



A Special Camp for Special Kids With Dovid and Nati

BY SEFFIE

"Mitzvah gedolah lihiyos besimchah, lihiyos besimchah ... Hi, Nati!

I hope this won't take too long. I don't like depressing places."

"Hi, Dovid! Camp HASC is one of the happiest places I know, and the staff psychologist, Dr. Pollak, is always cheerful. I know, 'cause she's Aunt Shaina's friend. Why did you think it would be depressing?"

"Um, well, you know ... All those kids in wheelchairs and with other disabilities. How could anyone be happy? Everyone there probably cries all day."

"I'm really glad you're coming, Dovid. You're in for a surprise – and a happy surprise, at that!"

...

Hi, Dr. Pollak. Wow, everyone looks so cheerful! How many campers and counselors do you have here?

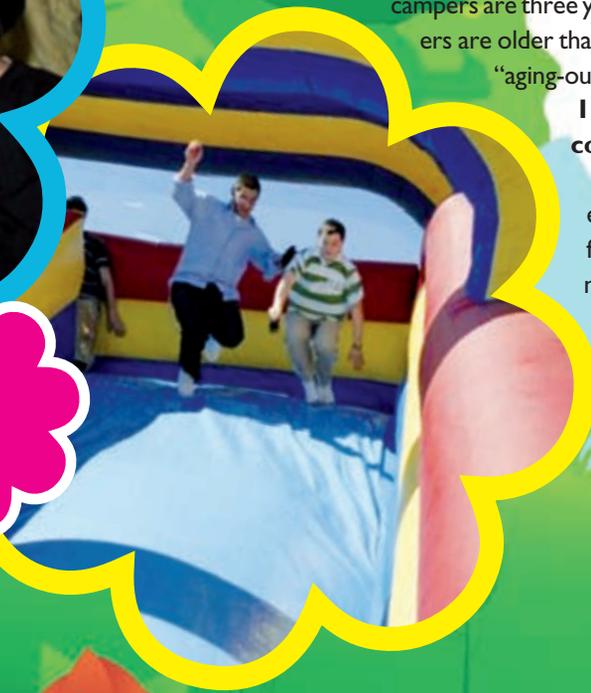
Hi, boys. We have three hundred campers and almost four hundred people on the staff.

And this is a sleepaway camp?

Most campers sleep here, but some come for day camp and go home to their families in a nearby bungalow colony every night. Our youngest day campers are three years old. And the oldest campers are older than you – a lot older. There's no "aging-out" at Camp HASC.

I was a little nervous about coming here.

Most of the counselors are excited and also nervous before they come, too. They're nervous about whether they'll be able to help the campers with what they need, es-



pecially if the camper doesn't talk. The counselors worry about being able to love the campers and be friends with them. With time, the counselors become close with the campers and forget all about being nervous. When we realize how similar we are to someone else, we're able to be less afraid of the differences.

What kind of differences do the campers have?

Almost all the campers here have a developmental disability – that's a disability that a person is born with that affects his development. Of course a person can always grow and develop, but there's a difference between the growth we expect from a child and the growth we usually see in an adult. The campers don't only have a physical disability – there's a lot more to it than that.

So is this camp really very different?

Our motto is, "Camp HASC – where miracles happen." But in most ways we're a regular camp, just for special kids. We play baseball, football and have balloon races. Lunch might be macaroni and cheese. Some kids go to one camp, some kids go to another camp, and some kids come to this camp. Everyone has a camp to go to.

Do you have special activities here that a regular camp might not have?

Well, there are classes where kids might learn the same sort of stuff they're learning in school, like reading and writing. Mostly the classes are more hands-on, like sensory enhancement.

Sensory what?

Sensory enhancement – stuff that uses the five senses. Feeling things, baking, smelling and listening to music. We might do messy things with shaving cream, for example. We have an adaptive library with audio books and great games, like a Bingo game that uses the sense of smell.

We do all the regular camp stuff, like music, art, gym, calisthenics, concerts, a circus and swimming. There's also speech therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy – that's where the kids go to practice their learning skills.

And most kids love the petting zoo, with sheep, goats and a donkey. The nature shack has ducks, a bunny rabbit, guinea pigs and fish. Pet therapy is all about touching and making a connection.

The kids learn to be responsible and gentle. Even kids who are kind of rough with other people learn to be very gentle with these animals.

But some of the kids are in wheelchairs, and other kids have other difficulties. How can these kids do the regular camp activities like playing baseball?

If a kid can hold a bat and hit the ball but uses a wheelchair, then the counselor could run around the bases with him. If the kid can't see, maybe the kid will hold the bat and the counselor will put his hands over the kid's hands and they'll hit the ball together.

What about swimming?

We have two indoor pools. One pool has a ramp, and the other pool is built like the beach – it starts off at ground level and slopes down. See these reclining pool chairs? They're not just for relaxing by the water. These pool chairs are on wheels. If a camper uses a wheelchair, we'll transfer him into the pool chair and wheel him down to the water. A counselor is in the water waiting. Once a person is in the water, there's an incredible feeling of lightness. The water holds you up and you're free to move and float. Some of our campers don't get that feeling anywhere else.

What other activities do you have?

We just finished color war. We had relay races, potato-sack races, a bucket brigade ...

What's a bucket brigade?

That's a race to pass a bucket full of water from one person to the other, along a whole line of people. Usually the water spills all

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over and it's really funny. So if a kid is sitting in a wheelchair and can't lift the bucket, the person on line before him will put it in his lap and the next person will lift it out. All the kids participate in everything. Kids who usually don't go to shul can go here.

You have a shul?

Sure. We daven three times a day. It's a little noisy in our shul, but everyone's welcome. Some campers like to sing the davening out loud. If they're a little off-tune, that's okay.

The campers might not be able to go to shul during the year because there's a level of decorum that they can't meet. They might call out to a friend across the room in middle of davening, "Hi, Moishie!"

If a camper needs to go out for a break and come back later, that's fine. Some of our campers have autism – that's a communication disorder. If a camper with autism wants to sit on the floor and play with a sock, that's fine. We'll make a place for him on the side, and he can stay with us in shul.

Are there other special accommodations here?

Oh, sure. There's no step to get into the shower, and the showers are especially large and wide, to accommodate wheelchairs. The basketball court has adjustable hoops – we can raise and lower them, so all the kids can play. And we have a really big collection of adaptive bicycles.

What's an adaptive bike?

It's a bicycle that's adapted for people with all kinds of disabilities. If someone usually uses a wheelchair, we can strap

him into an adaptive bike and he can pedal or be pushed around the bike path. All the paths are paved, so people who use wheelchairs and walkers can get around easily. We even have adaptive swings. All the playground equipment is built with ramps, so all the kids can go all the way up and play with their friends.

It's nice to have all this adaptive equipment, but there are still things that some people just can't do.

You're right. Be creative! If you're playing baseball, there's something that each person can do. A person with a disability could be the person cheering or the person keeping score. The players might be doing different things, but everyone is playing the same game of baseball.

There's a lot of *kavod habrios* here. Each person has a *nesh-amah* just like ours. We never talk about a person in front of him, and we take care of what has to be done quietly and in a *tzanua* manner – even if the person can't talk and tell us what he would like. We treat everyone with respect – the way we would want to be treated.

We have what's called a "person-centered philosophy." So we talk about a "person with blindness" instead of a "blind person." Even if someone is blind, he's a person first. The emphasis is on the person, not the disability.

What do the counselors say at the end of the summer?

We all see how each person is special, even if we're different. We learn to be gentle and caring. One counselor told me that he would make sure to put his camper's sock on right, because the camper couldn't tell him if it was folded and hurt when he walked.

We've learned a lot about being kind and about patience. Sometimes it takes a long time for a camper to do something, but it's important that he does it himself.

And we see how good it feels to give. Most counselors go on from here and continue to give in their own communities.

All of us are more tolerant – we've learned that a person doesn't have to be just like us in order to be a friend. Am Yisrael is bigger and greater than any one of us, and we're lucky to be a part of it.

