

## Appendix C Case Studies

In the summer of 2023, our research team visited four camps participating in the Yashar Initiative. At each site visit, we interviewed the senior leadership team, inclusion team, and counselors who work with campers with disabilities as well as those who do not, and when possible, we spoke to campers about their own experience in their camp's inclusion program.

The following pages detail our main findings from each camp as well as the main takeaways that can be applied to the field more broadly.



## CASE STUDY

# Camp Ramah New England

## QUICK FACTS



**Palmer,  
Massachusetts**



**900  
Campers**



**100+ Campers  
with disabilities**

Camp Ramah New England is an overnight camp located in Palmer, Massachusetts. Ramah New England has extensive programs for campers and staff with disabilities. In addition to their self-contained Tikvah program for campers, Amitizim, they have a robust vocational education program for Tikvah graduates, Tochnit Avodah. They also have a transitional program, Voc-Ed Maavar, that bridges Amitizim and Tochnit Avodah and allows participants to enjoy both vocational internships as well as camper programming. Finally, they have a number of campers with disabilities who participate in the main camp program and receive necessary accommodations from the camper care team.



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In summer 2023, of the roughly 900 campers served, over 100 were campers with disabilities. There were 18 Amitzim and 27 young adult participants in Voc Ed Ma'avar and Tochnit Avodah. Ramah New England also hired 17 staff members with disabilities who had been through their Voc Ed or regular camp programs for a range of staff positions (i.e. working in the mailroom, office, across specialty areas, etc.).

Ramah New England employs a year-round Tikvah director who works closely with the camp directors and director of camper care in preparation for and during the summer months. *Amitzim* and *Tochnit Avodah* directors are also part of the summer team, providing direct support for campers and staff during the camp sessions. The summer team also includes counselors for campers and young adults with disabilities.

## Background relevant to inclusion work

Founded over 50 years ago, the Tikvah Program at Ramah New England is a pioneer in Jewish camping for children and young adults with disabilities. In its half-century history, the camp has evolved its efforts to meet the needs of a wide range of campers, including campers with developmental and intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, learning differences, and neurological impairments.

Both inside the larger Ramah community and in the camping field more broadly, Ramah New England is well-known for its exemplary commitment to inclusion and its stellar inclusion programs. Ramah New England, in many ways, sets the standard for what is possible in the vocational education space - and, arguably, needed - for children with disabilities once they “age-out” of camper-age programming, allowing young people to continue in their camping journeys while learning essential life, social, and vocational skills in an immersive, committed Jewish environment. There is a “long path” for individuals with disabilities in the Ramah New England community, a path that is comparable to that of their neurotypical peers.

Everyone at Ramah New England, from the CEO down to the youngest campers, is on-board with the camp’s inclusion commitments and understands inclusion as a core camp value. It is “part of camp at this point...part of the culture.” Campers and staff with disabilities are integrated in formal and informal ways throughout the camp day. They participate with their neurotypical peers in camp activities, enjoy meals and camp-wide programs, and, with bunks centrally located on the sprawling campus, are afforded numerous opportunities for spontaneous, organic interactions.



# Yashar Capital Projects

Ramah New England participated in one round of Yashar funding and used the grant to expand their vocational education building. The project was completed in 2023 and was in use for the first time that Summer.

## Vocational Education Building Expansion

Amongst the camper cabins and staff housing units sits the newly expanded vocational education building for *Tochnit Avodah* participants. The expansion project added four new sleeping rooms to the existing structure. Rooms accommodate up to four people each and are ADA compliant; they are equipped with their own private bathrooms and air conditioning units and have ample sleeping and living space. Three of the rooms house program participants, and the fourth is reserved for program staff.

In addition to housing, the building functions as a “home-base” for the participants: It is used for classes, meetings, and socializing, and it has a laundry facility and residential-scale kitchen. The multi-purpose building is a “game-changer” for the program; participants have more opportunities to learn vocational, social, and independent living skills alongside their *Tochnit Avodah* peers, and the additional staff room ensures that the program director and counselors are not only more available to the participants but, in sharing a living space, can more naturally support the participants’ socialization and learning goals.

Up until this point, participants were housed in a number of different buildings. Not all were accessible, and for the program staff, coverage, communication, and behavioral control were especially challenging. The vocational education communal spaces were also underutilized, limiting the opportunities for learning and socialization. With everyone under the same roof, however, logistical challenges are minimized, and there is a greater “*kehilla*-feel,” a stronger sense of community and belonging.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Creating **accessible residential spaces** allows participants to have **“housing with integrity.”** It reduces logistical challenges and ensures that participants have the structure and support needed to succeed.

# Summary of staff training for inclusion

Ramah New England provides intensive training during staff week and three to four times per week throughout the summer. Workshops and classes focus on providing all staff, regardless their role, with tools and techniques for addressing the needs of a wide array of campers. The themes of staff training for Summer 2023 were “accessibility” and “belonging,” creating activities that are designed to accommodate a spectrum of needs and abilities and ensuring campers and staff “feel special...that they are where they are supposed to be.” Staff in the Tikvah programs - *Amitzim*, *Voc Ed Maavar*, or *Tochnit Avodah* - receive additional training appropriate to their roles. This includes supervision and mentorship from the Tikvah director and individual program directors.

In conversations with camp leadership and staff, the importance of inclusion is clear. It is a value strongly embraced by the camp community and is a source of tremendous pride. They are deeply committed to their work in this area and are eager to improve and expand.

## Overall Findings

- ✔ **Ramah New England benefited greatly from Yashar funding.** The grants have enabled the camp to **reach new heights** in terms of their **inclusion** work.
- ✔ **Location, location, location:** When centrally located amongst existing cabins and housing spaces, camp’s inclusive vision is further promoted and reinforced. It sends a powerful message about the **value and place of inclusion** within the broader camp community.
- ✔ **With its years of work in the disabilities space, inclusion is a “given” at Ramah New England.** It is central to how camp defines itself and its **Jewish educational mission**. The **success of their Yashar project** is in no small measure a reflection of the camp’s leadership and commitments in this area.
- ✔ **Even camps with years of success cannot afford to rest on their laurels.** Recruitment of younger campers with disabilities is a challenge for Ramah New England, and with increased marketing and direct outreach to local communities, they are working diligently to attract new families. Vocational education programs fill an essential and growing need for programming and support for individuals with disabilities across the life-span. It also keeps the door of the Jewish community open to individuals with disabilities and their families beyond the camper years.
- ✔ **Mitzvah goreret mitzvah:** One *mitzvah* leads to the next. Camp’s culture of inclusion has expanded beyond the disabilities sphere to include other dimensions of diversity. Its leadership in the disabilities arena has inspired initiatives in a range of other areas, (i.e. gender and sexuality).



## CASE STUDY

# Camp Ruach

## QUICK FACTS



**Bridgewater,  
New Jersey**



**640  
Campers**



**40 Campers  
in their inclusion program**

Camp Ruach is located in Bridgewater, New Jersey. It is part of the Bridgewater JCC and uses the JCC facilities and grounds to run their summer camp program. In Summer 2023, Ruach served roughly 640 campers. This included 40 campers in their inclusion program, more than 20 non-inclusion campers that receive additional support, and 22 adults in their day and vocational training program. The JCC employs a year-round special services director who works closely with the camp director in preparation for and during the summer months. A summer inclusion director is also part of the Ruach team, providing further support for campers and staff. Summer staff also include one-on-one counselors for campers with disabilities.



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# Background relevant to inclusion work

In its 25 year history, Bridgewater JCC has always been committed to inclusion. In the last 10-15 years, its efforts have ramped up considerably. In addition to hiring a full-time, year-round special services director who works across the JCC with all constituency groups and programs, they house a year-round day program for adults with disabilities. Through their considerable marketing campaigns and stellar reputation, the JCC has become known in the larger community as the most desirable and well-regarded destination for families with kids with disabilities. Ruach is part of this broader success story. They collaborate with local public and private schools and organizations to recruit families and ensure they have considerable reach and impact.

The commitment to inclusion is so pervasive at Camp Ruach and is initiated from the senior JCC team. Every administrator, from the director down, as well as the members of the Board of Trustees, is fully on-board with the JCC's inclusive mission.

The JCC website's homepage boldly promotes this important value:

**“We welcome everyone to our JCC.”**

In their mission statement, inclusion is celebrated:

**“Here at the JCC, we're devoted to fostering an atmosphere that is inclusive, safe, understanding, and accepting. We celebrate diversity in all its forms and cordially invite individuals and families from every race, religion, culture, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, economic background, and ability to join our cherished JCC family.”**

Further down the homepage, the JCC highlights three upcoming programs, one of which is their 10th annual prom for adults with special needs.

## Yashar Capital Projects

Camp Ruach participated in two rounds of Yashar funding. In the first round, Ruach built a splash pad, and in the second round, they created the “Etz Chayim Center,” an outdoor exploration area and sensory garden.

### Splash Pad

Adjacent to the camp pool and water slides is a fully accessible, zero-depth entry splash pad. In addition to the water features are toys and games that children of all ability levels can enjoy. In the midst of the camp day, it is quite a remarkable scene: children with and without disabilities are going back and forth between the pool and splash pad, laughing and playing together. It is designed specifically for such natural interactions between campers to occur, and the camp program supports this goal. As the assistant executive director explains, “Having the splash park [enables] all children to be together.” She contends that “this enhanced interaction,” encourages campers to “play cooperatively, negotiate space, and share equipment while gaining a greater appreciation of one another.”



The splash pad is open throughout the Spring, Summer and Fall to all JCC members. It is most heavily used by the camp groups: it is an activity that is included in campers' weekly schedule, and children with individualized plans are often allotted additional time slots in this programming area. In many ways, it is at the heart of the Camp Ruach space and program experience; it is centrally located, a beloved part of the day, and demonstrative of the camp's inclusive values.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Spaces that promote **organic interactions** between campers with and without disabilities are highly successful in meeting inclusive goals. When integrated into camps' existing physical space and program design, new buildings and initiatives can **more easily promote camps' inclusive vision.**

## Etz Chayim Center

The Etz Chayim Center is an outdoor exploration area and sensory garden. It includes a stage, seating, a music area, a water play station, an art play station, balance bikes, recreation areas, and an herb and vegetable garden. Like the splash pad, the Etz Chayim Center is utilized by the entire JCC community. It is, also, a space that is thoughtfully designed to encourage maximal interaction between children and adults with and without disabilities. Over the course of a camp day, the space is used for music classes, performance arts, gardening, and structured free play. Given its central location, it is also used when kids need down-time away from the larger group. Children are able to go safely to the center to decompress while still being within eye-sight and earshot of their counselors and peers.

In addition to the Etz Chayim Center, accessible walkways were built as part of this grant cycle. In some ways, the walkways are the most significant contribution to the camp vis-a-vis inclusion. Whereas previously the uneven dirt terrain made access to the various spaces in camp a real challenge for individuals with disabilities, the newly paved paths ensure safe travel to and from the various camp areas. In this way, campers can access a wider range of camp activities, and families with parents and grandparents with physical disabilities and limitations can more similarly enjoy programs throughout the camp grounds.

Finally, all the above projects are visual manifestations of camp's values. As one JCC professional explained, "Upon giving tours of camp, it is quite apparent to all that Camp Ruach is committed to our work on inclusion and creating a space ... physically, programmatically, and values-wise, that is accepting and welcoming of all."



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Multi-use spaces** further camps' inclusion goals.

**New walkways and accessible paths** are meaningful and significant contributions in creating an inclusive community for campers and families.



# Summary of staff training for inclusion

The summer inclusion director explained that all staff are inclusion staff and are trained to work with campers with a range of abilities. This includes at least one designated session on inclusion, although the value of inclusion is emphasized and infused throughout the entire training program. The counselors hired to work one-on-one with campers are given two additional training sessions. They also meet individually with the inclusion director and the camper and their family.

In conversations with staff, it is clear the importance of inclusion is strongly communicated and embraced by the camp community. They are deeply committed to their work in this area and proud of their successes.

## Overall Findings

- ✔ **Spaces that encourage natural interactions between children with and without disabilities are especially meaningful.**
- ✔ **Leadership matters.**  
The entire JCC leadership—from the senior administration down—is deeply committed to inclusion. It is a core value of the institution and central to its vision; the centrality of inclusion and its efforts in this area are felt in all JCC programs, including Camp Ruach.
- ✔ **As a year-round facility, the benefits of the capital improvements extend beyond the summer months.**
- ✔ **Camp Ruach—and the entire Bridgewater JCC—benefited greatly from Yashar funding.**  
The grants have enabled the camp to reach new heights in terms of their inclusion work.
- ✔ **Camp Ruach has a strong vision for inclusion at their site.**  
The capital projects have, therefore, been a natural extension of this already staunch commitment. This is likely part of why the projects have been so successful; they build on the camp's solid foundation and are seamlessly integrated in the existing camp program.



## CASE STUDY

# Round Lake @ NJY Camps

## QUICK FACTS



**Milford, PA**



**140  
Campers**



**80 Staff**  
Worked specifically  
with Round Lake  
campers

New Jersey Y's Round Lake @ NJY Camps is an inclusion program that takes place at Camp Nah-Jee-Wah (for rising 1st-6th graders) and Cedar Lake Camp (rising 7th-9th graders), which are both housed on a large campsite in Milford, PA. Its model is based on full integration of campers with disabilities into the general camp program. A large percentage of Round Lake @ NJY campers have social communication disorders, ADHD, learning disabilities, and anxiety, though they have the capacity to cater to a very wide range and types of disabilities and pride themselves on rarely turning campers away.



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Campers enrolled in Round Lake @ NJY participate in the same programs and activities and are included in all aspects of camp life. In fact, many campers are not aware of any distinction between Round Lake @ NJY and the “general” camp program. As stated on their website, “Campers are simply Nah-Jee-Wah and Cedar Lake campers, and are a part of the Round Lake @ NJY program, in which staffing and housing are structured to meet their needs.”

In Summer 2023, 140 campers were enrolled in the program. There are roughly 70 staff each summer who are assigned to work specifically with Round Lake @ NJY Camps (a 1:3 ratio). Additionally, this past summer there were six inclusion supervisors and six inclusion coordinators, who helped to oversee the 45 general counselors who were specifically hired to care for Round Lake @ NJY campers. For older campers, Round Lake @ NJY has a voc-ed program as well as a newly launched inclusive Israel trip (piloted in Summer 2023).

Round Lake @ NJY Camps has a year-round director and social worker, as well as a seasonal assistant director. In addition to their primary responsibilities of running the inclusion program, these staff members work closely with the senior staff of Nah-Jee-Wah and Cedar Lake Camp. In fact, their offices share a building (more on this below).

## Background relevant to inclusion work

Round Lake @ NJY Camps was established in 1981, on a separate campsite from the Milford location, 50 miles away. While the program was successful in its early years, camp leadership determined that in order to be as inclusive as possible, they needed to strive for full integration with the general camp program. In 2013, Round Lake @ NJY relocated to Milford. In the initial years of this switch, it functioned as a “camp within a camp,” and with the exception of some camp-wide programs in which they participated, they maintained their own program.

Throughout the last ten years, Round Lake @ NJY has integrated more and more each summer into the general camp population. One staff member reflected that Summer 2023 is “night and day” from Summer 2013 (in regards to the camp’s ability to be fully inclusive). Starting in summer 2024, campers in Round Lake @ NJY will be charged the same tuition as their peers in the general program – despite the greater expenses incurred by Camp (in the form of increased staffing). This signifies a further step towards complete integration and inclusion.

## Summary of Camp spaces that support inclusion

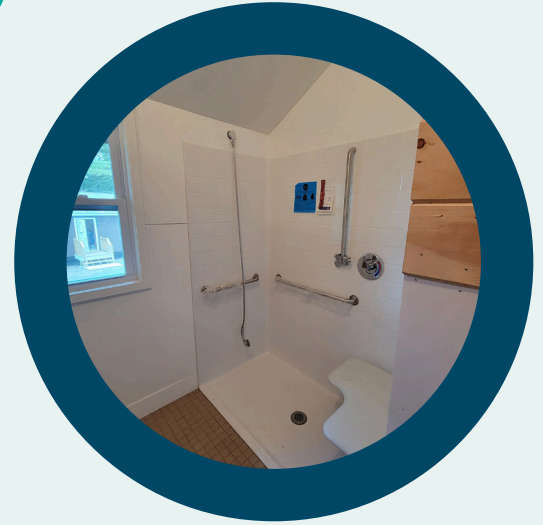
The Milford Campus is vast, and maintains many spaces that are assets for all campers - especially those in the Round Lake @ NJY program. Round Lake @ NJY campers (most often) live in their own bunks, which allow for smaller ratios and enable their counselors to offer more individualized support. As one makes their way throughout camp, it is often not possible to determine where the “inclusion” areas are and where the “general” areas are, which speaks to the camp’s dedication to full integration.

In recent years, through grants awarded as part of the Yashar Initiative, Round Lake @ NJY built several new spaces, which are described in detail below.

# Retrofitted, more physically accessible bunks

(one for summer 2023 and one for summer 2024)

A retrofitted bunk enables Round Lake @ NJY to be substantially more inclusive of campers with physical disabilities. It is fully wheelchair accessible, including an entry ramp and an ADA-compliant shower. This space did not serve any campers with physical disabilities this past summer, however, it will allow Round Lake @ NJY to serve these campers in the future. Round Lake @ NJY is proud to have created a space in camp that further widens the already-wide range of campers that they can accommodate. Importantly, this bunk is located amongst several other bunks - consistent with Round Lake @ NJY's dedication to full inclusion and integration.



## KEY TAKE AWAYS

The retrofitting of the bunk signals to the camp community and its stakeholders their commitment to inclusion -not just of campers who are currently part of the camp community, but also those who might not have been able to be part of camp until now. It enables camp to serve even more needs in the future.

# Retrofitted, more physically accessible program space

Similar to the retrofitted bunk, the program space, previously referred to as the “Den” (which now houses a makerspace activity) now has a ramp that makes it much more physically accessible than before. Additionally, the space has a new deck, which is roughly the same size as the indoor space. The deck is not only physically inclusive (as it connects to the ramp), but also enables campers with sensory needs to have a quieter space to work. During our visit, we met one camper in the Round Lake @ NJY program who was enjoying working with his counselor on the deck in a calmer environment. This space reflects camp's commitment to universal design, as they construct spaces that are accessible to everyone - both campers with a wide range of disabilities and those without.

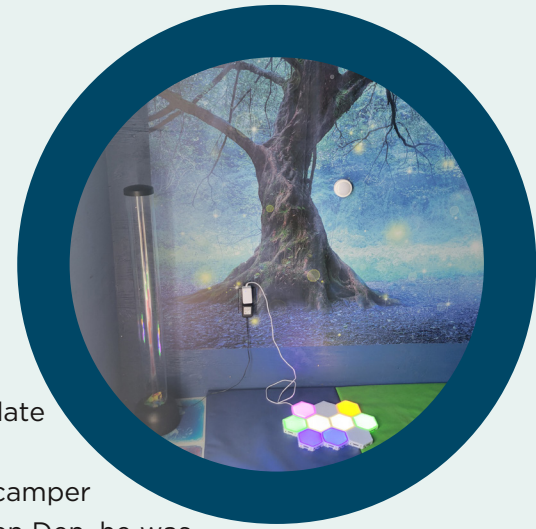


## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Similar to the retrofitted bunk, the Den now signals camp's commitment to inclusion (and is centrally located for all to see!). While the improvements to the space may seem subtle, it is sometimes these types of projects that can have significant and immediate impact. The Makerspace is regularly used each day, and its improvements have been quickly incorporated into the rhythm of camp life.

# Indoor sensory space - the “Zen Den”

Located near the center of Cedar Lake Camp, the Zen Den is a small structure that is used primarily for campers with sensory needs to rest, relax, and recharge (though campers without disabilities are also welcome to use and benefit from the space). The structure needed to be small because of Pennsylvania zoning laws, however the size of the structure does not limit its impact. The air conditioned space has soft seating throughout, as well as a “calming wall.” It is designed to accommodate 1-2 campers and their staff members at once. One Round Lake @ NJY counselor told us that the Zen Den “saved her life.” She described for us a camper that had great difficulty integrating into camp - and once he entered the Zen Den, he was able to calm down and feel anchored. He recognized the space as an area where he could manage his anxiety. His counselor speculated that she was not even sure if the camper would have been able to continue at camp had the Zen Den not been available to him.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Truly inclusive communities need spaces that can address the *full* range of its members’ needs. While the Zen Den may only impact a small number of campers on a daily basis, its vitality cannot be underestimated. The space functions as a key resource for a small number of campers whose camp experience is completely transformed because of it.

# Outdoor sensory playground

Opened in Summer 2023, the sensory playground is an impressive space with a variety of special equipment and structures. It is centrally located and easily accessible, yet still tucked away from the general business of camp. The playground is primarily designed to help campers who need to regulate, crave vestibular or proprioceptive input. That said, the playground was designed with elements that would be enticing to mainstream campers, including a big spider web and a large ring for balance / running (as can be seen in the picture). The playground can be (and was!) used by all campers, which is another example of camp’s commitment to universal design. In this way, it is a fully inclusive space that is welcoming and enjoyable for all campers. As the space is brand new, it is still being integrated into the camp’s culture of inclusion (when we visited during the second week of camp, the playground had just started to be used).



Even during our visit early in the summer, one Round Lake @ NJY senior staff member already reflected on the importance of this new space. When asked about which spaces at camp that were most helpful for her inclusion work, she immediately brought up the playground. She told a brief story about a Round Lake @ NJY camper who was very upset in the initial days of camp. Instead of having a conversation in the office, they brought the camper to the playground instead. The counselor said, “We had the same chat as we would have had in the office - but it had a huge impact. It probably cut the time of the conversation in half, just from having that sensory input [during the conversation].”



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The sensory playground is a new space, which certainly brings with it challenges of integration into the camp facility and culture (ironically, the challenge is in including an inclusive space). That said, while it remains to be seen precisely how the playground will be integrated into camp culture in future summers, it is already evident that this type of space makes a significant impact on camp's culture of inclusion. The playground simultaneously serves as a place where campers with disabilities can have their individual needs supported, and at the same time, can also serve as a location that all campers, regardless of their needs, can come together.

## Round Lake @ NJY Camps Offices

While not a project that used Yashar funds, it is worth noting that the building that houses one of Round Lake @ NJY Camp's offices is also home to the Cedar Lake Camp offices. Previously, there was a wall separating the two spaces in the building. In recent years, camp decided to remove this wall - which both literally and figuratively removes barriers to inclusion at camp. While this was a small project, its impact is significant, as staff can now more freely interact with one another. This change also signals the importance of inclusion to the entire camp community.

## Summary of staff training for inclusion

All staff at NJY Camps, whether they are part of Round Lake @ NJY or not, undergo extensive training during staff week. Training on inclusion is also required for non Round Lake @ NJY staff, as the fully integrated model sometimes necessitates cross-over between staff members in each program. For example, a Cedar Lake Camp counselor informed us that he took a Round Lake @ NJY camper to the infirmary this summer, which he was certain would not have happened even five years ago, as only Round Lake @ NJY staff members used to interact with Round Lake @ NJY campers.

Round Lake @ NJY benefits from its own senior staff, many of whom have years of experience at camp as well as professional careers in Special Education during the year. In addition to training provided by Round Lake @ NJY staff, each summer camp also brings in external educators to facilitate training sessions during staff week. This past summer, camp used Jay Frankel's "True to Life" training program, as well as Bright Moose Training with Emily Golinsky. When we visited camp in early July 2023 (only a couple of weeks after staff training week), the Round Lake @ NJY senior staff were very satisfied with both of these training sessions, both of which provided behavior management, problem solving, and communication skill building for all Round Lake @ NJY staff.

# Overall Findings

## ✔ **Some spaces are for everyone, some are not - and both are needed:**

The wide range of inclusion spaces at Round Lake @ NJY is truly impressive. Some spaces, such as the new playground, are open and accessible to the entire camp population, yet still serve specific needs for Round Lake @ NJY campers. On the other hand, spaces such as the Zen Den are primarily designed for Round Lake @ NJY campers (even as mainstream campers are welcome to use the space). It is important for camps to be able to build and make use of spaces that can cater to all campers, as this truly makes a space inclusive. And at the same time, it is important that camps also carve out spaces that are specially designed for campers in an inclusion program, as these spaces can often provide a much-needed respite and refuge.

## ✔ **Thoughtful, Intentional and Brave Leadership:**

Throughout our visit, we were struck by the thoughtful and intentional leadership of all Senior Staff at Round Lake @ NJY. It is through their vision that camp has dramatically changed in the last ten years, shifting from an inclusion model that was still very much separate (“a camp within a camp”) to one that is fully integrated. Moreover, the many new inclusion ideas and projects they have spearheaded require a certain degree of bravery in order to implement - as many camp communities are initially resistant to change.

## ✔ **Creativity in Capital Improvements:** Many Yashar capital improvement projects are creative, though the Zen Den at Round Lake @ NJY stands out. Faced with complex zoning laws in Pennsylvania, camp needed to build a smaller structure. The staff’s creativity in designing this small

space in such a warm, welcoming and inclusive way is clearly evident. This creativity brings the capital project to the “next level.”

## ✔ **Culture is Key:** At Round Lake @ NJY, a strong and inclusive culture is embedded into all aspects of camp life. A variety of factors influence this culture - including strong senior leadership, as well as a large and well trained inclusion staff. It’s also clear that non inclusion counselors are “bought in” to the project of full integration and inclusion, especially in the last ten years. This was even true for the campers we spoke with - many of whom were able to appreciate the importance of inclusion, at a young age (one camper succinctly told us: “It just is.”).

## ✔ **Culture and Capital:** While it is not possible to assess how successful the Yashar capital projects at Round Lake @ NJY would be if the culture of inclusion was less robust, it seems clear that the impact would likely be less impressive. For example, the sensory playground was immediately and obviously seen as an inclusive space at camp by all (not just by those in the inclusion program), even in its first summer. Additionally, the Zen Den is utilized regularly by staff who truly value its presence. It’s possible that at camps with less developed cultures of inclusion that these two projects would not be as immediately impactful and valued.



## CASE STUDY

# Lessans Camp JCC

## QUICK FACTS



**Rockville, MD**



**578  
Campers**



**95 Campers  
enrolled in  
the inclusion  
program**

Lessans Camp JCC, located in Rockville, MD, is a Day Camp serving the Washington DC suburban area. They serve campers entering pre-K through age 21. In Summer 2023, 578 campers were enrolled in the general program and 95 campers enrolled in the inclusion program. There were 84 counselors working in the inclusion program (not all worked the entire summer). The camp employs seven senior level inclusion staff who work seasonally, and three senior-level inclusion professionals who work year-round and full time. Senior level staff are individuals who are highly qualified and experienced educators (with decades of experience between them), who work in the inclusion space during the year. Additionally, the JCC employs a full-time Director of Inclusion who works for the entire Bender JCC year-round.



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## Background relevant to inclusion work

Lessans Camp JCC's inclusion program opened in 1979 with 10 campers, and was the first Jewish summer camp in the Washington DC area to accommodate campers with disabilities. Until 1994, inclusion campers participated in a distinct program and only sometimes were integrated into activities with the rest of camp. Today, the program is fully integrated.

The inclusion program is well regarded by many in the field, and attracts several visitors during the course of each summer who hope to learn more about best practices.

As stated on the home page of their website (not under a special "inclusion" section), "Lessans Camp JCC is a place where every child in the greater Washington D.C. area — regardless of developmental ability — can experience the joys of summer camp. Our nationally recognized inclusion program makes each individual feel connected and that they belong in our community." As one staff member remarked during our visit, the inclusion program at Lessans JCC "is what society is supposed to look like."

## Summary of Camp spaces that support inclusion

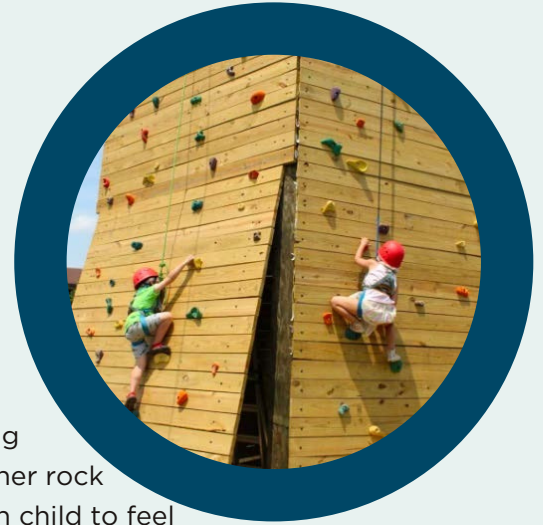
One of the many assets of the Lessans Camp JCC inclusion program is its many accessible indoor and outdoor spaces. Camp is housed in the JCC building which is a modern facility with many rooms, wide hallways, elevators, an indoor/outdoor pool, as well as many indoor areas that can be used as quieter / calmer spaces for campers. Additionally, the outdoor areas are flat, with a recently updated and large accessible playground, as well as ramps and wide sidewalks.

In recent years, Lessans Camp JCC has improved its already impressive facilities with Yashar funding. They constructed a new rock wall, a new ramp leading to the main JCC building, a new "sportsplex" (known at camp as the Pavillion) which functions as a large, shaded outdoor area for full-camp opening / closing programs and sports activities for smaller groups throughout the day, as well as new accessible restrooms . Overall, the physical space is highly conducive to an inclusive camp program, with many indoor and outdoor locations that are accessible, as well as multiple rooms and locations that are supportive for those with sensory needs.



## Rock Wall

Upon encountering the rock wall, it is immediately apparent that all campers are engaged, full of joy, and included. One staff member remarks that the ethos of this space is that “any camper can do something here, and it is celebrated.” Staff are specially trained to find ways to include each and every camper, no matter their skill, ability, or comfort level with the elements on the course. A series of ropes and pulleys allow for greater access to the climbing wall for campers with physical disabilities. Campers with developmental and intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD and learning differences are also afforded greater access to this space than at other rock walls, as staff are specially trained to engage campers and allow each child to feel a sense of accomplishment while climbing. One staff member remarked that the rock wall is a space that “allows campers with disabilities to focus on who they are as humans.” Another remarked that one time, a camper with disabilities was able to elevate themselves a few feet - leading all of the staff and campers nearby to erupt in cheers.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Camps with strong cultures of inclusion can transform spaces that are not “inclusive,” per se, into key locations that are part of the backbone of their inclusion program.

## New Ramp

The inclusion benefits of the ramp are obvious to anyone who encounters it. This ramp connects the main JCC building to the playground / Pavilion outdoor area. Previously, campers and staff needed to walk a much longer distance in order to access the building, to a ramp located in another area. Now, with a new, high quality ramp, it is possible for all campers and staff to transition between the outdoor and indoor camp spaces with ease. It’s obvious that this type of project has the potential for immediate impact for campers with physical disabilities. The ramp’s presence signals that Lessans JCC Camp is a place that takes inclusion seriously.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Inclusion spaces that clearly address physical disabilities are incredibly helpful, both because of the campers that are supported, and also because of the strong messaging associated with the project.

# Pavilion / Sportsplex

This is perhaps the most impressive structure at camp, and has had an immediate and clear impact on Camp’s ability to be inclusive. Previously, camp-wide programs were held in a large tent (which occupied the same space that the Pavillion currently does). The tent was not physically accessible for all campers as it required climbing down a hill to enter the space. Additionally, the tent posed a great challenge to campers with sensory needs, as it was very loud and uncomfortable. Many campers with disabilities used to congregate near a large hill near the tent, which was referred to as “inclusion hill” by camp staff.

The Pavillion is a vast improvement over the tent. It provides a larger area, with ample space on the perimeter for campers with sensory needs to participate in programs and activities from a distance, yet still feel part of the camp community. Additionally, with the new pavilion that has been constructed, everyone can feel welcome, comfortable, and included.

Numerous programs were held in the Pavillion throughout the summer, including opening and closing camp-day activities, sports, shabbat programs on Fridays, and other camp- wide gatherings.

Adjacent to the Pavillion are newly renovated and accessible restrooms. Staff members have described this addition as a “game changer,” as counselors no longer need to take a lengthier path back inside the JCC building. This has enabled campers with disabilities to more fully participate in camp-wide activities.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Spaces that are central to camp-wide programs are among the most important and crucial improvements a camp can make. When investing in these areas, camps signal that inclusion is a core part of their mission. While sometimes the most costly to renovate and adapt, camps cannot be truly inclusive until these spaces are open to all campers.

# Summary of staff training for inclusion

All staff members at Lessans JCC go through training that relates to inclusion - this is a crucial component of creating a culture of inclusion at camp. The staff members that specifically work in the inclusion program receive six additional hours of training during staff week - as one of the members of the senior team reflected, this training is about “demystifying” inclusion. Counselors work with the camp’s Director of Inclusion and the full inclusion leadership team. They spend time training on both practical elements, such as how to care for campers’ specific needs, as well as “bigger picture” areas such as breaking down stigma related to individuals with disabilities and viewing inclusion as an expression of Jewish values. Speaking with inclusion staff members during the site visit, it is clear that they find meaning and fulfillment in their work.

## Overall Findings

### ✔ Significant investments in large capital projects can pay immediate dividends:

Yashar’s impact is clearly and immediately felt when observing the brand new Pavillion. This significant capital investment is now a central and vital part of the physical facilities. It enables camp to be a truly inclusive space, fully living up to their vision. While these projects are the most costly, they can also be the most impactful, especially when the new space is so central to the camp community.

### ✔ The decades of inclusion work that led up to Yashar funding laid an important foundation to enable Yashar’s success with funding capital projects:

As one staff member reflected, “success breeds success.” It’s possible that the physical improvements made at Lessans would not have been as successful in camps with newer inclusion programs.

### ✔ Culture can build capital, and capital can build culture:

Yashar capital improvements require a strong culture of inclusion already in place to succeed. For example, the new rock wall that was constructed might have not reached its potential to be a fully inclusive space if it was built in a camp that had a less developed culture of inclusion. The fact that staff and campers alike rally around this space as one where all are welcomed speaks to a culture at Lessans that was already in place for decades before the rock wall was built. That said, some capital projects can also create *new* cultures at camp that did not exist beforehand. In this sense, capital “builds” culture. For example, the new Pavillion created a new phenomenon at camp in which all campers and staff are fully included in *all* camp-wide activities. This was (perhaps surprisingly) not the case beforehand. Introducing this new phenomenon added an important cultural layer to an already robust culture of inclusion.



**EVALUATION OF THE YASHAR INITIATIVE  
INCLUSION AND DISABILITIES AT  
JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS  
A SNAPSHOT OF SUMMER 2023**

