



A Lead Starling - Interview with Yehoshua Rosenstruch

Shay Cohen / July 8, 2022

"Talk to Yehoshua. A unique person." So, armed with words of praise and encouragement and a bit apprehensive about meeting someone of such a lofty status in an Association full of special people, I set out for Café Ben Ami in Herzliya to meet this exceptional person. Although he is one of my own people, his path in life and achievements could not be more different and so fascinating.

"I was born in Haifa. My mother, who was born in 1942, grew up in a house with Arab neighbors. An Ashkenazi family speaking fluent Arabic. Her uncles spoke amongst themselves in Arabic in the synagogue of the Gur Hasidim to which they belonged to, so that the other Hasidim wouldn't understand. My mother didn't like to speak Arabic and wasn't proud of her childhood at Wadi Rushmiya [an Arab neighborhood in Haifa], as my father used to tease her saying, "Did you also bring this from the Wadi?"

Thus, in rapid fire speech and a broad smile beaming from his face, flush from the summer heat, Yehoshua laid out the background for his activity in the Association. "I grew up and was educated in a yeshiva in Haifa. Arabic wasn't allowed and only later in life did I learn it and thus I discovered the Association. The ability to converse with the families of patients during the drive has led me to make a connection beyond the trip itself."

I can hardly keep up with his pace. With captivating blue eyes and a winning smile, Yehoshua is full of stories about the patients he has taken. Personal, moving, heart-felt stories. "During Covid, I volunteered more frequently, almost every day. Beyond the sense of mission, I wanted to practice my Arabic . . . and then I heard stories that I would not have been exposed to if I didn't know Arabic. I took Jud, about 2 ½ years old who was born with a life-threatening rare genetic disease, a few times a month to treatments. I forged a warm connection with her mother, who I learned was orphaned at the age of 12, and lives in Saudi Arabia and found herself for a long periods of time in hospitalization and recovery in Israel. I really fell in love with the child and I felt that we became family."

More and more stories, characters, details flowed without stop from this man sitting opposite me and I am filled with amazement and jealousy. Enchanted by this ability to connect with the "other", someone different, as equals. "I remember Muhammed Sroji who died of cancer. A child who had

dialysis several times a week and his mother who didn't give up on anything even for a moment, even the ironed sleeve of his missing arm, tucked into his pants. A woman who is all faith and infinite love for her son. I helped the mother and her son, and I gained strength.

"One day I set out to Jerusalem to pick-up Amjad, a "modern Job" who, together with his family endured endless troubles and sickness. With a thermos of hot tea, dates and nuts, I learned about his daughter who was born with a spinal deformity and is implanted with platinum in her back so that she can live and function. That day, I learned that the platinum implants in her back broke and an expensive operation was needed. I rallied with good friends from the association's volunteers in order to raise the funds needed for the expensive surgery, and with the help of the photographer Omer Manor, we made a lovely, poignant film, and along with other donors and a donation from 'the Road to Recovery' succeeded in raising the necessary funds." The girl is back to functioning and this excites us all, many of the association's volunteers know the family and feel one with Amjad and his family.

The stories keep flowing and flowing and mix together in my head. The professor of journalism from Tul Karm University, paralyzed and in a wheelchair, from the Palestinian village Kifl Haris, about a kilometer north-west of Ariel, the village where the tomb of another Yehoshua lies, Yehoshua Ben-Nun. Together they tour and visit Haifa and Tel Aviv, becoming brothers in spirit. The sweet girl, Yasmine Suqar (sugar in Hebrew), after difficult chemotherapy, sitting in the car for two hours from Tel Hashomer to the Erez Crossing, singing "Sugar, sugar, sugar, oh Suqar, if strength gives out, add more sugar".

I try to take things apart and put them back together, searching for the motivation, the butterfly flapping its wings and causing a gentle and elusive chain of events at this moment in time with Yehoshua. "I have been volunteering from a young age, already in my twenties I served as an emissary for the ultra-Orthodox organization "From the Depths" to prisons to work with and teach prisoners. 7 or 8 years ago I left the Haredi world and began asking questions. Today I am studying psychotherapy and work with others who have left the Haredi world, trying to ease the suffering of this journey. I have eleven children and thirteen grandchildren. I am divorced and live in the north with a son who is 23 years old. I remember when I was five years old I always asked complicated questions, some questioning the social order. Maybe this is connected to my grandfather on my mother's side. He was a philosopher, a communist with strong ties to his Arab neighbors. I remember that he criticized our turning to the British to get independence and said that it would be better to turn to the Arab leadership and build together with them a common future."

Yehoshua tells of his determination to learn Arabic. About the need to overcome the limits of language that form our perspective of reality. The extra language not only enables direct communication with the other, but broadens our perspective of the world.

Yehoshua tells me an Arabic saying which briefly sends the governments and leaders of both sides to sleep, we will know how to get along with our neighbor.

"People ask why I study Arabic and I tell them about the "dance of the starlings". Yehoshua explains the wonderful phenomenon of a huge flock of starlings that act in complete synchronization and create spectacular movement in the sky. Its source is not some common cosmic awareness but rather the close connection of each bird to an immediate circle of its neighbors. Each bird responds and communicates with 6-7 birds around it, and without reliance on leadership and hierarchy, influences the movement of the whole flock. The key to change is found in each and every one of us and it is rooted in direct, unmediated connection with our neighbors. Each and every one of us has an obligation to be a lead starling."