

ISRAEL

Bringing sleepaway camps, a nearly foreign concept, to Israel

By HILLEL KUTTLER

ON AN EARLY-JULY MORNING, 600 children arrived in buses at the Working and Studying Youth Camp in Israel's fertile Jezreel Valley for a four-day sleepaway camp. They joined 1,000 older kids who'd come the previous week to the spartan site owned by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), a semi-governmental land-management organization.

Just northeast, near Tzippori, a grassy expanse of JNF land buzzed with activity: an Omega zip-line, rock-climbing walls, rope ladders for tree climbing, and an *American Ninja Warrior*-like obstacle course. All 2,000 children at this one-week camp—some for a day, some staying over several nights—have a physical or developmental disability. This is Camp Etgarim (Challenges), founded by wounded Israeli soldiers.

An hour's drive away, near Netanya, paradise beckons: Camp Kimama, set upon a bluff above the Mediterranean Sea and offering children surfing, sailing, kayaking, swimming, and classes in cooking, dog grooming, and photography. Six hundred campers attend up to four one-week sessions at what's normally a boarding school.

For 10 Israeli educators (accompanied by a *JUF News* reporter), visiting the three disparate sites opened a window to sleepaway camps, a fairly foreign concept in Israel's summer culture.

Now, in early September, Israeli children are returning to school. Several Israeli sleepaway camp advocates, including American and Canadian immigrants, hope that the country will have taken large strides forward by the time school lets out next June 30.

Sleepaway camps are such anomalies in Israel that Hebrew offers no adequate translation. Just 20 or so exist, excluding those run by the popular movement Tzofim, the Israeli Scouts, which annually draw 70,000 youth for its 7- and 10-day programs.

The Israeli camps contrast starkly with North American ones. Most children at the latter go for two or three weeks minimum, with some enrolling



Eliza Weiss (foreground, far right), who grew up in New York, was a camper at the kibbutz, located in Israel's Beit Shean Valley.

for the entire eight- or nine-week summer break; most Israeli camps run one week or less. American sleepaway camp properties are privately owned by the individuals or nonprofit organizations who operate the camps; in Israel, camp operators lease the land. American sleepaway camps often are constructed around lakes; no camps about Israel's few lakes.

Otherwise, the fundamentals hold: sports, arts and crafts, hikes, campfires, and swimming to go along with social bonding and Jewish-themed discussions.

According to the New York-based Foundation for Jewish Camp, 80,000 youngsters attended 166 FJC-affiliated American nonprofit sleepaway camps in 2018. Anat Ben Dror, a consultant for the Forum for Summer Camps in Israel, said that 7,000 children now attend the country's sleepaway camps. She'd like to see a 2,000-camper (29 percent) in-

crease next summer.

Sleepaway camping faces an uphill struggle in Israel, where a young child's leaving home for several weeks is unfathomable to many parents.

Montreal native Shawna Goodman wants to change that. After immigrating to Israel five years ago, she and her husband continued sending their three sons to Camp Ramah Canada, north of Toronto. She soon turned her attention to Israel's sleepaway camp scene.

Last fall, the Ra'anana resident met with Israeli experts in informal education to learn what's what. She established the camp forum and hired Ben Dror and another consultant.

"I knew I wanted to create more overnight experiences for Israeli children that are affordable" and enable "kids of different sectors to meet," she explained. "The concept has proven itself in North America for Jewish-iden-

tity issues, but it needs to come to Israel as an identity that's fiercely Israeli."

With land at a premium, the practical model is to "repurpose youth villages and kibbutzim. In the summer, there are empty beds," she said.

That was Dvora Liss's and Kenny Goldman's approach. The New York natives had worked at Jewish sleepaway camps in Pennsylvania before each moved to Kibbutz Shluhot in the arid Beit Shean Valley. They opened Kayitz BaKibbutz (Summer on the Kibbutz) there in 1996.

Twenty-five campers registered. This summer, 300 children came for two- and three-week sessions. Half were visiting Americans; 90 percent of the Israelis were children of North American immigrants with fond memories of attending sleepaway camp, she said.

Eliza Weiss, a former camper and counselor at Kayitz BaKibbutz, called them "the best summers of my life."

Shluhot's setting was "more laid back" than Camp Ramah in her native New York, where Weiss spent five summers. She and her peers shared apartments amid the kibbutz's population, circulated by foot and on bicycle, made their own lunches, and enjoyed hikes punctuated by storytelling and lively singing.

"I was making friends with kids in Israel, [which became] a place I could call a home," said Weiss, a Los Angeles resident and film-industry employee. "They taught me so much about Israeli culture, music, food. Everyone was so happy to be in Israel, to be spending a summer in Israel."

That's music to Goodman's ears. While expanding Israeli summer-camp participation, she hopes to raise nearly \$1 million for a scholarship fund for families needing financial assistance.

"There's no downside," she said. "It's kids. We have to take care of them." ■

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