

Mah Rabu Maasecha Hashem

In *Maariv*, we thank Hashem for being “*machalif es hazemanim*,” changing the seasons. Change often adds spice and variety to life, and for this we are grateful to Hashem, Who is truly the “*Mechadeish bechol yom tomid*.” Although every season has unique delights, no time of the year elicits as much anticipation and excitement as the beautiful and inspirational months of the summer.

For the last ten years, young teenagers from across the globe have joined Camp Marabu, traveling out West to many of the national parks. The camp is run by Rabbi Raphael Mendlowitz, who has been a *mechanech* for more than two decades in Silver Spring, Maryland. Rabbi Mendlowitz’s goal is to use the *niflaos haBorei* to inspire today’s youth in *tefillah* by bringing the words of Dovid Hamelech alive and penetrating the *neshamos* of these young adults.

An ongoing story has been experienced in the camp as the importance and significance of “*kvius makom l’tefillah*” is brought to life. Ten years ago, the first year of Camp Marabu, the group of eleven found themselves on top of Yosemite National Park facing Half Dome. As is the camp’s custom, before each *tefillah*, the campers and staff “search out” to see if there are wandering Jews who might be interested in joining their *minyan*. Just prior to *Minchah*, a young Israeli man with two children was asked to join the *minyan*. His only request was, “Can I say *Kaddish*?” He joined the *minyan* and ended with *Kaddish Yasom*. Rabbi Mendlowitz warmly welcomed the young man and asked him why he had said *Kaddish*. His response was shocking. He had been in Yosemite for three days and had forgotten that his father’s *yahrtzeit* was that week.

“Last night,” he related, “my father came to me in a dream and yelled at me, ‘How can you be without a *minyan* and not say *Kaddish* on my *yahrtzeit*?’ I asked my father, ‘What should I do?’ He responded, ‘I will send you a *minyan*. Be sure to say *Kaddish*!’”

The next year, at the same spot, Rabbi Mendlowitz told this amazing story to his campers and then explained, “We have sanctified this place as a *makom tefillah*. I am certain that before we start *Minchah*, another Jew will join us.” No sooner were these words uttered when a Jew from Florida appeared and asked if he could join the camp for *Minchah*.

This past summer, as the time for *Minchah* arrived at Yosemite, these stories were repeated to the campers. There was a family from Eretz Yisroel who the camp had met and asked to join them for *Minchah*. The mother became very excited.

“You have a *minyan*?” she asked.

“Yes,” responded the campers. “We have 36 boys!”

She then explained that she was on vacation with her husband and her 14-year-old son. Their son had not wanted to join them on vacation, as he would need to forgo *tefillah betzibbur*. Although he had made a *kabbolah* at his *bar mitz-*

vah to *daven betzibbur*, his parents had insisted he join them for this trip. Now, for at least one *tefillah*, he would *daven betzibbur* with Camp Marabu at Yosemite.

This is the power of *kvius makom letefillah*. The *makom*, the place, becomes a source of *kedushah* and creates an environment of *mitzvah goreres mitzvah*.

Another powerful lesson for life that is often experienced at Camp Marabu is the impact of *kiddush Hashem*. Comments from outsiders, such as a flight attendant on the plane who said, “This is the first group of teenagers I’ve flown with who have used polite speech from the last generation,” make a strong impact on the boys.

A member of the cleaning crew in a hotel at the Grand Canyon was a trade student from Germany. The camp was concluding *Shacharis* as this young German stood with respect and awe, observing the young men finishing their prayers. Upon the completion of *davening*, Rabbi Mendlowitz thanked the young man for waiting so patiently to enter the room. The gentlemen’s first words were, “I’m sorry.” Playing innocent, Rabbi Mendlowitz asked, “For what?” The

response was, “For what my grandfather did to your grandfather.”

Shocked and almost speechless, Rabbi Mendlowitz explained that this young man had nothing to apologize for, but if he was sincere, upon his return to Germany, he should inform his family, friends and acquaintances about the Jews he met. He should tell them how respectful and dignified they were, and that would be the greatest apology he could demonstrate. He shook Rabbi Mendlowitz’s hand and promised to do so.

Stories of *Hashgacha Protis* and *kiddush Hashem* are experienced daily at Camp Marabu. *Davening kevosikin* at the Grand Canyon is truly the most memorable and inspiring moment for all the campers.

One experience stands out. There is a set place where the camp goes to *daven* to avoid the distraction of crowds and tourists. The campers were *davening*, and prior to *Shemonah Esrei*, a group of seven Orientals approached one of the campers and asked in a heavily-accented English, “We don’t know how to pray. Can we copy you as you say your prayers?”

The young camper took three steps back and forth and so did the group of Orientals. He proceeded to bend his knees and then stand erect and they immediately did so as well. He placed his hands overlapping each other and continued to *shuckel* during the *Amidah*. The Orientals did the same while whispering words as they “followed the leader.” After *Shemonah Esrei*, the campers, who were quite amused by the event, went to Rabbi Mendlowitz to share this experience. His reaction was one that left an impression on many who have since heard this story.

“Do you know that we ask for this experience every day, three times a day, in our *tefillos*?”

“*Rebbi*, what are you talking about?” asked the campers. “We ask to have Orientals join us and copy our *tefillos*?”

“Yes,” Rabbi Mendlowitz responded. “We say in our national anthem called *Aleinu Leshabei’ach* the following words: ‘*Ve’al kein nekaveh lecha Hashem – Therefore, we yearn from you Hashem, Liros meheirah besiferes uzecha - to see soon Your mighty splendor, lehaavir gilulim min haaretz - to remove the detestable idolatry from the earth, ...lesakein olam bemalchus Shakai - to perfect the universe through the Sovereignty of the Almighty, vechol bnei vosor yikre’u vishmechu - and all of the world’s inhabitants will recognize and know you, ...kee lecha tichra kol berech - to You every knee will bend... velichvod shimchu yekor yiteinu - and to the glory of Your Name they will render homage.*’

“We experienced this today,” continued Rabbi Mendlowitz. “We saw people who do not accept a Creator as we do. But they were so full of awe by the Grand Canyon, Hashem left his ‘Fingerprints’ on earth for all to see. We, as Hashem’s chosen people, must convey to those lacking this knowledge the extent of His greatness. We were *mekadeish es Hashem*. We were the *ohr*, light, *lechol hagoyim*. That sunrise was the light that inspired our *neshamos* and the souls of all those present, Jew and non-Jew alike.”



Boys from Camp Marabu at Yosemite National Park.



Boys from Camp Marabu *davening Shacharis* at the Pacific Ocean.



Rabbi Mendlowitz, director of Camp Marabu, performing *hagbah* during sunrise at the Grand Canyon.



Marabu campers at the Grand Canyon at sunrise.