

Leading The Field

by Rabbi Paysach Krohn

For the last two decades, my wife and I have had the wonderful opportunity to spend Shabbosim of the summer months in different camps in the Catskills where I speak. Sometimes it's a boys camp other times it's a girls camp; each camp has its own personality and is special in its own way. But as wonderful as these camps are, there is no camp as unique and distinctive as Camp HASC in Parksville, New York.

I remember vividly years ago, the first time I walked into Camp HASC on a Friday afternoon. I was stunned! Nothing I had ever experienced in any camp prepared me for what was before me. I had never seen a swing set that had a wheelchair type of seat swinging back and forth. In that especially made swing set chair was a child with a smile from ear to ear and a counselor pushing the chair gently into the air. A howl of glee emanated from the child as his face was swept upward into rarified air. Nearby was a little girl, bent over, on crutches, with a counselor's arm around her. She was speaking in a loud voice but I could not make out the words. No difference. The counselor somehow understood her and answered her with an animated smile.

I had never seen so many challenged children in one place, some wearing helmets to protect them if they fall, others being led in motorized wheelchairs, and still others sitting with counselors on benches strategically placed around the camp. With every camper there was a counselor. No camper was left alone even for a moment. The campers did not merely seem happy--they seemed ecstatic.

Davening Friday night was an experience I will never forget. The excitement level in the shul was at a pitch that would be unimaginable in any other camp. And yet no counselor seemed upset. They are well trained to take almost everything in stride. There are those who suddenly cry out uncontrollably with sounds that could be frightening to the untrained ear. They are not scolded, they are embraced or patted on the back gently. If a boy closes his siddur ten times, the counselor, unperturbed, opens it again and again to the page that the *Baal Tefillah* is up to. I watched with awe as an obviously challenged youngster, yanked the *tallis* off the shoulders of the *Baal Tefillah*. The reaction? The camp Rabbi with his endearing smile walked over to the youngster, shook his hand warmly to wish him 'Good Shabbos', gently took the *tallis* from his hand and put the *tallis* back on the *Baal Tefillah's* shoulders. Rebuke? Of course not. Criticism? Not in the least. I watched the love and the understanding of the counselors to their campers with amazement.

I did not know until I was in HASC that the campers range in age from 7 to over 40. The responsibility the staff carries at HASC is beyond imagination. There is a schedule for medications that must be followed. There is a walk-in swimming pool that is unlike any other I have ever seen. Children are led gently down an ever so slightly inclined ramp to ensure their safety. One can only imagine what devotion and patience it takes to dress these children every morning.

What goes on during the dancing at Shabbos meals is indescribable. One must see it to believe it. Every child is encouraged to participate and the joy that is brought on by the counselors and staff is nothing short of remarkable.

I remember one Friday night a camper, a Down Syndrome child, standing on a table in a world of his own, strumming an invisible guitar, singing into an invisible microphone. He was in a world onto himself and everyone just waved and cheered him on as they danced past him. It was heartwarming, even if it was sad.

Aside from anything else, the summer months when Camp HASC tends to these children it is a respite for their parents who diligently look after these special children throughout the year. As Mrs. Devorah Gewirtzman of Monsey says, "Having our son Simcha, in HASC for seven weeks is a most unbelievable experience for him. However for my husband and I it is a life-saver. We are able to take overnight vacations with our other children when Simcha is at HASC, which is more practical than during the rest of the year, as he is dependent on a wheelchair and other medical equipment."

Her husband Leizer concurs and adds, "The love that the counselors have for our son often makes us think as though he is the only child in camp. Would you believe," he says with astonishment "they call us every Friday throughout the year to wish Simcha and us 'good Shabbos'." Mrs. Gewirtzman adds, "A counselor named Adam wrote us a letter thanking us for sharing Simcha with him and HASC. We have that letter hung in our kitchen!"

HASC was founded in 1963 by Rabbi and Mrs. Mordechai and Blanche Kahn to benefit, educate and provide therapeutic services to children of challenge. Until HASC came to be many of these children were institutionalized and often sent away from home so that they would not 'interfere' with conventional family life or be a hindrance when it came to shidduchin for their siblings. The Kahns changed everyone's attitude towards these developmentally disabled children. They showed that these children could be taught to appreciate Yiddishkeit at some level, they could be productive, and most of all they could be part of a family where they are loved and respected. Camp HASC began in 1972.

Today many camps have bunks for special children and the campers become beloved and accepted as brothers and sisters in Klal Yisroel. Interestingly because many camps have accepted the higher functioning special children, Camp HASC is today meeting the challenge of tending to more lower functioning children than they ever had before. These include the multiple handicapped and autistic children amongst us. HASC now provides health services and parental education through its psychologists, social workers and registered nurses.

The HASC concert has become a household word. The performers, renowned throughout the world are proud to be affiliated with this extraordinary extravaganza. I have been to some of the concerts and each time I am amazed at the energy and vigor with which these performers sing (and sometimes dance). Once again others have followed the lead of HASC by making concerts for their organizations and that is wonderful. It has been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. HASC has set standards on many levels, May Hashem continue to give them strength, courage and yes finances to continue their great work. ●