

IllumiNations

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Dedicated in Memory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

*Rabbi Yitzchok Meyer and Leah Mindle Lipszyc,
Gam Zu Chabad*

The Staff of Camp Gan Yisroel

By Chaya Chazan

I've had many shlichus adventures – however, my very first shlichus was when I was newly 16, in 1963. Camp was about to begin, and I was excited to join my friends for a summer of fun and learning.

It was just a couple of days before our departure date, when Rabbi Avremel Korf, then the only shliach in Florida, ran into 770, a look of desperation on his face. I was sitting with a few friends in the back of the shul, and Rabbi Korf headed straight in our direction.

"Bochurim, I'm opening Florida's first Camp Gan Yisroel in Deland – just north of Orlando!" he said, urgently. "Everything is ready! The only thing I still need is counselors. So nu? What do you say?"

We all looked at each other uncomfortably.

"You're a little late! We'd love to, but we're already going to other camps this summer..." we explained.

"Nu? Write to the Rebbe and ask if you should come to my camp instead!" Rabbi Korf insisted.

Seeing none of us were volunteering, Rabbi Korf offered, "How about if I write to the Rebbe for you? Can I mention your names?"

In the end, Rabbi Korf gathered a list of ten names. The Rebbe circled three of them, including mine. Instead of going to the camp I'd planned to attend, I went to Florida to fulfill the shlichus the Rebbe had handpicked me to do.



From the moment we received the Rebbe's orders, we had exactly 45 minutes to throw all our stuff together. Camp was starting, and we needed to run to the airport for the next flight out. We only barely made it to the plane before the doors closed.

Just like that, our summer plans changed.

It was an amazing introduction to the mesiras nefesh, flexibility, and multi-tasking skills shlichus calls for.

The next summer in 1964, I returned to Gan Yisroel of Miami with a larger group of counselors. That experience was unforgettable. In fact, when Rabbi Korf went to report on the camp in a yechidus, as all Gan Yisroel directors did, the Rebbe told him his camp was one of two that gave him the most nachas that summer.

The Rebbe said he'd received inordinate nachas from Gan Yisroel Montreal, which had just introduced a "masmidim" bunk that summer. The bunk was a yeshivas kayitz program for yeshiva ketana bochurim, so they'd be gainfully employed during summer break.

Our camp, Gan Yisroel Miami, had also given the Rebbe immeasurable nachas for a different reason: every single camper came from a non-observant home, and each one had returned to that home committing to do at least one mitzvah from then on.

Four years later, the Rebbe sent me to Florida to check on every camper and see how they were doing. Incredibly, every single boy was still keeping their mitzvah commitment, some with mesiras nefesh!

Josh* told us he had to balance his pillow on his head every morning when he said Modeh Ani, because his parents forbid him from wearing a kippah.

Barry* had to hide in the bathroom to say Shema so he wouldn't be caught by his parents.

This was *four years* after they'd attended camp, but the impression Gan Yisroel had left on them was so strong, they were still eager to keep these mitzvos, despite the sacrifices they demanded!

Avi Fried*, like many of our other campers, was headed to public high school after his summer with us. We knew that summer was our one chance to make Yiddishkeit part of his life.

After an enjoyable summer, Avi traded in his bathing suits and baseball bats for notebooks and backpacks. Enrolled as he was in sixties culture, where drug use and anti-establishment sentiments were everywhere, it didn't take long for the influences of camp to fall by the wayside.

Avi leaned heavily into hippie culture, moving on after graduation to a commune in California.

And then one day, Avi called his father in Florida to share some good news with him – he was engaged to be married.

Knowing just how far his son had strayed, Mr. Fried asked Avi to tell him about his future wife, hoping that she was at least Jewish.

"Jewish, non-Jewish – does it matter?" replied Avi. "She's a human being, and that's all you should care about!"

Mr. Fried's pleas to appreciate the importance of Jewish roots and lineage fell on deaf ears. Devastated, Mr. Fried called Rabbi Korf in tears and asked him if he could do something, anything, to help. Located as he was 3,000 miles away, and with no Chabad presence in Los Angeles at the time, Rabbi Korf did the only thing he could think of – he wrote to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha for Avi.

Three weeks passed, and Mr. Fried called Rabbi Korf, this time with positive news.

It seemed that Avi and his fiancé had gone to the local courthouse to get married. As they climbed the many steps leading to the entrance, thoughts swirled in Avi's head and he began having doubts. The four weeks he'd spent in Camp Gan Yisroel suddenly began replaying themselves in his head. Avi started thinking about his camp counselors and the songs he'd learned, like "Ain't Gonna Work on Saturday." By the time Avi reached the top step, he turned to his bride-to-be and told her he was feeling sick and needed to leave – the wedding ceremony was going to have to wait.

Avi got into bed as soon as he got home and closed his eyes, waiting for blissful sleep to overtake him. The minutes turned to hours, and as Avi tossed and turned all night long, he thought of his time in Camp Gan Yisroel. The seeds of spirituality that had been sown in his soul began to sprout vigorously. By the time dawn broke, Avi knew there was no way he could turn his back on his Yiddishkeit – the wedding was off.

When Rabbi Korf was getting ready to open his camp the second year, the Rebbe told him to hire Coach Montgomery, an extremely sought-after sports coach in south Florida, and to use his face on all the fliers as the camp's main attraction. So even though the flier also clearly stated it was a Jewish, strictly kosher camp, the coach's non-threatening appearance made the parents feel more comfortable to send their children. How religious could the camp be if the main staff member didn't even *look* Jewish?

It also helped that the campsite was all the way in the north, a seven hour drive. For the entire two months of camp, the children were immersed in an entirely Torah-true atmosphere, without any outside distractions.

The staff never even met the parents, since the kids were bussed up from Miami, but, since we were coming from New York, we went straight to the campsite.

When camp was over, Rabbi Korf, not having enough funds to charter a bus, begged a national long-distance bus company to accommodate us. They agreed, since our camp was on their usual route anyhow, but told us they wouldn't make any detours. If we could be waiting on the side of the highway, the bus driver would stop for us. So, we schlepped all our suitcases and kids to the side of the road, and boarded the bus back to Miami.

When we reached the bus terminal, we saw all the parents waiting to pick up their sons. We watched their faces as they saw us for the first time. Jaws dropped, faces reddened, and teeth clenched as they took note of our white shirts, black pants, beards, yarmulkes, and tzitzis. Their lips tightened in anger and disapproval as they saw their own sons sporting the same yarmulkahs and tzitzis.

Mrs. Goldberg* was especially unhappy. She'd had experiences in her youth that very strongly opposed her to religion. She'd sent her two sons to camp "normal," and they came back with kippahs on their heads? It angered her so much, she ran over to them and grabbed the yarmulkahs off their heads. Benny*, her older son, grabbed it right back, and said, in a voice loud enough to make every head in the bus terminal turn, "Mom, I'm a Jew, and a Jew wears a kippah!"

When the campers stepped off the bus onto campgrounds, they were excited to spend their summer on a campus whose sylvan setting promised hours of fun and enjoyment. Their shouts of glee came to an abrupt halt as they saw us walking towards them, waving cheerfully.

"You're rabbis?" they asked, almost accusingly.

"I hate Sunday school! If I'd known, I'd never have signed up for a whole *summer* of it!" one boy whispered to another.

So we sat them down and Rabbi Avremel Levitansky, the learning director, explained that while there'd be a certain amount of teaching and learning happening, it would be done in a fun way.

"We also have an exciting schedule planned, full of all the activities you'd enjoy at any other camp. We'll be having baseball playoffs! Kayaking! Swimming! Bowling! An overnight hike!"

As he mentioned each one, we could see the kids start to cheer up and get more excited. We were determined to keep our word and make sure every single thing we'd promised would happen.

Everything was going great! We'd already finished most of the things on the list, and the others were all penciled in for the following week. There was only one activity that hadn't happened yet: the overnight hike. Every time we tried to schedule it, something forced us to cancel. We were determined not to let a single promise go unfulfilled, but camp was almost over, and the schedule was packed! It was the last day we could possibly fit an overnight in, so we put everything together, loaded up the vans, and drove to a clearing in the woods.

The boys chattered excitedly as they set up tents, sleeping bags, and fire pits. Suddenly, the sky darkened to an ashy gray. Every Floridian knew just how quickly an unexpected storm could hit, and the boys groaned.

"No fair! Now we're going to miss the overnight!" they complained.

"Boys!" Avremel Levitansky called. "I can't believe you guys! You're giving up that easily? Come on! Haven't we talked about the power of prayer and Tehillim many times?"

The boys nodded. They gave a Tehillim to the youngest camper and told him to read it aloud in English. Meanwhile, they turned around and continued setting up the tents.

"Wait! What about the prayers?" Avremel reminded them. "You're going to leave just one kid to say Psalms?"

"Avremel, he's saying Tehillim so the storm won't come. That means we'll be staying here tonight. It's getting dark, and we'll need these tents set up!"

Silenced by their emunah peshutah, we chipped in and finished setting up. The sky was still gray, but so far, there'd been no rain.

Suddenly, three station wagons pulled up with a screech. Rabbi Korf jumped out of the car and ran towards us. "Boys! Boys! Is everyone okay?"

We were confused. "Everything is fine, baruch Hashem. What's going on?" we answered.

Rabbi Korf shook his head. "I guess you don't know. There's a major storm raging in this area. It's knocked out electricity across the entire sector! You guys seem to have found some miraculous oasis - this is the only spot in a fifty mile radius that's still dry!"

We enjoyed a fantastic - and *dry* - overnight. The next morning, we loaded all the supplies back into the cars. As soon as we stepped foot into the station wagons, the skies burst in a torrential downpour.

The Rebbe had advised Rabbi Korf to hire Coach Irvin Montgomery. Montgomery was renowned as the best sports coach in the entire southwestern United States. He was, at times, an army drill sergeant, a racecar driver, and athletic coach. His expertise was highly sought after, and it showed in his prices.

Rabbi Korf knew none of this. Naively following the Rebbe's instructions, he made an appointment with Coach Montgomery. He sat in the waiting room beside sports teams managers and directors of prestigious schools, each of them more than prepared to pay the \$20,000 price tag to call Coach Montgomery their own for the summer.

Rabbi Korf couldn't even pronounce "coach" properly. In his heavily accented English, he said, "*Coach, ve have a kosher camp and ve want you should be sports director!*"

Coach Montgomery was taken aback by this unusual introduction. "...and how much are you offering?" he asked.

"Well," Rabbi Korf hesitated, "Our camp is for underprivileged kids. Some of them aren't paying at all! All our staff are volunteers, but for you, I make exception. I'll give you \$2,000!" Rabbi Korf beamed.

Coach Montgomery struggled to restrain his laughter. He was about to politely dismiss Rabbi Korf when he thought, *You know what- why not? I don't really need the money. This camp sounds fascinating! I'd like to see what it's all about.*

Miraculously, and, of course, due to the Rebbe's bracha, Coach Montgomery accepted Rabbi Korf's offer, and joined us in camp that summer.

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Rabbi Yitzchok Meyer Lipszyc

In the end, not only did he not take the \$2,000 he'd been promised, he ended up donating enough to cover Rabbi Korf's deficit.

Coach, as we called Coach Montgomery, was an ex-drill sergeant who stood 6 ft 5 with large, brawny muscles. He was tough and exacting, and felt no compunction about using the paddle he held in his right hand.

Although he was officially hired to oversee the sports program, Coach undertook responsibility for everything and everyone. He was always walking around, with his telltale ramrod posture, looking for anyone - camper or staff - who wasn't where they were supposed to be. If he saw anyone stepping out of line, he gave them a whop. Counselors suffered his scrutiny just as much as campers.

Davening was no exception. Coach could often be found patrolling the rows during davening, watching carefully for anyone who wasn't following along and singing every word. The entire camp was terrified of him and followed his every order without question.

As far as Coach was concerned, *he* ran the camp. Often, we'd be in the middle of an activity, when we'd hear Coach's strident tones over the loudspeaker: *Meet at the flagpole for a two-mile run.* We had 45 seconds to be at the flagpole, or we'd suffer Coach's wrath. Needless to say, whenever the loudspeaker crackled to life, we dropped whatever we were doing and ran for our lives.

Every day, we set aside 45 minutes for learning class. It was as much as we thought the kids could handle. One day, during learning class, Coach announced a three-mile run. My group immediately got up to run, so they'd make the 45 second curfew, but I stopped them.

"We're not going," I said.

Their mouths dropped open. "But-but-but... *Coach!*" they sputtered in abject terror.

I was trembling myself, but I hid it as best as I could. "Coach is *not* in charge of learning time. That belongs to Hashem," I asserted.

My confidence was shaken when I saw Coach striding angrily towards our group. He folded his arms across his chest menacingly and demanded an explanation.

Standing as tall as I could, I still only came up to his chest. I was sure he'd give me one good whack that would probably send me to the hospital, but Torah was too important.

"Coach," I said, bravely. "These kids only have 45 minutes a day to learn about their heritage. They've been left in the dark for so many years, so every moment is precious. We can't interrupt learning class for *anything!*"

Coach stared me dead in the eye, and though I was quaking in my shoes, I stared right back. Without a word, he did an about face and marched off. Seconds later, we heard Coach on the loudspeaker, ordering everyone back to class.

I later apologized to him for putting him on the spot like that.

"Nothing to apologize for," he answered, gruffly. "In fact, I respect you more for having the guts to stand up to me."

Coach did call for a five-mile run after learning class to make up for the three-mile run we'd skipped, but the extra exercise was well worth the value of the lesson we'd all learned.

When the Rebbe asked me and a few friends to visit every camper four years later, we managed to find everyone except for three brothers. The address we had wasn't correct, and we couldn't get in touch with them any other way.

I knew Coach had a special relationship with them, since they came from a broken home. I figured if anyone knew how to find them, it would be him.

"What if I *do* know where they are?" he responded when I asked him. "Will you do something for me in turn?"

"Of course!" I answered.

"Since Gan Yisroel didn't open again, I took a job in another Jewish camp in North Miami Beach. The three brothers are all here in camp. Here's what I want you to do for me: the camp isn't the same type of religious as you guys were, so every Friday, I make a mesibas Shabbos for the campers like you used to do. I want you to come this Friday and join me at the mesibas Shabbos."

Of course, I was happy to comply.

When I got to camp, I asked to meet with each of the three brothers.



Coach Irvin Jim Montgomery

"Todd*, the oldest, is down by the lake. Here, my assistant will show you the way," Coach offered.

I followed Coach's assistant, and was surprised to see that he was a completely Torah-observant Jew. How'd he get a position in a Conservative camp?

As we walked, the assistant answered my question.

"Coach was disappointed that Gan Yisroel wasn't opening again, but he was excited to be in another Jewish camp. After the first few days, he realized something wasn't right. Somehow, it just didn't have the same *feel* as Gan Yisroel. One day, as he was patrolling the lunch room, he realized a major omission.

"He immediately went to the rabbi and demanded to know why the campers weren't saying Grace after Meals. *You were at an Orthodox camp last year. We don't do things like that here,* the rabbi told him. Coach wasn't impressed. *I want them to say it. If you don't agree, you can find yourself a new director!* he threatened. *Fine. Do it if you want,* the rabbi agreed.

"Obviously, Coach didn't know the exact words. He knew the rabbi would be no help, so he looked for an assistant who'd know these kinds of things. That's how I got the job. Over the past four years, Coach has introduced more and more religious observances, and he always asks me to help him make sure it's done right."

It was incredible! Coach had built up the camp so it now had over 400 campers, all from staunchly Conservative families! He instituted a camp uniform - namely tzitzis and a yarmulka. He remembered how mesibas Shabbos had been the highlight of the week, so he made sure to have one every week. He copied the daily newsletters I'd made for Gan Yisroel, filled with short divrei Torah, and gave them out to his campers. Although it was a Conservative camp, they were keeping many mitzvos - all thanks to Coach Montgomery.

I finally understood the Rebbe's vision in making sure Coach Montgomery spent a summer in Gan Yisroel. Through him, hundreds of Jewish kids learned about Torah and mitzvos. (Many years later, we found out Coach Montgomery had a Jewish grandmother!)

When I told Rabbi Korf about Coach's new camp, Rabbi Korf shared what he'd heard.

Coach Montgomery was interviewed on national TV. The host asked him, "Coach, you've been directing camps for years now. Which camp was the best?"

"I don't even need to think about it," Coach replied. "Gan Yisroel, hands down. I've never met with a more dedicated staff, and the campers had the best time of any camp I've been in. It's all thanks to the staff."

*Names changed to protect privacy

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