

## ***By (Camp) Spirit Alone: How camp values prepared me for life***

First a fire. Then a pandemic. All within 18 months.

It is clear to me that my ability to not only rebound but thrive when disaster hits is because of my Jewish camp experiences. Resiliency. Grit. Flexibility. Creativity. These are values fostered as a camper and honed as a Jewish camping professional the last six years. With these values as my foundation, recent extraordinary challenges made me stronger and pushed me to think outside the box.

I have spent over half of my summers at a Jewish camp. I grew up in Texas, usually one of the only Jewish kids in school. Attending URJ Greene Family Camp hooked me on the Jewish camp experience. Every summer I cherished seeing my *Camp Friends*, with whom I shared an intimate and strong connection even though we “only” saw each other once a year. My three weeks at camp taught me more about life than I learned the rest of the year: the patience to live with 13 other people, the courage to try something new, to find wonder in a sunset over the lake while singing with 500 people.

When I moved to Malibu, CA in 2017 to join Shalom Institute as Program Director and Assistant Director for its Camp JCA Shalom Day Camp I was used to feeling outside of my comfort zone. Camp prepared me to go away to college, and to move from Texas to Massachusetts to begin my career in Jewish camping. Another cross-country move wasn't scary, especially when I was trading snowy Boston for sunny Malibu!

Just as I found my groove at Shalom Institute, the Woolsey Fire swept through Malibu in November 2018. I had never experienced California's “fire season,” so I didn't fully grasp the situation as we evacuated that surreal Friday morning. I thought it was just a necessary precaution, but the fire destroyed 95% of our site, my home, and ultimately burned more than 96,000 acres in Southern California.

Despite the shock, within one week after the fire we began planning for the future. I worked with a team researching sites where we could run camp programs. Thanks to the support of our community and the resilience of staff, within 100 days we secured a site for overnight camp and were running 90% of our year-round programs at multiple sites throughout Southern California. Each weekend we packed up our camp van and traveled to a different location, forcing me to lean on my creativity and flexibility.

Exactly one year after the Woolsey Fire, we welcomed 500 people back to our Malibu site for our Ashes to Blossoms Service Day. Many drove into camp to grieve and left with renewed hope as they discovered that camp was not gone as long as the camp spirit was alive. It looked

like 2020 would be an amazing year for us and for me as I had been promoted to Day Camp Director.

But in March everything came to a halt as we faced a new threat - the Coronavirus pandemic. It was clear that we were facing another massive challenge, not even two years post fire.

I like checklists and timelines and plans, but it was difficult to plan when guidelines were changing almost daily. I started researching the possibility of running camp virtually. I participated in video calls, talked with camp directors running online activities, and attended Master Classes. When we made the decision in mid-May that we could not responsibly open our doors this summer, I was wrung out from pandemic stress, but I also strongly felt that another door was opening. It was a major pivot from our nature-based, unplugged camp culture to create a virtual program. It was something we had never done, but we *never* shy away from a challenge.

I sought to create a summer camp experience fostering much missed social interaction, while encouraging independence, curiosity, and love for nature - the foundations of Camp JCA Shalom overnight and day camps. Ultimately, our core values and community's needs guided me to create **JCA at Home**, a free virtual camp-inspired experience. It allowed for socializing, had live virtual content guided by counselors, and independent offline activities.

On July 8, 2020 I sat at my computer, excited and nervous as I waited for campers to arrive. When campers flooded into the online meeting room, the joy on kids' faces as they saw *their* Camp Friends and beloved counselors made the months of work, stress, and even tears worth it.

Each camp day was filled with our traditional activities like Israeli dancing, challah baking, song sessions, science experiments, Shabbat-o-grams, arts & crafts, and nature. We relied on the comfort and familiarity of daily camp rituals, like beginning each day with *Mercaz* (all-camp singing silly camp songs) and ending with "Roses & Thorns" in small groups. Each week parents, campers, and counselors shared a similar sentiment: this is different, but it *feels like camp*.

I often hear campers and staff say that they live "in a bubble" during the summer. People unfamiliar with camp take that to mean that camp is separate from the "real world," but it is really a micro-version of it. There is the opportunity to safely try new things, to succeed and fail. Failure is an incredible learning tool, but it can be intimidating. Camp is a place where kids can try, fail, and then try again. Learning to try and *try again* teaches grit, work ethic, empathy, and many other values that shape people into even better human beings.

It is meaningful that this was my *chai* summer, my 18th summer, in Jewish camping. *Chai* is the Hebrew word for life. That camp was able to continue shaping campers' lives – and mine, even during this unusual summer, shines a light on the tangible and unseen life skills gained at camp. At Shalom Institute, we continue to find ways to serve our community, engage them and meet

their needs, while still fulfilling our mission even under difficult circumstances. As the entire camping community faces an uncertain future, I believe that the lessons and values of camp will continue to guide us as they have guided me.

Written by Allison Blonder, Shalom Institute Program Director and Camp JCA Shalom Day Camp Director. September 2020. Camp JCA Shalom is a program of Shalom Institute.