The Values Economy of Jewish Summer Camp
Parashat Vaetchanan 5784
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I had the opportunity to spend the last two weeks as a camp rabbi up at Crane Lake in the Berkshires, where my son, Zac, is a camper.

In case you didn't know that rabbis do this kind of thing—even 50-year-old rabbis like me—let me tell you about it. It's one of the great partnerships between Reform synagogues like ours and the URJ's summer camps around the country.

Each summer, the Reform movement's two camps in our area, Crane Lake and Eisner, invite clergy like Rabbi Megan and me to spend two weeks on their staff teaching classes, helping out with activities, and just being a presence around camp.

Our role is to help infuse Judaism in the day-to-day experience—and to show the kids that rabbis aren't just stuffy old people who live at the temple but that we can be fun and have fun, too.

And it works. I know it works because sometime around the middle of my time there, I got a nickname that seems to have stuck: Rabbi Chicken Nugget.

The girls of Bunk 10 gave it to me. They're 7 years old. Super cute. They remind me of Lindsay when she was that age.

I'm not 100 percent sure why they came up with that name, but I think it's because one rainy afternoon the camp song leader and I were doing some singing with Bunk 10 and I asked the girls, "What are we going to have for lunch today? I heard it might be chicken nuggets." Anyway, from that day on they were calling me Rabbi Chicken Nugget.

And then when I stood up to give a teaching at services the next morning and introduced myself to the whole camp as Rabbi Stoller, or as the girls of Bunk 10 call me, Rabbi Chicken Nugget, they went crazy and I kind of became the Bunk 10 mascot for the rest of the week.

And I consider that a success, because not only is it funny and fun to win the hearts of 7-year-old admirers—but also because, at Crane Lake, they teach the children that fun and silliness are important Jewish values that everyone should live by, no matter how old you are.

It's part of what I have decided to call the "values economy" of Jewish summer camp.

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Every society or community has a hierarchy of values, meaning that it values certain things over others. And that hierarchy of values finds expression in the community's economy. That is to say, people seek out (or demand) the things they really value—and, as we know from basic economics, the more we value something, the more we're willing to pay for it.

And the more you have of the stuff people value highly, the more prestige and admiration will come your way.

For example, secular American society places high value on things like material wealth, athleticism, and flamboyance. How do we know this? Well, who are our celebrities? Billionaires, athletes, and people like Kim Kardashian.

Contrast that with Haredi Jewish society. Who are their celebrities? Rabbis and Torah scholars. Have you ever seen the "rabbi trading cards" in an Orthodox Judaica shop?

I'm being serious: Whereas secular American kids are trading cards of baseball heroes like Aaron Judge and Francisco Lindor, Haredi kids are trading cards of Torah-scholar heroes like Maimonides and the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

This is because Haredi society has a different hierarchy of values: They value Torah learning more than material wealth. Just take a walk through a Haredi neighborhood, and that will be immediately evident.

It's why the Talmudic prodigy who spends all day studying and subsists on welfare has more social prestige—and will attract the more desirable marriage partner—than the entrepreneur or the doctor.

This is how a community's values become manifest in its economy.

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I had an aha moment this summer when I realized that the same thing is true of the camp economy.

First—yes, there is an economy at summer camp, insofar as there are items that are in high demand, and the kids who possess them like to flash them around because they are a mark of prestige and respect.

What are those items? Not fancy digital gaming devices, not brand-name clothing, and not rabbi trading cards.

They're bracelets. Inexpensive, colorful rubber bracelets with Hebrew and English words written on them. Words like "Chaverut/Friendship," "Derekh Eretz/Doing the Right Thing," and "Rachamim/Compassion."

And what are these words? They're Jewish values.

Kids earn the bracelets by demonstrating these values in their day-to-day actions at camp. If a counselor or a camp rabbi sees a child doing something to help a friend, or going out of their way to include someone who's sitting alone, or helping the kitchen staff clean up after a meal, they'll give the child a bracelet as an acknowledgement that they're living by the value.

What's so remarkable about Crane Lake (and other URJ camps) is that they create such a strong values-based culture that the kids want these bracelets more than anything else, and they wear them all day and night to show them off. And the kids constantly come up to us to tell us about how they demonstrated such-and-such value so they can get another bracelet.

Why? Because in the camp community, the bracelets are social currency, the tangible expression of what the community values most. And the more of them you have, the more prestige and admiration will come your way.

Who would have thought that Jewish American kids who live by-and-large secular lives 10 months of the year would come to so thoroughly embrace a culture with such a different hierarchy of values? The fact that they do is a testament to the incredible work our summer camps do.

It makes me proud to be a Reform rabbi, and I hope hearing about it makes you feel proud to be a Reform Jew.

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So, back to that rainy day with Bunk 10.

Trapped inside, all we could do was sing and play card games and be silly.

But we weren't wasting the day away.

In the spirit of this week's parashah, we were doing the mitzvah of "teach them to your children." We were living out our Jewish values in a place where those values are the most highly valued thing of all.

That's why, as goofy as it sounds, I will carry the name Rabbi Chicken Nugget with pride.