

Camp HASC Simchaton... a Yom Tov to Remember

By: Rachel Bolnick

The Camp HASC Simchaton which I just attended was a truly amazing experience... I'll do my best to capture it in words!

Although only 3 days long, Simchaton was a microcosm of Camp HASC, and represented the extraordinary things that the HASC stands for. HASC is a place where all people, blessed with all types of ABILITIES are able to come together to celebrate the Torah in an unparalleled environment of *ruach*. It is three days where the focus is on how the participants CAN celebrate the Torah, three days where the celebration is specifically geared to involve those with all types special needs.

Although the HASC Simchaton has been taking place for many years at various hotels, only recently was the change made to celebrate on Camp HASC campus in Parksville, NY. Spending Yom Tov in camp brought back such wonderful memories for all of us who have worked in camp recently and in the more distant past, and a strong sense of nostalgia for the magical experiences we so fondly remember. It also made a noticeable impact on the campers themselves, many of whom have been attending Camp HASC for many years. They were able to return to the familiar, warm environment that they feel so comfortable in; their 'home away from home.' There is no better a place to celebrate the chag!

We all felt that this year's Simchaton was the most enjoyable, the most exciting, and the most spirited Simchaton that there has ever been! The moment the campers and counselors stepped off the bus into the beautiful crisp autumn air, we felt like we were at home, and immediately delved into the Simchas Torah *ruach*. The scene was just as colorful as it is in the summer, but overlaid with multicolored fall leaves. With Sukkos music filling the air and hugs and laughs of campers and staff reuniting, the campers and counselors hurried to their bunks to unpack. On their way to lunch they were greeted by the *ruach* counselors, who got them all to shake the lulav and esrog, and to write "Simchaton-a-grams" to one another, to be distributed on Shabbos.

On the first night, Shmini Atzeres, everyone made their way to the shul. Before davening began, announcements were made, and for the very first time in Simchaton history, they announced that we would all be participating in Simchas Torah COLOR WAR! As the green and orange Simchaton bracelets were handed out, corresponding to the two teams - Team Torah and Team Simcha, some wondered, "Color war on Yom Tov and Shabbos?" Some thought it would not succeed, but once again, we proved that when the focus is on involving the campers in the *ruach*, our efforts always bear fruits.

The color war activity – known as the "sing-down" *ruach* competition, spanned the entire Yom Tov and greatly enhanced the singing, dancing and *ruach* of the chag. Interspersed between the "team times" where each team learned their team song, the campers and counselors participated in many other exciting activities such as the "Sukkah Hop" (potato sack race), "Sukkah Building" (out of crackers and marshmallow fluff), "Lulav and Esrog Baseball," the "Hoshanos Marching Band," the "Sukkah Farewell Fabrengen," and a "Seven Days of Creation" activity, with seven booths representing each day. The boys had the opportunity to participate in the choir "The SimchaTONES," while the girls had the opportunity to participate in a brachos

party led by our Simchas Torah “Rebbetzins.” A Yom Tov game room, filled with toys purchased for the chag, was set up to accommodate the campers who appreciated the chance to relax occasionally in a laid back and less structured space.

Not only were there activities for campers, but the staff were able to participate in various one-g programs, and attend inspiring shiurim over the course of the chag. When the campers were asleep and safely being watched by staff members on duty, the counselors formed new bonds and friendships, learning together, playing board games and reminiscing about memories from summers passed.

What makes Simchaton such an inspiring and memorable experience every year are the beautiful, ruach-filled hakafos, designed specifically for our campers to dance in. With campers lifted onto counselors’ shoulders, people in wheelchairs being lifted in the air, candy and Torah flags being handed out to all, the magic of the chag was palpable and unique. Staff members helped their campers dance with the Sifrei Torah when possible, and with toy Sifrei Torah when not. Both during the hakafos at night and during the day, everyone could feel that this type of unique inclusion is what the true Simchah of Torah is truly meant to feel like.

Perhaps the most emotional moment of the Yom Tov was *Kol Hanearim*, when we watched so many campers with such pure neshamos and so much enthusiasm, joining in for the special aliyah. Watching the campers and their counselors join as one under the giant tallis, brought tears to all eyes in the room. Could they have had this magical experience anywhere else...

Serving as one of the directors of Simchaton for the past 3 years, has afforded me the opportunity to be in touch with the parents who sent their children to our Simchaton program. It was beautiful to hear that not only did Simchaton provide an incredible and inspiring experience for the counselors and campers, but it also provided a well-earned respite for their parents. One parent remarked that for the first time, her family was able to spend the long Yom Tov at family, which would have been too difficult for her son with special needs to otherwise handle. Another parent said “Seeing the smile on our daughter’s face when she came home shows that the counselors are absolutely selfless... especially to leave their own families for Yom Tov!” All the effort in planning and running the program would have been worthwhile just to afford the parents the much-appreciated break while feeling wonderful about their child being in the loving and trusted hands of the Camp HASC staff. One parent quipped, “I know that my son will have more fun with you guys than at home anyway...”

Thank you to the Simchaton co-coordinators, Neal Wigod, Zvi Weiss, Alex Grossman, and Daniel Eisenberg, for so many hours of planning. Thanks to countless volunteers, nurses, and kitchen staff for your dedication. Thanks most of all to the parents of the participants for lending us your special children for the three days of Yom Tov! We look forward to spending another wonderful Yom Tov together next year... hopefully in Yerushalayim!