



Magic at the Safari

Shay Cohen / June 3, 2022

Translated from hebrew & edited by: Linda Gallant

I awoke in a panic, running away from an enormous African elephant called Yossi ...Yossi? Slowly, getting my breath back again, I gather the connecting fragments of a dream into a strange and fascinating collage.

A green hill covered with grass and trees; a group of men and women infused with a sense of mission, working happily and excitedly around the picnic table, arranging piles of shwarma sandwiches, bottles of mineral water, cans of cola and small cakes and desserts. Gila, a genial volunteer, writes down names in Hebrew and Arabic, with a look of importance. Amalia goes over

the list and Hadassah checks repeatedly that everything is going according to plan. I introduce myself and become acquainted with the other volunteers from the "Road to Recovery" who are waiting with bated breath for the start of this mission that has been meticulously planned and worked on for the last few months under the leadership of Hadassah Tron, the Association's Projects Coordinator, and Amalia Wiesel, in charge of border crossing permits.

Walking hesitantly and exhaustedly after the journey, groups of families get off the crowded bus and slowly make their way in the direction of the bunch of people waving excitedly at the top of the hill. Drinks and pitta bread stuffed with shawarma and salad are handed out. Volunteers from the "Road to Recovery Association: Hadassah and Zvika, her husband, Amalia, Avi, Uriel, Meni, Tali, Irit, Shimon, Oded and Daniel shout out in broken Arabic: saha ve kullo kwayes ...Smiling from ear to ear, looking with satisfaction at the families with young children on the grass, eating happily. Maybe there are language difficulties or there is an inherent embarrassment at the basic inequality, but I notice there is very little conversation between the families and the volunteers. Final bites of desserts and cookies and we get ready to go ...

Six men go off nearby for noontime prayers, and I take advantage of the moment and ask a young man how he is feeling, and he tells me with pride that he learned his Hebrew and a little English from conversations with the nurses at the hospital over the years of radiotherapy, chemotherapy and bone marrow transplant treatments. His father remembers with nostalgia other times, before the first Intifada.

While everyone gets ready, Uriel, a silver-haired volunteer and myself, look in amazement at a young child, six or seven at the most, chasing a baby crow that has not yet learned to fly and trying with all its strength to escape around the tree trunk. The crow's mother sees her baby's distress from afar and flies above him in a daring attempt to scare away the cheeky child ...This surreal scene continues to play out until the mother of the child, maybe because she identifies with the mother bird, or possibly out of fear for her son's safety, stopped this fascinating performance with one sharp cry. Uriel remembered from his childhood when he had been bitten on the head by a crow when he dared to lean on a tree which probably housed a nest of baby birds.

We set off on our way. I was in the car with Anat and Khouriya from the Center for Social Justice in Ramle, who tells us about the good people who donated the sandwiches for the children. The conversation with Khouriya flows and I note to myself that we need to interview her sometime, she has a wealth of stories. We congregate at the entrance to the zoo. We get on the golf carts and charge at a snail's pace over to the giant sleepy turtle. The peacocks and penguins, with clear indifference, ignore the explanations of the guide in Arabic. An elegant woman, dressed in a long yellow dress and black head covering, covered with sunflowers, cannot help herself and takes photos of the black swans in the lake, while the 5-year-old next to her sits in the driver's seat, turns the wheel and vroom ...vroom...makes faces in the mirror of the golf cart and imagines magical scenes and wild animals.

Nothing much is happening during a spring afternoon at the sleepy Safari. The three bears, busy scratching themselves against the trunk of a eucalyptus tree, show no interest in the surreal activities on the other side of the fence, and it is only the megaphone which disturbs their calm in fluent Arabic. It is Ella, the tour guide, who accompanies the caravan of golf carts loaded with excited families, explaining to them about the Fennec fox, and Macaque monkeys. However, it is mainly the fat sand rats - those little chubby rodents, which attract the curiosity of the children. Just around the corner, only one five-year-old leopard is left, he came from abroad and is called



Koresh - yes, after the Persian king of the famous declaration. A large sign sadly declares the names of his Arabian/ Galilee brothers who are no longer with us.

It is overwhelming to participate in these few hours of grace, to hear the joyful outbursts and see the happy smiles of the sick children, who are usually closed up at home, using the short time of freedom away, to watch the animals in the Safari in their cages. A smiling father tells a joke about a zoo, and they laugh. Khouriya is translating for me while Ella, the guide, tells a story in Arabic about the courting rituals of giraffes... it's a shame I don't understand Arabic.

The end of the trip is approaching and we try to increase the pace so as to see as much as is possible... to make the magic last longer. We say goodbye to the bears who, it seems, woke up from their nap just in time to say goodbye to the children and parents, who now seem rather exhausted.

"Yallah, come on, besuraah.....we are here with the elephants and I wanted to show you the difference between the male and the female....here... meet the female elephants Aviva and Bhatti, Yossi's mother".Yes... the same Yossi who chased me in my dream... maybe it was not a dream ? perhaps it was not my imagination? Apparently, Yossi is the biggest of all living African elephants in the world - weighing seven tons!

More and more images of families, curious children and animals are getting mixed up in my head. Children and parents who were able to forget their everyday troubles, treatments, radiation, dialyses, the various medical tests, the hovering fear of death, the checkpoints on route - all dwarfed and forgotten by the excitement of the declaration blaring from the megaphone... "and we have a newborn baby elephant called 'Magic'...". And indeed, what I saw before my own eyes was no less than magic. So tangible, and yet maybe only a dream.

This is an opportunity to thank Hadassa Tron, the Road to Recovery's Projects Coordinator for planning and organizing the wonderful Safari excursion; Amalia Wiesel, the Permits Coordinator, who is personally involved and familiar with every patient and their extended families, their pains and distress, and who never rests until she finds a solution; Lauren, Khouriya and Anat from the Center for Social Justice in Ramla; and last but not least, the volunteers who accompanied the participants to the Safari - Zvika Tron, Avi Daul, Uriel Yashiv, Gila Kopf, Meni Kaneti, Tali Applebaum, Irit Lahav, Shimon Finkelstein, Oded Bechar and Daniel Peles.