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

**Hosts: Tal, Tom, Aviya.**

**Guest: Gal Pe'er, manager of ELEM's Ma'ale HaChamisha pop-up space.**

**Tal:** Alright, now it's time to say good morning to Gal Pe'er, manager of ELEM's Ma'ale HaChamisha pop-up space. Hey Gal.

**Gal:** Good morning.

**Tom and Aviya:** Hello Gal, good morning.

**Tal:** ELEM is an association for at-risk youth, a known nonprofit, has been working for many years and doing amazing work, but especially now. Many youths from the south who were evacuated and were in a problematic situation to begin with fall between the cracks. So tell us about your work.

**Gal:** So, good morning to you all. So I'd like to say that really, in normal times, which is certainly not the case at the moment, we **are** working with youth and young people all across the country. In the last month a major task was added to our plate. Practically two days after that damned Saturday we put our heads together and realized there's a need for a very very quick, and as good and right as possible of a service for the youth evacuated from the south, and eventually from the north, too. And we basically took knowledge that already exists in the organization, an existing practice of opening youth spaces, meaning, we have our outreach vans, if you're familiar...

**Tal:** Yeah.

**Gal:** ...that are spread across the country and are placed in places on the street and basically set up shop in these places. So we took this knowledge which already exists in the organization and we used that to basically offer ourselves as a service in all the of the evacuee gathering places in the country, and in a very short time we created permanent teams that arrive at all of these locations and basically meet with the youth there. They stay present with them in that feeling, in everything the youth bring up and bring to us.

**Tal:** You know, we've already been hearing about many cases, even when we talk about... I had a chance to speak with the people who supervise the evacuation to the Dead Sea and other places, and they already see the youth spiraling, into alcohol consumption, drugs. People who were evacuated, youth

who've been displaced from their homes, some experienced the horrors directly, some are part of the second circle. And we can't imagine it, but it's like damage on top of damage on top of damage.

**Gal:** Yes, well, there's a refugee consciousness here to which you add trauma, or you have trauma and then you add refugee consciousness. This is a risk situation no matter where you come from, and from which background, and how much support you have from home. At the moment, there are thousands of displaced youth, without a routine, they miss home, and within all of this they're also dealing with loss, pain, and sorrow that no one even imagined we'll have to deal with. Meaning no one is prepared for a situation like this one.

**Tal:** Right.

**Gal:** So in this situation, when we don't have our feet on the ground, we have no home to come back to, no routine nor privacy, since they all live together in small hotel rooms, it means that many risk behaviors can manifest.

**Tom:** It's not even just privacy, it's some alone time to process.

**Gal:** Totally.

**Tom:** I mean, in light of all the horrors you describe, and I keep thinking these youths have also been through COVID...

**Gal:** Yeah, so to begin with...

**Tom:** Truly, they had five years from hell.

**Gal:** Totally.

**Tal:** Yeah and to begin with, it comes... those who are more prone to this are youth from families that to begin with are...

**Tom:** in distress.

**Tal:** Yeah.

**Tom:** I mean, there's not even a second to sit in a room alone, in peace, and think.

**Gal:** That's exactly it. It truly feels like five years of losing all innocence. And yeah, we're constantly thinking about the streak of catastrophes that hit the world, us, and that facing it is really, really hard, and we see that. Before this horrific story [of October 7<sup>th</sup> – ELEM USA] we've seen an intensification and worsening with the entire situation across the country, with youth in the country, from extreme introversion and avoiding living life, to really, criminal behavior, addictions, and harm, as if everything has gotten worse and the situation right now really is so complex and tough. I sort of feel like, let me say it this way, the name *Breathing Spaces* [the Hebrew name for ELEM's pop-up centers for evacuated youth – ELEM USA] is very well suited to what they are. There's something about coming to meet the youth during their day to day, in moments that are small, simple, over a cup of coffee, a bowl of soup,

while playing backgammon. Meaning - meeting them within this thing that is empowering and gives hope for a moment. We sit with teens who truly experienced horrors, and they are experienced in feeling fearful sitting at your home thinking rockets will fall on you, so when you consider what just happened, it's even worse. And there's something about coming to this space, see the strength...

**Tal:** Right, we have to note because we may have missed it, that you guys are basically operating four of these spaces.

**Gal:** At the moment we're already operating eight.

**Tal:** Eight already.

**Gal:** Yes.

**Tal:** And people can just stop by, right? And share with other youth, and sit down, and talk for a minute?

**Gal:** We have a permanent ELEM team and all the youth who are there at the same place, living in the same area come to us, and we're basically there to catch whatever is thrown at us. From retelling what happened that damn day time and again, to talking about small things, about what's happening now, missing home, wanting one's own bed for a sec, wanting to eat mom's food at home and not eating hotel food at a hotel.

**Tal:** Where are these spaces now?

**Gal:** You mean the eight?

**Tal:** Yes.

**Gal:** At the Dead Sea, Ma'ale HaChamisha, Shfayim, Mishmar HaEmek, Eilat.... When we're called in, we try to open a space as quickly as possible and to really allow for... we're opening one in Tel Aviv soon. Meaning, everywhere there are evacuees, we're getting ready to open a space like this with the hope of trying some sort of normalcy for a sec, back to a routine, something that allows them to truly take a second and breathe within this thing that didn't really end, meaning we're still in this ongoing situation which is constantly challenging and hard.

**Tal:** Say, now that I'm thinking about it, there was also an ELEM van at the party in Re'im, right? [The Nova Outdoor Rave Festival – ELEM USA]

**Gal:** Yeah, um, yeah.

**Tal:** I don't know if there are details you know and can share, but...

**Gal:** No, I do know. Good People is an ELEM program that arrives at outdoor rave parties with the goal of being good people at every party. We had nine people there, volunteers from the organization, some are past employees of ours, of the organization. Um... Six returned and three are no longer with us to my great sorrow. So Sigal, Lior, and Shapik aka Yonatan, our volunteers, Sigal is also a past employee

with our vans, who never returned from there. So, out of this big pain, from our private personal trauma of our organization, we tried to act as much as possible, understanding this is our reality right now.

**Tal:** Right.

**Gal:** And it's all of our responsibility to be there for this youth, who lost so much already, and all we can do is try and be there for a second, to catch that, counter that, strengthen, and they also strengthen us. I can say that these spaces aren't just so **they** can breath, it's also so I can breath, by seeing them there, within this environment.

**Tal:** So we'll just add that if you hear us right now and need to take this breath and are where evacuees are, if you're youth who've been evacuated, families that have been evacuated, you can go to ELEM's pop-up spaces. You're doing a very very good and important job. Thank you very much Gal.

**Gal:** Thank you very much and may we have good, peaceful days.

**Everyone:** Amen.