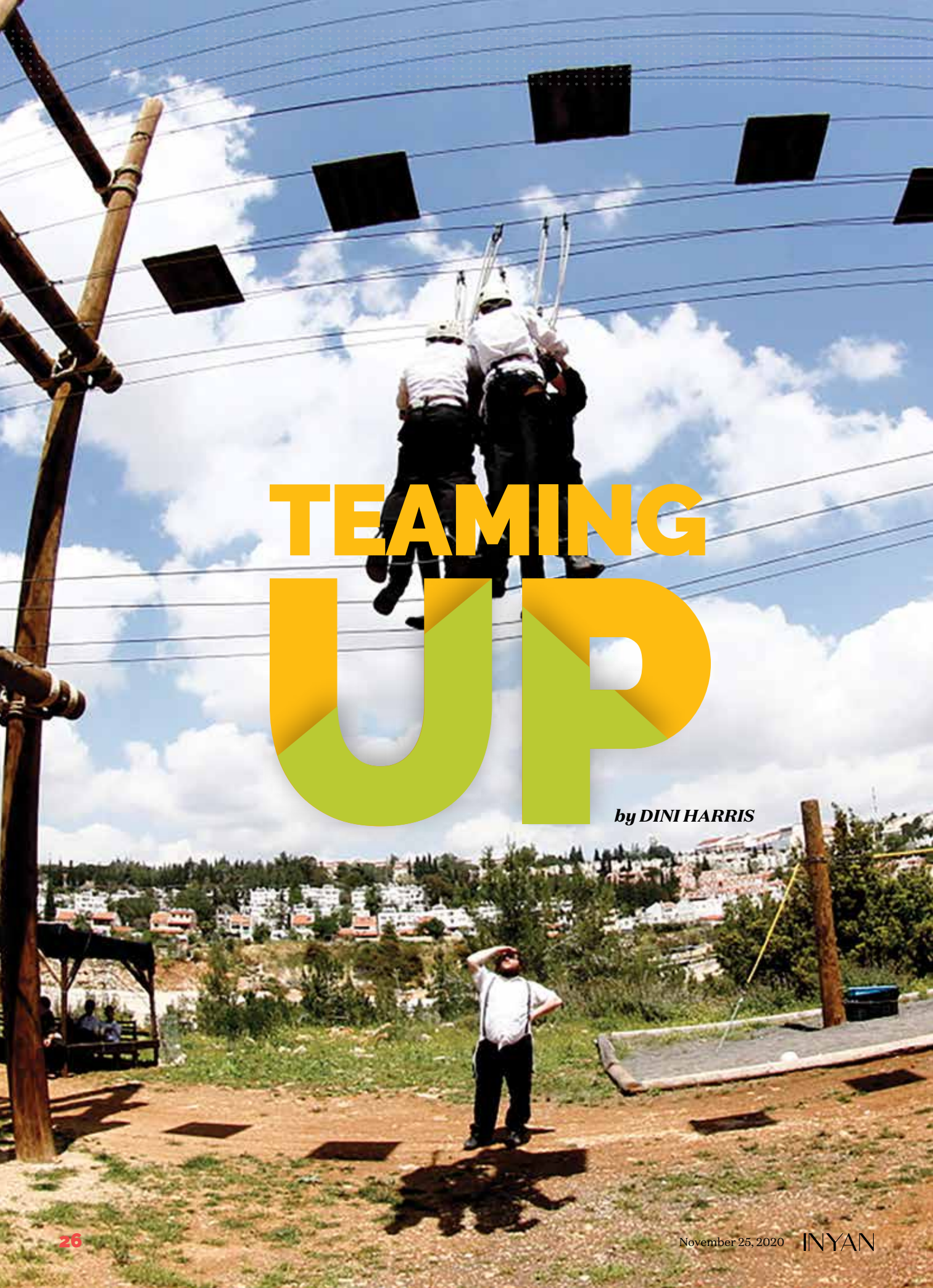




TEAMING UP

by DINI HARRIS



Teambuilding activity.
Reb Chaim Katz
looking up.

The New Forest National Park is one of the largest expanses of natural forest and heathland in England, and it was where Reb Chaim Katz planned on taking the group of boys he was working with back in 2007.

He wasn't new to the field of education. In Yerushalayim, where he had lived for most of his life, he had been a successful cheder Rebbe for several years. He had moved to London a few years earlier to work with at-risk youth.

This trip was meant to be like many other trips he had arranged. It was supposed to give the boys an outlet, an interesting experience, and a chance to open up about their problems to Reb Katz and the other chaperones.

"I needed activities to make the trip unique," remembers Reb Chaim. "A company rented out bikes that we could drive through the ponds in the park. That sounded like fun but it wouldn't fill all our time, so I asked them if they had something else to offer.

"They said they could also offer us a shelter-building activity. I was never in the Scouts, so I didn't know what that was all about, but because it was a cheap activity, I signed up the group.

"When it was time for the activity, a 70-year-old non-Jew took charge. He told the *chevrah* to choose two leaders to head two teams. Then these leaders chose their own teams.

"But then, before starting the activity, he switched the leaders, so that each one was in charge of the other leader's team!

"I immediately saw he had done something to the group; he broke up their usual loyalties. For the next two and a half hours, he had those unruly boys working intensively. He gave out jobs: He told one boy that he looks strong and put him in charge of searching for wood; another he assigned to check out what the other group was doing.

"After that activity, I sat around with the boys playing my guitar — something I had done many times with them before. But this was the first time some of the boys were able to unwind, to completely relax. Together, we sang song after song and it was clear that this activity had managed to crack through the veneer of the boys."

That experience stayed with Reb Chaim. It made him aware that there was more he could offer the boys he worked

with. More than just loving them, speaking to them, and being there for them, there were tools he could use to help them learn about themselves and initiate change.

It took a few more years of on-the-job training, attending courses and schools, but now Reb Chaim is an experienced leader in the field of wilderness and adventure therapy. Calling himself a "social entrepreneur in education," he wants to share with the broader community the benefits of all that he's learned.



Reb Chaim Katz

Learning and Trying Out

Reb Chaim didn't start training for his new calling right away. In 2008, when the program in London through which he was employed closed its doors, he returned to Eretz Yisrael.

"I wanted to use my experience in London with at-risk youth to help boys in Eretz Yisrael," he says. "I started to work, but all the while, in the back of my mind, I knew that the experience in New Forest was something unknown to the our community and that it was something I should learn."

Reb Chaim began by learning team-building activities and incorporating them into his work with at-risk boys. He even took a group on a trip for several days in the Carmel Mountains, but afterward he felt that the trip was underutilized.

"The trip was a 'wow,' and I was happy, but it didn't leave a strong enough

impression on the boys,” he explains.

“Out in nature, without modern distractions, the boys have a unique opportunity to think about *niflo’as haBorei*, why the world was created, and why they were created.

“But sometimes the boys are excited by adventurous activities and aren’t interested in the deeper meaning of the things that they see and do. I eventually realized that I needed to study the field professionally so that I would be able to teach them these ideas in a way that they would be willing to listen.”

“I wanted my trips to have a strong impact. I eventually realized that I needed to study the field professionally.”

After consulting with his Rebbe, Reb Chaim enrolled in rigorous course to learn wilderness and adventure therapy (WAT).

“I was very excited about this whole concept,” says Reb Chaim, “and I was sure that as soon as I finished my studies, I would implement it in our community. During the year of internship that followed my studies, some yeshivos were very receptive to my work.”

Well, Reb Chaim soon learned that though they were very receptive when he was volunteering, they didn’t yet appreciate its power sufficiently to find the funds to pay for his programs.

Reb Chaim was forced to put his dream of working with at-risk youth on the back burner for a while and, to support his family, he began organizing team-building activities for Jewish companies, school staff and the like. Though he wasn’t doing therapy, this work gave him a great amount of experience and expertise working with groups and group dynamics.

Professional, Methodical and Effective

His dream lay dormant for a few years when several individuals recognized the therapeutic value of outdoor experiences. His vision then

FATHER AND SON+

Over the course of his work, Reb Chaim once arranged parent-child activities for the opening day of a special program for troubled youth. He set up a number of different stations with a variety of team-building activities — some for the father and mother, some for the father and son, some for mother and son etc.

“That program was a fascinating eye-opener for me,” he says. “It made me realize that I had forgotten something central — that the story of the boy is often the story of his parents.

“A father and son did an activity together and the son did something outstanding, but the father didn’t compliment him or react at all. When I expressed my amazement, the father just grumbled to his son, ‘Look, you know how to do things, so how come you are where you are?’”

That insight pushed Reb Chaim in another direction. Over the past two years, he has arranged team-building activities for fathers and sons with normal, healthy relationships that they want to strengthen even more.

The first such father-son program had four participants: one father and son and Reb Chaim and his own son. But since then, demand for the program has grown. Participants come from every sector of the religious community — *kippot serugot* to Meah Shearim and everything in between, Na-Nachs, Belz, Gur, everyone.

“I take them for one full day, eight hours, of intense father-son activities. They do a rope course tied to each other, so that they need to confer and listen to each other. At night, they hike together with one flashlight — on the son’s head — so that they’re forced to walk in tandem.

“They do simple things together, simple things that are powerful and build relationships. The fathers are given a list of suggested subjects to discuss. Subjects like secrets — are secrets good? Should we keep secrets from each other? Tell me something that you always wanted, something that doesn’t cost money...

“At the end of the day, we all sit in a circle and the father has to look straight at his son and say something positive that he learned about him over the day. Something like, ‘Moishe, today I discovered abilities that I never knew you had. I saw you trying to light a fire without matches, and you tried again and again. I didn’t know that obstinacy is a good character trait, but I saw how hard you tried and see that it is very positive.’”

Interestingly, now, when Reb Chaim can’t run many of his programs because of COVID restrictions, this area is thriving because fathers and sons are part of the same nuclear family.



Group dynamics is serious business.

TEAM BUILDING

Team building is the process of turning a group of individuals into a cohesive group able to work together to meet the same goal.

roared back into ready-to-go, vibrant mode. He reached out to groups of boys and to different types of yeshivos and offered them his life-altering activities.

When I asked Reb Chaim to explain a bit more about what he actually does, he set off on a string of stories, anecdotes, lessons he's learned and projects he's started.

He uses rappelling as an example to explain what he does. Rappelling is a typical adventurous activity for *bachurim*. But when Reb Chaim takes his boys rappelling, he gives them an assignment: to focus on fear and try to define it. That assignment encourages discussion of fear and overcoming fears. Alternatively, he might have boys on the bottom write encouraging messages on stones for a friend to read during his descent, boosting the self-confidence of the descender and encouraging positive speech among the message-writers.

It was also clear in our casual interview that he approaches his work very professionally and methodically — and that it is this preciseness that underpins his success.

First, he follows the group dynamics to make sure that each one of his groups is sufficiently consolidated. He uses the Tuckman Model (a theory delineating stages of team development) to evaluate where the group is holding. As he says, “If the boys don’t consolidate into a group, you can’t do anything with them.”

He bases his work with the group on “Full Value Contract,” which means that he is not the one to decide what the group is allowed — or not allowed — to do.

“Often, the first workshop I do with a group,” he explains, “involves delineating norms. I divide the boys into four groups and give out four different pages with different titles: what is our norm, what’s forbidden, what’s suggested, and what we can try.

“The groups each make a list on the paper they receive, then we switch the papers. Each group, working with a marker of a different color, goes through the lists and adds or detracts as they deem necessary. At the end, we have norms that are approved by the entire group. Because they’re the ones who came up with the norms, they’re all committed to following them.”

Narrative therapy is another crucial element of Reb Chaim’s work. “Everyone has a narrative,” he explains, “a story that they tell themselves about their situation. A boy could tell himself that he is where he is because he was abused, or because nobody cares about him, or because he just can’t overcome his *yetzer hara*.

“During the activities on a trip, especially when sitting in a circle in the dark wilderness, we start to question this narrative. The boys begin to realize that their stories aren’t necessarily true. Nobody cares about him? What about his mother who really shows her care? You think you can’t



Teambuilding activity in the forest.

do anything? Well, you thought you couldn’t climb that mountain, but you did.

“There are some yeshivos here in Eretz Yisrael,” Reb Chaim says, “that take their *bachurim* to *chutz laAretz* as a prize for fulfilling certain criteria during the year. They take the boys to amusement parks and keep them very busy. But I say, let’s give them wilderness therapy.

“Let’s take them, in hiking boots, to a place where there is nobody else, somewhere without junk food and smartphones — a place where the boys will have a chance to think about themselves and their situations in life.”

One 19-year-old *bachur* with problems, almost passed up one of Reb Chaim’s trips because he drinks a lot of Coca-Cola. He couldn’t imagine surviving in the wilderness, where the best he could hope for was lemonade made of lemons he squeezed into a cup of water.

The boy did end up joining and during the debriefing circle time, Reb Chaim focused on this *bachur* who usually spent his entire day with a smartphone, smoking.

“As a group,” Reb Chaim says, “we turned to this *bachur* and said, ‘Look at what happened to you. You were a Coca-Cola man. But you managed on only water for a few days. You made a change.’ We focused on that change for a while.

“I did not stay in touch with him, but I recently met him at the Kosel, walking with a hat and jacket. He came over to me and said, ‘Chaim, you should know that I’ve made a lot of changes since then. I’m getting married next week, please come.’

“Another boy addicted to watching serials participated in one of my programs. After a few days detached from technology, filled with the activities, he begged me, ‘Give me a plan to get rid of the serials forever.’

“In the world of therapy, most therapists say that if a boy resists treatment, they can’t help him. I’m not opposed to that idea, but I have a different approach. I bring the boys on a life-changing experience that helps them reach the acknowledgment that ‘I need help, I want help, I know that the help will help me, because I know that I can make changes to my life.’” ■