

# HERE'S my STORY

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## WHEN THE HEAD COUNSELOR PASSED OUT

**RABBI MOSHE LAZAR**

Back in the early 1950s when I was a *yeshivah* student, there were very few religious summer camps. For several summers, I worked as a counselor at one of them — Camp Agudah — and from this experience, I got the idea of starting a more-inclusive Chabad summer camp which would leave the campers with a lasting connection to *Yiddishkeit*.

However, when I wrote to the Rebbe about it, I didn't get an immediate go-ahead. Starting a camp would require a lot of time and energy, the Rebbe said, and it would be a distraction from my Torah studies. He advised that I shelve the idea for six months, until after Passover, and write to him again at that time.

Still, I couldn't stop thinking and planning, and of course right after Passover I wrote to the Rebbe again. This time, I received a response from the head of the Rebbe's secretariat, Rabbi Mordechai Hodakov, with advice pertaining to the camp's organizational structure. He informed me that we would have to form a legal corporation — not just start up a private venture — so that there wouldn't be personal liability. Also, since I and Yossi Weinbaum, my partner in this undertaking, were still young *yeshivah* students, we needed a third partner who was older and married. We chose Kehos Weiss for that role, and we reported this to Rabbi Hodakov, who told us that the Rebbe wanted to see us.

When we went into the Rebbe's office, he asked us very seriously, "Why do we need a camp?"

This question sent my head reeling. Because I had invested so much thought and hope in this idea and the Rebbe's initial response was positive, I had expected that now he would advise us *what* to do, but here he was asking us *why* we should even do it. I felt my whole world shatter, and I actually blacked out. Kehos saw me wobbling on my feet and grabbed me before I hit the floor. Needless to say, the audience was disrupted. The Rebbe said we should go outside for a few minutes, and when I felt better, we could come back in.

Once outside, Kehos — who was a very level-headed person — set me straight. He said, "Moshe, just answer



the Rebbe's question honestly. Tell him why, based on your personal experience, you feel we need a camp."

We went back in and the Rebbe greeted us with a huge smile. After asking me if I was feeling better, he repeated his earlier question, "Why do we need a camp?"

So I told him, "Camp is the best way to infuse a child with Judaism. Even if he goes to a religious school, whatever he learns can be undone by his home environment. But he will be in camp round the clock for a month or two. During that time, whatever he learns will become permanently ingrained."

The Rebbe seemed very satisfied with that answer and he gave us his approval, and even some advice on how to go about finding the best site for the camp. I got on this right away because there was so much to be done in the three short months before the start of camp in July.

A real estate agent in the Catskills showed me several places that we could rent, but the Rebbe did not approve any of them. One place required the kids to cross a busy road between two parts of the camp; another would house the kids in a tall building where they might be trapped on upper floors in case of a fire, and a third was subject to some other hazard which had not been obvious to me.

*continued on reverse*



**EVENTS. IDEAS.  
PERSONALITIES.**

Marking 70 years from the anniversary of the Rebbe's leadership, each week, JEM will be focusing on one event, idea or personality in the Rebbe's life.



continued from reverse

In the end, I managed to rent out an existing secular camp in the village of Ellenville — Camp Israel — the owner of which wanted to retire. As soon as the Rebbe approved that venue, I started on the publicity to attract campers. This went extremely well and, before long, we had over ninety kids signed up as well as a full staff hired, and we were ready to go.

While I was still busy making all the necessary arrangements out of my little closet of an office at Chabad headquarters, I got a surprise visit from Rabbi Leibel Groner, the Rebbe's secretary. "How long does it take to drive out to the camp?" he asked. "Two hours, or maybe two and a half hours, depending on traffic," I answered.

He didn't say anything and left, but a short while later he was back with another surprise: "The Rebbe is leaving for the camp in an hour!"

Now, the Rebbe never left New York City from the time he assumed his position in 1950, so this was a very big deal. As soon as word got out, everyone at 770 wanted to come too. As it turned out, an entire convoy of tightly-packed cars made its way to the Catskills, where the Rebbe held a *farbrengen*. He treated the occasion with great solemnity and even put on his silk *kapotah* which was reserved for special occasions.

It was on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, 1956 — the 16<sup>th</sup> of Sivan, 5716 — that the Rebbe first came and inaugurated Camp Gan Israel. We kept the original name of the place, but changed it just a little bit to indicate this was something new, as per the Rebbe's advice. He said that there might be some children who attended the old Camp Israel and will want to come back — his approach was never to miss an opportunity to be as inclusive as possible. Since then, this has always been the policy of Camp Gan Israel which, over the years, has grown into a world-wide network that has been frequented by a million kids, and possibly more.

The second year, the Rebbe wanted me to find a nicer venue, because the Ellenville site was a bit dilapidated. So, again, I went looking. In Swan Lake — one of the fanciest locales in the Catskills in those days — I found Ziegler's Farm, which was originally a chicken farm plus a collection of log cabins built by the owner. We managed to buy this place and we moved the camp there.

Once the camp opened — with double the enrollment of the first year — the Rebbe came out again to see it, but this time his visit was planned in advance, not a total surprise like the first time.

I wanted the Rebbe to see the camp in action, and I took him to see the kids in their bunks, each child standing next to his bed. He toured the grounds and showed interest in everything. When we entered the dining room, he saw the sign, "Remember to tip your waiter!" and he took money out of his pocket and gave it to Yossi Weinbaum for the waiters.

He also spoke to them. He told the waiters — who might feel like servants a lot of the time — that they were doing

very important, holy work. This was the Rebbe's way of dealing with every single person — no matter their standing in life — to show them that they were important. This is one of the many things we have to learn from the Rebbe; he taught us that every person needs to be acknowledged.

It is an amazing feeling to be acknowledged, as I can personally testify. When the tour was over and the Rebbe was getting back into his car, he said to me — and I shall never forget his words — "I never imagined such richness." I took this as a sign of his approval and his encouragement has sustained me to this day.

*Rabbi Mosher Lazar has served as a Chabad emissary in Milan, Italy, since 1961. He was interviewed in June of 2011.*

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## This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין

> **5744 - 1984**, before his father's fortieth *yahrzeit*, the Rebbe requested that *chasidim* gather to study his father's teachings and make charitable donations in his memory. The Rebbe noted that Rabbi Levi Yitzchok was imprisoned and exiled for his work to promote Judaism behind the Iron Curtain and that when he passed away, he was also buried in exile. "May his merit bring protection upon us and every Jew," the Rebbe concluded.<sup>1</sup>  
9 Av

1. Likkutei Sichot vol. 39 page 231

MY ENCOUNTER  
with the **REBBE**

While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.

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