



## The Inner Grammar – Interview with Nili Gardin

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“I remember saying to myself: good gracious, how normal it is. Nothing amazing or unusual happened, as basic and simple as it gets – a meeting between people.

Usually, the passengers are exhausted from the day that began at 4 in the morning, or from the tiring treatments, and communication and conversation doesn't always flow, and I also tend not to be overly communicative. If the passengers are more outgoing than myself, then a conversation may develop, and I can really go with that.”

A pair of blue eyes, smiling through glasses and a mane of greying curls, Nili Gardin greeted me and invited me into her home in Hod Hasharon. Nili, a mother of four, three daughters and a son, is married to Harel.

“I remember the concerns I had before the first trip to the Sha’ar Ephraim border crossing. How would I get there? How would I find them? And the responsibility of getting there on time.... and I don't even like driving... I mostly thought how would I see this task through and get to the right place.

The successful completion of a task gives me great satisfaction, even if there are difficulties and disappointments along the way. I came to the Association about three years ago. Yael Roth, a founder of the Road to Recovery, together with her husband, Yuval, is my good friend Naomi's elder sister. Two years ago, Yuval suggested that I join the coordination team. Ever since, regularly, every Tuesday I coordinate rides for the Central region. I really have to take care not to get carried away and do it more than once a week.

Coordinating rides is no simple task. There is a feeling of urgency that overwhelms you, to help someone in trouble who has to get home, quickly and right now. When it succeeds, and I find a solution and manage to help, I have an enormous sense of fulfillment, but sometimes I get to a point where I have to give up. This can lead to a real emotional roller coaster of feelings and I have to remind myself: “Do this only once a week to avoid burn out, otherwise you won't be able to carry on.”

And what happens the rest of the week?

"I work with my husband Harel. We have a diving tourism business - going out on a boat with a group for five or six days on the Red Sea. My job is the logistics part. I don't go out with the groups - don't tell anyone, but the truth is I really don't like diving. Usually, I jump into the water and wait until it is over. Nevertheless, when I do manage to detach myself from the fear, I can enjoy the beautiful things and the experience.

I am listening to Nili and looking at her greying curls, the cheeky sparkle in her light eyes and the dimples appearing at the edges of her smile and trying to understand the source of this passion, the thing that enables her to overcome the fear and dive into deep water. To spend hours facing volunteers and patients who have to get home, with no-one to take them.

"I studied photography at Hadassah College and that is where I met my husband. I am extremely curious and I enjoyed studying but I understood that my forte was in logistics and I am a really good organizer, so I went on to do a general BA and later on also to language editing. When my children were young, I worked as a freelance language editor." In the years before her involvement with the organization, Nili worked for the American Greenspan Family Foundation running a project known as "The Pajama Library", which takes place in kindergartens and in first and second grades at school, with the object of encouraging children to like books and reading.

"I always loved reading. Probably my most meaningful hobby. I got to the job with this Fund as I am a language editor, but I ended up doing logistics, sitting in front of spreadsheets. Later, the Fund sent me to complete my master's degree at Tel Aviv University in the department of Child and Youth Culture.

"One day, before I became active in the "The Road to Recovery" Association, I was approached by a friend of my mother's, a very elderly woman who wanted to write her life story. I devoted one day a week to this project for ten years and the relationship that developed between us turned into a fearless friendship. I loved her so much. I think that this is exactly the same human bond that forms the basis of everything I do. The language editing, the logistics work, my coordination work with the Association. Always people. This is always the heart of the matter."

I suddenly realize that the choice of logistics, editing, and coordination rests on far more than just good organizational skills. These are all just frameworks with clear rules and structure from which it is possible to safely reach out and help others. With the help of internal grammar, which defines the rules of the game, the punctuation and spaces, you can go anywhere: crossing barriers, connecting with people from other worlds, and even diving into the depths of the ocean. I feel like I discover something about myself in Nili.

"Once, towards the end of my coordination shift, we received a message about an emergency trip from the Eliahu crossing, which is the nearest crossing to my home, about 10 km from here. Aware of the difficulty in finding a volunteer at this late hour, I decided to do the trip myself and Harel joined me. A young couple, in their early twenties, sat in the back seat. The young man, the patient's husband, spoke Hebrew and said that he had worked in Israel from a young age. He said that unfortunately he hadn't studied a lot, and then he simply and innocently added 'You know, you are doing such a wonderful thing. When I grow up, I want to help people like you do.' I was on the verge of tears. There was something so powerful about this.

"I remember another time when I took an older man who looked as though he worked hard for his living. He told me he has three children in universities in Jordan and in the West Bank. 'You don't know how much I spend each month for their studies. I myself don't know where I find the strength to send them to university.' I realized that this man devotes himself completely to giving his children a future. I'm left with the feeling that we share the same values, the same questions and the same commitments.

"There is a patient I have taken several times, a young man of twenty-one, called Hamza, who comes with his mother Aza, who is a driving instructor. They arrive in her car which has a sign and a learner's symbol in Arabic on the roof and then they join me. Not always, but every once in a while, we are forced to go through a more thorough security check at the Eliahu crossing. Hamza has to take off his prosthetic limb and put it through the x-ray machine and I have to open the hood of my car. I've never had to open the hood and have no idea how to do it. Aza laughs and comes to my aid. Afterwards she tells me about her son's illness which is improving, and suddenly the tension and pressure disappear and a good feeling and laughter fill the car.

"Listen, I didn't grow up with Arabs around me. I was born in Tel Aviv, studied at Ironi Aleph High School. In high school we participated in a program in which we met a class from Um El Fahm. They hosted us wonderfully in their homes, but when it came our turn to host them, our parents refused and we had to host them at school. I remember the feeling of disappointment and frustration.

"Being active in The Road to Recovery Association simply reinforces knowing that we are all people experiencing similar difficulties and similar joys. There is something in this awareness that brings us together as neighbors, to help a neighbor is important.

"Alongside this activity on behalf of the patients, I feel that the volunteers are what this is all about. As a coordinator, I sometimes have to push emotional buttons to motivate a volunteer who has just returned home after sitting for hours in traffic and his help is needed to go out again because I have no one else. This can be very unpleasant, but on the other hand I feel I have no other option. It's important to me that they know that I am first and foremost committed to the volunteers. First to them, and only then to the patients. They are our most valuable resource."

In fact, just like logistics, the ride is only a framework, the internal grammar that enables the connection between words and creates sentences and human stories. Grammar that creates an opportunity to connect people.