

In The Zone

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We have all heard of Oorah and are familiar with its jingles, loveable mascot Fiveish, and annual Chinese auction. We have seen its ads and know that Oorah has something to do with kiruv, but most of us don't know what the organization is all about.

I spent this past Shabbos in TheZone, Oorah's summer camp for boys. There is a separate camp for girls as well. I had been there twice previously; the last time was nine years ago. Though I knew what to expect, I was bowled over by what is probably the greatest secret in Jewish camping and kiruv.

It was Shabbos Nachamu and it was a nechomah to see and partake in what goes on there.

As Kabbolas Shabbos began the last time I was there, the head counselor announced that those present were about to experience the best Kabbolas Shabbos in their lives. For most of the hundreds present, it would not be much of a contest. For the overwhelming majority of the campers, if they wouldn't be in TheZone, they would not be experiencing Shabbos.

There was no such announcement this past Friday night, but the scene was similar, though this time it was much more touching. So many of our brothers and sisters in this country have been swept away by assimilation, lost to our people. In some places, the intermarriage rates are 90% and there is little hope of reaching those people, who have deviated so far from Judaism that it is almost impossible to find them, much less be able to approach them and send them a rope with which they can reattach themselves to their heritage.

The counselors, yeshiva bochurim who volunteer their bein hazemanim to make a difference in the lives of Jewish children, and guests at the camp were in for a special experience. It was a nechomah to watch how public school kids, who were new to Shabbos and to davening and so much else, were mekabel Shabbos that night. Slowly, but surely, the bais medrash came to life. We watched children trying mightily to daven. Their fingers, which would otherwise be typing on their phones or flipping channels, pointed to the letters in their siddurim, as they tried valiantly to sing the praises of Hashem and His Shabbos.

After growing up in homes where Torah, Shabbos, kosher and mitzvos are foreign concepts, and after going to public elementary and high school and attending college with no religious education, who can blame them for knowing nothing about and having no interest in Judaism, or anything Jewish, including Israel?

After growing up with Saturday as just another day off, with McDonald's and Burger King as favorite restaurants, and learning morality—or the lack thereof—from public school teachers and off-the-deep-end professors, quite often there is nothing that even hints at their genetic Judaism. Millions and millions have been swept away.

Oorah reaches these Jews when they are still young, before they have been so tainted that there is no way back. The camp is a key tool in teaching kids with love about who they are, where they are from, and what that means for them.

I looked at the children as they davened, their small, cherubic faces topped with a variety of yarmulkas, wearing tzitzis for the very first time in their lives. Their fingers pointed at the letters of the prayers they had just learned about last week when they experienced their first Shabbos. This week was their second Shabbos, and they seemed to be into it and enjoying it. I looked into the eyes of some of these children and saw a neshomah coming to life—a comforting sight in a confused world. As so many are being lost, these are being found, and you can see their latent sparks igniting right in front of you.

We wait all week for Shabbos and its brachos, and the menucha it brings. We take it for granted, but for many of these children, Shabbos is something unfamiliar, something they are just beginning to learn about. They have the zechus to be in this camp for a month, having a great time and discovering davening, learning, tzitzis, Shabbos, and other mitzvos. They have Torah sessions with their volunteer bnei Torah TorahMates, who will continue learning with them throughout the year over the phone.

At a time when the governments of the United States and Israel have all but declared war on religion, it was comforting to see further proof that they won't succeed.

For an hour before the Shabbos meal, the boys learn the mitzvah of the week with their TorahMate chavrusos in the various botei medrash on campus, each pair on their level. I circulated among them with Rabbi Mintz, asking them questions on what they had studied and engaging in conversation with them about where they are from and what school they attend. While every one of them attends public school, they were deeply engrossed in learning about the mitzvah of kibbud av vo'eim.

The children hailed from a variety of states, cities and countries.

One boy is from France. He lives there, goes to school there, and thinks that France is a better place to live than the United States. Why? "Because it's much more normal." And no, he hasn't seen much anti-Semitism where he lives. I hope he's right. He is spending a month in camp, getting acquainted with Torah and a path that we hope will lead him to Torah.

Another boy lives in Tel Aviv. This isn't his first time at camp. He was there two years ago and liked it so much that he returned this year with two cousins. Imagine that! Three boys from the heart of Tel Aviv traveling to the United States to become familiar with Torah. It's almost like a good news/bad news story. Jewish boys in the Jewish state know little about Torah and religion, so where do they go to get introduced? To Oorah's Zone in New York State. You can't make it up.

Another boy was from San Antonio. Another was from Hewlett, Long Island, one of the Five Towns, next door to Lawrence and Cedarhurst, and very close to Yeshiva Toras Chaim in Woodmere. He goes to the Hewlett-Woodmere Middle School.

For an hour, these boys and hundreds of others sat and studied Torah. I wish you could have been there with me and seen campers and counselors escape this world and climb to a much holier place. Those who wonder what Oorah does should have been in that room and felt the energy and the kedusha. They would have experienced the mesirah of Torah from special yeshiva bochurim who give up their bein hazemanim for this holy cause.

It was a nechomah to be there and speak to the campers. They shared their stories, relating how far they have come and how far they have to go. The kid from P.S. 41 was as sweet as can be. You look at him and your heart breaks knowing where he came from and where he is headed unless the bochurim, rabbeim and leaders of Oorah are able to convince his parents to enroll him in a yeshiva.

It is overwhelming when you ask a boy what he likes most about camp and he says, "Shabbat. I never knew what it was. It's awesome."

You don't know what will happen with him when he leaves camp. Will he be able to maintain his love for Shabbat in his secular home? Will his appreciation for kedusha remain vibrant in the world of public school and ta'aruvos of every type? Will his Torah time with his TorahMate keep him connected through the year until camp rolls around again?

I met several boys and yungeleit who are now learning in yeshivos, thanks to Oorah and its team of volunteers. Oorah started them off, moved them along, enrolled them in appropriate yeshivos, helped with tuition, assisted in getting them married, and remain connected with them. They came back to camp to help do for others what was done for them.

One college student approached me with some questions and then told me about his friend, who is with him in camp and wants to study in a yeshiva in Israel but needs help to accomplish that. Oorah is assisting him, but he needs to show his commitment as well. One boy helping another to progress along the religious path... Is there anything more touching?

Kids in camp have questions. One asked a shailah about whether he could make Kiddush on soda when he goes back home. He mentioned that his parents are not religious and he doesn't think that he can start keeping Shabbos just yet. However, he wants to keep something. Camp lit a spark inside him, and he wants to keep it flickering. He wants to make Kiddush at home every Shabbos, but there's no grape juice in his house. So, he wants to know if he could make Kiddush on soda and recall what Shabbos was like in camp. He wants to maintain some kedusha in his life.

A real boy, a real question, a real Yid, who will one day learn Torah and be shomer Shabbos thanks to Oorah.

Not only is the Shabbos davening special, but the meals are as well. The food and service are exceptional, probably better than anything they get at home. And the dining room comes alive as it's time to sing the "Shabbat zemirot at the Zone."

The tunes are the classics we all know and grew up with, but TheZone campers hear them for the first time when they experience Shabbos in camp. They quickly get the hang of the songs and are swept up as the hundreds of people in the room sing the century-old niggunim with heartfelt enthusiasm.

The melodies remain the same, but the words are written in English in a way that the kids can understand and relate to. It touches their souls and envelops them in holiness.

They sing Shalom Aleichem and the words, "Bo'achem leshalom, we're all prepared for a peaceful Shabbos, day of rest, a taste of the holy and divine."

As they wind it down, they sing, "Tzeischem leshalom, go in peace, go with shalom, keep this image in your heart, let this scene of bringing Shabbos home and to TheZone set our week apart."

That tune stays with them, and they bring it back home. They influence their family, introducing them to Shabbos, Kiddush, and zemiros. You never know how far it can go. Oorah connects with the parents, helping them reconnect with their heritage and where they come from.

Bit by bit, word by word, niggun by niggun, mitzvah by mitzvah, Oorah guides them along, bringing nechomah to entire families as they bring them home and to us, while the kanfei haShechinah expands.

Chicagoans who were alive in 1946 when Chief Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac Herzog came to town never forgot his message. He arrived soon after the Holocaust, and multitudes of people gathered to greet him in one of Chicago's large shuls. All the local rabbonim were there, along with important baalei batim, lovers of Torah, and bochurim of all ages.

First, he delivered a shiur. When that was done, he began to speak in a plaintive voice. He told the crowd that he had come to Chicago from Rome, where he had had an audience with the Pope.

He came to town after meeting with the Pope, as he attempted to convince the Catholic Church to release ten thousand children, whose names he had brought with him. Many of the children had been kidnapped. Others had been handed over by desperate parents on their way to the gas chambers.

Rav Herzog recounted how the Pope refused his request. Then he began crying uncontrollably. He couldn't continue. He bent over, propping himself up on the podium, and continued to sob

loudly. The people were in shock. They sat there in absolute silence. There was no sound in the vast room other than the terrible sobs of pain from the respected rov.

He finally composed himself, though his face was red and he was visibly agitated. He called out to the assembled and said, "I have done everything I possibly could for those kinder. There is nothing more I can do for those 10,000 Yiddishe kinder." Then he thundered, "What are you going to do for Klal Yisroel's kinder? You all have an achrayus to Klal Yisroel's children! You must never forget that. Never forget what I am telling you. Everyone has to do something for the children of Klal Yisroel."

Everyone who was in that shul that night and heard the appeal was changed and resolved to do something to help Yiddishe kinder.

We no longer have people like Rav Herzog and the Ponovezher Rov, whose Holocaust experiences drove them to do what they could to save Yiddishe kinder, but the need is the same, if not greater. So many Yiddishe neshamos are getting swallowed up, not by the church, but by the forces of tumah in the public schools and on the streets.

We all need to feel some type of achrayus to them, and to their zaides and bubbes who fought to keep mitzvos.

Rav Chaim Mintz heard the cry of the children. He saw them slipping away and developed the idea of Oorah, which blossomed into an empire of kiruv.

It was a long drive there and a long drive back, but I am so happy I went and saw Yiddishe kinder of the type that are getting lost being brought back by Yidden with achrayus who dedicate their lives to their mission. I am happy I got to see and touch the flame and work to make it a little stronger.

Ashreichem and ashrei all who dedicate their lives to working with Jewish children, through chinuch and kiruv, keeping them under the kanfei haShechinah through Torah and mesirus haTorah b'derech Yisroel sava.

May Hakadosh Boruch Hu bentch all who work to keep the flame lit and prepare the world for Moshiach Tzidkeinu.