AFTER CAMP AND MUSEUMS – WHATS NEXT FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE
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You can learn a great deal about a person by examining the contents of their inbox on any given day or week. The items that populate one's inbox can provide insights into their interests, passions, and affiliations.

For instance, individuals with an affinity for shoes or clothing are likely to receive numerous advertisements showcasing sales and promotions from their favorite stores.

Those who are politically inclined are likely to have their inboxes flooded with opinion pieces and attention-grabbing headlines highlighting various political crises and events.

Sports enthusiasts will find themselves receiving updates on trade rumors, speculations, and the latest news, even during the off-season.

As for rabbis, such as myself, my inbox is often filled with Torah commentaries, articles on Israel, and various Jewish news and headlines. While some of these subscriptions are curated materials, others come directly from my congregation, who often ask for my thoughts and opinions. I appreciate this effort to provide me with relevant content, although I must admit that I sometimes struggle to find the time to thoroughly read and respond to everything.

Recently, multiple individuals forwarded me two different articles that, at first glance, seemed unrelated. However, upon closer examination, I discovered a common thread worth exploring together.

One group shared a link to an NPR segment discussing Jewish summer camps. This four-minute story delved into the intentional origins of this uniquely North American Jewish experience. As someone who attended a Jewish summer camp myself and possesses knowledge of North American Jewish history, I was grateful for the heads-up about this particular piece. I was delighted to discover that the author of the book I have been slowly reading on the subject was featured in the interview.

Furthermore, knowing that Tova, who is having her Bat Mitzvah tomorrow, along with the Jaffe family, shares a love and appreciation for Jewish summer camp, particularly URJ Camp Kalsman where both our families will be heading this summer, it seemed like an apt topic for tonight's discussion.

The second article that many of you shared with me focused on the opening of a new Holocaust museum in Toronto. Surprisingly, despite being home to one of the world's largest Jewish communities, Toronto did not have a dedicated Holocaust museum until recently. This new museum is specifically aimed at educating young learners who will inherit a post-survivor world. It represents a departure from traditional Holocaust museums, as it aims to fill the generational void left by the absence of survivors.

Jewish summer camps and Holocaust museums—what connects them and why should they matter to us?

North American Jewish summer camps emerged relatively recently within Judaism. The idea of Jews engaging in camping activities was abandoned by many soon after Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. After spending around 40 years living in tents in the desert, the idea of a rustic life became a generational trauma. Moreover, for Jews who had resided in the shtetls of Eastern Europe or the bustling cultural centers of the Middle East, the notion of seeking solace in nature was antithetical to their desires. They longed for modern amenities such as running water and paved streets, not to mention indoor plumbing.

However, after World War II, when Jews had more opportunities to assimilate and become part of the broader American culture, Jewish summer camps emerged as immersive spaces for preserving Jewish culture. Sandra Fox, a professor at NYU and author of the book "The Jews of Summer," which I have been slowly reading, chronicles the expansion of these camps during the mid-20th century. According to her, "The Holocaust had just happened, and American Jews were incredibly anxious about the future of Jewish culture and Judaism as a religion. North American Jewish summer camps became a way to hold on to and rebuild that heritage. The idea was to take the typical American or Canadian summer camp with its archery, color wars, dining halls, and campfire songs and make it reflective of what Jews wanted their future to look like."

These camps sought to create a unique form of Jewish tradition. Bunk names and activities were connected to stories from Israel's founding, similar to how other summer camps incorporated narratives from indigenous cultures. Talent shows featured Hebrew versions of popular songs, and Color War became Macabbia, complete with obstacle courses inspired by IDF basic training. Group experiences and simulations formed the foundation of these camps, emphasizing the idea that being Jewish entailed a distinct identity—a blessing and a curse to be learned, accepted, and celebrated.

I recall vividly, even in the 1980s, being awakened in the middle of the night to re-enact an escape from Nazi Europe—a departure from the usual summer camp Color War for sure!

We were handed papers that we had to carry at all times and transported via rowboat in the dark, then in the back of a windowless van where older kids pretended to be police, shining flashlights in our faces. If it wasn't Nazis we were fleeing from, it was the KGB, and we became Refuseniks—Soviet Jews striving to reach the Promised Land, Israel, or, in the camp setting, the next best thing: the Canteen for soda and candy bars. Truly, a land flowing with Milky Ways and Bit-o-honey.

These dramatic re-enactments always concluded the same way. After indulging in sugary treats and reuniting with our bunkmates who were either deported or captured, we would gather in a large hall or pavilion to listen to an actual survivor of the concentration camps or a Soviet Refusenik who had miraculously escaped. This is where the second set of emails you sent me comes into play—the ones about the new Holocaust Museum in Toronto. For the first time since the Holocaust, we are faced with the need to build museums that preserve a story that no living person experienced firsthand.

Dara Solomon, the museum's executive director, explained, "From the very beginning, our goal was to create a space where we could continue to hear from survivors long after they're gone." The museum curators made a conscious decision to downplay the graphic and horrifying imagery commonly associated with Holocaust museums. In the new gallery dedicated to the atrocities, some materials, such as images of mass killings in pits on the outskirts of towns, are stored in drawers that viewers must willingly pull out.

Solomon stated, "We deliberately chose not to use the incredibly graphic imagery I grew up with because we know that students don't learn as effectively when they're terrified. If you make them sad and scare them, the learning process shuts down." I wish they had made this discovery when my summer camp woke me up in the middle of the night, shouting, "The Nazis are coming!"

However, the fundamental question remains: What is the role of these two institutions—the Jewish summer camps and the Holocaust museums—in a fully assimilated Jewish diaspora that has transitioned into a post-survivor era? What do we and our children need to ensure that we not only remember our past but also experience a vibrant and inspiring Jewish present and future?

We require Jewish summer camps like Kalsman, Miriam, HaTikvah, and Schechter—camps that are not mere museums of the past, nostalgic replicas of defunct kibbutzim that no longer exist in Israel. Instead, we need these camps to serve as laboratories for Jewish innovation in music, art, prayer, social consciousness, and deep interpersonal relationships. It is not sufficient to have Reform camps, Conservative camps, Orthodox camps and Zionist camps—we need Jewish camps that bring together all streams of Judaism, uniting them into a powerful river teeming with Jewish life and vitality.

Likewise, we need Holocaust museums and education centers that can translate a story of "Look what happened to us" into a narrative of "It can happen to you too; it can happen again if we forget." In the absence of survivors who can physically roll up their sleeves and show us in ink and flesh the depths of human cruelty, our museums and education centers must use contemporary atrocities and inhumanities as a mirror, revealing how such horrors originate. Then, opening those drawers, we can see the process and, if left unchecked, the unfathomable consequences.

I have always believed that if we could replicate what we do at camp within the synagogue, Judaism would thrive. In addition to museums that mourn the tragedies our people have endured; we should build museums that celebrate our accomplishments and contributions. Only then can the phrase "never again" truly be realized.

And we need one more thing, we need Jewish students like Tova who love being Jewish and Jewish families like the Jaffes who model an authentic and intentional blending of Jewish values and modern life.

Tova, your bat mitzvah this weekend signifies much more than just your personal journey. It encompasses the essence of who you are and what your family represents—a wonderful, proud, joy-filled Jewishness. You are the product of a Jewish summer camp that seeks not to dwell in the past for meaning but to find inspiration in the future. Judaism and Jewish values are woven into every aspect of camp life, from the ropes course and climbing tower to the art room, dining hall, and campfire circle.

Tova, your bat mitzvah is a celebration not only of Jewish survival but also of Jewish flourishing. The survivors of the Shoah have borne witness to the fact that the Nazis failed. You, your family, and this congregation represent a new chapter in the story of the Jewish people—a story that is not defined by terror and suffering but by pride, joy, and endless possibilities. Tova, the story you and your family are writing is not a history book looking back; it is a vision of our future, boundless as the stars. Tonight, you are our guiding light.