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Youngsters from Camp Gan Israel of Central New Jersey in Highland Park on a field trip.

Photos courtesy Camp Gan Israel of Central NJ

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## Security doesn't take the summer off

Jewish day camps aim to keep kids safe, parents' minds at ease

## by Debra Rubin NJJN Bureau Chief June 25, 2018

The pool at Camp Gan Israel of Central New Jersey in Highland Park has to be among the safest ones around. After all, "The police station literally overlooks our pool," said camp director Chayale Shagalow.

The security extends well beyond the bathing The security extends well beyond the bathing area. Gan Israel, affiliated with Rutgers Chabad, meets at the Bartle School, a seculocation where doors are kept locked, with the added benefit of being next door to the Highland Park Police Station.

"We take every safety measure we can," Shagalow said about the camp, for children in pre-school through seventh grade.

As children head to Jewish day camps in the coming weeks and parents pack bags with swimsuits, sunscreen, and bottles of water, moms and dads might be concerned about terrorism, especially since Jewish community centers received numerous bomb threats last war.

"Security is much more of a concern now than five years ago or even two years ago, and my general sense is that people take it much more seriously," said Keith Krivitsky, CEO of Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey. "We've made a great deal of progress in sensitizing our community partners, but that doesn't mean the Job is ever done."

NJN reached out to several local camps to find out how they're protecting their campers. Although they declined to give specifics for security reasons, all three of the camps interviewed said they have been working on their respective protocols with local authorities and the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey.

"We reach out to all our partners to encourage them to be more prepared and to also receive our security alerts," said Krivitzky. "We have a very active security task force and we do training with our institutions and organizations. Many of these sessions take place in the institutions themselves, and we continue to offer help on an ongoing basis."

The task force works with Jewish organizations in the federation's catchment area to facilitate security awareness and preparedness. There's an information sharing network of more than 70 organizations spanning law enforcement, public safety, and the Jewish community. The task force also advocates for security grants to local Jewish institutions and provides access to training sessions.

"We take pride in that we do everything we can to ensure safety," said Shagalow, whose camp is certified by the American Camping Association, which she described as "an incredible resource" for security and safety measures

She said counselors and staff are responsible teens or adults who are all CPR-trained. In addition, employees wear the same turquoise T-shirt, which easily identifies staff for emergency situations. The shirts would also make a potential intruder stand out.

Rabbi Avraham Bernstein, director of Camp Gan Israel of Central Jersey, which is affiliated with Chabad of Western Monmouth County in Manalapan, said safety and security measures are reviewed annually. Many people, he said, have offered ideas and perspectives on how to best secure the camp's Monroe location, adding, "Ten years ago, who would have ever thought of doing that? Security and safety comes before anything else."

Bernstein said, "We work with everybody in the system. If we see someone or something that doesn't belong, we make sure we deal with it and notify the authoritie

The camp, which serves pre-schoolers to eighth graders, as well as a travel camp for ninth and tenth graders, is located on a secluded farm.

As a security precaution, "There are no signs to indicate we are there," said Bernstein, adding that protective measures are sought from a variety of sources, including federation, Israeli authorities, and local law enforcement.

"Our first defense is to keep any intruder off the farm," he said.

Jewish Community Center of Middlesex County executive director Dorothy Rubinstein said security at its Kids Rock summer camp is an extension of year-round protections at its Edison facility. The camp serves children from 2-and-a-half to 13 years old. During peak periods such as arrival and dismal for camp and the daycare located within the JCC, at least two staff members are assigned as observers, she said, standing at the top of a staircase overlooking the front entrance to ensure compliance and that members with guests are properly signed in. Everyone must scan their membership cards before entering the building

Since the Middlesex JCC was among those hit nationally by a string of bomb threats in 2017, Rubinstein said every staff member takes time off during the day to walk around the outside perimeter of the building to check for irregularities.

"They all have their JCC IDs on, so if there are people with ulterior motives around, they know there are people from the JCC watching," she said. Signs provided by federal and state offices of Homeland Security are posted at exits and entrances warning people they are being recorded; a Homeland Security grant provided funding for a camera system, which Rubinstein and the membership director can view from their offices.

With exception of the front entrance, all doors are locked and alarmed throughout the day; classrooms have locks on the doors to be used in case of an emergency, such as an active shooter; and stairwells are locked except for emergency egress, according to Rubinstein.

"Our camp staff is given an orientation and a walking tour of the building showing them where the emergency exits are," she said. "We do mock fire and active shooter drills. Everybody understands the need to protect children and the building is heightened during camp.'

Backpacks and unaccounted-for packages are not permitted in the building. If a package is left unattended it is promptly removed, she said.

Rubinstein said Edison Police and the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office have reviewed the JCC's security procedures and said, "We are extremely prepared."

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