

Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah

Letters home from summer camp

My 10-year-old son went to sleep-away camp for the first time this summer. He boarded the airplane for Camp Ramah in the Rockies 6 days, two hours, and 58 minutes ago, as of the time of this writing.

I'm not counting because I am nervous. I just miss the guy!

Maybe it would be easier to tolerate the distance if we had received a letter. But there has been no word yet. I have never looked forward to receiving mail with so much eager anticipation.

Pictures from camp (what did parents do before pictures could be uploaded?) assure me that he is alive. They also confirm that for the first three days, he and all his bunkmates wore the same camp T-shirts they had traveled in. My husband informs me that this is normal protocol for pre-teen boys at camp.

Anticipating Emmett's first letter brought back memories of letters from camp that have lived on in family lore. One summer, my sister wrote from Camp Ramah in the Berkshires: "It rained so much that I learned to swim on my way to the chadar ochel" – that's the dining

hall. My mother saved a charming letter from my brother, who marked the envelope "top secret" because he disclosed the crush he had on a fellow camper. Apparently it was declassified after 36 years, so my mother passed it around the dining room table the last time we all were together.

Letters to camp are special, too. My mother always sent each of us a letter before the start of the summer season, so that my siblings and I would have mail waiting for us on the very first day. I did the same for my son. I even put a nice card in the book he planned to read on the plane. (Too much? My husband thought so.)

My father used to write to me exclusively in Hebrew. I will write at least one letter in Hebrew this summer, too, to support the shared mission of our family and the Ramah camps.

Phone calls, emails, and texts largely have replaced letter-writing, which has been popular on lists of "dying arts" for some time now. The only time most families I know still write and receive

snail mail is when their children are away at summer camp.

In my family, we are especially aware of the wonderful (though perhaps moribund) art of letter-writing. Just before my son left for camp, a cousin recovered and sent, via email and pdf, 105 pages worth of letters home that my husband's great-grandfather, Papa Jake, sent to his family back in Ohio. Jake, his twin brother, Izzy, and their wives, Dora and Francis, traveled throughout the western United States for three months in 1934.

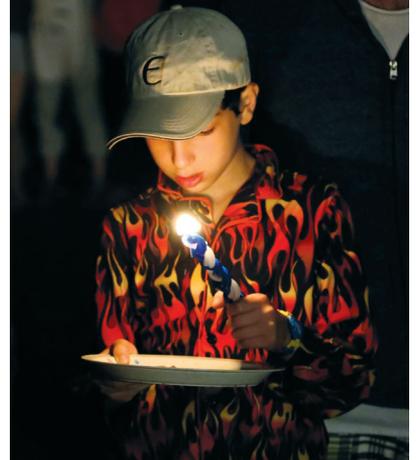
We began reading the letters aloud. They are full of humor and history. Papa Jake wrote long, detailed missives about the sights, the roads, the people, the food, the accommodations, and the prices. He described news from Europe, bear sightings,

and their beloved "Terraplane machine" (a.k.a. their car). He mentioned lots of Jewish highlights, including Borscht restaurants on Venice Beach and Uncle Izzy's recitation of the Shema during steep climbs in the North Cascades. Each letter began "Dear Everybody," and Papa Jake was so expressive that you can feel his

enthusiasm for this adventure and his love for the family in every line.

I was planning to conclude this column with some musings on one of Allan Sherman's great songs, the parody "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh." A lighthearted, satirical send-up of letters home, it both mocks and reassures us about the fears of children – and their parents. In the summer of 1963, it was the #1 single. Everyone could relate to it (with the possible exception of Allan Sherman, who grew up with three different fathers, in eight schools, on both coasts and in Chicago, and with a mother who suffered from undiagnosed schizophrenia. His family was not stable, financially or otherwise, and something as normal and privileged as nerves about summer camp played no part in his childhood).

Kids get to endure homesickness, bad food, dirty clothes, and mosquito bites – when they are lucky. Summer camp is a most delightful way to learn independence and resilience. Jewish summer camp shapes and strengthens Jewish



Rabbi Orenstein's son, Emmett Weisz, at Havdallah at Camp Ramah Rockies.

identity and affiliation in the process. Parents and kids whose biggest worries are the trifles associated with summer camp are blessed, indeed.

But forget all that. The mail just came and it brought Emmett's first letter home. Hurrah! It begins with the greeting "Dear Everybody." It includes humorous details about food, transit, and pricing. For \$2, you can have a large cookie at the Denver airport in 2015 or a season pass to Yosemite in 1934. The transfer from airport to camp took place on "a big yellow terraplane that takes kids to school." The letter was signed "Love, Papa Jake." It was so expressive that you could feel the enthusiasm for adventure and the love of family in every line.

I'm so glad that that Ramah Rockies doesn't let kids send email.

If it's not too backward an idea, may I suggest writing a letter to someone who isn't at camp this summer? Describe your day. Share some news. Express your gratitude or your concerns. Truthfully, it's unlikely that your words will be set to music or handed down four generations hence. But right now, you can express your love of this great adventure called life – and your affection for the surprised addressee(s). "Everybody" who opens the envelope, deciphers your handwriting, and receives your message is sure to be delighted.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein, spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, is working with Jews around the country to free 1,000 slaves before Rosh Hashanah. Learn more at RabbiDebra.com.



Rabbi Debra Orenstein

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