

The long and winding road



'On a recent Friday, on a blissfully cool day as children cavorted in canoes, peace broke out in the Middle East' – via Road to Recovery volunteers. (Photos: Roni Alfrandri)



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• By PAMELA PELED

In 1936, when the British were refusing to let Jews into Palestine, Kibbutz Sdot Yam was established just south of Haifa at Ben-Gurion's urging. Ostensibly a fishing enterprise, members of the collective helped smuggle in illegal immigrants. Yossi Harel, the captain of the *Exodus*, is buried on the kibbutz, which relocated in 1940 to the outskirts of Caesarea. In Israel, where every inch of land is layered with narratives, the sparkling sea of Sdot Yam has seen its share of conflicts and conquests that span centuries.

But on a recent Friday in May, on a blissfully cool and bright day, as children cavorted in canoes, peace broke out in the Middle East. No treaties were signed, no speeches recited, but the magical moments under the blue, blue sky realigned the mind-sets of at least some of the players; I personally could feel my brain reconfiguring.

Picture the scene: Arabic nursery rhymes streaming from speakers mingled with the aroma of kosher kebabs and parve milk. *Sesame Street* characters accompanied the kids from the buses to the beach, where they ran, squealing, to splash in the waves. The vast majority of these kids had never seen the sea before, but that is not the reason they were not normally so care-free: all of them were either ill themselves, or the siblings of patients with cancer, or thalassemia, or on dialysis. The mothers, lounging on chairs in the shade and enjoying the break, were dressed in flowing wraparound dresses and tight head coverings; the shouts of joy coming from the shore were in Arabic. These kids come from the West Bank where they don't have access to the life-saving treatment that they need to survive; every day hun-

dreds of Israeli-Jewish "Road to Recovery" volunteers pick them up at checkpoints as dawn breaks, and drive them to hospitals around Israel for chemotherapy or radiation.

The nonprofit organization was born by accident, and out of pain. In 1993, with Gaza still under Israeli military control, two soldiers on their way home from reserve duty were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas terrorists. One of them was Udi Roth. His brother, Yuval, recalls being "a typical leftist at the time, grumbling at home but not being involved." With the euphoria of the Oslo Accords fading fast, and the murder of his brother clouding his hopes for peace, Yuval was determined not to let his personal pain lead him to seek revenge; to this end he joined the Parents Circle Family Forum – a pro-peace organization of Palestinian and Israelis who have lost a family member in the conflict. There he met Mohamed Kabah, whose brother was killed fighting Israelis in Jenin.

Kabah, who lived in Yaabez near Jenin, had another brother, who was sick and receiving medical treatment in Haifa. There is no public transport from the West Bank or Gaza to hospitals in Israel; taxis cost hundreds of shekel each day. This effectively is a death sentence for many of the inhabitants – with no possibility to reach Israeli hospitals, they cannot receive the requisite treatment, even though the medical costs are paid by the Palestinian Authority.

"I offered to drive him," recalls Roth, "and then someone who heard about this also asked for my help." Soon he was receiving too many requests to handle by himself, so he roped in some friends. Today some 600 drivers ferry patients to and from Israeli hospitals each day, partly

thanks to Leonard Cohen, who donated \$10,000 to the cause when he visited Israel six years ago. This donation pays the petrol money of many volunteers, enabling them to do the drive more frequently.

Periodically, volunteers and patients and parents gather for a much-needed *yom kef* – a fun day – with a quintessentially Israeli flavor. Hummus, pitot and barbecued meat. Sea and sand and complimentary caps. And the stories... oh, the stories.

Na'im Albaida from Jaiyus near Kalkilya is the coordinator in charge of arranging lifts for West Bank patients. A 50-year-old construction worker with seven children, he gets up every morning at 3:15 to cross the checkpoint to get to work.

Most of his 1.2-hectare olive tree orchard is now on the other side of the security barrier; he claims that he is not allowed to farm it himself anymore and that the Israeli authorities would like to appropriate his land. The "occupation" has not been kind to Albaida, yet his close personal ties with Jewish Israelis encourage him to believe in better times ahead.

"My wife almost divorced me because of the hours I put in each day with Road to Recovery," he says with a smile. "I get hundreds of phone calls and go around the country with Yuval to drum up more drivers." Eventually, his wife relented; Albaida believes that God rewards good deeds with good lives.

Under a sunshade on the sand Noya, a beautiful interior designer from Ramat Hasharon, chats in almost-impressive Arabic to a family from Ramallah. And why is she learning a new language, at this stage of her life?

"My daughter, Shir, was stationed in Hebron during her army service," she

explains, "issuing permits to residents who needed to cross into Israel." Shir believed that understanding each other's languages is a stepping stone to meaningful communication; when she was tragically killed in a post-army accident abroad, her mother decided to continue her legacy by studying Arabic herself. "We all need to make our own little peace here," she says; "we need to do something in the face of political despair." Sometimes that includes visiting giraffes and chimpanzees. "I was driving a mom and her young child home from Tel Hashomer one morning," she explains, "and I understood they had never been to a safari [park]. We were right next to Ramat Gan. So I hung a left and off we went."

Noya, who herself has a son with a severe neurological condition, can identify with parents who are coping with challenges. Driving in the car with patients and their parents transports everyone into another sphere, she says. The Arabs often recount how they were terrified to enter the cars; for them "Israeli" means belligerent. Often their only prior contact has been with soldiers and settlers – with all the concomitant complications and aggression. For Israeli drivers West Bank and Gaza Arabs often mean terrorists: rock-throwing, gun-toting maniacs out to kill us. Suddenly it's just a mom and a sick kid in a car, with a mom or a dad driving them to a hospital. Stereotypes melt on the motorway, and the road to recovery stretches straight ahead.

Now, if only Bayit Yehudi MK Bezael Smotrich would take that road, or Likud MK Miri Regev would become a driver, who knows what could happen to all of our lives here?

To drive the Road to Recovery, visit: www.roadtorecovery.org.il