

Ramah goes wild: Former Gideon Hausner teacher heads new outdoors camp in Colorado

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Yaron Greenwald wants a summer camp where he can observe the Sabbath, keep kosher and explore the great outdoors.

A tall order? Not for Greenwald, a freshman at Berkeley High School, and his younger sister, Meka.

Yaron, Meka and around 100 other kids entering grades six to 10 will now be able to combine Judaism and the rugged outdoors at Ramah Outdoor Adventure in the Pike National Forest in the heart of Colorado. The base camp is a 360-acre ranch in the heart of the 1.2 million-acre forest.



Rabbi Eliav Bock

“I think Ramah Outdoors is going to be a lot of fun,” said Yaron, 15, of the camp, which has its inaugural sessions this summer. “I have always wanted to do all the stuff that camp is going to be about.”

All that “stuff,” said the camp’s director, Rabbi Eliav Bock, will include horseback riding, mountain biking, wilderness survival, orienteering, wilderness arts and crafts, bouldering and alpine field sports.

“We’re combining basic Jewish core values and outdoor adventures,” Bock said. “We’re going to go into the back country for extended periods of time and reconnect with nature.”

Though Bock has long been a nature lover (his nickname as a child was “Nature Boy”), his life hasn’t always been so rustic: He was once a Wall Street equities trader while studying for the

rabbinate at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

In the midst of his rabbinical training, he moved to Palo Alto to be closer to his fiancée, who was getting a Ph.D. at Stanford. He taught Judaic studies at Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School in Palo Alto in 2005 and 2006, then returned to JTS to finish his own studies.

Last year, he was chosen to become the director of Ramah Outdoor Adventure, the first specialty camp of the Ramah Network, which is the camping arm of Conservative Judaism.

Ramah Outdoor Adventure (<http://www.ramahoutdoors.org>) will be running seven weeks of programs, beginning June 16 with one-, two- and four-week sessions. Sessions range from \$800 to \$3,900. But Bock stressed that “campers living in the Western states are eligible for up to \$1,800 in tuition incentives through the JWEST program.”

Bock hopes the campers will also grapple with what are the necessities and the luxuries of life. He wants them to see that iPods and even clean clothing are luxuries, while food, clean water and basic shelter are necessities.

“We are developing a rustic outdoors camp, like those run by the Boy Scouts and the Quakers,” Bock said. “We are responding to an increased demand for more simplistic and wholesome experiences for youth.”

Besides camping and eating organic fruits and vegetables under the stars, Bock said, “Ramah Outdoor ... will enrich the lives of Jewish youth and instill a deep sense of joy and comfort in Jewish learning.

“A highlight of their experience is the magic of Shabbat. Shabbat will be a time for campers to reflect on the challenges and accomplishments of the week, pray together as one community, and have time to relax and prepare for the coming adventures that await them at camp and beyond.”

Helping the campers enjoy the experience will be a staff of outdoor enthusiasts and Jewish educators. One staffer, Sarah Shulman, who worked with Bock at Gideon Hausner before moving to Los Angeles, is a former competitive triathlete who still runs daily at 5 a.m.

“It’s important for the kids to see that one can be a passionate, committed Jew and be totally into the outdoors,” Bock said. “And we can also help build youth leadership, strengthen Jewish identity and connect young Jews to each other.”

The kids will also connect through prayer and informal and formal Jewish learning. Bock also hopes they will take time to reflect and meditate on life’s larger issues.

“Campers in the past have told me of experiencing God for the first time during the quiet and peacefulness of davening [praying] alone in the woods,” Bock said. “The challenge might be how to wake up when it is still cold outside, or how to climb to the top of a cliff attached to a rope and harness, or how to stay on a horse as it canters up a mountain.”