



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

Enthrall, Enrich, and Emulate: The Secret Formula to Jewish Engagement

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Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders
Summer Capstone August 2020

As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence below.

Enthrall, Enrich, and Emulate: The Secret Formula to Jewish Engagement

What differentiates a transformative Jewish summer camp experience from a mediocre Jewish studies class at day school or an ineffective Hebrew lesson at Sunday school? Why do we think of the meals we eat when we first arrive at camp all year long, yet the cream cheese and lox bagels at synagogue do not trigger any profound feelings of excitement? Of course, there may be many different answers to these questions. But I would like to take a specific approach, and claim that at the crux of successful Jewish youth engagement and continuity are three major components: *enthralment*, *enrichment*, and *emulation*. To explore these three concepts, summer camp, particularly Ramah, is the ultimate model in which this structure of engagement is employed.

Enthrall. It sounds like a very extreme word, and that is because it is. This is where I think counselors or teachers win or lose - it is the turning point, the go big or go home moment. As teens, we either become excited and feel impacted, or our interest is immediately lost. At Ramah, we step foot off the bus and are immediately hooked, regardless of whether it is our first summer at camp or our last. The air is filled with the **ruach** (spirit) of the counselors who, if this step of *enthralment* is a success, earn the respect and status of role models among us early on in the camp experience. Every person who comes to camp is unique and different. They each have their own, special identities, and many may be split into two categories - Jews of Being and Jews of Becoming - as we explored in a few of our earlier sessions in this Hartman Fellowship.

The campers who, up until this point, have been “being” Jews, following the observance and **kavanah** (intention) of their parents and Jewish community, may currently identify with Judaism solely on the basis that God told Abraham:

I will make of you a great nation - Genesis 12:2.

These "Being" campers join the "Becoming" campers, those who have been exploring and re-evaluating what their Jewish identity means to them as they and the Jewish people continue evolving. For these Jews of Becoming, the following concept of Jewish peoplehood may be more resonant:

"Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples" - Exodus 19:5.

At this step of *enthralment*, all that is necessary is engaging all of us, the campers of Being and campers of Becoming alike.

Now that our attention and mindset as teens is in it to stay, it is time for step two. *Enrich*, educate, enlighten, edify - however you spin it (as long as the word begins with an “E”!), as I see

it, they all aim to achieve similar goals. While *enthrallment* is key for sustaining our engagement as teens, *enrichment* is the stage where the change actually happens, and where the learning truly begins. And this is not just indoctrination or one-sided *enrichment*. This is nuanced, multi-faceted, open-ended discourse as we heard nearly all Hartman Beit Midrash presenters end with. They taught us to take the food for thought they presented us with, the discussions we had, and the Jewish sources we interpreted together, and use all of these as conversation starters for civil discourse, as this is how progress, and true engagement, can begin and eventually be achieved. Force-feeding us talking points or specific opinions results in the complete opposite of the goal - it leads to confused, disengaged teens. Instead, by creating a safe environment for discussion, teens can engage in impactful conversations and knowledgeable discussions that they will take with them wherever they go. Whether it be about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the issue of intersectionality, the ethics behind identity politics, the best approach to balancing universalism and particularism in our communities, or anything in between, this framework of free-flowing, analytical conversation, in which we are presented with some basic, foundational facts and opinions that we can then build upon to form our own, informed opinions is vital. And what is most powerful is that all different types of campers, from “Jews of Being” to “Jews of Becoming” to “Jews of not knowing what they are” all join together in this discourse and *enrichment*. This fabric of different Jewish experiences creates a far-more enriching, *enrichment* step for us as campers. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman says, “The Jewish people are healthier, stronger, and more vibrant when the Covenant of Being and Becoming dance together.”

And finally, it is time for what I view as by far the most crucial step - *emulation*. I would imagine that while it can be incredibly impactful to inspire a couple campers, what is the most powerful is to see those few teens go on with the same effect on a few more campers. Whether it be that they step up to lead tefillah and inspire their bunkmates to do similarly that same summer, or years later, those campers become counselors, in a sense, the step of *emulation* creates a Domino Effect, exponentially increasing the possible *enthrallment* and *enrichment* a counselor or teacher could have on each teen. This exponential impact can directly lend itself to enhancing Jewish continuity, which should be, after all, the ultimate goal. If as a youth educator, you can inspire campers to prioritize our Judaism and constantly reconsider how we connect with it and how it can beneficially impact all aspects of ourselves, it seems to me that the ultimate goal of engagement was achieved. So how might our teachers do this? From past summers spent at camp, I can say that when I am *enthralled*, or drawn in by the ruach and excitement of my counselors, and when I am *enriched* by them in all fields of study, I tend to look at them as strong role models, and I assume others would say the same. I begin to echo their actions, hoping to one day be in their shoes as an inspiring, invigorating role model as well. In Pirkei Avot, we read a very profound sentiment: “appoint for thyself a teacher, and acquire for thyself a companion” (Pirkei Avot 1:6). While we may not be appointing our camp counselors - although that would be an interesting twist on camp - our respect and relationship with our counselors

transforms from that of teachers and role models to true companions whom we proceed to *emulate*. Now not all counselors exhibit this remarkable connectability. Some may just be a fun, supervisory presence to have at camp. But the counselors who take this Pirkei Avot quote to heart, as well as these three steps of engagement, seem to be the ones who leave the longest mark on myself and other campers. And our engagement as Jewish teens seems to be just a side effect.

A few days ago, we commemorated Tisha B'av, the saddest holiday on the Jewish calendar. The main traditions associated with this holiday are those that emphasize and hone in on the deep sorrow felt due to the loss of the Temples and the other tragedies that occurred on this day. These traditions include fasting, chanting a melancholy megillah, refraining from wearing leather, sitting low to the ground, and many more **minhagim** (traditions). In short, Tisha B'av can be a very meaningful and spiritual commemoration of sorrow, yet for many of us, it is probably not the most engaging. There are no special foods, no upbeat, joyous **niggunim** (songs/melodies), no special family visits. Yet when this holiday is commemorated at camp, somehow, there is a beautiful sense of unity. Campers and staff alike share in the depressive nature of the day, study appropriate Tanach texts, and reflect all together. This anecdote of a Tisha B'av at camp is the epitome of the aforementioned three key aspects to Jewish youth engagement. The feelings of camp togetherness and unity seem to *enthrall* us enough to sustain our interest in the *enrichment* that often follows on this purely sad Jewish holiday. And most importantly, even now, when we cannot be among camp friends as we mourn this devastating day in Jewish history and reflect on how we can change in our current world, we continue to *emulate* the traditions we witnessed at camp. We hold onto those feelings of unity, connection, and support, and establish our own meaningful observances of this holiday.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book *From Optimism to Hope*, articulates that “perhaps the secret of Jewish survival through 4,000 years lies in the fact that we’ve always tried to put children first.” I am not proposing that this framework for youth engagement and putting “children first” is the be-all-end-all, nor is it by any means the final iteration of this concept. But it seems to be a step towards a more holistic, fulfilling form of engagement that continues to reap benefits in generations to come.