

Originally posted on YNET, Israel, 12.24.2021

## **“Right when I was about to fall, Kobi caught me.”**

Hundred thousands of youth and young people fall on the at-risk spectrum these days. Many of them have no family support and lack a safety net. During COVID, their situation became even worse, and will escalate even further with the upcoming third shut down. “If they do not receive support, they’ll be exposed to danger,” ELEM warns.

Written by Meital R. Fishman

Yoni Green celebrated his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday at a rehab facility, following years of alcohol and drug addiction. Unlike other youth his age, who take small and safe steps towards independent life (steps such as final exams, army service, trips,) Yoni as been thrown into adulthood almost overnight, without a safety net, financial or emotional.

He was born in the U.S., into a religious household. His family made Aliyah when he was a toddler and settled near Jerusalem. “Even at a young age I couldn’t really contain the reality of what was going on around me. An environment of immigrants and different cultures,” Yoni says, explaining the reasons for his decline. The pressure from his religious surroundings, as well as traumas he experienced in his early childhood, led him to his first experience with alcohol when he was 10. At 13, he already tried soft drugs, and later on hard and narcotic drugs. “When I was 13 I went off the Derech, and then I attended boarding schools and other establishments.”

He spent his teenage years feeling hopeless and unstable, but the will to overcome the traumas and the pain was stronger, and when he was 18 he decided to rehabilitate and check into a facility. “People at the facility were older. Everyone was post army service. Some were married. When they completed rehab they had somewhere to go. Jobs, or training. I was one of the only patients who had nowhere to go. I didn’t know what to do, I was lost. I felt like I was fighting to survive.”

Right when he was about to fall between the cracks, Yoni heard about a special ELEM program which assists and mentors youth like him, who were in out-of-home placements. The program helps them

manage independent living and find their place in the community when it comes to employment, finances, and on the emotional front as well.

“Young people need a safety net which allows them to explore their independent living and identity. Usually, that safety net is their home and family. But the youth we mentor at ELEM lack that safety net,” says Kobi Beytan, a manager at the Employment and Mentorship Field at ELEM, who was also the supervisor who mentored Yoni through this emotional process which started three years ago.

“It’s a critical point in a person’s life. Young people who don’t receive assistance or guidance when it comes to life skills, have less tools. So they’re more exposed to danger, be it falling back into dangerous patterns, or addiction, the prostitution spectrum, violence or criminal activity.”

Beytan notes that ELEM’s mentorship program is for young people who want the change and initiate it. “When it comes to 14-15 year old youths, we usually encounter resistance to institutions, but in our program the work is done together. We work based on where the young person is in their lives. In Yoni’s case, he had a lot of uncertainty. He didn’t know what was next for him. Within this relationship things come to the surface. Hardships, questions and complexities, but also thoughts and wants, and those lead to personal growth.”

Yoni says that his meeting with Kobi, who mentored him closely for over a year, saved him. He completed National Service as a counselor in a non-formal education establishment. He started living independently. “Kobi’s mentorship included many aspects, both practically, and emotionally. He helped me set goals, stick to them, both financial goals and those that have to do with personal fulfillment. This mentorship lasted for a year and a half, and honestly, I’m where I am today thanks to him.”

## **“COVID causes a downfall among youth and young people”**

Yoni is 21 today. He lives in Afula, works as a cook at a Thai restaurant, and studies Sociology and Psychology at the Emek Izrael College. He looks back at the journey he’s been on, and his maturity stands out. “These days I don’t see the world in black and white anymore. I’m capable of empathizing with people who aren’t addicts, who didn’t experience what I had. I found that I’m more similar to other people than I thought.”

Even the COVID crisis that pushed so many to the edge, mentally speaking, didn't throw Yoni off. The third shutdown is upon us, youth and many young people will find themselves, once again, dealing with growing hardships, but Yoni knows he's at a different place in life. "I'm still working at the restaurant. We switched to deliveries. The shut downs were hard on me in terms of social isolation because it was absolute isolation. But thanks to ELEM I have the tools to handle these situations and make the most out of it. I don't know what the future holds, but that's what I learned from ELEM - that even if there are uncertainties, that's okay. Uncertainties are a part of the experience, of finding your path."

Kobi Beytan notes that unlike Yoni, who graduated from the program and learned how to utilize the tools to deal with feelings of confusion and uncertainty, many youths who haven't been through the process are facing hardships and challenges that were only made worse by COVID19.

"For young people, exploration of identity and branching out into independent life is colored by uncertainty during COVID. This age group is being hurt by this pandemic the most, no matter whether or not they're at-risk youth. They have no profession, nor do they have the skills and tools to develop a career. They were the first ones to suffer when it came to employment. While "normative" young people take advantage of this time, maybe by enrolling in college, at-risk youth doesn't have these options, which can lead to regression and to dangerous behaviors again."

The COVID crisis doesn't only deepen the devastating status of at-risk youth, but also leads to a bigger slice of the young people's demographic that turns to ELEM due to violence, emotional distress, alcohol and drug use and more. In addition, ELEM itself, like many other nonprofits and support organizations in Israel, is facing decrease in donations due to the crisis.

"Our organization relies on donors and we find ourselves at a time that is critical for youth and young people, and we ourselves don't know what's going to happen next year," says Beytan. "We must raise funds and save the organization. It may sound dramatic, but that's where it's at. The bottom line is - in order for me and my colleagues to do our jobs, we need the help of the public."