

Customizable Camps

Judaism meets special interests in summertime camping

BY EMILY PAUKER

In the last two decades, as technology has diversified, multiplied and personalized, kids have gained more control and developed more specific preferences when it comes to entertainment. This same generation that has created the demand for copious consumer choices has also let their voices be heard when it comes to summer camps tailored to their interests, says Maggie Bar-Tura, interim CEO

of the Foundation for Jewish Camp.

At specialty camps, gone are the days of just campfires, canoes, hiking and swimming in a mountain setting. In secular groups, you'll see the transformation in the form of space, spy, circus, fashion, dinosaur, gaming and culinary camps (and yes, they all really do exist). But what about Jewish kids? Should their parents have to choose how they want their kids' lives enriched? Should they sacrifice religion for blossoming career interests?

In the past several years, and this coming

summer, choosing both is an option. As Jewish summer camps catch on to the trend of specialty camping, more and more choices abound for Jewish parents who want their kids to explore their secular interests in an environment rife with Jewish values.

"We are becoming more narrowly focused," Bar-Tura says.

Overnight Jewish specialty camps are a recent occurrence. The first one in the nation launched at the New Jersey Y in 2003.

In 2009, for the first time, the Jim Joseph Foundation (through the FJC) established a Specialty Camps Incubator comprised of five new specialty camp ventures selected from 29 proposals. The Foundation awarded \$10 million to the new camps, which were selected for their strong Jewish missions aimed at weaving Jewish culture, values, learning and Israel education in a non-traditional environment focused on a specific interest. All the camps are set to open this summer and will receive assistance for the first 18 to 24 months and seed funding for the first three years. The FJC has high hopes for this new model of Jewish camping.

According to the FJC, 500,000 Jewish children are currently not enrolled in a Jewish camp. This yields a large potential market and a niche to be filled, potentially by kids who opted to attend secular specialty summer camps in the past.

"More and more Jewish kids were going to specialty camps in the summer, and there's no reason why they should be going to a non-sectarian sports camp when they can be doing the same

A small group of campers from last summer's Jewish Community Foundation Tikkun Olam Camp poses in their camp T-shirts.



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thing in the context of a Jewish community and Jewish values," Bar-Tura says. In addition to the demand for individualized choices, Bar-Tura says kids want to walk away with a specific skill and a sense of accomplishment.

Aaron Selkow, vice president of program services at the JCC Association, agrees that there's a growing demand for Jewish specialty camps. Parents, he says, are just as torn as their kids when having to choose between Jewish and secular specialty.

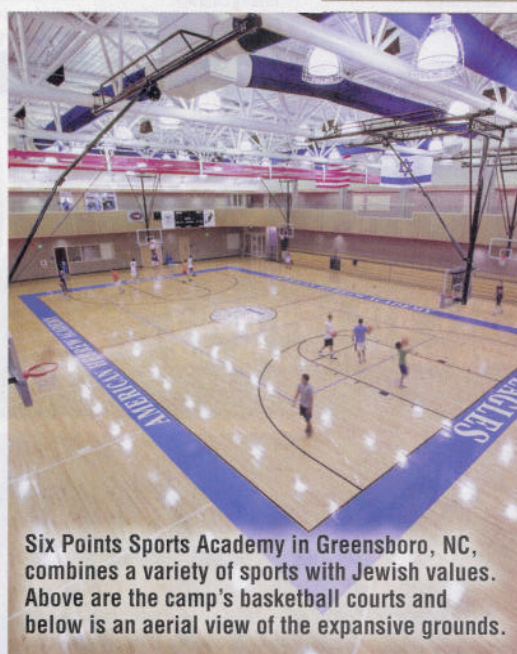
"They want to give their children the kind of general experience they've had and give their children the opportunity to be the best and the brightest," Selkow says. "They want to allow them the opportunities they didn't have when they were kids."

At the local level, Camp Jaycee at the Lawrence Family JCC in La Jolla has been offering its own day-camp version of Jewish specialty camping since 1989, though the offerings have increased and diversified since then, says camp and youth director Sandy Siperstein Rafner. Each summer, 1,400 kids attend Camp Jaycee, and many (especially those in fourth grade and older) enjoy myriad

specialty camps, including theater, volleyball and computers.

"More options means more families engaged and more children active in programming," Selkow says. "We in the JCC world say that once a family or a child is involved in any program in the JCC, they're more likely to connect to other programs being offered," Selkow says.

Campers at Camp Jaycee also get a healthy



Six Points Sports Academy in Greensboro, NC, combines a variety of sports with Jewish values. Above are the camp's basketball courts and below is an aerial view of the expansive grounds.





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"More and more Jewish kids were going to specialty camps in the summer, and there's no reason why they should be going to a non-sectarian sports camp when they can be doing the same thing in the context of a Jewish community and Jewish values."

dose of Jewish values through *shluchim*, Israelis who bring a sense of their culture to the campers and whose songs are in Hebrew.

The Jewish Community Foundation also caught on to the trend unintentionally four years ago with its Tikkun Olam Camp, which accepts 10 local Jewish teens each summer. The Foundation wasn't trying to fill the Jewish specialty camp niche, director Jamie Zander says, but instead trying to create a Jewish philanthropy camp for the like-minded organization.

"We're a Jewish organization that does philanthropy, which apparently is a specialty camp," Zander says, "so they just merged naturally.

As of now, no overnight Jewish specialty camps have opened in the Southern California area. Most of them, in fact, are located in the eastern half of the U.S.

In Greensboro, NC, is the brand new 6 Points Sports Academy, one of the five chosen by the FJC to begin this summer. The camp is run by executive director Randy Colman and emphasizes sports programming specifically selected to complement Jewish values.

"At 6 Points, our tagline is training young athletes for life," Colman says. "Not only will campers see an increase in athletic skills and Jewish skills, but we also plan to equip them with lifelong skills...we really go beyond the sports specialty with a Jewish specialty as well."

At 6 Points, counselors and leaders plan to incorporate Jewish values through teamwork. Rabbis and religious leaders will play right alongside campers, Colman says. In the plans are also a Jewish value of the day and a Jewish hero of the day (which, of course, will sometimes be a Jewish athlete).

The oldest of the Jewish overnight specialty camps, the New Jersey Y's Total Specialty Camps (through the New Jersey JCC), includes, in addition to various science and art camps, sports camps in which professional Jewish athletes spend four to five hours a day working with campers.

"We didn't want to do it halfway," says Len Robinson, executive director of the camp. "What we basically have tried to do is get Jewish role models or Jewish institutions and Israelis where we can."

With an extensive list of specialties from which to choose, the NJY's Total Specialty Camps really are a sign of what's possible in the future of Jewish specialty camping. Since they began, programs have expanded to include 1,200 kids at the 1,250-acre camp near a lake and ropes course. This summer, Robinson says, they're adding SCUBA diving certification, PSAT training, lacrosse, geology and fossil camps in addition to the long list they already have. This is nothing like Jewish camping used to be.

"It's definitely changing," Zander says. "When I was younger, they didn't have all of that, but every kid is different, and it's great that they can choose from so many different kinds of camps for the summer." ☆