

What Works: Yom Kippur at Camp

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This past Yom Kippur, 165 members of Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco gathered in the beautiful, woodsy setting of URJ Camp Newman in Santa Rosa, California to worship, build community, and renew themselves.

They began with apples, honey, and wine under the sky, followed by Kol Nidre services. Rabbi Yoni Jaffe then took about 60 parents and 40 kids on a night hike to an overlook, where he spoke about Moses ascending Sinai and then, on Yom Kippur, descending the mountain with the tablets.

In the morning, 30 kids took a yoga class rooted in the motif "*Adonai sefatitiftach*," with "*s'fatayim* in this context representing edges or borders," Rabbi Jaffe says. "The idea was to stretch to the point that their souls reached out of their borders." During the morning service that followed, 150 congregants, young and old, spread out all over the camp to offer silent prayer amidst nature.

After services led by Rabbi Jaffe and Rabbinical Student Jaclyn Cohen, who also served as cantor, congregants hiked for three miles and began developing new friendships, heeding the rabbi's direction to get to know at least two other congregants during the experience by talking to them about their year. "I heard a wonderful conversation about forgiving one's parents, especially as they age," Rabbi Jaffe says. "Others spoke about how to mete out autonomy to children without leaving them open for major mistakes."

Many of the young children participated in a whale-shaped "Jonah obstacle course" of balance beams, trampolines, tunnels, and landings. "We asked the kids what skills – such as jumping, ducking, and balancing – they needed to use in the whale and how they needed those skills to be a good person in everyday life," Rabbi Jaffe says. "We also had the kids close their eyes, pretending it was dark inside the whale, and connected this to closing our eyes when we pray. Why do we shut out this sense and how does it allow us to focus on what we're doing?"

Group text study of the Isaiah *haftarah* followed. By this time, Rabbi Jaffe says, "Our experience felt like a perfect metaphor for the prophet Isaiah's messages of not over-emphasizing rituals and thereby excluding *kavannah* [sacred intention], of not focusing on dressing one's finest, but rather on personal assessment. Wearing casual clothes, we could focus on separating Yom Kippur from the built-up pomp of modern custom and on returning the holy day to its roots."

Before the concluding *Neilah* service, all 165 participants joined together for a group art project: creating saran-wrapped “foot” sculptures affixed to black board “roads,” upon which families wrote where they hoped to head in the coming year. “Kids wrote goals such as ‘learning to swim’ and ‘doing a somersault,’ and more serious ones like ‘tell the truth’ and ‘when I do something bad, say I am sorry,’” Rabbi Jaffe says, “Some parents were surprised to hear what was on their kids’ minds.”

Afterwards, families celebrated *havdalah* with their arms around one another, and the evening ended with s’mores and singing song after song by the campfire.

Rabbi Jaffe notes that, “Many congregants have expressed gratitude for this novel approach to celebrating the High Holy Days.” For example, one participant later wrote: “Usually my wife and I have to negotiate all sorts of things with our kids – e.g. dressing up for temple, and which services everyone will attend. In fact, before this year's holiday, my youngest son asked for clarification: ‘Is Yom Kippur the time where we argue and fight?’ Sad, but accurate, I suppose. This retreat made it possible for both us and the kids to be more participatory in the holiday—and to appreciate and enjoy it.”