

The Shira Girls Choir And Camp- By Danielle Sarah storch

Praising Hashem with Jewish song can be a profoundly uplifting experience. Today we're meeting with Mrs. Chaya Bruria Sachs, the founder and director of The Shira Girls Choir and Shira Talent camp in Baltimore, Maryland.

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Hi, Mrs. Sachs. Please tell us about the Shira Girls Choir.

Our choir is made up of girls ranging from 4th graders until 12th graders. It's a broad range. Some girls stay with us for just a few years and some start from when they're very young and continue until they graduate from high school. The number of girls in the choir varies. Recently we had 36 girls in the choir.

Normally we rehearse once a week on Sundays. But when we are ready to record or just before a concert, we might meet three times a week. Over the years we have released three albums as well as a DVD of one of our concert tours. They're available at all Jewish outlets that carry women's music.

Sounds like hard work. Why did you create a choir?

When we started the choir I was the head of music and drama at Camp Bais Yaakov in Baltimore. Mrs. Leah Eichenthal was heading head of dance. We were putting on a production every summer. One summer a few parents approached us and asked if we could continue during the school year because their daughters enjoyed it so much. I had many of my own songs that I was looking to produce anyway; It had always been my dream to produce my own songs. I held auditions, formed the choir and eventually produced a girls' album for women and girls only.

That's so exciting. Can you tell us more about your productions and your music albums?

Before our first album even came out, we were doing concerts in Baltimore for tzedakah organizations. I directed the choir, and Mrs. Eichenthal would teach the choreography to the girls. People really loved the concept. There weren't too many outlets outside of school and camp for girls to use their creativity. So by the time

our first album was released, people were already familiar with us. We sold quite a number of albums. Baruch Hashem, it took off beyond our wildest expectations. We were bombarded with requests for concerts. Six weeks after our album came out, we performed in Brooklyn college before three thousand people. We went on to produce more albums and perform in other cities.

Can you tell us what you are focusing on now?

Since then our mission has changed. Twenty years ago, a choir was an exciting way to bring new songs to klal yisrael's women and it served as an extracurricular activity. Today, the choir and talent camp serve a real need for girls. Society has changed and now, more than ever, kids need a creative outlet. It's very painful for a girl to have a talent and not be able to develop it. The girls thrive when they're given that opportunity, especially those who aren't as academically inclined. So many of the girls come back to me years later to let me know what the choir did for them. It carries over to every aspect of their lives when they can nurture their talents: Kids become more confident, happier, more organized, focused and responsible as a result.

Please tell us about your Shira Talent Camp.

Many parents were approaching me about their daughters auditioning for the choir. I told them I was taking a break because I was nervous about the financial instability of the music industry. Unfortunately many people are copying music now or just downloading one song instead of buying a CD and it's hurting the entire industry. The men make up for it by singing at chasunahs and using their albums as expensive advertising.

We obviously can't do that, so we brainstormed with the parents and collectively decided to do a play so that we could focus on dancing, singing, and acting. We developed the idea

of a talent camp. We don't audition the girls before they are accepted into camp because there are so many different aspects besides singing such as costumes, props and lighting. Girls who are talented in the performing arts naturally gravitate toward a camp like this. Both years, Baruch Hashem, we had exceptional talent. For me, it was exciting to go back to doing plays after years of working solely with the choir.

So was the camp successful?

This year was our second summer and we were completely closed out. It shows what a need there is for this kind of camp. We produce a musical drama in eight weeks. The girls audition during the first few days of camp and then we place them into one area to specialize in. Some girls are talented in all three areas (dance, music, and drama) but we place them in the area where they shine the most.

What is a day like in camp?

The campers spend their mornings with their groups, improving their skills and rehearsing. In the afternoons we have performance workshops where the girls learn how to become better performers, and design workshops for props, scenery and costumes. That's where the girls with the artistic flare shine. There is something for everybody. The rest of the day is filled with regular camp activities: swimming, baking, sports. We don't want the girls to get burnt out.

When do you rehearse?

As we get closer to the performance, more and more of the day is devoted to rehearsals. For some girls that is the best part of the summer. The last week before the show we move onto stage and tech rehearsals. Before you know it, it's the night of the play.

The play is open to the women and girls from the entire community, not just the parents. This is not a typical camp play. The goal of the camp is to teach professional skills and this really shows in their performance. I write the plays and the songs. After camp is over, we sell our plays so other schools and camps can use them.

Do you have any stories to share?

Yes. We attract top girls in terms of both talent and middos. After our first album came out,

one of our girls went to sleepaway camp that summer. The entire summer, the camp played the song on our album in which this girl had a solo. She never mentioned that she was the one singing that solo even though it was being broadcasted across the camp. At the end of the summer, the director somehow found out that it was her. She asked the girl to come up and sing for all the girls. She did a great job but felt very uncomfortable. The director couldn't get over how modest this girl was. We don't make our girls into superstars. They don't go around bragging. They are simply using the talents that Hashem gave them.

Do you have any advice for our readers?

If you have a talent, use it. When someone is given a talent from Hashem and they don't use it, it weighs them down. They feel unfulfilled. If you are creative, you can use it to help Klal Yisrael.

When I first mentioned the idea of starting a girls choir and producing an album, people told me it would never work. If you want to try something, go ahead and try it, as long as it's in the right way.

Thank you so much, Mrs. Sachs. We wish you much hatzlacha, and we look forward to hearing more music in the near future.