Halakhah at Ramah Berkshires

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Camp is a place where rules are established quickly, passionately, and firmly. Among the halakhot of Ramah Berkshires is that Gesher (our oldest *ʿedah*, or camp community) must wear black on the final Friday night of their final summer as a representation of their sadness. The role of Friday night song leaders is passed down from the oldest *ʿedah* to the next one in the middle of the night just before that same final Shabbat. Brussels sprouts must be served on Friday night and chipwiches on Shabbat afternoons. If any of these rules were to be breached, the consequences would be steep. These are not simply camp customs. They are the halakhot of camp.

From the inception of this camp, there has existed the idea of having rules for camp and people designated to enforce them. In November 1986, at a conference to mark forty years of the Ramah movement, the specific concept of halakhah at camp was addressed. In an attempt to discuss the realities that then existed at the Ramah camps, as well as to provide a forum in which to anticipate the future of this camping movement, papers were presented by scholars and educators on the past, present, and future of Ramah. Joel Roth authored one of these papers, "*Halakhah* in Ramah."[1] He differentiates between a halakhist/consultant and a halakhist/educator. While the consultant is only invested in *pesaq halakhah* and making the rules for the camp, the educator is invested in sharing halakhah as a part of the educational goals of the camp. For this halakhist/educator, halakhah could be a means to personal and communal growth, not just an end in itself. In his paper, Rabbi Roth calls for more halakhist/educators in our Ramah camps so that halakhah can be taught and imbued into all that camp is and could yet be.

Nearly forty years later, Rabbi Roth's paper continues to resonate for me as a Ramah director. As a Ramah camp, we certainly have religious policies. Our camp hires a *mashgiaḥ* for our dining hall and establishes an *ʿeruv* surrounding our camp for Shabbat. In addition to serving as director, I am the *mara deʾatra*, or halakhic decisor, for our camp, and I establish our halakhic policies, a natural role for a halakhist/consultant. The true work of

[1] Joel Roth, "*Halakhah* in Ramah," in *The Ramah Experience: Community and Commitment*, ed. Sylvia Ettenberg and Geraldine Rosenfield (Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989), 63–68.

camp—indeed, the magic of camp—is the work we attempt every summer as halakhist/educators, which often goes unexpressed and unnoticed. Yet this work is among the most essential components of the Ramah experience. The implied halakhic curriculum of camp is not just about what we do, but about the way that our campers come to internalize the logic of what we do. For example, our campers cannot use their cell phones while at camp. While it is not addressed daily, the experience of being off of social media and fully engaged with their peers "in the flesh" is something that they come to appreciate and internalize. Once they have understood the value, the lessons become deeper and the behaviors can last longer. The halakhot we enforce at camp not only make camp better but enrich the lives of our campers throughout the year.

We cannot explore the topic of halakhah at Ramah Berkshires without a deeper understanding of how I understand halakhah to be defined and implemented. Not only are there myriad understandings of halakhah within the broader Jewish world, there are also a wealth of definitions and applications even with Conservative Judaism. As Elliot Dorff posits in *The Unfolding Tradition: Jewish Law After Sinai*:

> The particular processes rabbis use to interpret Jewish law depends critically on their deeper convictions concerning the nature and goals of Judaism, the place of God and human beings in determining the content of Jewish law, the degree to which historical, moral, social, and economic considerations can and should have a role in shaping and Jewish law, and the reasons why one should obey Jewish law—or at the very least pay attention to it-in the first place. All of these larger issues are treated in a person's theory of law.[2]

Halakhah, gratefully, encompasses not only what the laws are, but, as its name implies, the processes, values, and contexts that determine how they are to be enforced. As Rabbis Roth and Dorff have both suggested, an exploration of the rules and policies of Ramah Berkshires would not truly represent the essential role that camp plays in creating an environment to live according to halakhah but also in how we can teach the next generation of Jews to best approach matters of Jewish law in their own lives.

[2] Elliot Dorff, *The Unfolding Tradition: Jewish Law after Sinai* (Oxford University Press, 2005), xi.

One of the primary ways this is accomplished at Ramah Berkshires is through living our values. Ramah Berkshires is guided by five *middot* (or, core values), expressed in a mnemonic we created in 2024 in which the first letters of each aspiration spell out "Ramah." These values are:

***R**uaḥ* (fun and joy)

***A**ḥrayut* (responsibility and respect)

***M**alkhut* (wonder)

***A**havat Yisra'el* (love of the People and Land of Israel)

***Ḥ**averut* (friendship and community)

Everything we do at camp is meant to help us live these values. Halakhah at camp is no different. The observance of Shabbat is a perfect example of a rule at camp that is lived and loved because it is observed according to our *middot*.

Ruaḥ **(Fun and Joy)**

Everything at camp is meant to be fun and joyful; the observance of Shabbat is no different. While Ramah Berkshires is proud to offer outstanding outdoor education, performing arts, sports (and more), the parts of camp that are most often named as campers' favorite are those connected to our observance of Shabbat**.** When I ask campers and returning staff what their favorite part of the camp program is, they almost always answer *Kabbalat Shabbat* overlooking the *ʿagam* (Lake Ellis) or Friday night *Shirah*. Last summer, when we took our oldest campers to Canada for five days, the only thing that disappointed them was missing a Shabbat at our camp. A big factor is that those same campers are the ones who lead Friday night *Shirah*. I myself have never experienced anything quite like Friday night *Shirah*—the sheer power and passion of half of our camp singing together in our *ḥadar okhel* (dining hall). For our campers, Shabbat is not a time where they miss out on the most fun parts of camp, Shabbat *is* the most fun part of camp. It is not a day when campers feel that they are missing out; it is a day they desperately do not want to miss. Ramah Berkshires imbues Shabbat with so much fun and joy that our campers realize how special a siastically and diligently volunteer to read from the Torah every week is a

day it can be, not only at camp, but all year round.

Aḥrayut (Responsibility and Respect)

In a world that is increasingly homogeneous, it is rare to encounter communities as blessedly diverse as Ramah Berkshires. We have people at camp who observe Shabbat every week as well as those who do so only while at camp. We have people who have never used electricity on Shabbat and people who have never been off their phone for twenty-five hours. We have Israelis who have never experienced an observant, egalitarian community and non-Jews who have never before heard the Hebrew language. This is the beauty of Ramah. As such, part of the experience of Shabbat at camp is learning to live with other people whose practice is very different from our own and to be open to them and their needs. Every member of our community learns the importance of respecting our fellow campers and staff and their practices. While the communal practice is to leave off the lights in the main cabin room and leave on the lights in the bathroom, we still have campers who will turn on a flashlight to read a book or because they cannot sleep if it is fully dark. Those same campers, however, are learning that while they may use that light, they cannot shine it toward their peers or play games with it on Shabbat, as that is disrespectful of the needs and practices of other campers. They learn responsibility by remembering not to turn lights on or off as a way to assure that everyone has what they need. Many take on the *aḥrayut* of reading from the Torah on Shabbat, some for the very first time. Shabbat is a time of fun, but also a time that is imbued with the values of responsibility and respect in all that we do.

Malkhut (Wonder)

The value of *malkhut* focuses on camp as a place where campers and staff try new things and realize all that they can accomplish. While we often speak of climbing the high ropes or taking a lead role in a play as the moments when this takes place, Shabbat is also a time where *malkhut* is sought and often accomplished. In different *ʿedot*, varying amounts of Torah are read. In our youngest *ʿedot*, campers recite only one verse for an *ʿAliyah*, while our oldest campers recite the full Torah reading. This is partly an effort to be mindful that our services are age-appropriate, but it is also about affording as many campers as possible the opportunity to read from the Torah over the summer. Watching our *kokhavim* (rising fourth-grade) campers enthu-

highlight of my job. Dozens of kids are eager for the chance to read from the Torah and show off what they learned. Listening to ten-year-olds chant *Eichah* (Lamentations) or Israeli women take an *ʿAliyah* for the very first time underscore the halakhot we practice at camp.

Ahavat Yisraʾel (Love of Israel)

At its heart, this *middah* is about Ramah Berkshire's love for Israel as well as our love for all Jewish people. We are blessed at camp to have Jewish staff from Europe, Africa, Israel, and throughout North America. During the week, these staff members serve as counselors, life guards, art educators, fishing instructors, and more. Because Shabbat is spent not engaged in these activities, we dedicate time during Shabbat for these members of our staff to share themselves and not just their talents with our campers. They do *hargaʿot* on Friday night, which involves sharing stories about their lives with our campers as the campers drift off to sleep at the end of an exhilarating Friday evening. They help lead *peʿulot* ("activities") throughout the day that focus more on their passions than their talents. The slowing down of Shabbat and the prohibition of certain activities makes space for even more *ahavat Yisraʾel* to be experienced and enjoyed on that day.

Ḥaverut (Community and Friendship)

At any given time during the summer of 2025, there will be between 650 and 700 people living together at camp. It is nearly impossible to facilitate engaging programming (or honestly to find the space) to bring the whole camp together over the course of the week. Meals and plays are done in two shifts, and much of amp operates as either A side or B side. It is on Shabbat that our full camp community is able to gather together. Whether at our pre-Shabbat pep rally to celebrate our weekly successes, *Kabbalat Shabbat* overlooking the lake, or Havdalah with singing and dancing, there is something special about sharing these moments together. Moreover, it is on Shabbat that the deepest conversations are possible and relationships are able to grow. The slower pace of the day allows deeper connections to be established and lifelong bonds to be formed. Community and friendships are enriched by the presence of Shabbat in camp. The realization of what can be accomplished by being together and without technology is accomplished through these meaningful Shabbat experiences at Camp.

While I decided to use Shabbat to illustrate the ways in which our values inform and enrich the policies and practices of camp, Ramah Berkshires establishes rules and grounds them in our approach to Jewish life in countless other ways. Two summers ago, we made some changes to our dress code. In explaining the camp's decision, it was made clear to our campers and their families that two Jewish values guided the decision making. While *'anava* ("modesty") was certainly one of those *middot*, the community truly internalized the fact that the policy was also informed by our commitment to gender equity/egalitarianism. All too often, dress codes are overly punitive toward women, such as limiting what tops could be worn by female-identifying members of our camp community, while allowing our male-identifying community members to play sports or walk around camp without a shirt at all. The camp's new policy was designed to assure that the expectations for all campers' attire would be the same. We likewise created a food policy in which only nut-free, resealable, and kosher foods could be brought into camp. When discussing this rule, we ground the conversation in the values of *pikuaḥ nefesh* (the priority of keeping people healthy and safe) and *kol Yisra'el 'arevim zeh bazeh* (we are all responsible for one another). Our rules are not meant to be punitive or arbitrary; they are created in order to assure that we are all able to live our values.

One of the blessings and challenges of Ramah is that it exists, much like Shabbat, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel, as a "palace in time," allowing the camp experience to be singular and, in some ways, unable to be replicated. While the ability of Ramah Berkshires to dictate certain policies for our campers is certainly a piece of this success, I believe that our approach to instilling these values not only will inspire our campers to continue these practices when they return home at the end of the summer but are also easily replicable in all of our homes. While the famous Jewish summer camp joke has a child lamenting that they cannot do Havdalah at home because there is no lake, our program is designed to inspire campers to bring the magic and beauty of camp into their everyday lives.

The idea that actions have consequences undergirds any legal system. In camp life and Jewish law, "consequences" is erroneously understood to mean "punishments," whether losing free time or, for the rabbis of the Talmud, lashes or *karet* ("expulsion"). What is often missed is that the consequences of abiding by halakhah are even more powerful than the potential consequences of breaking it. That is the lesson at the heart of the camp experience. The food we eat, the holidays we observe, and the social mores

that we keep—these practices are done not because of fear of abrogation, but because of how meaningful and inspiring they are. Only with a true appreciation for the rationale behind the laws, the *taʿamei hamitsvot* can the fullness of the experience be accomplished. This is equally possible in our families, schools, and shuls.

Ramah Berkshires is a camp firmly guided and governed by halakhah. We pray every day, our food is kosher, Shabbat is observed, and we study Judaism daily. But that is not what halakhah is. The practices of Jewish life, just like the practices within camp, are ever-changing. Camp rules can and will always adjust over time. Halakhah, the approach to applying and enforceing those rules, is what remains constant. We encourage our campers to observe and perpetuate halakhah not only by exposing them to camp practices that are inspiring, but also by making sure they understand *why* the rules are what they are. Only by being required to be off their phones for the summer can our campers realize how impactful this can be in their daily lives and every Shabbat. Experiencing and truly comprehending the deep meaning behind our Jewish laws and practices is what inspires them to engage meaningfully with them at camp and beyond.

It is a tremendous privilege to be the cirector of a Ramah camp. I feel this most strongly in my ability to help train, inspire, and learn from the next generation of leaders in our movement and in our world. Perhaps in no way are we more able to accomplish that goal than through our approach to halakhah at Ramah Berkshires. Rabbi Ḥanina taught, "I *have learned much* from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and most from students." Thank you to my teachers, colleagues, friends, and campers who continue to inspire me in this work every day. I am so glad to be able to share those chipwiches with you every Shabbat afternoon.

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