As many of you have heard me tell the story before, my wife Deb and I first met at the UAHC (now URJ) Eisner Camp Institute for Living Judaism in Great Barrington, Massachusetts as teenagers. We met again almost two decades later on the campgrounds at the wedding of close friends, also former campers and staff members. Having spent over a decade at Eisner as a camper then staff member, I have also served as a rabbinic faculty member in previous years, and drop in every summer at both Eisner and Crane Lake to say hello to our campers (and my own kids).

While I realize that many of our youngsters already have affiliations with other camps, a number of which have a Jewish ta-am (flavor), this year I am actively encouraging the membership of BHS to consider what a summer spent immersed in a fully integrated Jewish camp program could mean for our children’s burgeoning Jewish identity and experiences.

The dozen or so of our students who return from a summer at Eisner or Crane Lake camps each year find they have gained a ‘leg up’ in their comfort, familiarity and ability both in the prayer service and in their Judaic studies. For our current 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th or even 7th graders that can have a remarkable impact on their confidence and preparation for the ceremony at which they will celebrate becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is time for us to send more than a dozen students from our religious school. With a population of over 150 students, I am challenging us to find the resolve and means to increase our numbers to at least double that.

In “How Goodly are Thy Tents: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences” the authors Amy Sales and Leonard Saxe write, “If community is at the heart of the Jewish enterprise and if the future of Judaism and Jewish life reside in the capacity to build strong communities, then socialization becomes the core task of the collective. Through socialization, people come to identify with the group and to feel a part of it. They internalize its values, and they learn its norms and behaviors. The community will flourish only to the extent that it succeeds in socializing young members into the fold . . . Commensurate with the heightened attention to Jewish summer camping are increases in participation . . . Jewish camping may be reaching the tipping point, the moment at which the idea and the experience of a summer at a Jewish camp becomes ‘contagious’ and spreads throughout the community.”

Of course, like all summer sleep-away camp programs, the tuition is not a negligible factor. But unlike all other summer camps, both the synagogue and the camps have scholarship funds set aside for those demonstrating a financial need. Just this past Sukkot, at the Consecration service, we distributed the first ‘gift certificates’ for $200 toward a child’s first summer at a URJ Camp to all our new religious school students. We shouldn’t let the cost of tuition for one session or the entire summer be the reason our youngsters aren’t registering for Eisner or Crane Lake. For those in need, or those interested in serving the need, I would be more than pleased to discuss scholarship opportunities with you personally and confidentially.

A few years ago, my brother-in-law David in California forwarded me the brochure and video for URJ camps Newman and SWIG (where I served as faculty for a number of years.) On the cover of the brochure and throughout the video were none other than the smiling visages of my niece and nephew. I can think of nothing that would make me happier than seeing one of our youngsters from BHS at a URJ Camp this summer and perhaps pictured in next year’s brochure or video!
Rabbi Serge A. Lippe