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**I camp
You camp
We all eCamp**

Jewish summer camping
in Israel goes digital

Honey, I digitized the kids!



TRANSFORMERS. Campers show off robots they assembled and programmed themselves.

No archery, horseback riding or basketball classes. For the kids at eCamp the summer's activity menu includes graphic design, C++ programming and phone apps development. Welcome to the future of Jewish summer camping

• RON FRIEDMAN

Jewish youth from 22 countries arrived in Israel this summer to interact with Israelis, see a bit of the country and get a taste of Israeli living. What drew them here were not appeals to their Jewish identity, the desire to see the Western Wall or the opportunity to relax on a Tel Aviv beach. What attracted them was an attempt to speak to the kids in their own language and offer them opportunities to learn about things that interest them on a personal level. The language was the international language of hi-tech and computers and the platform was eCamp, a private summer camp that specializes in computers, Internet and all things digital.

eCamp was first established three years ago by Dotan Tamir and Shlomo (Momo) Lifshitz. Tamir, then a 25-year-old student, brought his

love and knowledge of all things technological and his experience from working in American summer camps, and Lifshitz provided the logistical and financial backing, through his educational travel company Oranim, and his passion for modern Zionism. The result was an educational summer camp that lets children focus on the things they know and love, but that also introduces them to the values of Jewish solidarity and love of Israel.

"We wanted to connect world Jewry to Israel, not only through its history and heritage, but through its technological novelty and creativity. Kids that go through weeks of shared experiences form long lasting friendships. We think that hi-tech provides them with a common interest that enables the bonds to be tighter and last for longer," said Tamir.

eCamp, which recently completed its second session of the summer, invites youth from all over the world to participate in a two-week



REBOOTING. Dressed up in military fatigues,

sleepover summer camp based out of the Alonai Yitzhak boarding school, 20 minutes from Hadera. During the camp, the children take part in a wide variety of activities, both on the site and on field trips, all of which are connected in some way to Israel's hi-tech industry and culture.

THE CAMPERS, aged eight to 16, split into three age groups. Like most things at eCamp, the groups are fashioned after computer lingo, with the three groups being Kilobytes 8-12, Megabytes 13-14 and Gigabytes 15-16. Every



the campers prepare to play a game of laser tag.

age group has a director and a group of counselors and the groups live in separate dorm buildings. In addition to their age cohorts, the campers also split up according to their particular interests. Three times a day, they take part in eWorkshops, courses that the campers choose ahead of time and which make up a major part of their educational program. The eWorkshops take place in large classrooms with state-of-the-art equipment and are led by knowledgeable and experienced counselors. Each camper chooses three workshops that appeal to their interest and spends an hour a day for each



course, over two weeks, learning new skills and practicing what they learn. The list of workshops resembles a college course list more than a summer camp's activity menu. No archery, horseback riding or basketball classes for these kids; for them it's all about graphic design, C++ programming and phone apps development.

"With dozens of workshops on the menu, the kids can really choose what interests them the most. For the gaming freaks we have game production workshops, for the artistic kids, we have digital photography and digital music workshops and for the budding engineers we have build-a-robot and build-a-PC workshops," said Tamir. "Every year we work to update the curriculum so that it remains on the cutting edge. We also add new workshops to meet the demands of new technologies that arise throughout the year. This year, for example, we offered a class on mobile phone apps development because of the increasing use of smartphones for paying games and running applications."

In each workshop the children start by being taught the basic principles and programs which are in use by the industry and, with time, advance to manipulating existing software and using it to create their own projects. At the end of the session, the children present a project they have been working on to the rest of the campers. Tamir said that one of the keys to success is choosing the right counselors. "Anyone who has ever been to camp knows that it's the staff that create the memories. A large part of my time during the year is spent selecting counselors for the next summer. For us it's important that the counselors have both academic knowledge of the topics they teach in

the workshops and leadership skills for their work with the kids in their group time," he said.

THIS YEAR eCamp employed staff members from seven countries, including England, New Zealand and Argentina, and from a wide variety of backgrounds. "We have the hi-tech pros, students from Oxford and MIT, and we have artistic types with experience in graphics and animation. We have a counselor-camper ration of 1:7, which allows for close bonds to form. We believe this is important because the counselors are the ones who give the camp its spirit," said Tamir.

KABBALAT SHABBAT. Strengthening the Jewish people's identity with Israel at its center

Campers split into three age groups: Kilobytes 8-12, Megabytes 13-14 and Gigabytes 15-16

The campers live in modern dorm rooms, used throughout the year by high-school students who attend the boarding school. The campers sleep four to a room and have the possibility of requesting a roommate. eCamp deputy director Nir Gad said that the campers can request at the time of registration if they want to be placed in a room with English speakers or Hebrew speakers and that if two campers both request to be in the same room, camp management would make sure they were together. The campers have three meals and three snacks a day. The meals are eaten at the school's dining room and cooked by the



WEARING PROTECTIVE
lab garments during
their tour of Tower's
production plant.

school's staff. Some of the biggest highlights of eCamp take place outside the camp. Every session features one field trip, called a tech-trip, for all the campers and the older participants also enjoy an additional day trip in the second week.

"The idea of the tech trips is to expose the campers to Israel's hi-tech industry. We take the campers to see places like Israel's Google headquarters or Intel's manufacturing plant, or to the Technion, so they can see with their own eyes how things are done," said Tamir. "Last session we took the campers to Tower Jazz, a micro-

camper from London, said he first heard about the camp from his mother, who read about it in a Jewish magazine. "I'm interested in electronics and digital music and the camp has workshops that specialize in those subjects. I've been to summer camps back home, but this is my first time at a camp in Israel," said Benarroch. "I knew nobody when I came and it was interesting for me to meet with all the Israelis and the kids from other countries. You learn more about other people and more about yourself. The camp is directed at people who are interested in

from his synagogue. He and his parents decided that he should attend both sessions of the camp because of the long travel time. Michael chose to participate in two of eCamp's newest workshops: build a PC and hi-tech entrepreneurship. In the build-a-PC workshop, the participants are given all the components to create their very own desktop computer and assemble it to take home with them at the end of camp, explained Michael. "In the entrepreneurship workshop, you get to design your own product that you're able to make in the near future and present a business model of how to turn the idea into a reality." Michael's vision is an automatic simultaneous translation device that people can carry around while visiting foreign countries.

While much of the time at eCamp is spent on the computer, the camp also leaves time for kids to be kids and offers sports activities, pool time, bonfires and all the activities familiar to campers the world over. Though campers are not allowed to use their mobile phones, they have free access to computers and can use them to hold online conversations with their families or post updates on their social networking sites whenever they like.

"My dream for eCamp is that one day two campers who met each other at camp will produce the next big thing on the hi-tech front," said Lifshitz, CEO of Oranim, the company that oversees the camp.

15-year-old Michael from DC wants to create an automatic simultaneous translation device that people can carry around while traveling overseas

processor manufacturing company based in Migdal Ha'emek, to see their production facility. The campers got to put on protective clothing and entered the 'clean room' where the assembly takes place in a sterile environment."

"Afterwards," said Tamir, "we had a big change of atmosphere and took the kids to a nearby forest where they put on army fatigues and played a game of laser tag."

For many of the campers eCamp is their first visit to Israel. Yonatan Benarroch, a 15-year-old

computers, so you meet other people who have the same interests as you rather than going to a general camp and meeting only a handful of people who share your interests and hobbies."

Benarroch said he was also happy to practice the Hebrew he learnt at school with the Israeli kids who attend the camp and learn new words that belong to the technological world.

For Michael, a 15-year-old Gigabyte from Washington, DC, eCamp was the second time in Israel. He was here once before with a group

Lifshitz's name was once synonymous with the well-known Birthright program. For years, his company handled the logistics of visits which have brought over 50,000 young Jews to Israel. Two years ago he broke off his connection with the program and moved to doing other things.

"When I was at Birthright I was told I couldn't talk about things like intermarriage and making aliya. Now I'm free to say that I am a matchmaker. I want to see Jewish families and Jewish partnerships be formed as a result of my work and all of it with Israel at the center," said Lifshitz.

"Unlike Birthright, eCamp is not free. We need to offer more than a free trip to get the kids to choose us. We use the kids' interests to bring them to Israel. eCamp may be focused on technology, but issues of Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood are constantly in the background," said Lifshitz.

A majority of the marketing for eCamp is based on word of mouth and on the Internet. "I may not be as tech savvy as some of the kids, but I do have a Facebook account with 5,000 friends and I know how to get the word out," he says.

Lifshitz adds that while eCamp isn't cheap – it costs roughly \$2,000, not including flights – it is equivalent to a two-week family vacation in Israel. "For that we offer state-of-the-art equipment, great accommodations and the best counselors out there. I don't know how many families get to take their kids to Google or the newest physics and engineering labs in the



A VISIT to Google headquarters. Exposing the children to Israel's hi-tech industry.

Next year will see the launch of a fashion and styling camp focused on Israel as a budding fashion capital

country," he said. He also said that he welcomed contributions that will go towards scholarships for underprivileged children, and said that in previous years eCamp had hosted children from poor Israeli cities with the aid of donations from American communities. Lifshitz said that eCamp has grown in its three years in operation and will continue to grow next year too. "We started off with 180 participants from 12 countries the first year, 220 participants from 15 countries last year and this year we had 300 participants from 22 countries. Next year we are planning to add a whole new session and also to expand into new areas."

One of the characteristics of eCamp is that there is a striking imbalance in terms of male-to-female ratio. At its best, the camp featured 30% girls. Lifshitz said he hoped more would come next year, but is also planning a new camp more suited to stereotypically female interests.

"Next year we will be launching a fashion and styling camp focused on Israel as a budding fashion capital. The camp will be in partnership with a major Israeli design school and offer things like clothes design and hair styling," said Lifshitz.

"I'll go along with anything that strengthens the Jewish people's peoplehood with Israel at its center. We can do that, only if we adapt our message so that it relates to what the kids are interested in and enjoy doing," said Lifshitz. ■



FUTURE TRANSPORT. On a visit to Project Better Place's electric car facility in Tel Aviv.