

Insight on Reform Jewish Values at URJ Camps

By Mike Klau, Eisner Crane Lake Ambassador at Temple Sinai of Brookline

The Reform movement is lucky to have three camps in New England; in fact all three of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) New England camps are located in Massachusetts. Our three camps are different from each other. Two are traditional camps with different types of programming, and one specializes in science and technology and is geared for older kids.

All three camps have something important in common: Reform values. I am sure all the camps teach kids to get along with each other and not to bully. I am even sure they all teach their campers to be good to the earth (our camps recycle and compost). So what are our values? I was at one of our camps this past summer and sat in on a Limud (learning) Class, and a couple of Rabbis were talking about the Ten Commandments. They had made some changes to meet the needs of our modern campers. For example, instead of saying “honor thy mother and father,” they said “respect the people who are raising you.” The Reform Clergy know that we cannot take for granted that every camper has the same situation at home, but parental figures need to be respected. The other commandments had also been modified, though in no way devalued, to be relevant to our youngsters. Instead of “do not covet your neighbor’s wife,” how about “don’t want things that don’t belong to you.” I would suggest that most 10 year olds don’t care about someone’s wife.

Inclusion is another value shared at all the URJ camps. Lori Zlotoff is the inclusion coordinator at URJ Camp Harlam in Kunkletown, PA. Read what she has to say:

One of my primary responsibilities as the inclusion coordinator at URJ Camp Harlam, a Reform Jewish summer camp in Pennsylvania, is to make sure that campers with a disability (or a “different ability”) are set up for success at camp. We provide them with similar accommodations as the ones they have at home and at school, allowing them to experience camp to their personal best, in keeping with their abilities. This can often take careful planning, thoughtful conversations among partners, and communicating the right information in the right way to our counselors.

But there also are moments when inclusion and accommodation happen right before our eyes, without any interventions at all. That’s when we know that our community gets it – and that not only is this place ready to become a community that values inclusion, but it already is one.

I was fortunate to witness just such an event in one of our bunks this week.

A group of 12- and 13-year-old boys had requested to meet to discuss some of the challenges they’ve been having with a fellow camper who happens to have Asperger’s Syndrome. Although this camper had already shared information about his diagnosis with his bunkmates, the boys didn’t really know or understand what it meant, and they were struggling with how to respond to him when he exhibited idiosyncrasies related to

his Asperger's. At the same time, this camper had asked me to help him talk to his bunkmates because he could tell they were getting frustrated with him. So after a long day of rainy day activities and bunk togetherness, I sat down with a wonderfully reflective and sensitive bunch of teenage boys.

What unfolded in that bunk that day can only be described as magic. The group of boys was able to share, in a compassionate and thoughtful way, the struggles they were having, and their fellow camper was able to respond with confidence and courage. Together, we talked about how people with Asperger's Syndrome sometimes respond to seemingly small problems with disproportionately large reactions, and so changes in routine can upset them – and because of this, they need extra patience and understanding from their friends and peers. The campers were both receptive to and appreciative of the information.

By far, though, the best part of the night was when each boy shared something they like about their bunkmate, giving him props for being brave, helpful, funny, and a good friend. The discussion culminated in a raucous, laughter-filled, 16-camper pile-up on one of the beds – with the camper with Asperger's Syndrome right in the middle of it all!

The Reform movement has been on the forefront in the area of LBGT rights. Reform rabbis were among the first to perform same sex marriage; we as a movement were the first to ordain GBLT Rabbis and Cantors; and of course our Religious Action Center has been lobbying for equal rights for everyone. This past summer, when Eisner Camp was approached about accepting their first transgender camper, it would have been against our values to say no. Working with the Reform movement's partner at Keshet (a Jewish organization working for the full equality and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life), the staff at Eisner were trained to meet the needs of this pioneer camper. Slight modifications were made to the bunk and the campers' families were notified. I am pleased to report that not one camper backed out; there were no problems; and the camper has already signed up for both seasons this coming summer.

I believe that by sending your child to a camp that shares our Reform Jewish values, they will learn that there is no one just like them, that no two families are the same. Your child will spend the summer with fellow campers and staff who are committed to Jewish values and have a summer that lasts a lifetime.