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“When you have sex for pay, something inside of you becomes twisted.”

Tom fell into prostitution when he was 17 and Samir was already paid for sex at 13. They've both managed to turn their lives around, thanks to ELEM's program, "The Heart 24/7." But the center is about to shut down after a private company won a Ministry of Welfare bid. ELEM claims this is the result of a grudge, and the ministry is denying the claims. It's important to listen to those who survived life in prostitution. "I could've been loaded with drugs, but thanks to ELEM, today I'm back on my feet."

Written by Tomer Aldobi

Samir (alias, 28) was first paid for sex when he was 13, after meeting a man he didn't know. He's been involved in prostitution for years following that, and eventually managed to get out of this addictive cycle only thanks to ELEM's program – "The Heart 24/7."

Eight years after he got out of that life, he has remained in touch with the social worker who worked with and assisted him, and today he lives in Tel Aviv with his boyfriend, works as a graphic designer, and dreams about a career in hair styling.

Even though he moved on with his life, he can't forget those rough, formative years. Five years ago, he joined ELEM as a volunteer and today he spends a lot of his free time meeting youth who are in the same place he used to be when he was a teen. Except that unlike him, they might not receive the same assistance that helped him get out of the world of prostitution. That's because three months ago, ELEM lost the Ministry of Welfare's bid for programs for youth in prostitution. This was in complete contrast to the total support ELEM received over the years for its work at "The Heart 24/7."

"The youth I meet are constantly trying to think how they can utilize me for money, cigarettes or even a cup of coffee," shares Samir. "I used to be in that exact same spot, and I understand them. Up until a few years ago, I didn't think there was a way out, and I certainly couldn't imagine myself in a relationship. I thought I'll end up at the old Central Station with a syringe in my arm, and I started to

come to terms with the fact that this is how my life will end. It'll be a crime to shut down the program that saved my life and the lives of so many others."

"Members of the Knesset stopped their cars and asked me to get in."

Samir was born in Northern Israel and has been passed between hostels and boarding schools from a young age. When he was 13, he experienced violent bullying from school mates because he was "gentle and feminine." Feeling like he didn't belong, and the added lack of acceptance from his family, led him to pack a few belongings and run to Haifa.

Not long after, he arrived in Tel Aviv. But he didn't fit there either and couldn't find the sort of establishment that would provide him with the assistance and rehabilitation he needed. "Most places only offered me a place to sleep and shower," he recalls. "Some of these places had very strict rules, extreme even. One such place forbade touching other people entirely, not even hugging. That was something I couldn't handle."

The fall was quick, and shortly after he arrived in Tel Aviv he started drinking and using drugs. "It's the only way that a 13-year-old boy can sleep with a 60-year-old man," he says. "The hostel I stayed in didn't accept that and kicked me out. They made me feel like my behavior wasn't okay. I found myself sleeping on the streets around Central Station again, and that's when I realized that if I want to have money, I'll have to partake in prostitution. I did it before then, too. "Staying over" at apartments for a place to sleep and eat, but I didn't know how to name it."

It's hard to imagine someone so young working in prostitution. What was lifelike back then?

"I drank a lot of alcohol every day. I'd break the bottle and keep the shards to protect myself. Sometimes celebrities and members of the Knesset would stop their car right next to me. I'd hop in without a second thought."

He was 15 when he encountered ELEM's Outreach Vans for the first time. As part of the van program, social workers are scouting all around Israel, talking to youth in prostitution, offering food, a chance to talk, and extended support. "I was waiting for clients and a social worker offered me an instant meal," he recalls. "I've met so many social workers before, so I lost faith in them. I told her I'm working and asked her to leave. After a few hours with a client, I saw that she didn't leave. She was waiting for me."

This was the first time Samir came to ELEM's hostel in Tel Aviv. He was surprised to learn that no one there demanded that he'd stop working. "They didn't force you to do anything. Their way is more sophisticated," he explains. "They tried to minimize the hours I'm awake and active at night, and created a daytime routine for me. They took me to doctors, called me every few days so that I'd know I could trust them and that I could return to the hostel time and again. At some point they even helped me with legal counsel that I needed and funded my graphic designing classes so that I'd have a profession."

Does that time in your life still affects you today?

"In addition to insomnia and anxiety attacks, which I experience often, there's always this fear that one day I'll be forced to return to prostitution. If my boyfriend and I break up, or if I get fired, then I might fall into prostitution again. I'm fighting this and doing everything to make sure it doesn't happen, but I still can't fully say "this will never happen again."

"The reason for the bid loss: A grudge held by the Ministry of Welfare."

"The Heart 24/7" in Tel Aviv has been operating for the last seven years, and its model was developed by ELEM itself. Throughout the years, while ELEM was developing additional programs and deepening its knowledge, additional centers were opened, supervised and funded by the Ministry of Welfare in more cities, such as Eilat, Petach Tikva and Dimona. In the Tel Aviv center alone, 120 youth up to the age of 21 are being served. Almost half of them are members of the LGBTQ+ community, and half are transgender.

There's no other way of saying it – The Heart is going out of its way to help these youth escape the world of prostitution. The program provides legal counsel, medical assistance, conversations with social workers, funding of education and scholarships, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are ten additional centers throughout Israel, operated by different organizations and municipalities, that are **only serving young women and teenage girls.**

Currently, ELEM's center in Tel Aviv is **one of the only places in Israel** which assists **young men and teenage boys in prostitution.** According to the Ministry of Welfare, additional centers will be opened this year in multiple municipalities, which will serve teenage boys in prostitution, similarly to The Heart in Tel Aviv.

As previously mentioned, three months ago the Ministry of Welfare announced that the winner of the bid to operate “The Heart 24/7” was a private company, which up until this point served mostly homeless people and people with disabilities. When it comes to government bids, the staff of the Ministry examines all of the submissions in accordance with pre-determined criteria and rates the submission accordingly. ELEM, for example, received zero points under “Ministry’s Satisfaction.” And that’s how, with no intervening, a private company won a bid to run a program which was established by ELEM. “Surprisingly, and in what is essentially a precedent, former experience working with youth in prostitution wasn’t one of the criteria to win the bid,” Shani Nardimon, Manager of “The Heart 24/7” in Tel Aviv told Mako. She believes that the reason for ELEM’s loss is a grudge held by specific people in the Ministry. “A few months ago, the manager of the Rehabilitation Office at the Ministry of Welfare, demanded that we stop assisting teenage boys in Haifa who work in prostitution,” she shared. “If this isn’t the reason why we received zero points, I don’t know what is. Especially considering that over many years we’ve received nothing but praise, from the Ministry as well.”

“Without ELEM I would’ve ended up high as a kite at the station.”

Tom (alias, 21) also managed to escape the world of prostitution thanks to the assistance of “The Heart 24/7” this past year. Just like Samir, he also fell into this world as a result of lack of family acceptance of his sexual orientation. “I felt alone at home, until I decided to leave for PetachTikva when I was 17,” he recalls. “I wanted to leave so that I could be who I really am. I worked at a hair salon and that’s how I managed, but it wasn’t enough. At the time I also received many offers on apps and on Instagram to get paid for sex.”

Was there a specific type of men who tried that with you?

“Everyone. I got many messages from married men, men in the closet and Palestinians from the territories. Many men turned to me, and I didn’t even know how they found me. Almost all of them weren’t my type, but they all offered money and I was too naive. Many offered hard drugs, even though I was only 17, but there was this inner voice that told me to refuse. I smoked cannabis once, but it made me feel bad, so I avoided it ever since.”

You already had a job, so why did you do it?

Because I did have a job I only did it sporadically. The money helped me. There were times when I worked every day, and times when I didn't see anyone. I believe there are a lot of people who are drawn to things that are bad and harmful, like prostitution, and it takes incredible will power to stop themselves. I'm like that, too, because deep down I knew how dangerous it was to be sucked into this."

Just like many others, Tom also started coming to Central Station to find clients. That's where he first met ELEM's volunteers, whom he chose to ignore. "I never trusted people," he says. "I remember they told me they had an empty house I could go to, and in my head, I knew what that meant. Eventually I gave them my number, but I didn't think anything will come out of it."

But as per usual, the volunteers of The Heart didn't give up, and contacted Tom on a daily basis to ask how he was and encourage him to turn to them if he ever needed help. A year went by, he enlisted and lived at Beit HaChayal, but he left the service six months later. When he found himself drawn into the world of prostitution once again, he decided to try and ask for help. "A friend told me ELEM actually helps, and he was right," Tom recalls. "ELEM helped me until I was back on my feet. Without them I'd be one of those junkies, high as a kite at Central Station."

How did that period affect your life?

"The way I think of others shifted. I'm a little emotion-less. It's hard for me to trust others, and it's hard for me to get to know new people, even if I really want to. When you have sex for pay, something inside of you becomes twisted. Only now, four years later, I'm finally finding myself again and becoming more human, but it requires hard work."

Are you afraid you might turn back to prostitution in the future?

"It's very tempting because it's easy money. I also know how to go about it and who to attach myself to on the street. I had thoughts of how rich I could've become by doing it, but I also know I can be loaded with drugs, or dead. Unlike others I met, I wanted the help and I managed to get it."

Both Tom and Samir hope that their story will help youth in prostitution realize that rehabilitation is possible. "They're at the extreme fringes of the Israeli society, and of all people they're the ones who are going to lose the only support that's available to them," Samir explains. "When I realized that The Heart is shutting down, I felt like my home was taken away. Even today, if I'm in a crisis I turn to the

social worker who worked with me at 'The Heart'. The staff changes, but the program maintains that same path and treatment for the benefit of the youth. I feel for these teens who are out on the streets and might not have any support. They'll continue to sacrifice their bodies."

The Ministry of Welfare is expected to reply to ELEM's appeal about the results of the bid in the next few weeks. In the meantime, ELEM fears that the youth they've treated up until now will go back to find work on the street. "We'll continue to serve the population of youth in prostitution and maintain a high professional level when it comes to treating at-risk youth," Nardimon concludes.