

The Jerusalem Life

Summer Camp – In Today's Economy?

by :Motty Bergman

It's still winter, and yet it seems that people have summer on their minds. Every year at this time, camps open their doors for registration. But in today's difficult financial environment, is anyone even thinking about sending their kids to summer camp?

To find out, The Jerusalem Life spoke with one of the well-known camp directors here in Eretz Yisroel, Reb Elly Merenstein, who is the director of Camp Emes. After speaking to him for a few minutes, I knew I'd come to the right address. He has about as much camp experience as you can find in one person – a total of 14 years at Camp Agudah in the Catskills, first as a camper and then joining the staff, moving up in the ranks over the years. Even after he got married and moved to Eretz Yisroel, several camps offered to fly him back for the summer. But Reb Elly decided to use his vast inside knowledge and experience to bring the American camp experience here to Eretz Yisroel.

Reb Elly, money is extremely tight for a lot of people these days. How can people afford the expense of summer camp?

If a parent looks at camp like a babysitting service – you know, they just keep the kids busy and out of trouble for a few weeks – then you're right, it's like you said, an "expense." But a good camp is not just a babysitting service. It can be the difference between a mediocre year (or worse) and a really focused year of development and improvement. Summer can be an incredible time of growth for yeshiva boys. You need to spark that growth, encourage it, and then build on it. Use the happy, healthy experience so that they go back to yeshiva and have a great year.

As much as today's financial climate is shaky, so is today's "street." More than ever, our kids need us to provide them with enriching experiences to keep them healthy. So, to answer your question, with the right program, camp is not an "extra expense." It's part and parcel of their education.

So how would you define a "good camp"?

Like I said, a good camp doesn't just keep kids busy, it builds them.

In what way?

One of the reasons I decided to open up my own camp here, instead of going back to New York every summer, is because here, in Eretz Yisroel, there's an ingredient you just can't get there: the *ruchniyus* of Eretz Yisroel. We use the unique holiness of Eretz Yisroel to give the boys *nesbama*-experiences. After a solid two-hour learning session, the boys go absolutely everywhere: *mikomos bakedoshim, kivrei tzadikim*, Meron, Amuka, Shabbos in Tzefas.... The list goes on.

What about the "regular" camp activities?

Of course we have them, too! This is a crucial part of it all. First of all, we take our sports very seriously. Our sports director oversees the athletic leagues in our own, spacious gym, as well as the inter-camp games – an idea we initiated in Eretz Yisroel. At the end of the season there are championships, with trophies and all.

Besides sports, we do all the attractions, including water skiing, paintball shooting, cliff rappelling, tornado boating, snorkeling, and more. We tour as we go: the Dead Sea (and a mud fight), Masada, banana boating on the Kineret, separate beaches – an Israeli specialty – and lots more.

And then they come back to base and collapse?

No. They come home at the end of a long day, eat supper (the food is catered, but we end up doing a lot of barbeques and shwarma), and then there's a 45-minute night *sefer*, which is usually a *shmeuss* or *shiur* with special, well-known speakers who impart words of *chizuk*, *hasbkafa* and inspiration. In the past we've featured speakers such as Rabbis David Orlofsky, Asher Wade, Hanoch Teller, Natan Gamedeze, and Uri Zohar, to name a few.

Who are the counselors?

The counselors are American *bachurim* learning in Eretz Yisroel. They stay in the dorm with the boys. Besides giving their campers a great time (there's one counselor for every five or six boys), their main job is to be on top of their charges 24/7. There's also a paramedic with them at all times, as well as an armed security guard who accompanies the camp wherever they go.

Where is the camp located?

It's based in Shaarei Chesed, in the dormitory facilities of Yeshivas Midrash Shmuel under the guidance of Harav Hagaon Binyamin Moskowitz, *shlita*, the Rosh Yeshiva.

It sounds like a dream! How can our readers find out more about Camp Emes?

They can call me directly at 02-563-0411, or email me at emesyerushalayim@gmail.com. There's also a website: www.campemes.com. And the American number to pass on to brothers, nephews and cousins is 718-713-8453.