



Ramah Alumni Survey 2016

A Portrait of Jewish Engagement

Based on research conducted for the National Ramah Commission by Professor Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at Stanford University. This study was supported by generous funding from Eileen and Jerry Lieberman.

I. INTRODUCTION

The comprehensive 2016 Ramah alumni survey powerfully demonstrates that Ramah alumni have deep long-term engagement in Jewish life and a network of lifelong Jewish friends.

Professor Steven M. Cohen conducted the survey in June and July of 2016, emailing approximately 45,000 invitations to alumni, parents, donors, and other members of the Ramah community. Over 9,500 people responded to the survey. Of the completed surveys, 6,407 were from alumni (Ramah campers, staff members, or both).

In his analysis of the survey, Professor Cohen compared the responses of Ramah alumni to those of individuals with similar backgrounds, specifically, respondents to the 2013 Pew study of Jewish Americans who reported that their parents were both Conservative Jews (“the Pew subsample”). Professor Cohen found that even compared to this group of people likely to show greater levels of Jewish engagement than the general Jewish population, Ramah alumni have much higher rates of Jewish involvement across many key dimensions of Jewish life, such as feeling committed to being Jewish, connection to Israel, and participation in synagogue life. In his report, Professor Cohen stated, “We can infer that Camp Ramah has been critical to building a committed and connected core of Conservative and other Jews in North America and Israel.”

As a follow-up to Professor Cohen’s analysis, we compared the Ramah alumni responses to those of all Pew respondents who identified as Jews (“Pew overall”). The results were even more dramatic. Quite simply, Ramah alumni, who compare favorably to almost any subset group of North American Jews, show remarkably high levels of Jewish engagement as compared to Jews generally.

Another compelling finding is that young Ramah alumni in their 20s and 30s demonstrate as strong a connection to Jewish life as older alumni. Although recent studies of Jews and non-Jews find declining levels of religious involvement among younger people, in this study of Ramah alumni, most differences by age are small.

In discussing the survey results, Professor Cohen indicates that while a response rate of 21% is high by today's standards, there is the possibility of self-selection bias, response bias, and list bias. He acknowledges that those on the original list provided by Ramah are likely to be more connected to Ramah, and of those invited, "those with greater feelings of loyalty to Ramah were possibly more likely to answer." However, he says, "Even if we have some upward bias...the fact remains that Ramah alumni constitute a prodigious number of people who have gone on to live engaged Jewish lives."

Furthermore, Professor Roberta Rosenthal Kwall writes, "This survey may contain some 'upward' bias based on the reality that the most Jewishly connected Ramah alumni are also the most likely to have participated in the study. Still, it cannot be denied that the Ramah culture has proven effective in keeping former campers strongly attached to Conservative Jewish practice."

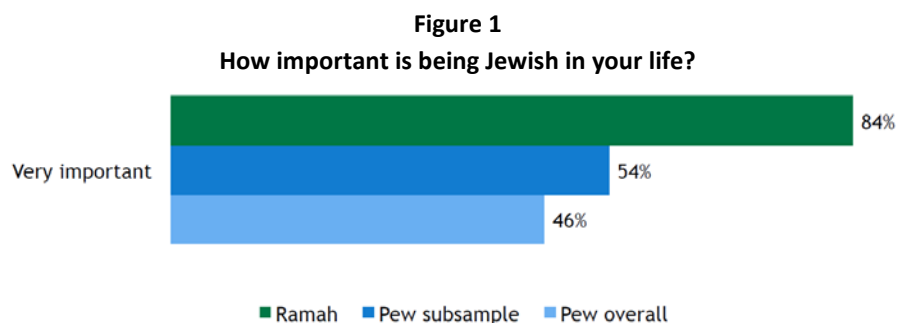
Key findings are presented below.

II. FINDINGS

Importance of Being Jewish

The Ramah alumni who responded to our survey are almost twice as likely as U.S. Jews overall to say that being Jewish is "very important" in their lives (Figure 1). Repeatedly, respondents said that Ramah helped to build a strong Jewish identity. According to a Ramah Rockies alum, "Ramah not only influenced my sense of being Jewish but also my entire identity. I began to realize how being Jewish can be just as important a part of one's lifestyle as other everyday routines." Similarly, a Ramah Poconos alum said, "Ramah taught me to love being Jewish....I feel so eternally grateful to Ramah for the Jewish values and Jewish way of living that it provided for me."

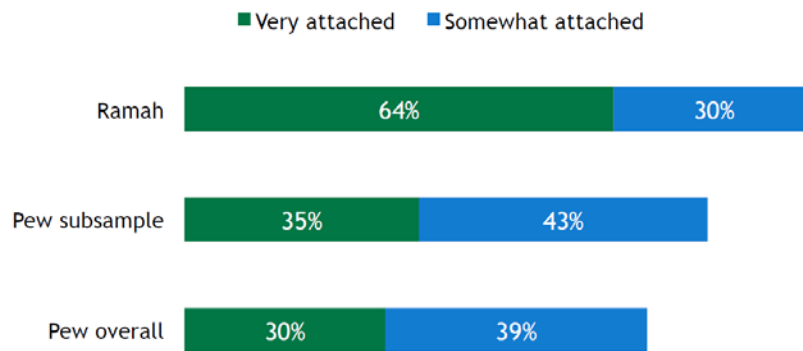
"Ramah taught me to love being Jewish."



Connection to Israel

Compared to U.S. Jews overall, Ramah survey respondents are more than twice as likely to say that they are very attached to Israel (Figure 2). Almost all respondents (96%) have been to Israel, compared to less than half of U.S. Jews overall.

Figure 2
How emotionally attached to Israel are you?



“Ramah is what helped create my love for Israel and become a Zionist...Ramah Seminar was the first time I went to Israel, and there I developed a love and passion for a place that I now call home,” reported a Ramah Darom alum. A Ramah Nyack alum said, “It is because of Ramah that I lived in Israel, have Israeli friends from the mishlachot at camp, and feel passionate about Israel education.”

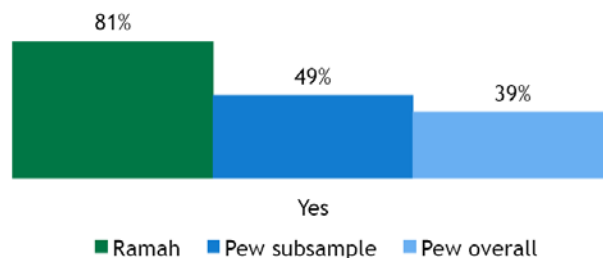
Participation in Synagogue Life

The percentage of survey respondents who belong to a synagogue, minyan, or havurah is more than twice that of U.S. Jews overall (Figure 3). Of those who belong to a congregation, approximately 70% belong to a Conservative, Masorti, or Traditional Egalitarian congregation.

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“Ramah provided an environment where I could celebrate being Jewish with my peers and felt a strong sense of belonging and community. As an adult, I sought out a large Jewish community where I could feel that same sense of belonging,” said a Ramah New England alum.

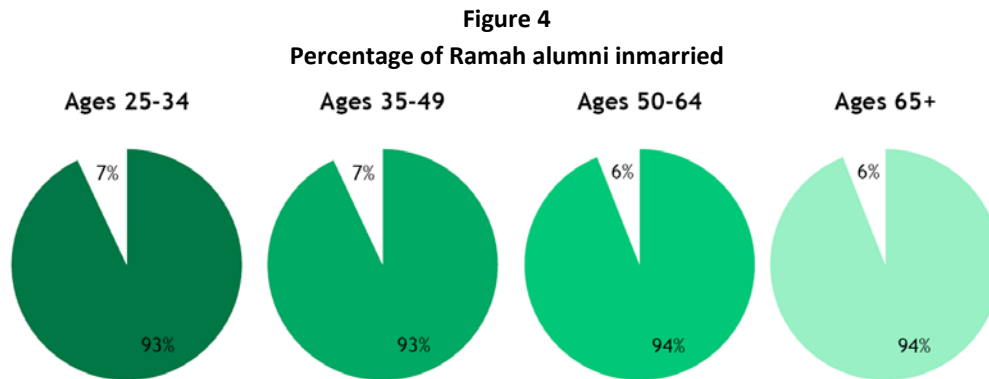
Figure 3
Do you belong to a synagogue, minyan, or havurah?



Moreover, Ramah fosters a high comfort level with Jewish prayer. Numerous respondents indicated that in the last year, they had taken on some kind of liturgical leadership activity requiring a high level of skill (chanting Torah, leading services, etc.).

Inmarriage

Almost all Ramah alumni (94%) who responded to the survey are married to Jews, compared to just over half of U.S. Jews overall (56%). In contrast to U.S. Jews overall, where the rate of inmarriage has decreased over time, Ramah alumni of all ages have the same rate of inmarriage (Figure 4).

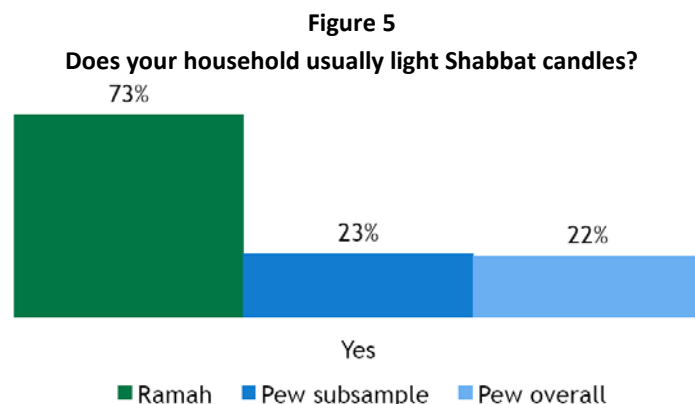


An alum from Ramah Wisconsin observed, “While my parents had a Jewish home and hoped that I would marry someone Jewish, these things became a priority to me based on my experiences at camp.” Using almost the same words, a Ramah Canada alum wrote, “After Ramah, I was certain I wanted to marry someone Jewish and raise my children Jewishly.”

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Ritual Observance

Survey respondents are more than three times as likely as U.S. Jews overall to light Shabbat candles (Figure 5), attend services monthly, and keep kosher.



Although many Ramah alumni came from strong Jewish backgrounds, a common theme echoed by many survey respondents is that their Ramah experiences led to their becoming more observant in their lives outside camp. According to one Ramah Berkshires alum, “Ramah was the single most formative Jewish experience I had growing up. Every summer I would come home from camp and bring some new observance or practice to my family. We

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began keeping more strictly kosher out of the house, bentching at our Shabbat meals, saying Havdalah and singing zemirot because of Ramah.” Along the same lines, a Ramah California alum said, “My Ramah experience as a camper reinforced my connection to Judaism and greatly enhanced my love of Shabbat, ritual, tefillah, and Jewish study. It had a direct effect on my decision to keep kosher.”

Long-Term Engagement and Lifelong Friends

An important finding of the survey is that serving as a Ramah staff member has an impact on long-term differences in Jewish engagement. Ramah campers who went on to work as staff have higher rates of Jewish engagement levels than campers who never became staff members. A large majority of Ramah campers return as staff members, and indeed approximately 75% of the camper alumni in the survey had returned to camp to serve as staff. Also, a greater number of years on staff is associated with higher levels of Jewish involvement later in life. This is not surprising, as the years from 17-25 are critical for values development, identity formation, and relationship-building.

A significant majority of respondents to the survey—almost 75%—report that they have close friends from Ramah. Moreover, almost half have at least three close friends whom they met at Ramah. One Ramah Canada alum said, “Camp Ramah provided me with a close-knit community of friends whom I feel closer to than any other friends I've made outside of camp. Camp instilled Jewish values in me that I hold to this day, and it is the place where I experienced some of the happiest and warmest memories of my life.”

III. CONCLUSION

None of these survey results surprised those of us who work closely with Ramah. We see the statistics come to life every day in the form of young people growing up and embracing Judaism in new and different ways. In great part, this is due to the experiences they have and the relationships they form at camp. Ramahniks marrying other Ramah alumni, making aliyah, becoming leaders in the Jewish community, engaging in meaningful Reshet Ramah events, choosing careers in public service, joining synagogues as young families, and taking on more Jewish observances – all of this confirms the powerful impact of Ramah.

And yet, even those of us who lead Ramah were astonished by the extent of the findings. We know that Ramah alumni tend to be more engaged Jewishly, but these statistics are truly remarkable, exceeding our expectations.

As Ramah camps continue to flourish and grow, and as we continue to build new overnight and day camps to serve hundreds if not thousands more children and young adults each year, we are confident that these incredibly strong statistics demonstrating a powerful connection between Ramah camping and deeper Jewish engagement will remain true, with Ramah serving as one of the brightest lights to illuminate the future of our Jewish communities.