

# Lubavitch Summer Camp Songs

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The songs sung at American and Canadian Lubavitch boys' camps during communal sing-alongs had English lyrics composed in sleepaway camps and were primarily intended to be sung there. These songs were not merely created to promote camaraderie and camp spirit but were also intended to educate and instill the proper Hasidic values and commitments in the next generation of devout Lubavitchers.

As a camper and later a staff member in several Lubavitch summer camps in the 1990s and early 2000s, I remember that photocopies with lyrics would sometimes be passed around for those unfamiliar with the songs, and I once saw several staff members huddled around a thick booklet of camp songs, discussing their favorite entries. But for the most part, the songs and their backstories were part of the *torah sheba'al peh*, the oral tradition of camp, passed down from counselors and staff to the next generation of campers during late night sing-alongs. As the lyrics of one popular song put it, campers were "small and immature trees" whose proper cultivation was crucial since "these young years will set the way/the fate of its life does lie here."

As campers we didn't know who authored these songs. It was as if these composer-less songs simply materialized, a natural and pure expression of what we all felt in our hearts. Most of these songs were originally composed for Color War, and after a brief life on stage many simply disappeared. But dozens of them, the most evocative



The author at a Lubavitch summer camp, photographed with his counselors and fellow campers, 1991

and eloquent ones, have joined the canon and continue to be used even decades after they were first composed. There are Lubavitch boys' summer camps in various rural locations, including Parksville, New York; Kalkaska, Michigan; and La Minerve, Quebec, Canada. In addition to songs that are specific to each camp, they all use some of the same songs, regardless of where they were composed. This contributes to the sense of a shared Lubavitch community and identity across these geographical areas.

Some songs consist of playful tunes with catchy lyrics, such as the following ditty:

Shake it up *Zaidy* [Grandpa]! Shake it up *Zaidy*!  
You look so cool when you daven [pray] in shul [synagogue]!  
You look so hip when in the *mikvah* [ritual bath] you dip!  
You look so weird when you shave your beard!

But for the most part, these songs were somber affairs, imbued with anguish and longing. The title of one song, “A Tear Runs Down from His Cheek,” aptly captures the emotional mood in which many of these songs were sung. These songs highlight numerous topics, but three focal points are *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice), *shlichus* (a commitment to Jewish outreach work), and *hiskashrus* (devotion) to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the spiritual leader of the community.

One of the most poignant examples of the theme of *mesiras nefesh* is a haunting melody titled “Awaiting His Turn” about a Jew during the Spanish Inquisition. He faces the terrible choice of remaining alive as a “goy” or dying as a Jew in an auto-da-fé:

Just because I was born as a Jew  
 Does it mean I must die as one too?  
 What is there to gain for the suffering and pain?  
 Better as a goy to remain.

After an internal struggle where his reason “was making him blind,” his “Jewish spark” emerges, and in an emotional eruption he chooses to die as a Jew:

With this burst of emotion he lunges towards the flame  
 As he cries *Shma Yisroel!* [Hear O Israel!], ash he became  
 But with *libi eir* [an awakened heart], his soul was saved  
 A Jew he forever remained!

While not all the songs were quite as macabre, they did contain tremendous pathos. For example, one describes a camper from a non-Orthodox home who struggles to maintain his new religious observances in the face of his friends’ ridicule. The camper, Yossi, writes to his Lubavitch counselor complaining about his uninformed and less religious Jewish friends, who presumably attend non-Orthodox synagogues, but are not truly committed to their faith:

But so many are lost in a world of confusion  
 Their faith isn’t real, it’s just an illusion

I cry for them all, I pity them so  
 For the beautiful things they don't know.

Yossi's counselor, Dovid, responds, "Don't cry for them all, but teach them to do/The beautiful laws of the Jew." For us Lubavitch campers the message was clear. It was our mission to educate those who were not Orthodox and to help them embrace the beauty of our way of life.

Although the songs covered many themes, by far the central one was the Rebbe, our love for him, our dedication to his teachings, his continued presence in our lives even after his passing in 1994, and his eventual return through the messianic redemption. One song, titled "Despondently Crying," summed up the ethos of Lubavitch and its attitude toward its absent leader:

Oy, Rebbe! Although we feel so alone  
 Connected to you we must be  
 For a *chosid* [a follower of Hasidism]  
 I am, I will carry out your plan  
 Your return inspiring me.

In the wooded forests of camp, far removed from our family and familiar streets and stores, our sense of what was possible expanded. A young boy from Brooklyn could be transported by a song and imagine himself as a martyr in the Spanish Inquisition. He could be motivated by a song to renew his commitment to piety and to the Lubavitch way of life.