

Israel

Road to r

A photograph showing a child in a car seat. The child is wearing a blue and white striped hat and a black t-shirt with a white graphic. An adult's hand is visible, holding the child's head. The background is blurred, showing the interior of a car. The text 'Road to r' is overlaid on the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

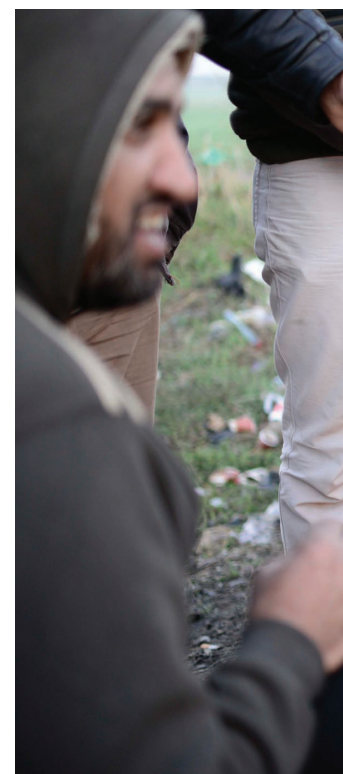


recovery

Yuval Roth, whose brother was murdered by Palestinian terrorists, helps transport sick Palestinians to Israeli hospitals as 'an act of reconciliation instead of revenge'

By Patricia Golan

Photos by Tomer Neuberg / Flash 90



It's an hour before dawn outside the Eyal checkpoint on the outskirts of the West Bank city of Qalqilya in early January.

Groups of Palestinian laborers destined for work in Israel's cities and towns have already passed through the gate and are warming themselves around campfires. By 7 a.m., roughly 4,000 Palestinians from the Qalqilya region and the northern West Bank will have crossed the border – after having their papers checked and passing through a metal detector, and finally making their way down the enclosed corridor.

There are 11 major crossing points between the West Bank and Israel. Among the Palestinians passing through the checkpoints are seriously ill children and adults and their accompanying family members who have special permits to cross over to get medical treatment at Israeli hospitals.

While the Palestinian Authority pays for hospitalizations and medical treatments in Israel (in the form of a deduction from the money Israel owes the PA from taxes, etc.), it doesn't pay for transportation to and from the checkpoints. This can be prohibitive, particularly for those patients requiring regular treatment.

By 7 a.m. this morning at Eyal, some 50

WITHOUT THIS PICKUP AND DELIVERY SERVICE, MOST PALESTINIAN PATIENTS COULDN'T GET TO THE HOSPITALS

Palestinian patients and family members have also crossed through the checkpoint and are piling into vehicles driven by drivers from Derech Hachluma (Road to Recovery) the volunteer-run organization that transports Palestinian patients from checkpoints to hospitals in Israel and back again.

Road to Recovery founder Yuval Roth shepherds the various family groups into the waiting vehicles – one group to Tel Hashomer Hospital near Tel Aviv, the other group to Wolfson Hospital in Holon and the rest to Rambam Hospital in Haifa.

Roth's 2001 Citroen Jumpy, a nine-seater van, has traveled half a million kilometers since he founded the non-profit in 2006. Today, Roth is off to Rambam Hospital with three children, all of whom suffer

from Thalassaemia, a Mediterranean genetic blood disorder, and who have undergone bone marrow transplants abroad.

Khaffia Bajat accompanies her daughter, Hind, 15, and son, Kareem, 16, for their regular monthly treatments. Mohammed Darajmeh brings his daughter, Amani, 16, who has also been treated at Rambam for years. (The children all look much younger than their actual years – a symptom of the disease.) The Bajat family lives in Azzun Atma near Qalqilya; the Darajmeh family is from Luban Asharkiya, near Nablus.

Without this pickup and delivery service, most Palestinian patients couldn't get to the hospitals, says Roth. "The family of an infant that needs daily dialysis in Rambam or Hadassah couldn't possibly manage this financially," he says.

In 2006, Roth, a master woodworker and professional juggler, launched what would become Derech Hachluma as, he says, "an act of reconciliation instead of revenge."

In 1993, Roth's younger brother, Udi, was returning home from reserve duty when he and a fellow soldier were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas terrorists. A few years later, as a way to cope with his loss, Roth joined the Forum of Bereaved Families (or the Parents Circle – Families Forum), which



brings together Israelis and Palestinians who have lost a close family member as a result of the prolonged conflict. The Forum, made up of about 500 Jewish and Arab families, was created by Yitzhak Frankenthal, a religious bereaved father, who believes that reconciliation between individuals and peoples is possible and a prerequisite to achieving a sustainable peace.

ONE DAY, a Palestinian member of the Forum asked Roth for his help in getting his brother, who had a suspected brain tumor, to Rambam Hospital, as he had no way to get there. Roth readily agreed. He was then approached by another family in the same village whose children needed bone marrow transplants, and he took them to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Roth recalls suddenly understanding that he could create something that would be a positive step for reconciliation. Recruiting a few friends at the beginning, he launched the “travel service” network that subsequently expanded into Derech Hachlama.

The first donation for the project came – to Roth’s astonishment – from Leonard Cohen. The Canadian novelist and singer had read an article about Rambam Hospital

that mentioned Roth ferrying Palestinian patients back and forth from the hospital. “That donation was what pushed me to form a proper non-profit organization,” Roth relates to *The Jerusalem Report*, explaining that he is now able to reimburse volunteers for their travel expenses.

Roth says he is amazed by the willingness of his volunteers to drop everything and drive to checkpoints at unearthly hours to collect sick Palestinians. Three years ago Roth gained some international recognition when he was selected as one of CNN TV network’s “Heroes.”

Some 450 Palestinian families from the West Bank and Gaza are served by Road to Recovery. Some patients come every day, some every few months. Most are children, many travelling to be treated for cancer. The demand is great, and every month new patients join. More than 200,000 Palestinian patients and their family members receive medical permits each year from the Israeli Civil Administration in the West Bank, according to Daliah Bassah, coordinator of the Health Office for the Civil Administration. (Approximately 8,500 permits are issued to Gaza residents annually, according to World Health Organization figures.)

Amani Darajmeh (above), 16, from Luban Asharkiya, near Nablus, waits at the Eyal checkpoint for Road to Recovery transport; (left) Khaffia Bajat accompanies her daughter, Hind, 15, and son, Karem, 16, in Yuval Roth’s van on the way to Rambam Hospital in Haifa; (center) Palestinian laborers wait at the Eyal checkpoint for transport to work in Israel; (preceding pages) Moaz Khilkhil and his son Omar in Roth’s van

Some 500 Israeli volunteers are registered with the organization; 200 of them are “frequent drivers.” One is Anita Steiner, a Reconstructionist rabbi and retired social worker who lives in Ashkelon. She’s been ferrying patients from the Erez checkpoint at the northern tip of Gaza for almost a year to Soroka Hospital in Beersheba and to Hadassah Ein Kerem or Augusta Victoria hospitals in Jerusalem.

She says that the most frustrating trips are those in which there is no one who speaks Hebrew or English. “Unfortunately, I don’t speak Arabic, so then we just sit in silence,” she says.

From Ashkelon via Gaza to Jerusalem seems a long way to go to perform a mitzva, but, explains Steiner, “I’m drawn to the fact

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Yuval Roth (second on right) with Mohammed Darajmeh and his daughter Amani at the Eyal checkpoint getting into Roth's van

that no politics are involved, just human acts of kindness.”

Arranging the schedule of all this coming and going is a daunting task, and things don't always go smoothly. Luckily, Roth now has volunteers arranging the schedules in the north, the center and the south.

On the Palestinian side, Naim al Baida, a builder in the West Bank village of Jayous, coordinates transportation from the central region. Al Baida, whose own village is surrounded by the security fence, has become a popular speaker for groups of Israelis who visit his village to hear about his own situation.

He began his Road to Recovery “job” two years ago, when a relative asked for his help to get his young son to the hospital. “I can't stand by and watch people suffer. If I can help I do,” he explains in accentless Hebrew. Sometimes he also helps people to get permits to cross into Israel; but he complains that the Palestinian doctors sometimes wait until a patient has become too ill to treat before referring them to Israeli hospitals.

Some crossings have “humanitarian gates” that allow those with permits for medical treatment to pass through

separately from the workers. There is no such gate at Eyal, however, so patients must compete with the workers for places in line.

Ahmad Bajat, whose children, Hind and Kareem, are on their way to Rambam today, says that after waiting up to two hours, he often has to plead with the laborers to let them jump the line. “Then there's often the problem of having to repeatedly explain why the children cannot pass through the metal detector,” he notes.

“It's very crowded, and actually dangerous for these children because their immune systems are weak and they are exposed to viruses,” adds Muath Zaid from Qalqiliya, who is accompanying his 18-year-old brother, Issam Wael, to Tel Hashomer Hospital in Ramat Gan.

Road to Recovery also organizes a five-day rehabilitation summer retreat for Palestinian children and their guardians at the Jordan River Village, the newest member of the global network of free sleep-away camps for seriously ill children started by US actor Paul Newman some 26 years ago.

The only program of its kind in the Middle East, the Jordan River Village lets children take part in medically supervised

recreational activities. When the camp first opened in 2012, the Hamas Health Ministry in the Gaza Strip refused to allow the children who had been undergoing treatment in Israel to attend. Treatment, yes; a fun vacation, no.

The organization turned for help to Israeli peace activist Gershon Baskin, who worked behind the scenes with Hamas officials to help secure the release of Gilad Shalit in 2011. “We asked him to explain that these are very sick children who won't survive the year, to tell them that this is a completely humanitarian mission, with no politics involved,” recalls Roth.

Baskin did speak to Hamas Deputy Foreign Minister Ghazi Hamad, but to no avail. “It's cooperation with the enemy,” Ghazi declared. To which Baskin says he replied, “Do you want to tell me an organization in Israel cares more about your children than you do?”

Despite the ban, the families made their way on their own to the Erez crossing and were able to pass through on their medical passes. The following year, the organization presented the camp as “medical treatment” and not “fun and games,” so the process went smoothly, and children from Gaza were allowed to attend the camp. ■