

Journey of Summer Camp – Matot Masei

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As many of you probably know, summer camp was a huge part of my Jewish journey growing up. I started going to camp before third grade and continued every summer—except for a few grad school interruptions. My camp journey began as a camper, then a CIT, music specialist, unit head, and eventually director of Jewish Life. I always knew that when I became a rabbi, I wanted to serve on the faculty at camp—and I’ve been lucky to do just that these past two weeks.

This week’s Torah portion, Matot-Masei, details the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land. We read a long list of the places they traveled and camped along the way. It reminds me of my own Jewish journey and my journey through camp—from camper to staff, from my home camp to other URJ camps, and eventually back to my home camp for my final full summer before ordination.

It also makes me think about the journey of a single day at camp and how different that looks depending on the camp.

My first week was at Eisner, a regional camp. Campers wake up, eat breakfast, and participate in a full day of activities, including sports, arts, *teva* (nature), *limud* (Jewish learning), and more. Afternoons include free time and showers, while evenings feature song sessions and evening programs. With so many rotating activities, every day at Eisner can be something new.

Amid all the movement, there’s magic in the little moments—singing at the top of your lungs at song session, seeing campers beam with pride after sharing a Shabbat *iyun*, or watching a lightbulb moment when a camper understands something during *limud*. My days focused on *limud* and Shabbat prep, teaching campers about Torah stories, *tzedakah*, and—for older campers—Jewish representation in the media. One of my electives explored how Jews were portrayed in the TV show *Nobody Wants This* and how that made us feel as Jews. We ended the session with a creative project where each camper made a “Jewish identity poster” reflecting what being Jewish means to them.

My second week was at 6 Points Sci-Tech Academy, a specialty camp. Campers spend half their day diving into focused workshops—robotics, digital film, biology, game design, and more. They work deeply in their chosen subject, creating and refining a project to showcase at the end of the session. Though there are electives and a sports block, the structure is more concentrated than at a regional camp.

At Sci-Tech, the focus is deep and intentional—campers aren’t just learning about science; they’re exploring how it connects with Jewish values and wisdom. During Boker Big Bang, a morning ritual that blends scientific wonder with Jewish thought, I gave a reflection on the *neis* (miracle)—a blessing of the day.

I chose the blessing for distinguishing between day and night and taught about how our photoreceptors help us sense light even when we're not actively trying to see. That ability to orient ourselves in the world is something we thank God for each morning. As someone who once thought they were going to grow up to become a scientist, I love connecting science to Judaism and helping campers see their Jewish identity in new and meaningful ways.

The diversity of our URJ summer programs gives campers the chance to find the experience that best fits them. Not everyone thrives in the same environment, and that's OK. Each camper and staff member has their own camp journey, discovering where they can grow, succeed, and shine.

I'm grateful that as faculty I get to spend a week or two at camp helping guide and support those journeys. And I know my own Jewish camp journey is far from over.

When thinking about our anthem for today, I found myself reflecting on my own camp journey, especially my journey with music, and how camp played such an influential role in shaping it. I knew I wanted to share a song from camp that I love, and Stephanie and I decided on "Not By Might" by Debbie Friedman.

Debbie had a profound impact on Jewish music, and she herself got her start at summer camps. Her legacy continues to live on in all of us, and we're excited to share this song with you today.

There are a few fun spots where we add some *shtik* at camp, and I'd love to teach those to you before we sing it together!