



A Visit to the Jordan River Village

Shay Cohen / July 8, 2022

Between green hills and breathtaking views in the Lower Galilee, under a broad awning spread overhead between the holiday resort village buildings, an unusual spectacle is taking place; for the first time after two years of Covid, a festivity of color and the sound of drums are engulfed in a sea of colorful ribbons, masks and feather crowns on the heads of excited Palestinian girls and boys. Clusters of children and their counselors put their heads together and assemble strange creatures on wheels: dragons with cardboard heads adorned with ribbons and colored hearts, attached to wooden surfaces on wheels; children in make-up amble on stilts, fearless, they hover above under the watchful eyes of young, protective counselors, lest they fall.

On a table nearby, volunteer women from the Road to Recovery Association, who, during the rest of the year, drive sick children from border crossings to Israeli hospitals, help some charming

girls to daub white glue on plastic cups and then apply a generous layer of gilded glitter.

The hot early-summer sun paints the spectacle in bright colors. Yael Roth leans over and ties the wooden stilts on to the fragile girl who is looking at the camera with a smile. Yuval ties a few last ribbons to the dragon cart and passes instructions on to the scooter that will lead the colorful procession. A group of volunteers from the Association under the command of Dina Inbar and Amalia Wiesel, has been working tirelessly in preparation for the start of the journey.

Finally, wearing masks and colorful feathers, the long procession of excited children, counselors, volunteers and parents sets off around the village, walking in the blazing sun.

"Thalata, tnein, wakhad, azraq ya khayati (Three, two one, blue is my life), followed by the Akhmar and Burtugani groups calling out happily with hoarse voices. Ranya, a wonderous drummer on the Darbuka, accompanies the marching procession. The charming Shoshi Rothschild joins in singing at the top of his voice and occasionally translates for me from Arabic the lyrics of the songs and the excited chants.

The procession is now coming to an end and the colorful group gathers on the plaza near the entrance to the village, yet for long minutes the singing and the dancing continue, unwilling to stop.

Women in long black gowns and head coverings watch in amazement, their eyes shining happily, their children singing at the top of their voices and dancing, hovering meters above the ground as if they had never been sick. It's hard to grasp the feelings of a mother whose son or daughter has been coping, for months or even years, with dialysis and chemotherapy, bone-marrow transplants and countless surgeries, all this in the impossible reality of abject poverty and, in many cases, bereavement. For a moment of grace, the look on their faces and the dampness in their eyes tell all.

I walk in amazement among the children who seem to be walking on air, leading the procession of dragons, wrapped in colorful ribbons with song, drumbeat, and endless smiles. It was my privilege to witness the last day of this exciting vacation in the Jordan River Village. A unique holiday village for children suffering from chronic, genetic, and life-threatening diseases. It is impossible to remain untouched by this extraordinary experience that the village volunteers and the volunteers of the Association have provided for the children and their families. For four magical days, volunteers from the Road to Recovery Association, and the Jordan River Village counselors managed to achieve the unbelievable and make any trace of disease, hardships and checkpoints magically go away.

The excited group gathers in the dining room with its abundantly loaded tables. They gather around the long tables, row after row, exchange experiences, laugh and hug each other. This is our opportunity to join and chat with a few of the young counselors. Towards the end of the meal, they crowd around the stage for the graduation ceremony. Amalia toasts and hands out gifts and trophies for participants who contributed most to the project, for the wonderful children who were an inspiration to all. Some of the children's personal stories are epic and we have a hard time keeping our eyes dry.

That's it. The end of the holiday and it is time to get on the buses and return to their harsh reality. But how is it possible? How could we go our separate ways? A bond of deep affection, yes love, has grown between the counselors and the volunteers on one hand and the children and their parents on the other. Many find it difficult to hold back the flow of tears. The children and their parents hug staff members tightly and utter words of thanks and love, tearing themselves away with great difficulty from this ethereal dream.



Armed with renewed strength and additional tremendous mental force, they return to their struggle, their struggle for life.

I seize this moment to express my thanks from the bottom of my heart to Amalia Wiesel, our permit manager, for the planning and organization of the vacation in Jordan-River village. Amalia, the permits coordinator, who is personally involved and thus knows the patients and their extended families, their pain and their distress, is directly responsible for nothing short of miracles in the lives of many of the children. To Dina Inbar who led the project alongside Amalia, to Shoshi Rothschild, the group leader, to Yuval and Yael Roth and to the talented group of volunteers who made up, built, pasted, painted and animated the children, to Naama Gorelli, the association's CEO, who supported and responded. To Yael Noy, in charge of the liaison center, and to Yoram Ashheim, who photographed the procession. Thanks also to the DCO commander and his officers who supported and still support this project, and to Shlomo Tzaban, the commander of the border crossing and to his team for their long-standing partnership and the special preparations they made on the day of departure and on the day of return, so as to facilitate the passage of the children and their parents.