



Rebbetzin Chave Hecht working at her desk for Camp Emunah, as she has for the past 60 years.

Rebbetzin Chave Hecht

The name Rebbetzin Chave Hecht, zol gezunt zein, is synonymous with Camp Emunah, the first Chabad overnight camp which she and her late husband, the legendary activist, chossid, counselor and educator Rabbi Yaakov Yehuda (J.J.) Hecht, founded in 1953. Rebbetzin Hecht has been running Camp Emunah for 60 years without stop. Rebbetzin Hecht was interviewed exclusively for the N'shei Chabad Newsletter by Mrs. Rosa Grossman.

When my husband and I were chosson and kallah, in the year 5705 (1945), it was customary to have yechidus with the Frierdiker Rebbe before the chassunah. We were told two or three weeks before our chassunah that the Frierdiker Rebbe was not feeling well. My chosson made a call every day to the Frierdiker Rebbe's office to inquire about the Rebbe's health. The answer he got was always the same: "The Rebbe is not feeling well."

On Sunday morning, the day of our chassunah, I got a call from the Frierdiker Rebbe's office, telling me to come with my parents and grandparents to 770. My chosson also received the same phone call, telling him to come with his parents. Upon arriving at 770, the Frierdiker Rebbe's secretary put each family in a separate room. The Frierdiker Rebbe was then told that both families, with the chosson and kallah, were in 770. The Frierdiker Rebbe gave instructions to his secretary to tell both families to come in together with the chosson and the kallah. Our lives were shaped forever from that yechidus and the brochos that we received the day of our chassunah.

EARLY YEARS

My parents, Reb Elimelech and Mrs. Esther Leah Lasker, instilled in us a very positive attitude for doing mitzvos, and a deep awe and respect for rabbonim. When I got married, my grandmother would never call my husband by his name – she always called him “Rabbi Hecht.” Despite the fact that he was her grandson-in-law and many years her junior, her respect for rabbonim would not allow her to address him casually.

When I was fourteen years old, I attended the Talmud Torah High School in the afternoon after public school. At that time, a choshuve yungerman from my family’s shul suggested that I change schools to attend Bais Yaakov. My parents respected his opinion and decided to send me to Bais Yaakov. There I was introduced to a totally new way of life. Each of the teachers taught from the depths of her soul, especially the principal, Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, a”h.

In the 1940’s, when I attended Bais Yaakov, life in the Jewish community was very different than it is now. In my frum Jewish neighborhood, I could count on one hand how many women had a sheitel, and how many men had a beard. We had never heard of cholov Yisroel or glatt kosher. When the Frierdiker Rebbe came to America, his influence on the Jewish community was seen and felt immediately.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REBBE

The Rebbe was not only our Rebbe, he was our personal mashpia. We always consulted with the Rebbe regarding every facet of our lives.

To give you an understanding of how close the Rebbe was to us, we were honored that the Rebbe agreed to be sandek for our firstborn son, Sholom Dov Ber, in 1946. That was the first time the Rebbe ever served as a sandek at a bris. Having never been a sandek before, the

Rebbe asked the Frierdiker Rebbe what he needed to know in order to be sandek. The Frierdiker Rebbe answered simply, “A sandek must hold the baby firmly!” We were also honored to receive the only pidyon haben letter that the Rebbe ever sent.

PERSONAL SHLICHUS

There were two personal Shlichus’n that the Rebbe gave directly to me.

There was a woman from our congregation who went to the Rebbe to ask for a brachah for her daughter, who was not well. The Rebbe told her she should start going to the mikvah. The Rebbe then asked me to teach her the laws of taharas hamishpachah, and to find one more woman and convince her, too, to go to the mikvah. I had no idea how to find the second woman that the Rebbe had in mind. I started teaching the woman and we made plans for her to go to the mikvah for the first time. She told me that her sister-in-law, who used to go to the mikvah but had stopped, would accompany her. I realized that the sister-in-law must be the other woman that the Rebbe was referring to. Boruch Hashem, I was able to convince her, too, to return to a full commitment to the laws of taharas hamishpachah. Both women started to go to the mikvah and continued thereafter.

My second Shlichus came about through a yechidus we had with the Rebbe in 1955, in honor of our son’s upsherenish, which took place on Lag B’omer. The Rebbe told me, “I understand that your sister is getting married in the next few weeks. Please talk to her about having a mechitzah at her chassunah.”

I told the Rebbe I would speak to my sister about having a mechitzah at her chassunah, but it would not be easy to convince her because I had not had a mechitzah at my own wedding, ten years earlier. In 1955, it was still a very new concept in this country to have a mechitzah at a wedding. I told the Rebbe that

I understood that in Montreal the mechitzos were made of flowers.

The Rebbe said, “So make a mechitzah of flowers.” I said it was probably very expensive. The Rebbe said he would pay for the flower mechitzah at my sister’s chassunah.

I spoke to my sister and boruch Hashem she listened and agreed to have a mechitzah. My parents paid for the flowers, and the Rebbe was very happy to hear that his request had been fulfilled.

HORO’OS FOR CAMP EMUNAH

When the Rebbe introduced mitvza neshek, in the 70’s, we were not sure how to handle the issue in camp, because at the time we had many frum campers from non-Lubavitcher homes. (There were not very many options for camp in those years.) We did not want to encroach on anyone’s family minhagim. We wrote a letter to the Rebbe asking him how to approach it. The Rebbe said that we should introduce the mitzvah in a very nice, gentle manner. All the girls should be given the opportunity to light but nobody should be pressured.

One year there was a Stoliner chossid who started a boys’ camp in the area. There were no other girls’ camps nearby, so he enrolled his daughters in Camp Emunah. The first Erev Shabbos in camp, the girls saw everyone else lighting Shabbos candles and they were not sure what to do. They called their father, and he said that if it was minhag hamokom that girls light Shabbos candles, they should do so as well.

We once sent the Rebbe a brochure for Camp Emunah, which included the camp’s full daily schedule. The Rebbe asked us why we had a learning session in the morning but not in the afternoon. Because of this we added a small learning session called “Din a Day” before Minchah. We reported this to the Rebbe and he was very happy.

There was a time when it was difficult for us to get enough



FOUNDING CAMP EMUNAH

In the summer of 1952, my husband and I were in the country, staying near Camp Agudah. We decided to visit the camp Shabbos afternoon. The camp spirit during shalosh seudos was so inspiring that after Shabbos we resolved to ask the Rebbe if we could open a Lubavitcher camp. We put in a tzetel several times, each time asking for haskamah to start a camp, until the Rebbe was finally maskim. When we had organized all the basic requirements to start the camp, we sent in a tzetel with two requests: to acquire a suitable property, and to name it Camp Emunah. Boruch Hashem, the Rebbe gave his blessing to both these proposals. We decided to open a girls' camp because we thought girls would be easier to manage than boys. (We would later learn, however, that running a girls' camp is actually more difficult in almost every way.) In the summer of 1953, with the Rebbe's brachah and haskamah, we started the first ever Lubavitcher overnight camp.

► On 15 Tammuz 5720 (July 10, 1960), the Rebbe visited Camp Gan Yisroel and Camp Emunah (see photos, this page)
Photos: LubavitchArchives.com.



1950's

In the early years, most of our campers were kids from the Release Time program, who learned in public schools during the day but were taken out for religious instruction. We would try to get the kids from Released Time to enroll in yeshivah. The Rebbe once said that sleepaway camp was better than day camp, because in sleepaway camp, the children do not only learn about Yiddishkeit, they live Yiddishkeit.

1970's

In 1971 we started Tiny Tots, for children from K-3, as one of the 70 new mosdos that the Rebbe asked for in honor of his 70th birthday. One mother told me that she was happy her daughters were accepted into Tiny Tots. They were so poor that at home the girls had to share beds. In camp, boruch Hashem each girl had a bed of her own. Camp Emunah also oversees the operation of the Shaloh Center in Napanoch, New York, which is the home of the Jonas and Sadie Rennert Ivy League Torah Study Program as well as the summer home of Hadar HaTorah Yeshiva.

1960's

In the 1960's we had many children whose parents were Holocaust survivors. We took many of these children free of charge, as their parents had no way to pay for camp. We did not set a price, we just let parents pay whatever they could.

Mrs. Perel Schulkind recalls (N'shei Chabad Newsletter, Tishrei 2008), "My husband and I, being greeneh, were not able to help [our two daughters] with their English homework, but boruch Hashem they were bright girls and managed very well on their own. When they were 13 and 10 years old, we wanted them to escape the hot city and go to the country, to overnight camp, so we sent them to Camp Gilah. The following year, when we went to register them again, Camp Gilah informed us that they had installed a new pool and so the price had gone up. We could not afford the new price. In fact, we could not even afford half the new price. We did not know what to do. We did not want our daughters to spend the summer in the steaming hot apartment, but we did not have the money for Camp Gilah and we couldn't leave the city due to work obligations.

"Someone suggested, 'Call Rabbi J.J. Hecht. He has a camp, Camp Emunah, and will take your girls at whatever price you can afford.' So we did. And that is how our daughter Chaya Sara made friends with Lubavitcher girls and eventually married a Lubavitcher chossid, Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg. They are Shluchim in West Bloomfield, Michigan, and their children are Shluchim as well. All because of Rabbi J.J. Hecht a"n and tbl"ch Rebbetzin Chave Hecht! Their policy was: Rich or poor, always an open door. Or as we say in Yiddish, 'Ohrem oder reich, du zeinen alleh gleich.'"

1980's

In the 1980's we welcomed into camp many children from Iran, who were rescued from there after the fall of the Shah. We also started the Ivy League Torah Study program, which pays a weekly stipend to college students to learn in yeshivah during the summer. We had separate programs for girls and boys.

One summer there was a student in the Ivy League program who found out that he had been circumcised in the hospital when he was four or five days old. This type of milah is invalid and he would have to have a procedure known as hatafas dam bris. He agreed to this and we arranged for it to be done in the city. When he came back, he said that he had been planning to use the money he got from the Ivy League Study program to buy himself a pair of tefillin, but he had spent it all on the bris procedure. On the last day of the program, we had a banquet. This boy was called up and presented with a gift from all the other students – a new pair of tefillin.

1990's

By this time there were fewer and fewer parents sending their children to Tiny Tots. There were many more day camp programs available in the city, and most parents would wait until their children were older to send them to overnight camp. We decided that it was more important to provide a program for teens, so we opened B.J.J. Teen Camp on the grounds of Tiny Tots, run by Rebbetzin Sarah Hecht since its inception. We also introduced the Teen Traveling Shluchos program, run for many years with great success and enthusiasm by Rabbi Shaya Gansbourg a"h and tbl"ch his wife Goldie. The campers travel along the West Coast of America, from Vancouver to Mexico, visiting various Chabad Houses along the way as well as hiking, touring, and sightseeing. The campers get a first-hand view of what the work of a Shlucha entails. Many parents tell me that their daughters come home inspired to lead a life of Shlichus.

2000's

We started the bas mitzvah program, as well as our special needs division for girls with Down Syndrome and other disabilities. For several years I had mothers approaching me, asking me to develop a program for their daughters. Initially I was very hesitant; I was very worried about the risks this might entail. But finally we took the jump and now I am so happy we did it. The girls are involved with all the camp activities and are an integral part of camp.

2010's

We recently started a campaign to remodel some of our old bunk houses, which have been in continuous use for over half a century! At Camp Emunah we continue to look toward the future, with new projects and innovations every season.

Every single day we see peiros from our campers, and after every summer we get reports from the parents telling us how Camp Emunah affected their daughter in a positive way. After my husband passed away, the Rebbe wrote to us asking us, "How do you want the organization to run?" My children gave in two different proposals for how my husband's duties would be apportioned among his children, but did not mention Camp Emunah. The Rebbe chose one of the two proposals and in his answer he added, "*Un di mama blaiht in camp.*" Your mother will remain in camp. Therefore I am still involved with Camp Emunah to this day.



Photos: LubavitchArchives.com. Clockwise:
 (1) Rabbi J.J. Hecht with Release Time children outside 770, with a cake to give Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog. (2) Rabbi J.J. Hecht in his place next to the Rebbe at the Lag B'Omer parade, 1983. (3) Rabbi J.J. Hecht with NY Sen. Hugh Carey, before his yechidus with the Rebbe, mid-1970's. (4) Rabbi J.J. Hecht addresses public school children at Release Time program, mid-1940's. (5) Rabbi J.J. Hecht translating the Rebbe's words on the radio, mid 1970's. (6) Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy visits the Rebbe (1964). Standing, L:-R: Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Eizik Hodakov; Rabbi Binyomin Gorodetsky; Dr. Nissan Mindel; ?; Rabbi J.J. Hecht; Rabbi Shlomo Aaron Kazarnovsky; Rabbi Yosef Wineberg; Rabbi Shemaryahu Gurary.





REBBETZIN CHAVE HECHT AND CAMP EMUNAH

During her 60 years as Camp Director, Rebbetzin Chave Hecht has actively developed the programs, the guidelines, the framework and the activities. She also designed the special trips and outreach programs that Camp Emunah is famous for. Above all else, it is Rebbetzin Hecht's personal love and devotion to every child which has made Camp Emunah so special. Very often, years later, as mothers and grandmothers, women come back to Emunah and remind Rebbetzin Hecht of some special kindness, gesture or encouraging word which she quietly shared with them during the time that they were campers in Emunah.

Rabbi and Rebbetzin Hecht were pioneers in Jewish summer camping. Many camps that followed later have approached Rebbetzin Hecht for her guidance and mentorship in developing their camps.

counselors. Girls wanted to go on Shlichus in the summer, to day camps all around the world. So I asked the Rebbe if working in Camp Emunah is also considered a Shlichus. The Rebbe responded, “Camp Emunah is a Shlichus of the Eiber-shter Mamosh.”

NO TAKING IT EASY

Every year on Tu B’Shvat, our wedding anniversary, we would go to the Rebbe for yechidus. One year when we went to the Rebbe for our anniversary, my husband was not feeling well. I asked the Rebbe to please tell my husband to take it easy. The Rebbe said to me (in Yiddish), “I don’t like telling something to someone when I know he will not listen. In your husband’s dictionary there is no word for ‘take it easy.’”

A few months later we went to the Rebbe for dollars because we were going on a trip to Australia. The Rebbe asked me, “Nu, is your husband listening to you?”

I said, “Sometimes.”

A chashuve chossid went to the Rebbe for yechidus, and the Rebbe gave him a Shlichus to do. The Rebbe told him, “I have three chasidim who do everything I tell them to do – Rabbi Moshe Gurkov, Rabbi Binyomen Gorodetsky and Rabbi Yankel Hecht. *Un ehr toot afileh aieder ich zug ehm.*” (He does it even before I tell him.)

My husband used to sit down every night and give a din v’cheshbon. He would ask himself, “What did I accomplish today?”

WITH HATZLACHAH

After Rabbi Hecht passed away, I was asked by the Shluchos convention to speak and tell stories about my husband and the Rebbe. The first year after my husband’s passing, the thought of speaking about him publicly was very difficult, because I was afraid I would break down crying. The second year, however, I did accept their request.

It was customary for the Shluchos to pass by the Rebbe for a brachah in honor of the convention, along with women from the entire community. The year that I spoke, in addition to giving a brachah the Rebbe also gave out a kuntres. When the women were lined up to go to the Rebbe, there was an indescribable tumult. As I stood before the Rebbe, he said to me, “Nu, si iz geven b’hatzlachah?” (Was it successful?)

I was deeply touched that the Rebbe thought of me at that time. To me this showed the greatness of the Rebbe. The Rebbe knew about every detail that pertained to his chassidim. Amidst all that tumult, with all the truly important burdens he was carrying, the Rebbe stopped to ask me how my speech went. The Rebbe knew how to make each individual feel important, and this is an approach I try to apply every day in Camp Emunah. •

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