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This story is presented with the intention to raise awareness and provide information about ELEM's work.

## **It's Been Over a Month - What Does the Assistance for Evacuated Youth at Hotels Look Like?**

Written by Gaya Nir

\*\*\*Gaya Nir is the manager of the *Breathing Spaces* Program. In the past, she was the manager of the Ashdod *Outreach Van* for seven years. Gaya came back to ELEM following the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>, in order to run the program for displaced youth, evacuated from Southern and Northern Israel.

A month has passed since I started managing ELEM' emergency program, which operates spaces for youth from the south and the north.

I approached the task with humility from the get-go, and I discovered that in the duffle bag I packed for "reserve service" at ELEM I also need to include compassion, a lot of space for everyone who has encountered trauma, and all the strength I have to deal with uncertainty, lack of control and helplessness. Just let these feelings in like guests and remind myself that I am bigger than them.

So, I started, and this road brought back to my life beloved people, and connections with those I missed in the previous round, maybe because I matured, maybe because they matured.

What is certain is that in the difficult moments these people are my support. And there are difficult moments.

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I sit in the lobby of one of the polished hotels, with the scent of freedom and gleaming plastic plants, having a meeting. Families are sitting around me, drinking their afternoon coffee. In the pre-war reality, this was an after-work coffee, a coffee to relax.

In the meeting, we talk about numbers and data. The number of families, the number of youths, how many event halls there are in the hotel.

Suddenly, a 10-year-old boy, with a black shirt and a cropped haircut, approaches me. He hands me a huge bag of sweets. I look up at him, intending to politely refuse. But his eyes don't meet mine, they are on a mission to hand out sweets, a purposeful, clear

mission, there is no room to refuse it. I understand the message, I take the candy, and say that this is exactly what I need right now, and all my colleagues do the same.

A younger boy, 8 years old, follows the boy with dedication. He directs his look at me and asks, determines - "Did you take a candy?!" I tell him "yes" and they carry on, handing out candy to all the families without asking if anyone wants it.

And this was the first time that the numbers turned into eyes that I wish were looking at me.

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I am enlisting for this "reserve duty" the best team that is ready to go with me on the adventure of mapping the need in the Dead Sea region.

I pick up the van from Be'er Sheva, it doesn't start, I get fuel, fuel additive, oil and off we go. Along the way we catch up, recalling experiences from hundreds of shared hours of street work.

Our introductory meeting with to area takes place in one of the hotel rooms with the social worker who coordinates the work in the area.

We're looking for the right room, 522, at the end of the hallway.

On the way, we pass through the new "neighborhood", open rooms, strollers parked outside, small trash bags tell us about the families that live here now. On one of the doors, a letter-sized paper is hung, with a drawing of fish painted in colors by a little girl, and it says, "The Kablan family live here. For Now." And the stomach can't help but turn.

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The teams are starting to form and I'm joining them on a Thursday evening. Tonight, this team is opening a space for the first time, and you can't help but be excited. We lay out the equipment, boil water, talk among ourselves about what will happen, divide into pairs, and go scouting. We will meet youth and invite them to join our space - an area full of mats, beanbags, and chairs, with something hot to drink, and backgammon for those who prefer to remain silent.

Inside the lobby are groups of boys, some playing cards, others staring at their phones.

We approach a group of three boys, the youngest among them is 17 years old, and the oldest is 20 years old.

"ELEM? Like in Sderot? Of course, we know it!" They tell us and the hollow look we were met with at the beginning is replaced by a glimmer of hope, a spark that I learned to recognize over the years when I met teens who had already encountered ELEM before.

One of them is there on a break from the fighting, he lost friends, the other came from the horrors after terrorists murdered the neighbors in a building next to door. They discuss the headlines. Take a sip of lemon Arak.

"Backgammon?" one of them asks me.

"For sure," I say to him. Sometimes, silence is louder than words.

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The hostage deal is happening. Tomorrow another round of exchange should take place.

I've been walking around with a lump in my throat since last night. I went to bed early and woke up with it in the morning. During the day, I catch up on the news more than usual, for much longer than I can afford. Catch up, and continue to work.

"Yesterday was a different kind of night," says a colleague who leads an evening shift at an evacuation center for one of the kibbutzim from the Gaza Envelope.

The kibbutz has dozens of dead and kidnapped.

"During the Shloshim memorials [which concludes the 30 days of mourning – ELEM USA], for example, it looked different - much more noise, they played, shouted, ate... Yesterday it was quiet. Sometimes it was dead silent."

This depiction forced me to muster all the strength I have, to remind myself that a month ago I had packed enough strength in my duffle bag to deal with the lack of control and uncertainty that overwhelms me now.

We finish the conversation and I start going over all the practices I know, breaking down the thoughts about the right intervention in this crisis into small pieces.

And although I ask for advice, go deep and start to find the way, the lump from yesterday rolls out of my throat and occupies a corner of my heart. And I understand that this is one of those moments that I cannot escape from the fact that in this profession that I have chosen, you have to lay your heart on the table.

And sometimes that hurts.

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I'm not a philosophical person, but this story of the Japanese belief to join pottery shards with gold-colored glue has been on my mind for a week.

Like everyone else, I've matured in the last month, so I don't think it's naive to hope that we'll pick up the pieces and come out of it more beautiful than we were before.

It's a month into the most significant job I've done in my life, on a date that coincides with the hostage deal.

With feelings of pain, joy, fear, and sadness, I dare to humbly hope that the amazing people of ELEM, who are now all over the country, can be the golden glue for some of the youth we meet.

Because in the end, a connection is all we need.