

# YOUTH AT RISK

## Tough choices

*How much fighting, stabbing and stealing does it take before you realize there's another way to live?*

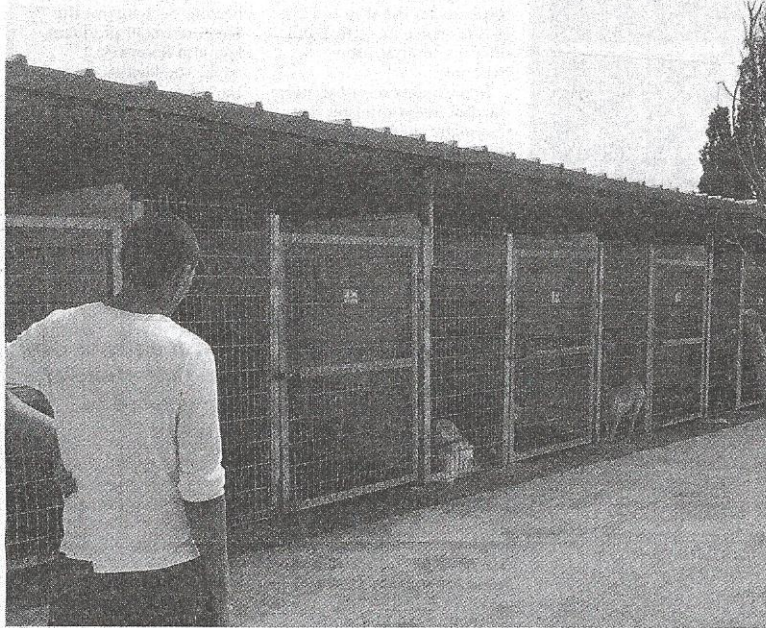
• By Michelle Klein

It all happened so fast: the moment of recognition, the greeting – “Lior” – the slow handshake. Two pairs of eyes met, locked and threatened. Lior’s hand instinctively went to his “knife” pocket, even though he knew he didn’t have one. The other boy took out his cell phone: “Lior’s at the ice cream parlor,” he said calmly.

“Right, we’re going straight home,” snapped the counselor, sensing the mounting tension in the air.

For once, the 14 hostel boys quickly did as they were told. But the other boy and his friends followed Lior. The hostel boys broke into a run. The others ran after them. Just as the boys rounded the corner to their hostel, a red car drove up carrying more gang members. The slowest boy, the one with the limp, caught the first blows. The gang hurled bricks and wooden debris at the hostel boys from a construction site across the road, while chairs flew at the gang members from the hostel balcony. The boys’ shouts and curses roused the neighbors, who called the police. When the cops turned up, the street was deserted.

“It all happened so fast,” the counselor told the police. As they examined and washed their bruises, the boys relived the fiasco. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt. One boy handed over a cell phone he had grabbed in the fight, which the police used to track down the gang members. The inquiry that followed revealed that one of the hostel boys, “Yaniv,” had been the first to throw something at the gang members who, until then, had done no physical harm. Yaniv was almost 17, a year older than Lior. Both boys had criminal records and were in full-time care by court order. Yaniv had been living in the Wing of Love hostel in Gedera for over a year and had only two months left there, whereas Lior was a new arrival in the same rehabilitation frame-



**EARNING RESPECT.** Yaniv has a part-time job at a kennel, caring for some 200 dogs. He loves the work. (Courtesy, Wing of Love)

work. Of course, the rehab program doesn’t allow knives, so Lior didn’t have one in his trouser pocket that evening.

Lior once had his own gang in the streets of his hometown. “Ron,” who shook his hand in the ice cream parlor, remembered him well, as they had both been involved in a knifing outside a disco a year before. The fight had been over a girl and Ron had been hurt, ending up in the hospital. Lior was sentenced after that incident and – as he was under 16 – the court offered him a place in the Wing of Love program to help him learn the basic rules of good citizenship. But there was unfinished business between the two. Since the knifing, there’s been tension between the kids from Lior’s town and the kids from Ron’s.

Most of the boys living at the Gedera hostel have been involved in street fights. These teenagers have all been ordered into full-time care by

the courts. On weekdays, they study and work at the Kfar Menachem wildlife park as part of a holistic program offering remedial education that helps make up for the boys’ lost years of schooling, vocational training, and work

ing... In December 2005, I went to have pizza in town with a friend. We saw some new immigrants from the US. We went up to them and demanded their money and their phones. They said they didn’t have anything, so we

*‘Don’t take revenge. Go to your room and drink coffee, smoke a cigarette. Or go for a run. Violence doesn’t pay. Think of the consequences. Think of your mother’s broken heart if you go to jail!’ – Yaniv*

experience, as well as ordinary bike rides and social activity. Both the hostel and the park with its zoo are run by the Wing of Love non-profit organization. The outing to the ice cream parlor had been an unusual reward for good behavior, a treat that ended badly.

Lior’s friend, Yaniv, recalls: “For two years, I did whatever I wanted – stealing, hit-

took out our knives and made them give us all they had in their pockets... A police van drove up and caught us in the act. Now, I understand how many mistakes a kid can make.”

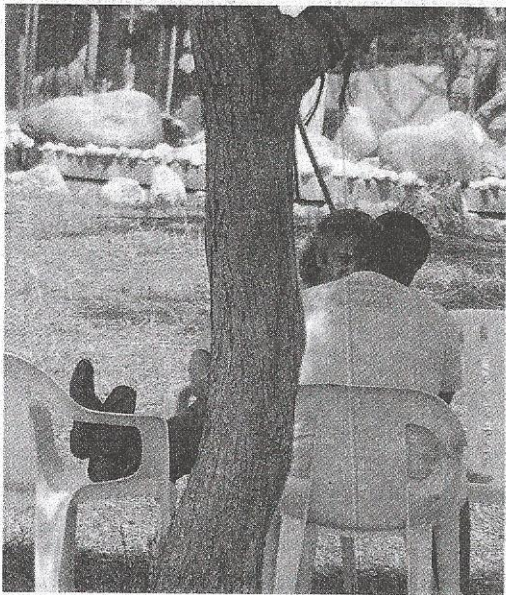
The altercation that began at the ice cream parlor occurred a few days before his 17th birthday, as the end of his court order was in sight. Yaniv had just made

another mistake, which returned him to the dock.

As Yaniv faced his court hearing, he had to think about his choices. Since he had showed considerable responsibility and progress during his year at Wing of Love, director Boaz Miller was willing to take him back, on the condition he agree to attend a special course to help him control his aggressive impulses and learn better ways of dealing with provocation. “We can help you and we will help you, but only if you undertake to help yourself. You have to take responsibility for your actions,” Miller told him. “If you choose the path of violence, power and revenge, you know exactly where it will lead you. If you use reason – which I know you are fully capable of using – and go back to your schoolwork and vocational training, you can enter the work market as a respectable citizen. The choice is yours.”

Yaniv remembered his mother’s tears when he was first arrested. He thought of the pain he had caused her. He also thought of the poverty in which he had grown up, but now he knew that he could work and earn money. “I grew up deprived,” he said, with anger in his voice. He recalls that when he was 14, “I had a knife put to my throat, and if I hadn’t fought back, I would’ve been butchered.”

Yaniv learned that only the toughest survive. His survival skills were well-honed; he knew when to run away fast and when to fight back. The encounter with Ron and his gang brought out his childhood instincts. But at Wing of Love, he discovered other ways of living. He found new role models. He guided, hosted and served meals to many visitors who came to visit the park’s zoo. He took smaller children for donkey rides, and they trusted him. He studied hard to pass his mathematics matriculation exam. He wanted respectability. So he agreed to return to Wing of Love and make an effort to put violence behind him. The court extended his



THIRD CHANCES? Wing of Love director, Boaz Miller, has a face-to-face chat with one of the youths at the village. (Courtesy, Wing of Love)

term in the program by another nine months.

That was five months ago. Today, with only four months to go before he is free, Yaniv has a part-time job at a kennel, caring for some 200 dogs. He loves the work and is conscientious and reliable. His employer thinks highly of him. He is saving his earnings to take driving lessons and hopes to earn a driver's license. He is now a senior in the rehab program and an "older brother" to the younger boys.

Two weeks ago, another senior boy reported that Lior was bullying a new boy who was younger than him. Gang culture strictly forbids "telling" on others, and Lior apparently forgot that he was no longer on the street and he wanted revenge. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: the old rule is part of the criminal code of honor. The hostel staff strives to break this code, teaching instead *derech erez* (the Jewish tradition of correct conduct), through discussions, dialogue, focused group activities, and setting examples.

Yaniv had been a bully, too. But he learned that bullying – strictly forbidden at Wing of Love – is a form of violence. Yaniv tried to persuade Lior to walk away from taking revenge on the boy who reported him. "Watch out," he warned him. "Don't take

revenge. Go to your room and drink coffee, smoke a cigarette. Or go for a run. Violence doesn't pay. Think of the consequences. Think of your mother's broken heart if you go to jail." Lior didn't listen. He wanted to get even. He took his revenge, and when a counselor intervened, Lior took out his fury on the counselor. Wing of Love has a zero-tolerance policy for illegal behavior and Lior had intended to cause the other boy grievous bodily harm.

Lior was once again arrested for violent behavior and is now doing time in the juvenile prison. Miller visits him every week to talk to him and help him consider his choices. At the end of his prison sentence, Miller may offer him another chance at Wing of Love, as he offered Yaniv, but only if Lior convinces him and the court that he really wants to mend his ways. Lior now has to think very carefully about his next steps. Will he use his brain, instead of his fists? Will he agree to attend the anti-violence program, to obey the law, and to walk away from provocation? The choice is now his. Think, Lior – Wing of Love wants to help you. Please don't make another mistake.

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