

standing on

One morning I arrive at the Wing of Love park at Kfar Menachem, Israel and notice that – unusually – there are three people in the donkeys' yard. S, a 17 year-old boy, is hugging the largest, palest donkey. "Hi, Michele!" he calls out, making me alter my usual path to go over and see what is happening. Netta, our animal specialist, stands opposite S and is also holding this donkey, who, I now see, wriggles uncomfortably between them. As I approach I see that the third person is an attractive young woman whose right arm is buried, almost to her elbow, up the donkey's backside.

The donkey – a female, a jenny – is pregnant and not well. She keeps falling down and now she no longer has the strength to get up. So Netta has called Dr. Bar Eytan, a young vet. S and Netta are trying to calm and reassure the donkey during the unpleasant examination. "The baby seems to be fine," says Dr. Eytan, pulling out her arm. "She may have an illness that donkeys sometimes suffer from as a result of acute stress, such as advanced pregnancy," she concludes and recommends enriching her diet to strengthen her. "You can see that her legs are very scarred and damaged; they are apparently now too weak to support her heavy belly."

Her damaged legs are a result of abuse – probably from the rope that often tied her legs to prevent her running away and from the overly heavy loads she carried for too long for her Bedouin owners. Her broken teeth were another sign of mistreatment. She had been sighted some weeks earlier, wandering aimlessly in the nearby hills, so S went out with a kibbutz member to bring her to our park for shelter and care. It was clear that she had served as a beast of burden, had been overused, abused, and then abandoned when she could no longer carry loads.

Donkeys are used as beasts of burden around the world. Genesis tells that Abraham saddled a donkey for his journey with Isaac to Mt. Moriah: the donkey carried the wood for burning the offering. Later, in Exodus, Moses' wife and sons travelled to Egypt on a donkey. And our Jewish tradition says that the Messiah will appear riding on a white donkey at the end of days. In the 1920's, my ancestor used to stand on the terrace outside his home at Motza every dawn, scanning the horizon hopefully for a sight of that white donkey that would change the world. Today our donkeys, the black, the grey and the not-quite-white domesticated asses, are not about to carry the Messiah, but they are changing the world for a few boys, or at least the way they see the world. Our

pregnant jenny has shown these adolescents that life has meaning.

Nowadays it is only the poorest Jews and Arabs who keep donkeys to pull loaded carts, to carry supplies on their backs, or as a means of transport. These animals are cheap (they can cost as little as NIS100 – approx £15) and when they get sick or injured, their owners often abandon them and leave them to die. It is cheaper and makes more sense to buy a new donkey than to get a vet and medicine to treat an old one.

The teenage boys who shelter and nurture the seven donkeys in the Wing of Love park are, like the donkeys, in full-time care and undergoing rehabilitation. Both the boys and the animals are scarred by life, victims of neglect or abuse. Both boys and animals were brought to our park to heal and gain strength for a new life.

S came to the park a year and a half ago, by court order. He is one of 14 teenage boys who work in the park, sent there by the social services or the juvenile courts. The day he arrived, he was a small and lean 15 year old. He had been sentenced with full-time care, because of the conditions at his home in one of Israel's worst slum neighborhoods, and community

service (one day a week) for thieving. In his home, money was needed for a drug habit. He was small enough to steal, strong enough to defend himself, and – usually – nimble enough to run away. He had spent more time on the streets than in school. S knew no other life until he was caught by the police and sent to the Wing of Love wildlife park by the juvenile court. He was brusque and quick to fight back if provoked.

He immediately took an interest in all the animals in the park and learned quickly. He chose to take responsibility for the donkeys. He watched them at first, from behind their fence, and learned to understand their ways. Then slowly he approached them, with a reassuring voice, with kindness. He brought them food, clean water, and noticed their attachments and rivalries. He led them from the stable to the field in the morning and back at the end of the day. In time, he taught the stronger donkeys to wear a harness on the park's occasional open days and, with his new-found gentleness, he helped small children on to their backs and guided them carefully around the park. He instilled trust in both the donkeys and the children and won praise. S is now 17 years old and has many scars, like our donkeys. But he has taught the donkeys to trust him and they have taught him love, gentleness, and self-esteem. He has helped to rehabilitate the donkeys and the donkeys have helped to rehabilitate him.

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But what happened to the pregnant jenny? The days passed and she continued to fall over. Soon she also refused to eat. The enriched diet had not helped. S helped her up each time, but one morning, S couldn't raise her. It looked as though all she wanted was to die in peace. S was miserable and pleaded staff member Netta to call the vet and save this poor miserable donkey. Netta warned him that the vet would probably give the donkey an injection to help her die without suffering. Her time had come. Devastated, S sat by the jenny on the ground and stroked her. He had grown to love her. He had discovered the power of this emotion, an emotion that he had never felt before. When the vet came, he pleaded with Dr. Eytan to save her, somehow.

The vet knew that the only hope was to hospitalize the poor creature, but this would cost a lot of money. Could the struggling Wing of Love non-profit organization afford such a luxury, for an old, battered donkey? This is an organization that receives funding to rehabilitate youth at risk, not animals. It did not make financial sense to pay the high hospital fees to keep this poor donkey alive. Had the sick animal been a rare species, worth thousands of shekels, like a crowned crane or a wallaby, there would have been no hesitation to save its life. But could we justify trying to save the life of a weak, twenty-year old, pregnant donkey?

"Yes," says Boaz Miller, director of Wing of Love, without hesitation, "for the donkey's sake and for the lessons of this life-saving act for S and the other boys undergoing rehabilitation. Life, even a donkey's life, is valuable. It is our duty to care for the animals in our midst, to do our best for their sakes, and to preserve their lives if we can. Just as our boys hope for a good future for the donkey and her foal, so too Wing of Love hopes to help these boys have a good future. The struggle to help the boys to stand on their own feet is not easy, less easy than the struggle to help the donkey, but we have to try hard to win, for the future of both the donkey and the boys."

Yes, certainly, we should try to save the donkey's life and that of her baby, says Dr. Amir Steinman, the new director of the large animals department at the veterinary hospital at Beit Dagan, who helps animals in distress as a matter of principle. He kindly agrees immediately to take in the old jenny at an affordable price, in consideration of our budgetary constraints. In the hospital, she is put in a supportive sling that takes the

weight off her feet. She starts eating and drinking again and remains under 24-hour supervision.

A week later, on November 6th, she gives birth in a padded room, with difficulty, but with expert help. That evening, Dr. Eytan calls: "The mother looks well and happy, although her newborn is weak. The young foal is suckling at her breast and the hospital staff have fallen in love with this stoic pair. The staff's biggest problem now will be to part from them."

The Lubavitch teach that the Hebrew word for donkey is *chamor* from the word *chomer*, material. The Messiah's white donkey, they say, is the material that is harnessed for a lofty purpose, for a higher end. Our donkey is not pure white, but she has moved all the people who have met her in the last weeks towards a higher awareness of the spirit of life. S will soon leave the rehabilitation framework; he is a good worker, trustworthy, and a caring friend.

Michele Klein is a volunteer at the non-profit Wing of Love park for rehabilitating youth at risk. This article first appeared in the Metro section of the Jerusalem Post

