- Invite camp staff to volunteer at community events
- Offer programming at RSJ events and use it as an opportunity for parents to "meet the staff"
- Host a trivia night at a local community center
- Organize a communal holiday celebration

For example, Herzl camp partnered with RAJMN (Russian American Jews of Minnesota) to bring Herzl Camp programming to new families through Purim and Chanukah events, and other family programming.

DID YOU KNOW?

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INCENTIVES FOR RECRUITERS AND AMBASSADORS

COMPENSATING RECRUITERS

Hiring someone to help with recruitment efforts can look different for every camp and is dependent on the relationship and needs of the recruiter. Some examples of how camps are compensating recruitment efforts are:

- Providing a discount on camp tuition
- Stipend for time and effort
- Finder's fee (fixed amount of money per camper enrolled)
- Refer-A-Friend incentive

Some examples of what this looks like in practice are:

1. Both Eden Village and CYJ Midwest camps **incentivize parental referrals**, offering RSJ families anywhere from \$180-\$1,000 off their child's tuition if they recruited other RSJ campers.
2. At Camp Zeke, their main recruitment tool was **financial parental incentives**, such as subsidizing camp tuition for RSJ recruiters which has proven very successful.

The time and effort spent on targeted marketing to the RSJ community and engaging Russian families became an integral component of Camp Zeke's overall recruiting strategy and has resulted in roughly **20% of all Camp Zeke's campers being of Russian-Jewish descent.**



ADVICE FOR WORKING WITH RECRUITERS

Recruiters should see camp in action in order to effectively and accurately communicate the value of camp to prospective families.

Communication between the recruiter and the camp director is crucial.

- The camp recruiter needs to have access to regular updates on camp and space availability in order to help engage more campers.
- It is best for both partners to be mutually invested and committed.
- It is important to make the recruiter feel supported, but also be sure to have some specific questions to ask them to gauge their work experience and what they can bring to the camp team.
- Create a list of goals and outcomes for each conversation with the designated camp recruiter to help frame your discussion.
- Throughout the partnership with a recruiter, the camp's needs might change based on what is happening in the field. Ideally, the camp should feel that they have a true partner who understands the ever-evolving nature of camp and is both flexible and proactive in responding to needs as they arise. This partnership is also helpful in handling the logistical side of camp work – for example, sharing when the camp has communications with RSJ families or maintaining awareness of which sessions are filling up and/or selling out.

CBB Montreal's recruiter explains the instrumental impact of a positive working relationship with the camp director as follows:



I organize information sessions that explain more about the camp and give deeper explanations about topics like: the day to day life of a camper, various camp activities, Jewish life, food, etc. Since I've been working at this camp for many years, I know a lot about the place and my camp director gives me permission to run different activities on the camp grounds. I find that it's very important when the management team shows support for their recruiter.

ENGAGEMENT & RETENTION



FACT:

RSJ parents that are familiar with camp staff are more likely to send their children for an additional summer because of the resulting sense of connection.

RSJ STAFF AT CAMP

Returning RSJ staff members help parents and campers feel comfortable with the idea of camp for another summer. Returning RSJ staff bring experience from summers past, and are better equipped and committed to implementing Jewish identity building strategies and supporting RSJ campers.

The Informing Change study outlines the impact of having RSJ staff at camp:

What seems to have the biggest impact on an RSJ camper's experience is being at a camp where staff are equipped with the training, ability, and knowledge to build a culture of inclusivity at camp for all...camp leaders say they are paying more attention to inclusive policies and programs because of a more diverse Jewish camp population overall and a greater interest in pluralistic environments.

Camps that have an RSJ camp director have recommended having "Americanized" Russian speakers at camp, or a Russian speaking recruiter that will be at camp. From their experience, RSJ parents don't necessarily want to send their child to a "Russian" camp, rather, they want to send their child to camp where they have other Russians to connect to, and are actually building relationships and expanding on their knowledge of Judaism and the world around them outside of the "Russian bubble".

RSJ parents that are familiar with camp staff are more likely to send their children for an additional summer because of the resulting sense of connection. Camps may choose to offer an additional stipend to returning RSJ counselors.

Camp Zeke's director explains the added value of having RSJ counselors at camp:



The RSJ North American staff are important role models for our RSJ campers. It's extremely powerful for the campers to see counselors who are like them exemplifying our Jewish values. The experience strengthens the RSJ campers' connection to camp and their Jewish identities.

If a camper has a low level of English proficiency, it is helpful to have a counselor available who speaks their language.

A staff member at CBB Montreal reflects on being called to help break down a language barrier in 2018. She says,

“ I was working as a SIT (staff in training) and we had a few RSJ campers in my group. Often times, they wouldn't understand all of the directions and I was asked to come in and help the group.

JCC Camp Chi experienced a similar impact by their RSJ counselors. They explain,

“ The RSJ North American staff were instrumental in assisting with translation and helped ease adjustment for these Russian-speaking campers. They helped camp staff communicate with RSJ parents when needed, and were able to provide support – because of a language or cultural barrier – for other counselors and staff who were working with campers from RSJ families.

For these situations, having a counselor who can act as a translator is incredibly valuable for the camper and their overall experience.

At Herzl Camp, three North American RSJ staff who grew up at the camp created an ongoing program called “Ruski Couch”- an optional Shabbat afternoon activity where campers play Russian games, learn songs and practice the Russian language. It was widely attended by campers of RSJ backgrounds and other backgrounds alike.

Reflecting on the impact of RSJ staff training, Herzl's camp director wrote:

“ We found that the RSJ staff training helped our staff member articulate his personal story and connection to his history in a very meaningful way. He found unique ways to weave snippets of his experience into his work at camp. One example of this was the introduction of Russian children's songs into the “Ruski Couch” activity. This small addition to the program encouraged our campers to bring snippets of their own histories to share with the group. The pride each camper and staff showed was beautiful.

RETENTION

Friendships, year-round engagement, cultural inclusivity, and access to RSJ counselors can deeply impact whether or not a Russian speaking camper chooses to return to camp.

The idea that “camp is better with friends” is often what keeps campers from all different backgrounds coming back summer after summer. Parents who are hesitant to send their children to camp would benefit from being a part of – or connecting with – other RSJ parents in an “ambassador group” (as mentioned in the “Recruitment” section), which would help them feel more comfortable with camp and will increase their likelihood of returning for another summer.

The impact of the social experience is a large factor in retaining campers (Informing Change).

Campers learn from each other and from their counselors during the summer, which impacts the way they interact with one another, the Jewish community, and the world.

When speaking to incoming counselors on a training webinar, the facilitator, an experienced RSJ professional, explained to them their role and significance:

“ We are the next generation at this point... when parents are sending kids to camp they are trusting the educators with instilling Jewish values and creating a platform for them to explore and become comfortable. In my experience, there is a piece of me that’s Russian, there is a piece of me that’s Jewish and I’m totally cool with being all those things at the same time.... this makes me who I am and this is our job as counselors and educators; to show them that its cool to have this multi-faceted identity.

When camp staff creates an environment where campers can celebrate their differences and embrace what makes them unique, this feeling of being heard, respected, and comfortable in one’s own skin will play a large role in their desire to return to camp.

ACTIVITIES FOR RSJs YEAR-ROUND

Offering activities year-round is a great way for campers to reconnect with friends from the summer and keep the spirit of Jewish camp alive during the year. These activities should not just be limited to RSJ campers, and would even be more beneficial if expanded to the greater camp community.

Some examples of successful year-round activities are:

- RSJ Tea Time: encourage RSJs to bring friends (can also be non-RSJs) to promote a greater sense of global Jewish community
- Give a taste of camp to parents and kids alike through a camp weekend
- Provide families with resources (links, audio books, videos, songs from summer) to keep the camp experience alive for their children
- Hold a workshop for Russian Speaking Jewish educators to share best practices
- Camping trips
- Day-hiking trips near to camp



DID YOU KNOW?

Year-round work proves to be one of the best RSJ recruiting strategies for CBB Montreal, and they continue to work in this direction by offering multiple family camp weekends and hosting open houses.

CULTURAL INCLUSIVITY AND EMBRACING DIVERSITY

Cultural inclusivity at camp is imperative to camper retention. When campers are encouraged to celebrate their differences, inclusion culture becomes the “norm.”

This is not limited to RSJ campers, but can be a platform for ensuring every community and/or group feels welcome at camp. Overall sensitivity to differences enables campers to be more adaptive and equipped to embrace those who are different from themselves.

Lessons learned from RSJ outreach are applicable to other subgroups in the very diverse American Jewish community today (Israelis, interfaith families, Jews of color, various gender identities, etc.). The RSJ engagement approach can benefit the overall culture of inclusivity that camps are pioneering today in the field of Jewish education and community engagement.

When understanding specific nuances of the RSJ community, it is important to address cultural norms and find a way to adapt them to camp life. Some examples of cultural inclusivity that we have seen at camp are:

- Offering a weekly Russian cultural club which promotes storytelling, cultural foods, and Russian language lessons. This gives RSJ campers a feeling of connection to their peers by sharing knowledge and skills in a way that may not be accessible within another framework.
- Incorporating Russian words to the popular “Milat HaYom” or, “word of the day” program. At Habonim Dror Camp Galil, for example, Milat HaYom happens through a daily skit called “Ivrit Shimushit”- or, “useful Hebrew.” Each morning, the campers gather together at the flagpole. Before everyone is dismissed to breakfast, a team of counselors come together and prepare a skit that incorporates the Hebrew word of the day. This is an example of cultural sharing which could also work for the RSJ community. Camps can adapt this to “Russian word or phrase of the day” to bring awareness to another culture.

- Berkshire Hills Eisenberg Camp (BHEC) director suggests offering hot soup during camp lunches. This idea surfaced through many recruitment efforts of RSJ families asking about the food at camp, specifically if the camp offered hot soup every day. In Russian speaking regions of the world, hot soup is eaten daily, and tea is offered before bed. Incorporating specific lunch options for the campers helps RSJ parents feel at ease and assures them that their child will be taken care of.
- Camp Zeke invited a local Russian comedian to work at camp. “Baba Fira” is the stage name of popular comedian Gary Cherkassky, who performs for Russian-Jewish communities around the world by adopting the persona of a typical Russian Babushka (grandmother). Having him at Camp Zeke, a community with around 100 RSJ campers, helped them connect to the larger RSJ community by publicizing the dilemmas and struggles that a lot of Russian-speaking Jewish kids face. Campers were able to come together and bond over their shared upbringing and culture.

Reflecting on his time at Zeke, Gary posted on his YouTube channel:



I’ve never seen such an amazing camp in my life, I’m so envious that I wasn’t able to go to one like that as a kid... please sign up if you want to go to camp too!

Creating a relationship with a public figure like Baba Fira not only helps to boost enrollment, but is also a perfect example of cultural inclusivity at camp; celebrating RSJ campers’ heritage while surrounded by new friends from diverse backgrounds.

Camp Livingston has been making great strides in cultural inclusivity at camp. They recruited 20+ RSJ campers and shared with us,



An American-Born non-RSJ camper ran up to me at the end of camp and began speaking to me in Russian. When I asked her where she learned this, she showed me a sheet of paper that an RSJ camper made for her with Russian words and phrases, along with English translation.

RSJ STAFF FROM ISRAEL

Having RSJ staff from Israel at camp encourages cultural awareness through the Israeli RSJ experience by providing an authentic narrative which highlights their unique culture and traditions.

Many RSJ parents have a relationship with Israel, regardless of their affiliation with Judaism. When RSJs were fleeing after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, many found safe haven in Israel, or knew someone (whether a family member or a friend) that was granted passage to Israel. Having RSJ staff from Israel at camp provides campers with a different perspective and can help to explain what life looks like in Israel for RSJs, and shows campers that there is a life for RSJs in America and in Israel.

Some nuances to be aware of when helping RSJ Israeli staff acclimate to camp life are:

- Many RSJ Israeli shlichim can be “more Russian” than their American born peers, in part due to the timeframe of when their family left the Former Soviet Union and in part due to cultural norms for this population within Israel. This can help to spark a connection between them and the American RSJs, but it’s important to note that there can be significant cultural differences.
- RSJ shlichim may come to camp with an understanding and passion for Israel that is different to American-born RSJs, due to their own experiences in Israel being immigrants. Their narrative is different, and celebrating those differences will better enable them to make an impact.

CREATING AWARENESS:

Herzl Camp welcomed an RSJ Shlicha from the Jewish Agency in 2018. This Shlicha shared her family’s stories with campers and staff during the summer and created awareness about the Russian community in Israel.

B'nai B'rith Camp in Oregon was lucky to have an RSJ shaliach who was eager to speak Russian with other RSJ campers. The camp director explains his significance:

“ We had one specific RSJ counselor who sought out RSJ Campers to speak to them in Russian. During the end of session banquet, with the theme of “home countries”, a group of RSJ campers were sitting with him, and when he went up to the stage to play a Russian song, all of the RSJ campers ran toward the center of the room to dance and sing with him. Throughout the song, they brought in their other non-RSJ camper friends to dance along with them. It was so nice to see the camp community as a whole celebrating their Russian heritage.

At Pinemere Camp, their RSJ shlichim were open about their family’s history, and provided a platform for campers to learn from each other, and deepen their connection to their Jewish identity. The camp director explains:

“ One of our RSJ schlichim gave an amazing talk during a program about his family’s journey and growing up in Israel. This was part of our global Judaism program. It was touching for many people and we learned a lot about many of the kids, both RSJ and not. It was great to hear so many people discussing the variety of communities/cultures that they feel connected to and part of their lives.



FJC SUPPORT

In 2019, FJC hired a full time Program Manager for RSJ Initiative, Elissa Katz. Elissa is the point person for RSJ Initiative related questions, ideas, and collaboration. Elissa will support prospective camps, camps that are just starting out in the RSJ Initiative, current and graduate camps, recruiters and RSJ camp staff.

She can be reached at elissa.katz@jewishcamp.org.

FJC supports camps in this initiative through a variety of webinars, one on one consultations, professional webinars/in person trainings.

- Camps and RSJ staff are encouraged to attend specialized training webinars and in-person sessions which provide professional development opportunities. Stipends are awarded to RSJ camp staff that attend 75% or more of the trainings.
- FJC plans to provide a staff training for Russian speaking shlichim in Israel. This is an excellent way to help familiarize the counselors with the concept of American Jewish summer camp, develop a partnership with each other and start preparing for their summer experience together.
- In addition to one-on-one consultations, FJC offers online recruiter meetings with the goal of sharing best practices, discussing challenges and learning from each other's experiences. In the past, most meetings lasted longer than expected since participants were eager to connect, brainstorm, share and answer each other's questions.
- Recruiters stay connected in between the calls to share ideas, best practices, and resources. These meetings help build relationships among participants and create a supportive micro community of RSJ camp recruiters. All past participants attested to the value of this experience in working collaboratively with their colleagues. At the participants' request, we have increased number of meetings in 2019 and hope to provide support to all recruiters in 2020 by offering regular meetings earlier in the process.

A special thank you to Olga Markus for providing excellent leadership and support for both the Russian Speaking Jewish Outreach and Engagement Initiative and assisting Foundation for Jewish Camp with the compilation of this manual.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS



The RSJ Outreach and Engagement Initiative is successfully helping to grow the number of RSJ campers attending Jewish camp each summer and strengthening the Jewish identities of RSJ children in North America.

Through the recruitment, engagement and retention strategies mentioned in this manual, FJC hopes to further develop and expand this initiative and community of practice for camp professionals.

In a recent FJC survey of participating camps, camp directors expressed immense gratitude for the opportunity to take part in the RSJ Engagement initiative and attest to the extreme value of the program and its ongoing support.

FJC will continue to advocate on behalf of the RSJ community to ensure that Jewish communal institutions and funders (Jewish educators, camps, federations, etc.) are prioritizing and providing the necessary resources to engage this population.



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