

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5779
Camp

I want to take us back over 30 years - to the summer of 1985 - to a small town nestled beneath the Santa Cruz mountains in Northern California. Tall redwoods tower over the dusty road where car after car, and an occasional school bus, pull off Highway 9 onto a dirty road, lined with guitar playing songleaders who welcome us with the most enthusiastic version of *Heveinu Shalom Aleichem* I've ever heard.

I can transport myself right back there to that summer before I started 4th grade. There was a warm, dry breeze coming in through the window of our VW Vanagon carrying with it the earthy scent of the forest. My dad sharing stories about the summers he had spent – at what was then known as Camp Saratoga before I would come to know it as Camp Swig. What had been a magical place in solidifying my father's Jewish identity was about to do the same thing for me. It has done the same for so many including today's generation of campers who know it as Camp Newman in Santa Rosa.

Here, just about an hour north of us, we have the Reform Movement's Camp Kalsman. Temple has a very close relationship with this camp and many of the other Jewish Camps up and down the West Coast. For the last five summers, Temple has sent more campers to Jewish summer camp than any other congregation in the country.

American Jewish summer camps have been an institution now for 125 years. Originally, they were a way to get immigrant children out of the city and into the fresh air. They have **become** an integral piece of teaching Jewish values becoming more sophisticated every summer. Campers can now choose among Reform Jewish specialty camps dedicated to things like science and technology, sports, the arts and teen leadership development. Some of us have been fortunate to have had this experience ourselves as children or perhaps we've been able to appreciate it through the experience of a loved one.

We're Pacific Northwesterners; we get camp... the power of the great outdoors, right? But what is it that camp can do for us —the Jewish community – in today's world? Camp can provide us with a connection to, and confidence in, our Jewish identity for a lifetime.

The camp experience carves out dedicated space and time for a person to experience Jewish life in a kind of laboratory. Sometimes the experiment works and sometimes it doesn't.

Camp Swig worked for me. It worked for my dad and for others here in this room. In high school I decided to give leadership camp on the East Coast a try - that month was not so successful. I was so homesick that I made daily credit card calls home that must have cost my parents as much, if not more, than the camp tuition itself.

Camp exists in a bubble. It doesn't have the demands of everyday work, school, house chores or the pull of our modern day, technologically driven lives which can sometimes feel counter to our Jewish values.

Judaism asks us to attempt the elusive balance between work and rest, chore and delight, labor and leisure. Not only are we asked to do this for ourselves, but for the land and the environments in which we live.

We are expected to show *kavod*, respect, towards others, the physical world, to ourselves, and to God.

Jewish living requires us to be in community. Not only must we be responsible for something greater than ourselves, but we are expected to be part of a network for celebration and for struggle.

We are taught to be gracious, not to take things for granted, but to offer praise and thanksgiving for what we have.

And we are taught to show *chesed*, loving-kindness, to those around us. Choosing kindness is always an option and that is the choice Judaism tells us to make.

Making these values part of our lives isn't easy. For many of us, our days are beyond full and there just isn't enough time. Work life can be all-consuming. You know what I mean, the ever-present, nagging feeling that email is piling up and the expected response time that comes along with it.

We're invested in relationships with friends, family, and others in the community –often feeling like we don't have adequate time to invest in the relationships we value the most. We have our health and well-being to manage in addition to anyone else we are responsible for. Will we be able to pull ourselves out of bed early enough in the morning to catch a workout before the “real” marathon of the day takes off. There are also things we're committed to like cultural activities, alumni groups, civic engagement, and the list goes on. To include authentic Jewish living within these routines can feel burdensome, especially if we're not certain how to facilitate it.

In addition to time, lack of knowledge can be a barrier for living Jewishly. Some of us were not raised in homes steeped in Jewish practice. If we don't understand the mechanics or the "why" behind various rituals how can we expect ourselves to find personal meaning and relevance within them? To make informed choice is a daunting task, but this is the ideal of Reform Judaism; to make our Jewish choices through knowledge.

There are a number of things that help inspire us to infuse Jewish values within our daily lives. Synagogues, Day Schools, on-line learning, living in Jewish neighborhoods, the JCC, even cooking "Jewish" foods can bolster our feeling of Jewish connection and belonging.

However, it is the immersive environment of Jewish sleep away camp where it all comes together and we see Jewish identities take root for a lifetime. This unique setting allows Jewish values to permeate all moments within a day.

From the time campers arrive on the grounds they are welcomed home. As they set up in the bunks, counselors intentionally build community through the cabin covenant or *brit* where those Jewish values of *kavod*, *chesed*, and gratitude, frame the interactions taking place between campers. This same covenantal frame for behavior is in place all throughout camp.

Prayer is woven into various actions throughout the day. Gratitude is expressed before and after we eat. At the breakfast line, all campers and staff sing and stretch to *modeh ani*, a prayer which offers thanks as we begin a new day. Before heading off to bunks at the end of the day, age groups sing *haskiveinu* and the bedtime *shema* asking God to watch over them as they head to sleep.

Each summer Temple's rabbis and educators spend time in residence at Reform movement camps. We are there to support campers and staff with everything from Torah study to gearing up for the swim test. We become part of the laboratory where risks with Jewish practice are taken. For example, this summer while serving as faculty at Camp Kalsman I was part of the Remixing T'fillah *chug*, one of the many electives campers could choose from. For about an hour each day, nine campers studied the prayer liturgy. They looked to find the themes and messages that spoke to them. Then in pairs, they connected those themes to a pop song they enjoyed. Some of the campers found their connection in the mood of the melody while others connected it to the message of the pop song. At the end of that week, we "remixed" *t'fillah* at the camp-wide prayer service. The campers had written new lyrics to songs, brought in popular music where it captured the essence of a more traditional prayer and crafted an entirely creative

service. The ownership those nine campers felt over our Jewish liturgy that evening has given them a level of confidence that they will carry with them for years to come.

Each camper has such opportunities for growth like this. At the climbing tower, for example, it's not about each camper getting to the top of the tower. It's about pushing ourselves one step further knowing that we have the support of our *kehillah kedoshah*, our sacred community right there with us.

What we do at camp comes home. It enhances our lives year round. We put ritual items like challah covers and candlesticks that were made at camp to use in our homes. Bedtime-bunktime activities mirror nighttime routines at home like sharing highlights from the day as we drift off to sleep.

What we do at camp comes to the synagogue. Informal Jewish Education is a cornerstone of our Sunday Religion School programming. Our teachers don't stand in the front of their classrooms lecturing to our students, they engage them through all of their senses utilizing learning stations, peer-to-peer teaching, project-based learning, and more. The music and melodies used for prayer at camp are what we use here at Temple.

I began by telling you how my parents provided me with a Jewish legacy by sending me to Camp Swig. My husband Ilan and I are joined by many of you who are doing the same for today's children. Remember that our congregation sends the highest number of campers in the country to Jewish summer camp? Know that each and every one of us in the Temple De Hirsch Sinai community makes it possible for thousands to experience Jewish summer camp.

If you didn't have the Jewish summer camp experience as a child, it's not too late. Today there are wonderful opportunities to experience it as an adult. There are Jewish family camps, young professional get-a-way weekends, sisterhood retreats, men's camp and we're seeing Jewish residential camp for boomers emerge.

As we welcome in this new Jewish year, I invite you to reflect upon camp experiences that you and family members have had or will have - it's not too early to consider how you might participate in camp next summer. Our camp experiences not only inspire Jewish living and learning for our lifetime, but for generations to come. We ensure this as we welcome and embrace aspects of Jewish camp into regular life. When we put our Jewish values in action we make our lives and the world a better place.

Shanah Tovah – Happy New Year