From the Archives | Back to camp

Camp Winnebegoe around 1955. Established in 1933, Camp Winnebagoe was the first Jewish co-educational camp in Canada. It was owned and operated by Joe and Sadie Danson. First located on the Rouge River, east of Toronto, the camp moved to different locations in the Huntsville, Ont., area. In 1971, Camp Winnebagoe purchased Camp Ogama on Fox Lake and continues to be operated from this location by the Lustig family. Photograph by Turofsky.

From Yoni’s Desk

How not to talk about intermarriage

Last week, the Jewish Agency’s board of governors elected Isaac Herzog to be its next chairman. Herzog, the leader of the Opposition in the Knesset (a position he will abdicate, along with his duties as a member of Knesset, in order to assume the new role), will take over from Natan Sharansky, who during his nine years at the helm of one of Israel’s pre-eminent institutions and the largest Jewish non-profit in the world, worked to evolve the Jewish Agency’s focus from encouraging aliyah to fostering Jewish peoplehood and identity. (“It’s not enough to speak about aliyah,” Sharansky said in 2010. “It can’t be our goal (just) to bring more Jewish people to Israel.”)

Herzog, who said he accepted the post because of “the significant challenges that lie ahead for the relationship between the Jewish people and the State of Israel,” beat out Yuval Steinitz, a Likud MK and Israel’s minister of national infrastructure, energy and water resources, who was, according to various media reports, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s preferred candidate for the post. Historically, the Jewish Agency has affirmed the prime minister’s choice when it comes to selecting a chairman, but it changed its own bylaws a decade ago, so that the prime minister’s approval would no longer be necessary to make leadership decisions.

Bougie, as Herzog is affectionately (and alternatively, less-than-affectionately) known, found himself almost immediately caught up in a public dispute when, during an Israeli TV interview on the eve of his election, he described intermarriage as a “plague” (using the Hebrew word “magefa”) that “we have to rack our brains to figure out how to solve.” Days later, and after some outcry that his remarks were insensitive to intermarried Jews, he suggested he hadn’t meant to use “magefa” as a negative term, but rather as Hebrew slang. (“A Jew is a Jew is a Jew, no matter which stream he belongs to, if he wears a skullcap or not,” he added.)

Herzog’s intermarriage controversy follows on the heels of Michael Chabon’s May commencement address at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, where the award-winning Jewish-American author made the case in favour of intermarriage before a group of graduating rabbis. “Any religion that relies on compulsory endogamy to survive,” he said, “is in my view, ceased to make the case for its continued validity in the everyday lives of human beings.” Intermarriage, Chabon argued, is “the source of all human greatness.” The speech was widely panned – at least one graduate walked out midway – and after some outcry that his remarks were insensitive to intermarried Jews, he suggested he hadn’t meant to use “magefa” as a negative term, but rather as Hebrew slang. (“A Jew is a Jew is a Jew, no matter which stream he belongs to, if he wears a skullcap or not,” he added.)

Herzog’s intermarriage controversy follows on the heels of Michael Chabon’s May commencement address at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, where the award-winning Jewish-American author made the case in favour of intermarriage before a group of graduating rabbis. “Any religion that relies on compulsory endogamy to survive,” he said, “has, in my view, ceased to make the case for its continued validity in the everyday lives of human beings.” Intermarriage, Chabon argued, is “the source of all human greatness.” The speech was widely panned – at least one graduate walked out midway – and Chabon faced severe criticism from virtually all corners of the Jewish world. (In an ironic twist, Philip Roth, who made a literary career out of fetishizing intermarriage, and was vilified in many Jewish circles for it, died just days later; with his graduation speech, Chabon would appear to have assumed Roth’s mantle.)

How not to talk about intermarriage