

# ILLUMINATIONS

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

*Rabbi Gershon and Devorah Sandler, CKids Gan  
Israel of the Poconos*

## A Month of Mitzvos in the Mountains, CGI Poconos, Part II

By Chaya Chazan

**It's difficult to explain CGI Poconos to someone who's never been there. On paper, it's a summer camp, tucked away in the Pocono Mountains. There are bunks, games, and packed schedules. But anyone who's spent even one summer there knows the camp itself is only part of the story.**

The real magic happens in the quieter moments.

Standing arm in arm during a spirited Friday night dance. A hush, settling over the dining room as hundreds of girls sing together by candlelight. A counselor, staying up long after curfew listening to a camper talk about things she's never told anyone before. Somewhere between the laughter, the friendships, and the inspiration, Yiddishkeit stops feeling like an obligation and starts feeling personal. For many girls, that spark follows them home.

Sometimes it begins with lighting Shabbos candles. Sometimes it's saying Modeh Ani in the morning, or putting away their phone for a few hours on Saturday. Baby steps. But over time, those little moments can shape entire lives.

Jessica first arrived at CGI Poconos in 2013 as a shy ten-year-old from a loving - but not deeply observant - home. To her, camp was

just a fun way to spend the summer. She had no idea she was stepping into something that would transform not only her own life, but her family's as well.

That first summer, she was captivated. Shabbos wasn't something people simply acknowledged. It was something they lived. The counselors took their dedication beyond staff members. They were role models, demonstrating a life of joy and purpose she couldn't ignore.

Jessica returned every summer. Slowly, camp - and all it stood for - became part of who she was.

She began bringing pieces of camp home with her. Every Friday night, she lit Shabbos candles. One small mitzvah led to another. Her younger sisters joined CGI Poconos too, returning with their own inspiration and excitement. Little by little, the atmosphere in their home began to shift. Shabbos became more meaningful. Judaism was now woven into everyday life.

After high school, Jessica spent a year learning in Israel, immersing herself in Torah study and Yiddishkeit. She returned home afterward and enrolled in college, but something inside her still craved more. Soon, she made the decision to go back to Israel and continue learning at Machon Alta Seminary.

Camp, though, remained central to her story. She wanted to share her knowledge with other girls who were now walking her footsteps.

She eventually returned to CGI Poconos as a staff member, eventually becoming a counselor in 2023. Now, she was the one up late with campers, offering encouragement and warmth, just as older girls had once done for her. Her commitment to Torah and mitzvos deepened, and alongside her own growth, her family grew, as well.

In 2024, Jessica made aliyah and settled in Eretz Yisroel. That same year, she and several friends launched a traveling program for religious high school girls across the western United States, hoping to inspire others the way camp had once inspired them.

One summer had ignited something in her that never stopped burning.

Sonia grew up in Coral Springs, Florida, caught between different worlds. After her parents divorced when she was six years old, sta-

bility became a luxury. Although she attended Jewish day school for a time, Judaism slowly faded into the background of her life. By middle school, she transferred to public school and felt herself drifting further from her roots.

Then, in 2013, one of her teachers suggested CGI Poconos.

That summer, Sonia found something she hadn't realized she was missing.

For the first time, she was surrounded by girls who were proud to be Jewish. Her counselors encouraged her, her new friends embraced her, and Judaism suddenly felt warm and vibrant instead of dull and distant. She returned to camp summer after summer, growing stronger in her connection to Yiddishkeit each time.

Still, going home was never easy. At camp, inspiration came naturally. At home, life felt complicated. Her family struggled with financial instability and mental health challenges, and Sonia was often simply trying to survive. Each year, she left camp determined to cling to the inspiration, only to feel it slip away once summer ended.

By ninth grade, the pressure became overwhelming.

One day, exhausted and unsure where to turn, she whispered a quiet prayer. "G-d, what do I do now?"

That final summer as a camper felt different. Sonia threw herself into every moment, knowing she didn't want to waste a second. Then, Rabbi Shais Taub visited camp, and shared a message that stayed with her.

"Everything you're doing here in camp is wonderful," he told the girls. "But the most important thing is to impact someone else."

The words settled deeply inside her.

Sonia realized she wanted to inspire others, too. But first, she knew she needed stronger foundations herself. One of her counselors suggested Bader Hillel High School in Milwaukee, describing it as an extension of camp. With only weeks left before the school year began, Sonia made the leap.

Looking back, she sees that decision as the turning point of her life.

After high school and seminary in Israel, Sonia married Elyahu, and together, they're building a beautiful Jewish home in Milwaukee. Today, she works with students of her own, offering them the same warmth, encouragement, and faith her counselors once gave her.

Sara grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, in a Conservative Jewish home. Judaism was always present in her life. Her family celebrated Shabbos and Yomim Tovim, and she attended Hebrew school and later, a Jewish day school, run by Chabad shluchim. But Judaism still felt like just one part of her life, not the center of it.

That changed in 2017, when she traveled to CGI Poconos for the first time.

The singing at the Shabbos table, the excitement surrounding mitzvos, the counselors who radiated joy and confidence in their Yiddishkeit - all of it left a deep impression on her. For the first time, she saw what it looked like to fully live as a proud Jewish girl.

Sara returned every summer after that. Each year, her commitment deepened a little more.

She began taking on mitzvos gradually, beginning with tznius. What once felt unfamiliar soon became a source of comfort. By the end of her fifth summer, Sara had become fully Torah observant.

She knew the next step would require sacrifice.

Leaving home and moving across the country for a Jewish high school wasn't easy. The adjustment came with challenges - and loneliness - at times. But camp had given her confidence, along with role models she continued turning to for guidance and support.



Over the years, Sara's love for Yiddishkeit only grew stronger.

She spent summers working at CGI day camps, welcoming campers as warmly as she had once been received herself. In school, she became a leader among her peers, organizing programs and helping other girls strengthen their own Jewish identities.

Then, in 2025, Sara returned to CGI Poconos as a counselor.

The same girl who had once stepped off the bus unsure of who she wanted to become was now helping shape that journey for others.

And somewhere in the bunkhouse, another young camper was probably watching her with the same admiration she had once watched her own counselors with years before.

When Karina's family immigrated from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Judaism was more of a nametag than a lifestyle. They attended shul on the High Holidays and held onto a sense of Jewish pride, but observance wasn't part of daily life.

Years later, her family began exploring Judaism more seriously and eventually connected with Chabad.

Then, in 2013, Karina attended CGI Poconos. It was her first experience in a fully immersive Jewish environment, and it opened an entirely new world.

At camp, she discovered the beauty hidden inside everyday mitzvos. The brachos before eating, the rhythm of davening, it all felt so much more real. More than that, camp offered a community of girls navigating similar journeys of self-discovery. For the first time, Judaism felt personal.

When Karina returned home, something inside her had shifted. Though she was still attending public school, she quietly committed to dressing more modestly. That inner growth slowly began influencing her family as well. Her younger brothers became more involved in Jewish life, and over time, their home took on more Shabbos and kosher observance.

Determined to continue growing, Karina enrolled in a Jewish high school, despite the exhausting commute. For two years, she traveled hours each day, just to spend time in the environment she had come to love.

Eventually, her family moved closer, strengthening their own commitment to Torah life.

Karina later became a CTeen leader, channeling her inspiration into helping others on their journeys. In 2021, she married her husband, Allen, graduated nursing school, and began building a Jewish home of her own.

Growing up, Leilah always felt emotionally connected to Judaism, even if that connection remained distant and undefined. Judaism was something she felt in her heart, but not yet something she knew how to live.

That changed the summer she arrived at CGI Poconos.

For the first time, Judaism no longer seemed like an abstract idea, but something living and real. As camp drew to a close, the approaching departure dead weighed on Leilah with unexpected heaviness. Returning home meant returning to a life where kosher and Shabbos weren't part of the rhythm of daily living. But the spark camp had ignited was too strong to ignore.

She approached her parents and told them she wanted to begin keeping kosher.

The transition wasn't easy. Leilah was careful to balance her growing commitment with sensitivity toward her confused (but largely supportive) family. Whenever things felt daunting, she found herself thinking back to camp - the music, the sense of belonging. She stayed in close contact with former counselors, who continued encouraging her long after summer ended.

Eventually, after university, she made the decision to spend time learning in Israel at a midrasha, immersing herself once again in the kind of environment that had first inspired her years earlier.

Today, more than a decade after that first summer, Leilah lives in Jerusalem and continues building a Torah-true life.

Before seventh grade, Eliana knew she was Jewish only in the broadest sense. Her family celebrated the High Holidays, and she attended Hebrew school, but Judaism, to her, was distant and difficult to define.

Then her local Chabad shlucha suggested CGI Poconos.

At first, the idea was intimidating. A religious overnight camp far from home, surrounded by strangers - it was the last thing Eliana imagined herself enjoying. But something inside her pushed her to try.

The moment she arrived, she sensed something different. There was warmth everywhere. Girls singing together, counselors who genuinely cared, friendships built around shared values and purpose. But underneath all the fun, Eliana also discovered meaning. She learned about mitzvos, davening, and the beauty of her Jewish soul.

For the first time, she felt proud to be Jewish.

She returned the next summer even more eager to grow. Surrounded by authentic Jewish life, Yiddishkeit began feeling less like a place she visited occasionally and more like home.

Back home - her physical one - Eliana slowly began incorporating mitzvos into her daily life. She started each morning with Modeh Ani and Negel Vasser, and ended each night with Shema. Those small acts became anchors, grounding her identity, even while attending public school.

Eventually, she became a CTeen leader herself and began teaching at Hebrew school on Sundays, helping younger children connect to Judaism the way she once had.

Eliana embodied the Rebbe's words: "If you know aleph, teach aleph." She didn't wait until she knew everything. She shared what she'd already discovered, with an open-hearted curiosity to always learn more.

As she prepared for university, one thing was clear: Judaism would remain central in her life. Any school that didn't have Chabad on campus was immediately crossed off the list of possibilities. She was determined to continue growing and deepening her connection with Yiddishkeit.

Sydney grew up in Surfside, Miami, in a traditional Jewish home. She attended a Conservative school, lit Shabbos candles occasionally, and went to shul on the High Holidays.

Then her mother heard about CGI Poconos.

At first, camp sounded like little more than a fun summer experience. But from the moment Sydney arrived, something clicked. For the first time, sitting around the Shabbos table, singing with other girls her age, she felt an overwhelming sense of security and belonging.

The following summer, she, of course, returned, and even brought two friends along with her.

Although she couldn't continue as a camper afterward, the inspiration never disappeared. During high school, Sydney got involved with CTeen and slowly began strengthening her own observance, including putting away her phone on Shabbos.

But more than anything, she found herself longing for the feeling camp had given her.

That longing eventually brought her to seminary in Israel, where she deepened her connection to Torah life.

Then, in 2024, Sydney returned to CGI Poconos - this time as a sports specialist. Now, she was the one helping younger girls discover the same spark she had once found herself.

Today, while continuing her studies at Stern College and preparing for another summer of learning in Israel, Sydney continues growing, searching, and building. Her story is still unfolding, but she knows, for certain, that Yiddishkeit will always be at the center of it.

Growing up in Temecula, Aliyah's connection to Judaism was complicated. Her father wasn't Jewish, and her mother gave Jewish observance very little thought in their everyday life.

But after her family connected with the local Chabad shluchim, religious inspiration and a call to *come home* managed to slip quietly into their life.

Then, Aliyah's older sister returned from a Birthright trip, deeply moved by what she had experienced. Although she felt it was too late to become fully observant herself, she was determined to give her younger siblings the opportunities she'd never had.

Soon afterward, Aliyah's older brother became heavily involved in Chabad learning programs, and eventually attended yeshiva. His excitement for Yiddishkeit slowly transformed the atmosphere of the home.

Then came 2020 - COVID. Aliyah was disconnected, lonely, and unsure where she belonged. She had few Jewish friends and little support system around her.

The following summer, her shluchim encouraged her to attend CGI Poconos. There she discovered something she had never experienced before: genuine belonging. In only a few weeks, she learned more about Yiddishkeit than she ever had in her whole life.

She returned again in 2022, and this time, the impression dug even deeper into her neshama. Encouraged by camp friends and staff, Aliyah made a major decision: she would leave public school and enroll in Bader Hillel High School.

The adjustment wasn't easy, but camp friends and counselors remained close beside her, encouraging her every step of the way.

Then came CGI Winter Camp. Surrounded, once again, by girls and counselors living Judaism with confidence and joy, Aliyah suddenly realized something with complete clarity: *This is who I want to be.*

Today, she remains deeply connected to the friendships and mentors who helped shape her journey. And those same counselors who once inspired her now find themselves inspired by her in return.

## APRIL 2026 DAILY DONATIONS

May 6	May 7	May 8	May 9	May 10	May 11	May 12
19 Iyyar 5786	20 Iyyar 5786	21 Iyyar 5786	22 Iyyar 5786	23 Iyyar 5786	24 Iyyar 5786	25 Iyyar 5786
<b>\$644</b>	<b>\$643</b>	<b>\$643</b>	<b>\$643</b>	<b>\$644</b>	<b>\$645</b>	<b>\$645</b>
Donating to: Chabad Cares Nevada	Donating to: Chabad of Carson City	Donating to: Chabad Budva Montenegro	Donating to: Chabad of Thane	Donating to: Maayan Chai	Donating to: Chabad N.E. Iowa, Postville Iowa	Donating to: Chabad of Thane
						