



BOUNCING OUT BACK: A baby kangaroo at the wildlife park at Kibbutz Kfar Menahem. (Courtesy)

Out of pocket

The non-profit organization *Wing of Love* treats animals as well as rehabilitating disadvantaged at-risk youths

• By MICHELE KLEIN

During Pessah, a dog ran into the wildlife park at Kibbutz Kfar Menahem. It was horrifying to see the strange four-legged creature. It yarked and barked, and scared the animals. The rabbits and a baby deer died of fright, and a wallaby threw her baby out of her pouch before also dying of fright. The park was a sad place.

A. is a disadvantaged 15-year-old who cared for those rabbits. He fed them each day and loved them. He was quite

sad, even though his friends comforted him. He hopes that we'll manage to get some more rabbits from somewhere. But we will have to wait another year for the deer to give us a new fawn. By then, we hope we'll have a new gate and be able to keep unfriendly dogs out of our park.

We are the non-profit organization *Wing of Love*, which is responsible for the 30-dunam park. We hired the whole zoo in order to conserve the animals within as well as rehabilitate disadvantaged at-risk youths. The youths care for the animals, under the supervision and guidance of our professional staff, and in this way they gain life

skills and responsibility.

We decided not to give A. responsibility for the skinny baby wallaby that is only just beginning to grow some velvety fur. It weighs less than two kilograms, and we are still not sure if it will survive the trauma of losing its mother.

Netta Levy, the animal carer who supervises A.'s work with the animals in the park, has never

had to raise a joey before, even though she has worked there for many years. She immediately made him a soft pouch out of an old cloth shoulder bag padded with an infant's duvet, and keeps him warm and safe in this new home. She feeds him Materna vegeta-

tarian milk formula, squeezing small amounts into his mouth every three to four hours, and

allows him to jump out of the pouch every now and then to stretch his legs.

Unlike the intruder that harmed the mother wallaby, Netta's dog – a mongrel Labrador – cares gently for the baby macropod. She licks him lovingly, as she would her own pups, including in the genital area to help him to urinate – a job that Netta would otherwise have had to do after each feed, with a damp tissue.

Netta was wary of giving the baby too much attention. Would the wallaby become attached to her and refuse to go back to its enclosure in the park? Would he be rejected by

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the other wallabies, the "mob" in the park?

"Just let the animal free and it will die a natural death," one person advised her. "Hand-raise it and you'll have to give it away or sell it to someone who wants an unusual pet," another person volunteered.

But our job is conservation and we have to keep our youth in mind too. What lessons would they learn from this tragedy? Is there not a way, we wondered, to raise him and return him to our little group of macropods?

We scanned the Internet for advice. "Castrate him or he'll grow up aggressive," said the men Down Under with experience of alpha-macho kangaroos.

"Cuddle him, carry him around in a warm pouch and give him lots of love and affection," say all the women who have been nurturing adorable abandoned joeys in Australia.

I clicked "contact us" on a couple of Web sites and sought advice. "You have

wallabies in Israel?? Wow!" came a reply from Jenny at a wallaby park on the other side of the globe.

"How did you come to have wallabies in the wildlife park?" asked Susie, my second penpal from Oz. She hand-raises abandoned joeys and then returns them to nature. "Please don't listen to people who say you have to feed and toilet him then leave him in his pouch without paying him attention – that is a sure way for him to die. They have an intimate relationship with their mothers, they need comfort and reassurance and affection." She signed off with "Give joey a big cuddle for me xxx."

This looked like a recipe for imprinting, just what we want to avoid.

On the issue of neutering, the Marsupial Society Web

site warns: "A tame buck is as dangerous and unreliable as a bull. No matter how gentle he has been, one day he will treat you or your children as a mate or rival, and either can be equally traumatic."

Jenny added that as a male wallaby reaches breeding age, it does not want any other males around and fights whoever is in his way. Our teenage boys have already noticed how 20-kg. adult male wallabies rape the weaker sex in their mob. Susie

suggested: "If you wish to leave him whole, so to speak, I suggest you re-house him when he reaches sexual-maturity and maybe supply him with his own wife. I guess you have to weigh up the issues regarding castration, for example. It is unfair

for him, how would he feel? I also don't know how the other males would treat him."

How would our boys feel about our having him castrated, I wonder. We would have to do some explaining.

Netta is taking the middle road, without cuddles and without surgery – at least for the time being. Our joey is still too young for this surgery. If this is done, it should be done when he is about 10 months old, say the experts. But how old is he now, we wondered?

Females of the kangaroo family give birth to a tiny, underdeveloped fetus that crawls straight up into its mother's pouch, called a marsupium, on the doe's body and latches onto her nipple. The baby nurses there for several months before it peeks its head out of the pouch to have a look around. By the time it is seven months old, it has grown a velvety fur and begins to venture out of the pouch for short periods. Normally it

continues to suckle in the pouch until it is about 10 months old. We think ours must be about six or seven months old.

Netta is re-introducing our joey to the mob for an hour a day, slowly building up to longer periods. They pay no attention, but he is curious and sniffs around and tastes everything like a toddler. When he tires, he hops back into Netta's pouch and snuggles up to rest.

"A wallaby is easily stressed and just when you think he is doing okay he will suddenly take a turn for the worse and sometimes will die for no apparent reason," Jenny warned. But Netta keeps calm and we're hoping our joey will survive his trauma and grow up in good health and in peace.

Although the market price for a pet wallaby would enable us to install a new gate, we hope we won't have to sell him, neutered or whole. Meanwhile the gate has become a fund-raising priority.

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Netta Levy, with the handmade pouch, has never had to raise a joey before. (Courtesy)