

Kosher Camp Abilities

In 2017 I was visiting Camp Abilities in Saratoga. It was their 5th anniversary, and they were very proud. There was a mother there visiting her child – she was also visually impaired. Her name was Rachel and she had a son who was going to the camp. The campers were ice skating and she wanted to give it a try with my support. She had never skated before. She strapped on the skates, and with some apprehension she started to inch along the wall while she held tightly to my hand. I taught her how to push and glide and she slowly started letting go of the wall on occasion. She started to gain speed and had longer periods when she let go of the wall. After about 30 minutes she was skating across the ice with her long blue skirt flowing behind her and a huge smile on her face. She loved the feeling of movement and wanted to ensure that it was provided to children in her community.

Rachel is Orthodox and is part of a very large Orthodox Jewish community in NY City and New Jersey. There are a number of individuals in this community that have visual impairments due to retinal disorders. This includes children, one of whom is Rachel's son, who had attended Camp Abilities, but experienced some challenges due to religious observance. Orthodox Jews eat only Kosher food, observe Shabbat, and maintain separation between genders in social settings. Rachel's son had therefore participated in some of the camp activities but not all such as swimming and dancing.

After skating with me, she immediately started talking about hosting a Kosher Camp Abilities for these children who are in this Orthodox community. Having a Kosher Camp Abilities would provide him and all of the children an equal opportunity to be active within parameters

that aligned with Orthodox practices. I had helped set up Camps in many countries with different customs and traditions from the ones I grew up with so I know I could make this dream a reality for Rachel, her family, for the Orthodox community and for me. I loved Rachel's passion and drive to make this happen despite so many variables to consider.

Throughout the school year Rachel and I had many meetings about where to have the camp, what sports to offer, and how we would navigate the Kosher guidelines. I recruited five enthusiastic and open-minded students to help with the weekend. Rachel sent me a video to show them Orthodox customs and guidelines. My students watched the video and knew to be sensitive to the customs of the Orthodox Jewish religion. They would wear long sleeves and pants (covering bare limbs), and the schedule would be minimal for Shabbat. We would eat Kosher food and keep the boys' and girls' group separate.

One thing Rachel and I could not quite figure out was if beep baseball and goalball would be permitted. The Orthodox religion does not allow one to work on Shabbat. This means that pushing an elevator button, turning on a stove, or even turning on a light, are all forbidden. These actions are considered work. So, does the act of pulling the pin out of the beep baseball constitute work? Rachel asked her Rabbi. He said that we could not play beep baseball as that is considered work. BUT we could play goalball as it is not considered work. So, we would go swimming, do track and field, goalball, and dance. We could play beep baseball before and after Shabbat. The groups would be divided up and there would be a girls' group and a boys' group.

The venue we reserved for a weekend in May for the Camp was an Orthodox Jewish resort in the Catskills mountains. It was a beautiful large hotel with a pool, many large meeting rooms, and a large property. They served only Kosher food there.

We arrived early on the Friday of the retreat. We arrived before any of the families, so we found our rooms and got settled in. We scoped out the pool which had not been opened since the summer before, so they had to run the water and chemicals through it.

Rachel and her family came, and we got to catch up. She introduced me to her brother who was also visually impaired and his family, to her sister who was visually impaired and her family and to her father who was blind. She also had several other siblings who were not visually impaired. They consistently thanked me for coming and bringing my students. They were genuinely happy we were there and valued what we had to offer. A Shabbaton is the celebration of Shabbat or Sabbath. In this case the celebration lasted the entire weekend. There were 200 people attending the Shabbaton from orthodox communities in NY City and in NJ. There were 27 participants with visual impairments and 17 of them young enough to attend our Camp program.

It is interesting that in the Orthodox religion young adults are matched by a match maker. Each person who was visually impaired was matched with another person with a disability. Rachel's husband used a wheelchair, and they were great together. They had two sons and one was visually impaired, he was the third generation of the family with a visual impairment.

After lunch we rotated between the girls' and boys' groups swimming, beep baseball, and exercise class. We did the beep baseball before Shabbat as it was deemed "work" so we could not play on Saturday. Most of the activities were new to the children so they were very excited to play the various sports. My students had to wear long sleeves and pants all weekend, and it was hot. They never complained and did a wonderful job.

I had agreed to do a presentation for the families before Shabbat on Friday. Once the activities were under way I met with the parents in a large room with a white curtain dividing each group down the middle. The men sat on one side and the women sat on the other. I was to stand in the middle and present to both groups. I sat on a bench with no power point or hand-out and discussed the importance of physical activity and sports for all children. I shared some of the barriers for youth with visual impairments and how to make accommodations. Everyone seemed very interested. When it was time for questions the men and the women asked questions, but they did not say their names so the participants on the other side of the curtain probably didn't know who was talking. This was a first for me and it was different, but I understood the tradition.

The parents then transitioned to prayer. I had told my students that I wanted to join the women in their Friday night Shabbat prayers, so they were on their own. I took out a prayer book and went through the Friday night service prayers that I was familiar with. They did not have a Rabbi leading a service, but each person did pray quietly to themselves. At one point they had a Rabbi go to the front of the room while we were still separated and discuss what the Torah says about helping people with disabilities. He and his wife had their own program for people with disabilities in NY and they discussed what they did to fulfill their role. I felt totally

comfortable with these amazing people as they welcomed me with open arms and made me feel like family. I had never had any friends who were Orthodox Jews, and I can now count Rachel and her diverse family as my friends.

The next day was Saturday. Everyone in the Shabbaton was going to pray in the morning so I took my students on a hike since we were in the Catskills. The trails were beautiful, and we had an opportunity to discuss the various similarities and differences between the Orthodox culture and the one they were brought up in. They thought through the customs and began to understand the reasons behind these rules and customs. It was a beautiful long hike up a small mountain.

Once we got back, we played goalball, track & field, and danced with the campers. The kids really liked the goalball, and the girls loved the dancing. My students did a wonderful job as it was again very hot for the field events in the grass, and they did not complain. I think I was the one that complained the most as it was so hot! At one point one of Rachel's sisters asked me if someone could turn on the air conditioner in a room where a group of men were having a meeting. I said I would be happy to, but she said I couldn't because I was Jewish. I had to find someone else. I asked my student JJ to go in and turn the air conditioning on. Rachel's sister was very thankful. From then on JJ was an absolute favorite among the men. They talked to him whenever they saw him with smiles all around. That night they all gave him drinks and cakes and he reveled in the attention.

Our sports went on until about 6pm when we freshened up to get ready for dinner. I actually thought it was dinner. We ate what I thought was a nice meal with bread and some other dishes unfamiliar to me such as a light brown dish that looked like oatmeal but was not

oatmeal, and some light brown grain dishes with a unique texture. My students asked me and I was surprised that I didn't know what they were as the sign in front of the dishes was in Hebrew, and I know how to read Hebrew from my own studies as a Jewish child growing up but did not know what it meant. During our meal there were prayers and presentations by various men around the room. This went on for a long time and a bit after 9pm I had to go to bed. My students were fascinated by these speeches, and the children from our Kosher Camp were coming over and talking to them so they wanted to stay. This went on for several more hours and they said that they ate a real dinner at about 10pm. JJ said he stayed up until 2am having tea and talking to the men.

The next day everyone slept in, but my students and I went for a long run. We planned to do goalball, dance, and track and field again. We did end up having a wonderful final day of Kosher Camp. The campers continued to set goals, challenge themselves, and showed progress and achievement. They scored more goals in goalball, ran using several guide-running strategies, threw the shot-put and discus further than they had before, and perfected their dance moves! The campers all thanked us for a fun weekend of sports and physical activity.

I felt very satisfied with the outcome of providing sports opportunities to youth with visual impairments who had not had much opportunity to participate in the past. Would they and their families find the time, space, and equipment to do these sports in the future? I hope that Rachel's wonderful passion and forward thinking would keep this momentum going.