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A Heartbreaking Announcement: In-Person URJ Camps, Israel and Youth Programs Canceled for Summer 2020

Published: 4/30/2020

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Among the many difficult decisions we have had to face together, today we share one that is especially difficult: After months of carefully following and evaluating the evolving COVID-19 situation, the URJ has reached the heartbreaking, difficult, and values-based decision to cancel all in-person activities this summer. This includes our 15 summer camps, as well as all Israel/travel programs and in-person youth activities.

Notifications conveying the news, along with our deep sadness, were sent today to families, staff, faculty, and other members of our camp and youth communities. We also shared with them that if, at any point, new conditions change that lead us to be able to provide in-person gatherings, doing so will be our top priority.

Each year, nearly 25,000 Reform Jewish youth, teens, young adults, and families are inspired by and find their home in our programs. This year will mark the first time since 1947 that the Reform Jewish Movement will not have on-site summer camps in session.

Coming to This Difficult Decision

We arrived at this difficult conclusion after ongoing conversations with local, regional, and federal medical authorities and other experts, as well as deep exploration by the URJ's camp professional and lay leadership teams. Ultimately, we determined that there are simply too many risks – both known and unknown, both now and over the full summer – to hold our programs as usual.

Although we have continued to plan, prepare, pray, and hope for another transformative summer, the risks posed by COVID-19 threaten our most sacred values: the health and well-being of our children, staff, and faculty that attend camp, along with their communities back home.

These risks also compromise our ability to provide the excellence in programming and participant care that are hallmarks of URJ camps. The changes that would be required to beloved activities – reducing the number of campers in a cabin, no contact sports or Shabbat strolls, and more – would render the heart of the camp experience unrecognizable and would not permit us to live by our values of health, safety, and community. Campers, staff, and faculty with asthma, respiratory conditions, and other health challenges would be extremely vulnerable, resulting in their exclusion from our communities and thus contradicting another one of our core values – inclusion.

Emotional Support for Campers, Staff, and Families

URJ and camp staff, including mental health support staff, clergy, professional, and lay leaders, are on hand to provide immediate emotional support in a variety of ways, including [resources to help families share this news with their children](#). In the coming days, individual camp communities will join together on Zoom to comfort one another and celebrate all that is good and special about camp.

We are deeply grateful for everyone who is part of the URJ camp and youth staff team, including alumni, our faculty from Reform congregations, international staff, and Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries), all of whom have deep emotional connections to camp and our campers. This is an incredibly difficult time, but the power of our entire camp community, and our support for each other, is immeasurable.

While nothing can replace the feeling of being together at camp, the URJ is committed to offering a virtual camp experience this summer to ensure that the ties that bind campers to one another and to their summer home remain as strong as ever. The URJ team will be serving camp families, staff, and communities in new, creative, and different ways through this unique moment in time.

Virtual Experiences: Bringing Home the Magic of Camp

Not having camp in person this season will be absolutely heartbreaking, but we will continue in our mission to inspire even more young people (and, indeed, people of all ages) to embrace Jewish life as a path to meaning, purpose, and joy. In the URJ's camping system, the magic of camp is created by the unique partnerships and relationships between staffers, faculty, artists, campers, and families – and this same magic will continue to bring our community together now.

In the weeks leading up to Memorial Day, we'll share additional information about Movement-wide opportunities to participate in regional and specialty camp programming focused on creative arts, science and technology, sports, Jewish learning and worship, songleading, and more – and fortunately, we already know what an impact these virtual opportunities can make during difficult times.

Within the past month, URJ communities – including camps, NFTY, and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism – have hosted more than 400 online youth programs, resulting in nearly 100,000 engagements across virtual platforms. These creative gatherings for campers, teens, families, alumni, and other supporters are nurturing friendships, joy, comfort, meaningful Jewish rituals, learning, and personal growth.

See our full [URJ Camp and Youth Virtual Programming Calendar](#), updated regularly with new opportunities.

Considering the Financial Impact of This Decision

The decision to cancel in-person activities at camp this year is based on our values, with health and safety as our top priority. This is the right decision, even as the reality is also clear that its financial ramifications are significant, both today and looking forward.

Several options are available for families regarding tuition paid for the 2020 season, including making a donation, which will be generously matched by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation; crediting fees paid for use on future URJ programs; and/or receiving a refund.

Moving Forward and Looking to the Future – Together

We are deeply thankful to all of the leaders in our Reform community and beyond who are helping to provide care and support for everyone connected to our camps and summer programs during this difficult time.

We know, too, that camp extends beyond physical locations and buildings; it dwells in our hearts and friendships, our values and souls. We've learned this lesson by overcoming difficult circumstances in the past, and as we face this most significant challenge, we are strengthened by the URJ's vibrant spiritual community, which has shaped Jewish lives for generations, *l'dor vador*.

As we sing at camp, "*Hineh mah tov umah na'im shevet achim gam yachad*," how good it is for us to be together – and how thankful we will be when we can be together again. Until then, may we each find strength through this painful news and move forward together towards hope, joy, and better days ahead.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs is the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, and **Jennifer Brodkey Kaufman** is chair of the URJ's North American Board of Trustees. **Ruben Arquilevich** is the vice president for URJ camps, NFTY, and immersives, and **Shelley Niceley Groff** is URJ vice chair and North American camping chair.

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Source URL (modified on 04/30/2020 - 3:16pm): <https://urj.org/blog/2020/04/30/heartbreaking-announcement-person-urj-camps-israel-and-youth-programs-canceled>