

Giving across Borders

A religious, right-wing kibbutznik and a left-wing kibbutznik whose son was killed by a mortar bomb on the last day of Operation Protective Edge, both of whom live in the Gaza Envelope, drive a sick Palestinian girl, together with her father, from the Gaza Strip for treatment in an Israeli hospital. A story of love, dedication, and a very special friendship.

By Bat-Chen Epstein Elias, *Israel Hayom*, July 18th, 2019

8:20 am, Monday, Erez Crossing: Yair Noy, a skullcap-wearing member of Kibbutz Alumim in the Gaza Envelope, stands among those waiting on the Israeli side of the crossing, and peers through the dark glass windows at the long queue from Gaza. There, amongst the adults and children waiting for a security check at the border crossing into Israel, waits Nur Hadj.

She is eleven years old, wearing a short white blouse and black trousers, her hair gathered into half a pony-tail, her face sunburned, and waving hello to Yair. Her father Ibrahim (39) stands next to her, smiling with tired eyes and attending to the security checks.

Once every three weeks, Nur and Ibrahim come here. They leave their house in Nuseirat, in Deir al-Balah, and travel for an hour and a half to the Erez crossing. Afterwards, they wait for a few hours until they cross over to Israeli territory. Nur, whose life was saved because of kidney and liver lobe transplants at Shneider Hospital in Petach Tikva, has to cross into Israel for checkups every three weeks.

At the Erez crossing, she and her father meet the volunteers from "Road to Recovery", who drive sick Palestinian children from the border crossings to hospitals throughout Israel. For the last one and a half years, Yair Noy is the person who has taken them to most of their hospital visits. They usually spend the night at the hospital, complete all the required tests, and go back to the Strip the next day. The connection with Yair has become stronger each time they meet, so much so that his adult children call Nur the "Gaza grandchild" and Ibrahim calls him "Dad".

Two different worlds, waiting for each other in the vestibule of the border crossing, with a big glass partition separating them. On one side is a religious man, right-wing in his political views, from a kibbutz in the Gaza Envelope, which in the last few months has been the butt of many incendiary balloons. It was only a few weeks ago that he himself sat in a shelter because of rockets launched from the Gaza Strip. But when he's here, at the crossing, he only sees how he can help sick children, no matter where they come from.

On the other side of the glass partition is an eleven-year-old Palestinian girl, whose life was saved thanks to medical services in Israel and the good people who have been caring for her. Her father, who for many years has been escorting Nur for her treatments, repeatedly says that "Politics doesn't interest us; we're all simple people who want nothing more than peace." When the alarms sound in the Gaza Envelope, he makes sure to get in touch with his friend on the other side of the glass partition, to make sure that he and his family are safe and well.

During the last few months, Moshe Etzion (86) has been accompanying Yair. He, too, lives in the Gaza Envelope, on Kibbutz Nirim. Moyshe, as his friends call him, became a bereaved father when his son Zevik, aged 55, was hit by a mortar bomb on the last day of Operation Protective Edge. In that same incident in August 2014, Shachar Melamed was critically injured and died later on; Gadi Yarkon, currently chairman of the Eshkol regional council, lost both his legs.

Moshe also sat in the shelter for a few days before meeting Nur and Ibrahim. He also received a telephone call from Ibrahim, asking if everything was alright. An almost impossible connection between two different worlds, stemming from the impossible situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Like a cup of water for a boy in the Holocaust

Yair (74) comes to the crossing in a big seven-seater kibbutz vehicle. He usually takes Nur and her father, and another patient with his escort. He holds two bags, one with chocolate snacks that he gives to the children, and the other filled with four apples and two bananas for his passengers during the day.

He and Moshe Etzion have been waiting at the crossing for a long time. Ibrahim and Nur are delayed. "Sometimes they come out after a few minutes, and sometimes after several hours," says Yair. On Mondays, which he devotes to driving the patients, waiting time is not so important. The ability to help sick children is a great privilege for him, a privilege which he compares to "a cup of water for a child dying of thirst in the Holocaust".

An hour and a quarter later, the security checks are over, and Nur and Ibrahim are allowed to cross. Nur runs into Yair's arms, who envelops her in a warm and loving hug. He smilingly gives her the chocolate snack, just like a grand-dad sneaking a chocolate goodie to his little grandkids. Ibrahim joins them a moment later and shakes Yair's hand warmly, apologizing for the delay which was caused by a more stringent security check.

Ibrahim takes out two crocheted skullcaps from his bag, one blue and one green. "One of my relatives crocheted this especially for you," he said. Yair quickly took off his own skullcap and put on the new green one. "Who could believe," he says emotionally, "that a Palestinian from Gaza would make a skullcap for a Jew as a sign of gratitude for a lift."

"How's your wife?" Ibrahim asks Moshe, knowing that his wife is not feeling the best. Moshe answers that there has been no change.

"Yair, Dad, look after them too, OK?" he says, turning to Yair, and immediately explains in excellent Hebrew: "I call him Dad, because that's how I really feel. He's like a father to me, a good person who does good deeds.

"All the volunteers are good. They all have work, children, activities, but they make time to help sick children and adults, in order to make them feel good. And we see that it's important to them that the patients smile. They don't want any reward or thanks. Only good people can do this."

On days of high tension, such as the last few months, Ibrahim regularly checks on his friends near the border. "I know that both live very close to the border, and I worry about them. I ask how they're feeling, how they're getting on. I know it's not easy. Also, when there are problems on our side, demonstrations on the border or shelling of bombs, they get in touch to see whether I'm alright. They tell me to look after the children, to look after everyone. Just as if they're worrying about their own families."

For a year and a half, Ibrahim accompanied his daughter to various hospitals in Israel. Ten months in Rambam, in Haifa, where she was first treated, and another half a year in Shneider, when Nur's mother, Maha, donated a liver lobe and a kidney. In the meantime, Nur's grandmother looked after the other children in Deir al-Balah. Many staff members fell in love with Nur's winning smile and good eyes, and also with the unending dedication of her parents.

Everything to help our children

Nur was born with oxalosis, a disease causing dysfunction of the liver, potentially affecting the kidneys, ears, lungs and heart. Five years ago, her condition deteriorated, and her kidneys and heart were affected. After four hospitals in Gaza were unable to detect the problem, Ibrahim asked for permission to bring his daughter to a hospital in Israel.

"There was no one to treat her in Gaza. And everyone knows that Israeli hospitals are the best in Europe, if not in the whole world. For eight months I begged to be given a permit to come to Israel. The doctors in Gaza said that she might die on the way to Israel, but that I could try.

"In Israel they agreed to accept us, and we were able to obtain a payment commitment from the Gaza authorities. We received a referral to Rambam hospital in Haifa. Nur's kidneys had already ceased functioning; she was extremely weak and thin. The doctors at Rambam put her on dialysis immediately and saved her. They carried out all sorts of tests, and two months later told us that she had to have a liver and a kidney transplant."

Nur was hospitalized in Rambam for ten months, and afterwards was transferred to the Shneider children's hospital. Here she was treated by Dr Michael Gurevich, head of children's liver transplants, and by Dr Yael Moser, head of the department for children with liver transplants. The medical staff explained to the parents that the transplants were Nur's final chance of staying alive.

Blood tests carried out on Nur's mother Maha (34) showed that she was the most suitable person to donate both the liver and the kidney. "We weren't afraid," says Ibrahim. "We knew everything was being done to help our child, and that the operation would be successful.

"We needed help to finance the transplant operation, and the staff at Rambam, who had become like family, opened a crowd-funding page on the internet. They all gave us everything they could. It's very gratifying to know that there are good people in these places."

He looks at his daughter, who in the meantime has fallen asleep in the back seat of the vehicle. "Usually, as soon as Yair starts up the car, she falls asleep. Using her time well."

Nur's mother, Maha, had to appear before the organ transplant committee at the hospital, which confirmed that the donor was fit both mentally and physically, and that she was donating her organs willingly and with a clear mind.

"The doctors on the committee explained to her that the operation could end in death," said Ibrahim. "She looked at me, and at them, and said that if she died in the operation, they could donate her liver and kidneys to Nur, and to donate the remainder of her organs to anyone who needed them, Jews or Arabs. Thank God she recovered and is strong."

13 pills a day

On the first of February, 2016, when she was eight years old, Nur underwent the liver transplant. It was in itself a very intricate and dangerous operation, complicated by the heart defect that was threatening her life. Her mother was recovering in the transplant department of neighboring Beilinson hospital, and after a few days was transferred to Shneider, to be near her daughter and husband.

Four months later, Nur underwent the kidney transplant in Shneider hospital. This time, too, her mother stayed for a few days' recovery at Beilinson hospital, and afterwards was moved to be with her daughter. While the two parents were in Israel, Nur's grandmother on her father's side stayed at their home in the Gaza Strip to care for Nur's siblings – fourteen-year-old Saad, nine-year-old Dima and three-year-old Suba.

Several weeks after the kidney transplant, Nur and her parents returned home. "At first we would come for check-ups at Shneider every ten days," says Ibrahim. "Two months ago, they told us that we could come every three weeks. Nur has the checks and gets medical prescriptions. We buy some of the medicines in Israel, and some in the Strip."

Last February, when Nur contracted chicken pox, she was hospitalized in Shneider for a week, her father at her side. Yair was in continual telephone contact with Ibrahim. He didn't visit the hospital for fear of infection, but a week later, when Nur had recovered, he made sure he would be the one to drive both back to the Strip.

"Today Nur learns, plays, and feels really well, thank God," says Ibrahim. "She is grown up, looks after herself, knows that she has to drink a lot and to take her medicine. In the beginning, she took almost forty pills. Today it's thirteen pills, so that the body won't reject the transplanted organs."

Yair tells us that on Hanukkah, a year and a half ago, his daughter Ayala donated a kidney at Soroka hospital for altruistic reasons, without knowing in advance who the recipient was. "When I told this to Ibrahim, he kept reminding us that she had to drink a lot in order to look after herself. He is a sort of good 'Polish mother'."

"At one point I fell and was hospitalized myself, and wasn't able to drive them. When Ibrahim heard that I was in hospital, he started to cry, thinking I was going to die. One of the times he was in Israel, I asked them to bring me specially to Yad Mordechai, so that he could see that I was OK. By the next visit, I had already resumed driving them."

In the name of the daughter

Yair Noy was born in Tel Aviv; he grew up in the Bnei Akiva youth movement and studied at the yeshiva of the religious kibbutz movement. He was one of the founders of Kibbutz Alumim in 1966, together with his wife Tammy, who is one year younger than him. They are parents to five: Ayala (50), Yael (49), Michal (48), Ofer (42) and David (39), and grandparents to twenty-four children. Most of their adult lives have been spent on the kibbutz, except for two years in England, when Yair was an emissary for the Jewish Agency, and emissary for another six months in Uzbekistan.

He became associated with "Road to Recovery" through his daughter Yael Noy Ben-Dror, who coordinates the activities of the organization. "In the beginning, she didn't tell me she was helping Palestinians come to Israel. But after some time in the organization, she suggested that I myself join. In truth, I was afraid of criticism that might arise in the kibbutz – members of which are religious, right-wing, and who have spent quite a bit of time in security rooms.

"I was afraid that they would be critical of this volunteering activity. But after two conversations with the kibbutz rabbi, Amit Kola, I decided to go with it. We agreed that I would not do this at the expense of other activities I'm involved with, such as volunteering with the Department of Defence to help bereaved families. I knew that I would see a sick child before my eyes whom I was able to help, and it didn't matter who his mother or father was.

The founder of "Road to Recovery", Yuval Roth, is also a member of a bereaved family: his brother, Ehud Roth, a reserve soldier, was kidnapped and murdered by terrorists in 1993 together with another reserve soldier, Ilan Levi. Despite the tragedy, he tried to find a point of sanity, and founded "The Road to Recovery".

Yair began working for the organization two years ago. On the night before he first drove patients to Israel, he didn't sleep at all. "I don't remember who I drove or where, but I do remember my heart beating fast and the feeling of being on a meaningful mission.

"When I arrived at the crossing and heard the security people calling me 'Yael's father', there was nobody prouder than me." He wipes a tear of emotion flashing through his glasses. "I think that to this day I'm recorded on the commander's cellular phone as 'Yael's father'."

"Despite the fact that Yael and I don't meet very often, I wish every person of my age to work together with one of his children at this sort of work. It gives great satisfaction. You come to a place, and because of your daughter, you are distinguished. Of course, I would in any case have stood out because I am just about the only person wearing a skullcap."

Every week, Yair turns up at the Erez crossing in order to help sick children. The organization, which is funded entirely on donations, pays his petrol costs. "I don't usually know who I will

be driving until the night before; it's only then that I'm given a name and the time they'll be arriving. I don't speak Arabic, and not all the Palestinians I take know Hebrew, so many of the drives are silent, without any personal communication. But when it comes to Ibrahim and Nur, I ask to be the person driving them.

"There was a period when they would not come at regular times; they would be held up for all sorts of reasons. Because I live a quarter of an hour away from the crossing, Yael suggested that I wait at home, and that the organization coordinator would get in touch with me when they arrived so that I could come and pick them up. That's the way we started.

"The fact that Ibrahim had lived here for a year and a half and knows Hebrew, and also knows the customs and the fact that I'm religious, helped establish the original connection. I call that a cycle of peace. Obviously, a person who sits in my car and receives help from me is not going to say anything derogatory. But when I sit in the security room and he rings up to ask how I am, then I know that his words ring true."

We connected immediately

It's been fifteen years since Yair Noy has volunteered to help bereaved families. In 2014, several months after the end of Operation Protective Edge, he began to visit Moshe and Batya Etzion, who lost their son Zevik when he was hit by a mortar bomb an hour before the ceasefire.

"We connected immediately," says Moshe. "From the ideational point of view, both of us are good kibbutzniks. It doesn't matter that the kibbutzim hold different world views. After his first visit, people asked me how it went, and I answered that 'he left feeling quite encouraged'". We managed to establish a friendly connection, and the fact is that he brought me here to volunteer."

Moshe has been accompanying Yair on his drives for several months, out of a feeling of mission. He was one of the "children of Teheran" (about one thousand child survivors of the Holocaust who reached Israel from the USSR via Persia in 1943), and he gives lectures on his childhood in the Holocaust. "As a person who experienced real hunger as a child, I know how important it is to relate kindly and extend little acts of help to whoever needs it," he says.

"It doesn't matter that I'm a bereaved father, or that I live in a kibbutz which is rained upon by rockets. I see before me sick children. To help children is important."

So Moshe goes to Yair's place in Alumim, and they get in the car together. "I can't always commit to driving to the crossing, so I amuse Yair, and he amuses me.

"Two months ago, we were waiting at the crossing, when an old man who lives in Rafiah approached us. He looked at me, shook my hand and hugged me very hard, with his whole heart. 'That wasn't for you; it was for Zevik.'

"I didn't know him, but he told me that he remembered me from the past. He knew that I was the kibbutz electrician, and that Zevik was in charge of the cowshed, and it turned out

that he used to come and buy calves from us. He heard about Zevik's story, was saddened by what happened to him, and when he saw me he was so moved that it was important for him to approach me. I was very surprised by this, but I'm beginning to understand this connection between us and them.

"As a member of Kibbutz Nirim, whose members demonstrated in favour of the disengagement, and, on the other hand, are at a distance of fifteen seconds' alert in advance of mortar bombs, I didn't doubt that the kibbutz would look favourably upon my volunteering for "The Road to Recovery". When I was asked once if I ever thought that the father of one of the children I was driving caused Zevik's death, I answered that I saw before me a sick child, and at that moment it didn't matter to me who the father was."

He took a deep breath, and smoothed down his hands which were trembling with emotion. "I know that if Zevik were in my situation, he'd also go and help children. Zevik was an ambulance driver, and he saved many people from death. He was capable of getting angry about Arabs, but would help Arabs whenever they needed it. So I have no doubt that he would be doing the same thing. That is what guides me; not the question of who fired the rocket which killed him."

The child didn't sin

"There might still be a change here," says Yair, "and that's what drives us, all the volunteers." His hands tremble as he relates that one day his daughter rang up and asked him to wait at Yad Mordechai junction in order to take a patient to Ichilov hospital. It turned out that one of the children from Gaza had been hospitalized for a long time in Ichilov, while his father was a security prisoner in Nafha prison, near Mitzpeh Ramon.

"That day they told the boy that he could visit his father. One of the volunteers drove him and his mother, who was escorting him, in the direction of the prison, but on the way they were told that the visit had been cancelled. You can imagine how much pain and crying there was.

"The boy and his mother had to be taken back to Ichilov, and Yael asked me to drive them. I picked them up from Yad Mordechai and bought them an ice-cream to make them happy. We were all very upset for them. Because when you see a child cry, it doesn't matter where he's from. He's a crying child who feels bad.

"In retrospect, this is a situation that only a right-wing volunteer could experience as a dilemma. A left-wing extremist would say that the court which judged the father and prevented him from meeting his son is evil, and would have argued in favour of the meeting. A right-wing extremist would say that if the child's father is being held in a prison such as this, the chances are that he committed a serious offence and that we shouldn't be helping his child at all.

"But I, Yair Noy, say that here is a sick child who wants to see his father." His eyes water once again. "I really don't know what his father did. But it doesn't interest me. The child didn't sin.

The child wanted to see his father, and he couldn't see him, and if we can comfort and help him, then there's no reason why we shouldn't.

"And that's what happened. They were given ice-cream, and a kind word, and at Ichilov the staff waited for them with sweets and presents in order to make them happy.

"A secular friend told me that the fact that I volunteer also gives him strength. I asked him why. He said that when he is asked why he helps Arabs, he answers that he knows a skullcap-wearing right-winger who does this, so why shouldn't he help. I really think of myself as a simple person, looking for a way to make a change by means of good deeds.

We don't want politics

An hour and ten minutes after leaving the Erez crossing we're already at the entrance to Shneider hospital. Moshe and Yair laugh that this time they won't make it back to lunch at Kibbutz Alumim, and Yair adds that "at Nirim there's nothing for me to eat because it's not kosher."

Ibrahim gently wakes up Nur. "We feel at home here," he says. "The doctors and the medical staff have become family for her, caring and embracing. Three years ago, after the operation, Dr Gurevich stayed at the hospital overtime in order to look after her.

"We have our own room in the hospital, and the medical staff have become like friends. We know that they'll take care of us. That's why Nur isn't sad when we come here. She knows that she is coming to a place where people love her."

Yair stops the car at the entrance to the hospital, hugs Nur and Ibrahim warmly, and gives them the bag of fruit. "This is our opportunity to say thank-you to all the volunteers and to everyone who wants to make peace," says Ibrahim a moment before we separate. "To all those who care about our children being healthy."

"We're all human beings, and we, the simple people, don't want politics. We want to return to the good situation that was here thirty years ago, and then we'll have a big party with both Jews and Arabs. Inshallah."

Yair and Moshe set out on the long road southwards, to the Gaza Envelope and to the smell of incendiary balloons, which refuses to dissipate. Ibrahim and Nur will go back to the Strip the next day. Till the next visit.

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Photo 1: Right to left: Yair Noy, Nur and Ibrahim Hadj, and Moshe Etzion at Erez crossing. "We're all simple people, who simply want peace," says Ibrahim. // Photo: Miriam Tzachi



Photo 2: "I know that if Zevik were in my situation, he'd also go and help the children." Moshe Etzion and Nur // Photo: Miriam Tzachi



Photo 3: "Nur isn't sad when we come here. She knows that she has come to people who love her." Ibrahim, Nur and Yair in the Nephrology Unit in Shneider Hospital // Photo: Miriam Tzachi



Photo 4: "There could still be a change here; that's what we're aiming at." Yair Noy in the area burnt as a result of the incendiary bombs near Kibbutz Alumim // Photo: Miriam Tzachi

