

Some 40 years ago I spent a summer working for a genius. His name was Shlomo Bardin, founder and director of the Brandeis Camp Institute. At one time he had three camps running, one in New York state, one in North Carolina and one in California. They originally offered a month-long experience in Judaism to young adults aged 18-25, then expanded to include a program for younger campers. I worked in the West Coast camp, located in Simi Valley, California, in exchange for a campership for my 13-year-old daughter.

My duties were in both the younger camp, called Alonim (oak trees), and the adult camp BCI (Brandeis Camp Institute), and consisted of leading singing and giving an occasional lecture. Thus I got to know many of the campers and counselors and we got along really well. At the end of the summer, Shlomo asked me to stay on as his assistant, an offer I could not accept since we had three other children in school in L.A. and had just moved into the house that is still our home, a place my wife loved and did not want to abandon to move to Simi Valley. But I couldn't simply refuse. You didn't say No to Shlomo Bardin. So somehow I worked the conversation around to where he withdrew his offer. But I retained my high regard for him and his work.

Bardin's program was all-inclusive, from prayer services to dramatics to music to learning with visiting rabbis from all branches of Judaism, to Israeli dancing – and of course a fine swimming pool and horseback riding and a tennis court which got plenty of use. The summer was divided into two regular sessions called Aliyot, each about a month long, and an arts program lasting 10 weeks. During those sessions the campers, who came from a wide variety of backgrounds, got a concentrated experience of total Jewish life.

Bardin himself represented a wide scope of Jewish experience. A native of Zhitomir, Russia, he had a traditional yeshiva education, went to the Land of Israel as a young man and worked on the development of the new harbor at Haifa, founded a naval technical school, and in 1940 came

to the United States to raise money for that school. Here he soon observed a growing generation that he said was “in flight from themselves.” The outbreak of World War II kept him from returning to Haifa. About that time, through contacts in New York, he met Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who although not a religious man expressed concern about young Jews who were drifting away from their people – a view from a famous native American that excited Shlomo because he completely agreed with it. So how did a man with Shlomo’s background and considerable ability react? He dedicated his life to bringing that generation home, by serving its potential leaders with a positive taste of Jewish identity.

Having spent time in Europe, he observed an institution called the Danish Folk High School, and took some suggestions from it. He would choose his campers on the basis of recommendations from reliable leaders in their communities, and provide them with as wide and positive an experience as he and his staff could create. That staff, in my time, included master musician Max Helfman, dramatic actor-director Raikin Ben-Ari, Israeli folkdancer-choreographer Dani Dassa, and rabbinical and literary guests of real prominence who made themselves available because they valued Shlomo Bardin and his mission. He named his camps for Brandeis, who helped endow the project, and whose name inspired respect throughout American Jewry.

Those of us who took the opportunity to work with Shlomo did more than help the campers. We got some inspiration ourselves.

Some 18 years before my summer at camp, I was hired to write a script for a program Shlomo was putting on in Beverly Hills for potential patrons. After a few story conferences with him, I came home and told my wife: “That man’s a tyrant. I don’t want to work for him.” She knew Shlomo before she knew me, because at age 18 she went to Brandeis on a dance scholarship. In fact she once told me that if not for Brandeis she probably would not have married me! Well, in succeeding years I observed the results of Shlomo’s work in the communities I served, and I

realized that – tyrant or not – he was accomplishing all the things that were important to me. So when it came time to send my children to camp I jumped at the opportunity to work for him again. In fact, the song that appears on the home page of this website is one I wrote that summer at Brandeis. It's called "We Wish You Love – *ahavah v'akh'vah shalom v'reyut.*" Just four Hebrew words, with companion English lyrics and a melody that campers were singing all over the Santa Susana mountains.

That was 40 years ago. Shlomo never retired. He once told me "They will carry me from my desk to my grave." And at the age of 78, he left us. He was buried at the camp in 1976. Succeeding administrations tried to continue Shlomo's work, but their success was limited. The first BCler to chair the Board of Brandeis Camp, my friend Orrin Kabaker, recalls that in recent years, Brandeis faced serious economic problems. Anxious to salvage elements of the Brandeis program, its leaders decided to merge with the University of Judaism to form the American Jewish University, a move which achieved their aims and also partially rescued the University from its lockstep connection with the troubled Conservative movement. The location is still there. The program is still based on the Bardin pattern, but inevitably it is different now.

I wonder what Shlomo Bardin would say today about the challenge that motivated his career. Do we again find a generation "in flight from itself?" Certainly there is evidence of that condition. In religious life we see many Jews militant about what they reject, and equivocal about what they accept. And politically we see Jewish names among activists who champion the enemies of Israel and of the Jewish people. Submerged identities, intermarriage, and detachment from the community rank among today's trademarks.

On the other hand we have some dedicated individuals working hard in the spirit of *kulanu k'ehad* – "all of us as one." People like David Harris of the American Jewish Committee, Roz Rothstein of StandWithUs,

several leaders of Jewish War Veterans – all take a positive approach to Jewish life and social activism. More power to them. They know that we don't always have to agree, but we desperately need to work together. I think of an old Yiddish song that says it best:

*Vos mir zynen zynen mir / obber yid'n zynen mir* – “Whatever we are, we are, but we are Jews.”

That's how Shlomo Bardin saw it. And he was right. *Zichrono liv'raha*. We remember him for blessing.