

Back from the Brink

Let's say you had a friend with a donkey. One morning that friend asks you to walk the donkey back to its stable. The donkey decides to do what donkeys typically do: stop dead in its tracks and refuse to move. What do you do? Tug its bridle? Kick it? Would it occur to you to opt for a more persuasive solution, i.e. to offer the animal an incentive in the form of food? If you were one of the 14-18-year-old boys enrolled in the two-year program at Wing of Love, only the first two alternatives would come to mind. Based on their life experience so far, nothing would suggest that anything else would work. With a criminal record to their name and a court order to under-



go remedial therapy, they have come to Wing of Love to discover that if they can learn to win over a donkey, this skill can be translated to interactions with humans – and a totally new life.

Wing of Love, established five years ago at Kibbutz Kfar Menahem, is a zoo using a singular model of animal therapy to give boys who have slipped into crime a last and very real chance to find a productive place in society.

Not that life at Wing of Love is a picnic. On the street your time is your own; here you are up by 6:30 a.m., clean cages, feed the animals, and take turns to cook meals for everyone.

Some of these teens arrive with a 300-word vocabulary. For them, this routine is challenging. It's not hard to open a cage, but try keeping the animal inside; you not only need to take out the bucket, but also to empty it, clean it, return it, and then lock the cage. Complicated? Yes, if you haven't even finished primary school.

For a boy who has never had a home, taking care of animals is an effective way to discover what a home really is: a place for privacy, a place to eat, a place to sleep. Responsibilities grow as comprehension and ability expand. Further along, the boys even will

guide visitors to the zoo.

And then, there is the remedial aspect of the program. After years of failure at school, these boys see no point in entering a classroom. So at Wing of Love, the staff begins by shifting from negative to positive, starting with a series of simple tests designed to ensure they succeed and have fun in the process. Like the donkey, they are being persuaded rather than coerced. If they complete the two-year program, they should have a tenth-grade-level education.

The zoo itself is older than Wing of Love. Begun 30 years ago by two Kfar Menahem boys, it developed from the kibbutz animal corner into a proper zoo with exotic animals, mainly birds, imported from such places as the Amazon, India, Nepal, China, and Burma. One of these young entrepreneurs was killed in Lebanon; the other succumbed to cancer. The dream they fulfilled in their short lives was now too much for the kibbutz to take on. Then someone encountered Boaz Miller. Miller had taught at the Israel Arts and Science Academy, a high school for gifted children, and decided he wanted to turn his talents to the other extreme of the socio-educational spectrum. He took on the zoo and developed it into Wing of Love.

It is called Wing of Love because most of its residents are birds. Why one wing? Because what is offered is one wing of love to shelter under - and the chance to develop a second wing of independence.

Today, graduates of Wing of Love serve in the IDF, are an integrated part of Israeli society, hold steady jobs, and form relationships. For boys who had no concept of future, who lived only to survive, that is a great deal to accomplish in just two years. For Wing of Love management, this fuels the hope of setting up a similar program for Bedouin boys.

There are many ways to fly to freedom; at Wing of Love, it is one wing after another. ■

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