

“Rabbi”, says the Kibbutz camper – an incoming 10<sup>th</sup> grader laying on an uncovered mattress on the floor of the hang out space, “How do you decide if someone is Jewish? What makes them Jewish? Like what if they have a father who is Jewish and a mother who isn’t – are they Jewish? What if both of their parents were Jewish but they don’t go to synagogue and never became bar or bat mitzvah – are they Jewish? What if a family who is Jewish has a Christmas tree in their house – are they Jewish?” These were some of the questions I received from the oldest campers at Greene Family Camp, the Union for Reform Judaism’s summer camp in Texas, last week while I was serving as faculty with fellow clergy and educators. This summer, second session Kibbutz had only 26 campers and half of them were Israelis, many coming to camp for the first time ever, experiencing Progressive Judaism for the very first time. I wanted so desperately for these Israelis to see how Reform Judaism in the US is powerful, religious, spiritual, and like a welcome home – if it fit. I ran Kibbutz’s education time, which had been decided to be “Meet the Rabbi” sessions where the campers could ask me whatever they wanted. It went for 3 sessions because the questions didn’t stop. And the questions I just shared? They came from the Americans, not the Israelis. They were really trying to understand a definition of “Who or what is a Jew?” with an underlying common insecurity “Am I Jewish ENOUGH?”

I kept reassuring them that we can all practice our Judaism in different ways and that my role as Rabbi was not to judge, but to give practical advice, share the foundational Jewish texts, conversations, and perspectives, explain Reform understandings today, and then give them the space to figure out what they want to do or who they want to be as a Jew. As I left each “Meet the Rabbi” program, I felt good in my responses. I felt that I had done Reform Judaism and my view of my rabbinate a solid representation. I still feel that way.

The reality is that even what I teach today or tomorrow or next summer, will impact people differently and would be heard differently by each person. Each of us is made up of the nature and nurture aspects – we can be influenced by one tiny experience that lasts in our memory forever, but someone who was at the same event forgot about it.

My childhood summers were spent at OSRUI, a sister URJ camp in Wisconsin. The faculty members who were with us then – leading services, helping us learn Hebrew, teaching us Torah, and joining in on mundane activities – stick out vividly in my mind.

I remember we thought one of the songs we were taught by our faculty was something about a sukkah – connecting it to this web we had built with yarn as a symbolic sukkah over us. We hated it and thought it was lame, so after he left and we still had two weeks, we begged to not sing that song ever again. I remember that we got to help lead services by bunk since we had services twice a day and when it was our turn, we got all jazzed up with CRAZY amounts of glitter while we read our paragraphs about what camp and friendship meant to us. I remember, in my Hebrew immersion unit, learning about the Torah portion of Balak in Hebrew during services by one of the rabbis who was gesturing wildly and jumping up and down so much that the ark almost fell (we held it) and I remember him getting a volunteer who would jump on his back to demonstrate Balaam and the rabbi being the donkey. I remember seeing my childhood rabbi in shorts for the first time and being totally weirded out because I had never seen his legs before. I remember that on one of my 5 day trips we did in the adventure unit, we were camping and there was a rainstorm, so the rabbi on our trip knew we would have trouble with firewood so went and got us pizza.

I could go on and on and on. However, all of the ones I just shared were about the Jewish influence on me – the roles of the clergy, the worship services, the education sessions, the Hebrew classes. So much of who I am as a rabbi – in services and educational settings – was

inspired by the clergy, programs, and service at camp. I know the importance of being faculty on camp in terms of letting our Temple Beth-El campers see me in a different setting, but also letting these campers build different relationships with clergy outside of the synagogue.

Now, I know not everyone had the joy (or sometimes the glitter-induced chaos!) of a Jewish summer camp experience. But the truth is, the same principle of growth applies to all of us, no matter where we are on our Jewish journey. Whether it's coming to services like tonight – in person or online, reading a book with Jewish content, listening to a Jewish podcast, sharing a Shabbat meal with friends, or even just having a challenging conversation about Jewish values – each of these seemingly small moments builds who we are and deepens our Jewish identity.

The Israelites did this too, but a little differently. In the beginning of Ma'asei, part of the double portion of Matot-Ma'asei, this week's portion, we find a lengthy list of all stops along the Israelites' 40-year journey in the desert. In the 49 verses, we are reminded of places we have heard of before and places we only hear about here. The rabbis want to understand why each of these stops needed to be recorded. There are, unsurprisingly, many answers and ideas.

One that really stood out to me is that of MALBIM, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew grammarian, Biblical commentator, and Rabbi from the Russian Empire. He explained that at the start of the journey,

When the nation was in Egypt, they were at a low state of impurity. In order for the nation to reach the spiritual level they needed to enter the land, they had to wander for forty years. This list, therefore, is a gradual list of increasing spiritual growth. At each stage, the people grew closer and closer to God.<sup>1</sup>

This list reminds us that there is no direct path or specific way we are to grow spiritually. There are going to be highs and lows. There will be times where that spirituality seems to disappear. There will be sparks of inspiration that seem so silly to remember – like the TONS of glitter for leading services – that still allow us to see the growth of our spirituality and relationship with God.

To me, one of the beautiful things about Jewish summer camps – of which there are so many – is that we provide endless opportunities for Jewish growth. We lay the foundation of sharing the *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after the meal, for each meal. We call units by Hebrew names. We participate in Shabbat, singing songs. We see faculty from all over come and join us for the programs – big and small, Jewish and... just camp. We have our Saturday night campfires which include popular music or folk music, but always kick off with Havdalah. We remind these campers, staff, parents, and other faculty that there truly is no right way to be Jewish. As staff and faculty, we will never know what sticks with the campers (and staff). But each of these Jewish moments or lessons help us become who we are today.

Rabbi Avidan Freedman, a rabbi and educator for Israeli and North American high schoolers, points out

If you want to know where you are, you have to know where you've come from. Every step of the journey until now has brought you to this point. The good, the bad, certainly, but especially the boring and the mundane. It is in these that can be found the small moments of *chesed* [moments of acts of lovingkindness], God's [*chesed*] for us, and our own as well.<sup>2</sup>

This Torah portion and its detailed recapping reminds us each and every day that we may not know where we are going, but we should pay attention to what is happening so that we can

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of [https://www.sefaria.org/Malbim\\_on\\_Numbers.33.1.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Malbim_on_Numbers.33.1.1?lang=bi)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.929.org.il/lang/en/page/150/post/48865>

Jewish Lives Built Step by Step and Moment by Moment  
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grow and learn, better ourselves and our connection to Judaism, God, and the world around us. Just as the Israelites' journey was built on many stops, and just as my camp memories shaped me, so too are *your* Jewish lives built moment by moment. It's in every Torah discussion, every moment of reflection, every holiday celebration, every act of *tzedakah*, that our Jewish selves truly flourish.

Shabbat Shalom.