



Foundation for Jewish Camp 2018 Leaders Conference Plenary Speech

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Everyone in this room knows that Jewish overnight camp is the most effective way for our children to develop lifelong Jewish friendships, to grow as individuals, and to form meaningful connections with the Jewish community and Israel.

And while this may in fact be true, there's one big problem: **90% of our kids aren't going to Jewish overnight camp.**

This stat begs the following questions: What are we doing to address this reality? How can we bet the Jewish future on the 10% who are attending overnight camp? Why aren't we doubling down on the 90% who deserve to connect with our vibrant Jewish community?

Let's look at the realities facing today's Jewish families.

- The Jewish community is more diverse than ever before. Jews of color, Jews by choice, and Jewish LGBTQ families are all seeking community connection.
- 71% of today's Jewish children are being raised in families with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent.
- Only 1/3 of American Jews belong to a synagogue.
- Nearly half of Jewish families are affected by divorce.
- More than 50% of Jewish households report income under \$100,000.
- 10% of American youth have diagnosed disabilities.

Bottom line, the world has changed. Jewish families look very different today than they did 50 years ago when many Jewish overnight camps were born.



Shalom. My name is Eileen Price. I'm founder and CEO of In the City Camp, an Atlanta-based, independent, pluralistic, non-profit Jewish day camp for children entering Kindergarten through 10th grade. Our unique program delivers the proven results of overnight camp – lifelong friendships, personal growth, and community connection – in an affordable, accessible day camp format that acknowledges the realities of today's modern Jewish family.

I'm here today to share our story of success with you because we can all learn from each other. My goal is to inspire you to think differently about how more Jewish kids can experience the fun, friendship, growth, and community connection that is Jewish summer camp.

I was born and raised in Atlanta, GA. My parents met at the Jewish overnight camp where my uncle served as director. I attended Jewish preschool, Jewish day school, and Jewish high school. I participated in High School in Israel and March of the Living. None of these experiences, however, made me fall in love with being Jewish like overnight camp did.

I am now the parent of four incredible and diverse Jewish children. My oldest son, Avi, has attended three different schools in the past three years to provide the type of structure he needs. My daughter, Emma, is a sensitive homebody. My middle son, Zion, is the kid who is up for anything. And my youngest, Levi, is a sports nut with a nut allergy.

When it came time to figure out how I was going to connect my children Jewishly, I immediately looked to Jewish overnight camp as the answer. To make a long story short: My son went away and loved it. My daughter came home and made me promise never to send her away again.



That fall, I started looking into local Jewish day camp options. When I was unable to find a program that provided the Jewish connection I wanted my children to experience, I did what any good Jewish mom would do – I started my own camp! After all, how hard could it be?

Since In the City Camp's first year, camper enrollment has grown 726% – from 65 campers in 2012 to 540 campers at two locations in 2017. 20% of our campers come from interfaith families. 30% don't belong to a synagogue. 66% attend public or non-Jewish private schools. 99% of our day campers and 100% of our counselors are Jewish.

Beyond the numbers, we see overnight camp-style qualitative results in our campers. They long for their five-year t-shirt. They cry on the last day of camp. They save their allowance money during the year to spend at canteen. They sing Hebrew camp songs in the shower. They show up to camp-sponsored school-year events and log on to attend camp online while they are snowed in at home. They stand up a little taller during the winter holiday song performance at school. They freeze with nervous excitement when they run into a counselor at Target and shriek with joy when they see camp friends and staff at our reunions.

Jewish day camp is a natural entry point into a child's lifelong Jewish journey. Imagine if every Jewish five-year-old child attended an intentional Jewish day camp like ours. What would our community look like in 20 years? What would overnight camp attendance look like?

I'll give you a hint: Participation in intentional Jewish day camp leads to increased participation in other Jewish communal experiences including religious school, overnight camp, youth groups, Israel trips, Jewish college life, and ultimately raising a Jewish family of one's own.



You may be wondering: What does it look like to deliver the benefits of Jewish overnight camp in a day camp setting?

It looks like weaving a pedagogically appropriate, PhD-developed curriculum that teaches Hebrew language, Jewish values, and Jewish and Israeli culture, into everything we do.

At In the City Camp, young Jewish campers look up to their Jewish role model counselors like they hung the moon. We gather each day for morning shira to sing Hine Ma Tov, Oseh Shalom, and our very own camp song – complete with all the hand motions. We make Israeli hummus and pita over a fire. Our Kindergarteners burst with pride when they complete the ropes course for the first time. We cheer during Maccabiah, learn the Hebrew word of the day, and FaceTime with former counselors serving in the Israeli army. Campers learn Jewish values like kavod, chesed, and tikun olam and strengthen 21st century life skills through fun activities they choose themselves every hour. Our younger campers go on day trips and make surprise slushee stops on the way back to camp. Our Tween campers travel to area Jewish overnight camps. Following our camp-wide Friday Shabbat oneg, campers head to carpool with challah dough to bake at home, extending the Jewish experience to their families. Our all-Jewish counselors, who become experiential Jewish educators, call us offering to do whatever we need just so they can spend another summer with us.

From where we stand, the Jewish future is bright.

The camp I started to give my daughter a Jewish future now provides an accessible first step on the communal Jewish journey for hundreds of kids who otherwise never would have participated in Jewish life.



We have figured out how to deliver the Jewish overnight camp experience in a package that acknowledges and addresses the realities of the modern Jewish family and our parents, staff, and campers simply can't get enough.

Jewish people come in more shapes and sizes than ever before. We must invest in high-quality, intentional Jewish day camps that expand the reach of the Jewish overnight camp model we know works.

We're all in this room because we deeply care about the Jewish future. We have an obligation as Jewish leaders to listen to our community and develop innovative Jewish engagement solutions that produce measurable, meaningful outcomes.

So how hard is it to create a Jewish day camp like ours? It's damn hard. But the community we have created fuels the fire that keeps us going.

We're doubling down on the 90% because none of us can afford to do anything else.