

A MIDNIGHT VISIT TO  
KIKAR  
ZION



TOVA SAFRENAI IS THE  
MINISTERS TO THE HOMELESS KIDS  
ON THE STREETS







# Thursday, 11:50p.m. Kikar Zion, Jersuaalem

It is close to midnight in Kikar Zion, where I’m supposed to meet a young woman named Tova Safrenay to watch her interact with young people who are living on the streets. The souvenir shops have already lowered their shades and the vendor behind a food cart is packing up his goods. A lone man is playing a saxophone next to a tin plate half-filled with coins. The soulful notes are drowned out by the clanging of a tram on its last circuit for the evening.

I spot Tova sitting on a bench. She has a round, fresh face, with bright eyes that could light up a room. Her head is

covered with a colorful kerchief, tied in a creative way. She stands up and smiles at me cheerfully. I notice that she is in highly pregnant and thank her again for coming to meet me at this late hour. “It’s still early,” she says. “Just sit down and observe.”

The square is swarming with boys and girls. Most of them are wearing sneakers and sweatshirts, each with a can of beer in hand. They tip their heads back to guzzle the liquid, then try to outdo each other by throwing the can as far away as possible. A young girl plays a tune on an old baby grand piano—a

local fixture badly in need of tuning—while four other young people, their hair dyed in fluorescent shades, sit on top of the piano smoking something. Some of them will soon go home. Others will stay here because the square and its neighboring alleys have become their home.

A young, skinny boy with long *peiyos* hanging out of his gray hoodie walks by with another kid his age. He is ten and a half years old, says Tova, and is from Gush Etzion. Both boys having been living on the street for months. The boy with the *peiyos* goes over to the cart and says something to the vendor. The man

hands him a sandwich and he greedily takes a bite.

“Now watch what happens,” Tova says, her expression grim. An older boy of about 14 suddenly appears and snatches the sandwich away from. The younger one stands there helplessly as the older boy proceeds to eat the whole thing.

Tova explains that the older boy is also hungry, semi-apologizing for him. “The older kids don’t elicit the same sympathy as the younger ones,” she explains.

“How is it possible that a ten-year-old kid is living on the streets?” I exclaim.

“These kids are from broken homes, runaways from orphanages or foster homes in which they were placed by social services,” she explains.

I ask if I can go over and speak to the child. “Legally, it’s forbidden,” Tova replies. “Only a licensed social worker or someone from the municipality can question minors.”

Tovah Safranai is the founder of Ahavat Chinam, an organization she started in 2018 whose aim is to provide protection to young people who, for whatever reason, are on the extreme margins of society. (It became an official nonprofit in 2020.) “Although our primary focus is on homeless youth who have already outgrown social services, whenever we spot a minor we alert one of our 160 volunteers—including psychologists, social workers and other professionals—who have experience with at-risk youth and know how to speak to them,” she tells me. “We then search for a relative, guardian or grandparent with whom we can place the child.”

She stops to wave at two young people who appear to be around 18. “*Mah korei*—What’s happening?” she asks with a big smile. “*Hakol tov*—It’s all good, Tovaleh!” they shout, waving back at her.

## IN HER BLOOD

Tova’s father is Rabbi Yosef Schneider, who has been involved in helping homeless youth since before she was born. At the age of five, little Tova started accompanying him on his outings to be *mekarev* them. “I was raised on the principle that one must always look into a person’s heart and soul rather than his outer appearance,” she says. “Every human being is deserving of unconditional, non-

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judgmental love and respect. My father taught his children that it doesn’t matter if the person is wearing a kippah or is covered with tattoos. ‘We cannot understand the workings of another person,’ he would say, ‘but we do have the capacity to love everyone.’” This approach would later become the motto of her organization.

The middle child of a family of 12 from Bnei Brak, Tova went to a chasidic school where she had trouble fitting in. After graduating from the eighth grade, she announced to her parents that she wasn’t continuing on to high school. At that point, she was labeled a “bad element” by her friends, who cut off all contact with her. She admits that dealing with the loneliness was hard. “I remember sitting at home at the age of 13, crying because my friends wouldn’t have anything to do with me. But in retrospect, I think it made me more empathetic to other young people who are going through challenges.

“Well, then,’ my father said once he saw that I was adamant about not returning to school. ‘What are you going to do now? I suggest you that pursue what you are good at and already like to do: help needy young people.’ My father knew me very well, and he proved to be right. I am very grateful that my parents always had faith in me. They supported and strengthened me until I figured out what I wanted to do in order to realize my potential.”

Tova went on to earn a certificate in alcohol and substance abuse as well as posttraumatic stress counseling. She then passed the test to obtain a license to work with this population. But it took some time before she started applying what she had learned.

“One evening,” she recalls, “I went to one of my father’s events for young people at risk, where they showed a film about an Arab who was in prison for murder. He had confessed to killing a

Jewish girl in Zion Square in Jerusalem. The whole thing started when he offered her a can of Coke.” Outraged, Tova told herself that although she might not be able to change the world, that was no reason to sit at home and do nothing while young people wandered the streets at the peril of those who wished to exploit them.

The next night, encouraged by her father and accompanied by a family member for protection, Tova went out to distribute some homemade sandwiches. “I made a whole bunch of them,” she says with a laugh, suddenly looking like a little girl. “I also bought bottles of water and chocolate bars. I put stickers on everything that said ‘*Ahavat Chinam: Lateit Bishvil Lateit*—Giving for the Sole Purpose of Giving’ and went off to Zion Square and set up a makeshift cart. I was sure that everyone would grab them, but to my disappointment only a few kids came over, even though I stayed there till almost 3:00 a.m. It took me a while to realize that these ‘alley cats’ sleep with one eye open. So many people offer them things because they have an agenda. It makes them wary of accepting anything for free.”

Tova returned every single evening. “It took time for me to gain their trust, but

I was stubborn and persevered. In their minds, I was just a stereotype. ‘Oh, look. Here comes another pious person trying to trick us and then brainwash us.’ I realized that it wasn’t enough to hand out sandwiches. I had to find a way to make them understand that I was sincere.”

The change in their attitude occurred after the temperature dropped in the winter. One night it was also raining heavily, and Tova had to go around searching for everyone. “I found them in the entrances of buildings huddled against each other, plastic bags on their feet to keep them dry and wearing large garbage bags instead of coats. With the money I collected I bought them sweatsuits, throw blankets, gloves and scarves. They were all snapped up within minutes. I think that’s when they finally realized that I really had no personal agenda and had only had their well-being in mind.

“Their trust in me gradually built up and they began telling me their stories, many of which were brutal. At first, their stories simply devastated me. I would come home and be unable to fall asleep. I couldn’t understand how such things could happen. These young people were in so much pain and had built walls around themselves for protection. Covering themselves with tattoos, I realized, was part of an attempt to appear threatening and scare others away.

“After two years of bringing them warm food and clothes night after night, even the most suspicious of them were disarmed. These days, our stall is a permanent fixture, and everyone knows that our volunteers are there because we want to help. Sometimes I’ll get an urgent call in the middle of the night. It could be a youth who got involved with criminals, and now he’s sitting in the Russian Compound [a central Jerusalem police station] and needs someone to bail him out, or a girl waking up after getting high on drugs or alcohol and finding



herself in an Arab village with no way to get back. My husband and I will immediately go out to help them or send one of our volunteers instead.”

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE NOCTURNAL KIND

The “established” older homeless roll out their mattresses on the sidewalk right next to their belongings and settle down for the night. One of them is a woman with a large dog. The dog was

stolen twice, but each time found its way back to her, she tells me with pride.

Nearby on a concrete step lies a youngster with half-open eyes. Tova sits down next to him. “Are you *satla* (high on drugs)?” she wants to know. “*Tzamei* (thirsty),” he groans. Tova takes a water bottle out of her bag, opens the top and puts it in his hand together with a chocolate bar. The boy raises his head and drinks the water greedily before lying back down.

The place is still noisy with activity. Many of the young people have simply come to have fun, Tova tells me. The untrained eye might not be able to tell

who will be going home to a warm bed and who will remain behind to sleep on the concrete. The telltale sign is their sneakers, she explains. The homeless kids’ sneakers are encrusted with grime. Some of them may actually have nice clothes, but if you get closer you will notice their unwashed smell and realize that they are never changed.

Two girls of about 14 wearing scanty black dresses, one with a long mane of thick blonde hair, pass by. They walk with a swing in their step, their eyes glowing with eagerness. Tova’s eyes follow them. These girls are from chasidic homes, she tells me. The blonde one went through a personal trauma and the other comes from a broken home. It is too early to approach them, she says. They’ve only been on the streets for a month, and they’re still too full of the adrenaline of being on their own.

“How does she keep her hair so clean?” I wonder.

“They go to the restrooms of restaurants, fill a plastic cup with liquid soap and then go to wash their hair under a fire hydrant in the park. They don’t really bathe or shower properly. All they wash is their face and hands in public bathrooms. During the day, they drink, smoke and do drugs with friends. They hang out together to feel as if they belong somewhere. But at night, each one goes separately to search for a place to sleep before starting all over again the next morning.

“Every population group is represented here: religious and secular, right and left, new immigrants, and even sometimes local Arab youths. We try to extend a hand to everyone. After two months on the street, those from religious homes will be unrecognizable, sporting tattoos, nose rings and trendy hairstyles. Minors are the most vulnerable to exploitation. It’s illegal to employ them, so they’ll accept pennies to do menial jobs. Their best bet is to sell drugs. Older criminals





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scout the streets looking for the most desperate kids and make believe they’re befriending them, showering them with gifts and attention. The kid thinks, *Wow! Someone cares about me!* The judgment of a teenager who hasn’t eaten in a few days is impaired. Give him a hot meal, some fashionable shirts, brand-name sneakers and a cellphone and of course he’s going to agree to peddle your drugs. ‘All you have to do is bring this envelope to such and such an address,’ they’re told. He doesn’t understand that he’s going to get arrested and have a criminal record for the rest of his life. All he’s looking for is short-term relief of his distress.”

“Where can all these lost kids be found?” I ask Tova. “Where *can’t* they be found?” she replies. “Jerusalem has a relatively high concentration of homeless youth. They are attracted to the city because it has many places they can live. Jerusalem is full of alleys, basements and abandoned buildings. They live on rooftops, in stairwells, in rooms for strollers in apartment buildings, in parks and in gardens. Some kids sleep under children’s slides in playgrounds.”

WAKING UP TO REALITY

“If a youngster thought that after he

runs away from home he will finally be able to do whatever he wants, reality soon slaps him in the face,” she continues. “The rules on the street are tough, much tougher than those he had to obey at home. It’s the law of the jungle: Either you are the bully, or you are the bullied one.”

“Do these kids feel a sense of solidarity? Do they help each other?” I ask in curiosity.

“It depends. On the surface they call each other ‘brother’ and sister,’ but best friends can suddenly turn on each other. All it takes is one drink too many or a bad drug experience and they become dangerous. And even if they do hang out together, each one feels alone. They’re wary of each other, knowing they may have to fend for themselves at any moment. They’re much too cynical for their age.

“It doesn’t take long for them to realize that instead of breaking free, they are now in a different kind of prison. Let’s say that a troubled adolescent has a big fight with his parents and runs away. Sometimes, the parents are so angry that they tell him not to come home for a few days or weeks. For the child, this is a disaster. Every day on the street is destructive to his psyche. A kid like that isn’t toughened up yet, and it’s easy for predators to take advantage of him.”

“Do parents ever ask you to help them locate their child?” I ask her.

“Yes,” Tova replies. “It’s happened several times. But by then it’s usually too late to reverse the damage.”

Two young men walk by on the opposite sidewalk with a swagger, trying to look tough. They wave to Tova and ask the standard “*Mah korei?*” She waves back at them with a warm smile on her face. For a moment their harsh masks fall away, and when they return her smile their young age is revealed.

“You see these two? They are both *chareidi* boys from the Bukharan Quarter. Don’t be fooled by their stylish sweatshirts and expensive haircuts. It’s all a defense. They know the rules of the street and try to convey an image of power, but inside they are torn to shreds.

“I know it’s not easy to empathize with someone who is lying in the gutter and hallucinating,” she continues, “but inside that person is a soul. Sometimes, even a kind word can make a difference. At the same time, these homeless kids are extra sensitive to being patronized, and they’ll immediately shut down if they get that vibe.”

“How many young people do you meet on a given night?” I inquire.

“Hundreds,” she replies.

“What’s the first thing you say to them?” I want to know.

“The first thing I do is listen. Then I ask them what their dream is. That becomes the beginning of our work together. I give them a peek into a different kind of life. As soon as I know what that person really wants, I don’t let the momentum of his dream recede and allow the street to take over. I find the right contact who will then take over and steer him towards the next step, whether it’s a job, the army, a school or a suitable *yeshivah*. I have a whole network of professionals and nonprofits to whom I direct them, and I stay in touch until they are self-sufficient and on solid ground. It can take as little as three months to get a youth off the streets and on the path to a stable future.

“It’s also an asset that I’m practically the same age that they are. When a young person tells you that you’re special and have potential, it’s a lot more powerful than hearing the same thing from a middle-aged social worker. It challenges them to get out of their self-imposed ghetto. My overall aim is to change the mentality of society. Each homeless youth who isn’t picked up off the street is a lost treasure to future generations.”

“Aren’t you afraid to be out so late at night?” I ask her.

“Fear is not my strong point. I believe that someone who is trying to do good has protection from Above. I do have someone accompanying me at night, but these homeless kids become aggressive only when they feel threatened. They have no reason to be on the defensive.”

“What’s your secret?” I want to know. “Why do you succeed while so many others fail?”

“I think it’s because I really care and they can sense that,” she replies. “Social services do a fine job, but they represent authority. What all of these young people have in common is the need for someone to believe in them. Living on the streets, their emotions become dormant. My objective is to gently wake them up from their stupor. After they are warm and fed we can talk. I find a different way of communicating with each one. If I see a youngster who is shy and reserved, I’ll ask him how he is and not overwhelm him with words. I give everyone the space to tell me his or her story without being judgmental. I know how they feel about themselves in their heart of hearts. *Baruch Hashem*, hundreds of young people have been taken off the streets and gone on to lead conventional lives.”

“How many homeless young people would you say are living on the streets of Israel right now?”

“I don’t have the exact number, but there are thousands in Jerusalem and its suburbs. Add those who live in the Tel Aviv area

  
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and you probably have around 10,000.”

## DURING THE PANDEMIC

The arrival of Covid delivered a serious blow, raising the number of young people roaming the streets and lowering their age. With families shut indoors, sometimes crowded into small apartments, situations that were grim to begin with exploded with the force of a pressure cooker. Where there had once been poverty, with so many parents finding themselves unemployed, there was now hunger as well. Where there had been occasional violence, now it was more frequent and escalated. The result was more and more children and teens being pushed onto the streets.

During lockdown, Tova was forced to stop her activities. “Covid was a disaster for the homeless. When the police came to evict everyone from wherever they were living, as per the emergency regulations, they had nowhere to go. All they had was their little plot of sidewalk. There were a lot of clashes with the authorities. Homeless people were beaten or shocked with Tasers. Some kids suffered fractures and other injuries. And because they were street children, no one came looking for them or asked what happened to them.”

Many of these youths eventually moved to the north to live in forests, or to the south to live in the desert. But the lack of food was unrelenting. On several occasions, Tova and her crew succeeded in obtaining a permit to go out and distribute food, but they were rare and insufficient.

While some *frum* families refuse to accept a rebellious child, others are ready and willing to accommodate a young person who is having difficulties and has left the path. If they think that the child is having a negative influence on his siblings, doesn’t keep Shabbos and is generally disruptive, they will often find a place for him with family members or elsewhere so they can remain in touch and keep tabs on him.

“A *chareidi* man once called me up and asked me to convince his grandson, who had a criminal record, to move up north because he was embarrassing the family. I explained that pushing the problem away would only cause it to boomerang. Left on his own, the grandson would probably spiral deeper into a life of crime and create even further scandal. The man took my advice and placed the boy with a relative. Today, even though the boy isn’t as observant as his family, he is working and in close contact with them.”

At the moment, Tova is running a campaign to raise enough money to buy a sleeping bag for every youngster on the street. “It kills me to know that I will return to a warm home, while they will be spending the night sleeping on the ground in inclement weather.”

‘You’re a *chareidi* woman, barely 20 years old, who grew up in the insulated universe of Bnei Brak. Sadly, the people you help lead lives that have become very degraded. Does it have an effect on you?’

“I will answer you with a *mashal*. There was once a king who was riding in his royal carriage when his crown flew off and landed in the sewer. When



he asked one of liverymen to retrieve it the man refused, claiming that it would get his uninform dirty. Another servant, however, volunteered for the job. He immediately jumped into the sewer and emerged with the jewel-encrusted crown. It is true that I sometimes come in contact with a very low element and see disturbing things, but every youngster I bring back is another precious crown that has been saved.”

ONE OF MANY  
SUCCESS STORIES

“A year ago, I was standing behind my little stall distributing food when I noticed a young man trying to decide whether or not he should take a sandwich. ‘*Mah nishma?*’ I asked him casually. ‘I heard that you give out good stuff,’ he said, ‘so I came to see if it was true.’ ‘It depends on what you consider good,’ I said jokingly. ‘With your warm eyes and friendly smile, it can only be good,’ he replied. ‘Would you like something

to eat?’ I asked him. It turned out that he hadn’t eaten in days. He gobbled down four sandwiches without stopping. Then he said, ‘Would I be able to speak to you for a minute?’

“We sat down on a bench. ‘What’s a guy like you doing on the streets?’ I asked him. ‘You look perfectly capable and smart.’ ‘I’ve been living like this for the past seven years,’ he explained. He was 22 years old and hadn’t seen or spoken to his *chareidi* family in all that time. ‘I didn’t want to be *frum*,’ he continued. ‘They told me to shape up or ship out.’ After he was thrown out of *yeshivah*, his father had filled a plastic garbage bag with his clothing and shown him to the door. ‘From now on, you are not my son,’ he told him. The boy was adamant that he would never go back home.

“I’m addicted to drugs and sell them for a living,’ he confessed. ‘I have a rap sheet a mile long. I sleep inside the enclosed section of a slide in Gan Sacher that everyone knows is mine. I’ve been physically abused many times—and I

will never forgive my family!’ he said adamantly.

“I understand,’ I told him, ‘but you mustn’t allow yourself to become a victim. Your best revenge is to show your family that you succeeded without them.’ After I said that, he cried for a while. Then he said, ‘You are the first person who has ever gone to the trouble of talking to me and giving me encouragement.’ We sat and talked for two whole hours, after which I gave him my phone number and told him he could call me if he ever needed anything. I never heard from him.

“Nine months later, I was out one night distributing sandwiches. A groomed young man with a decent haircut and a well-cut suit approached me. ‘Do you remember me?’ he asked. Something in his eyes was familiar. ‘Lior?’ I said. ‘Yes, it’s me,’ he replied. ‘I came to thank you. That same night I met you I couldn’t fall asleep. I kept thinking about our conversation. No one had ever spoken to me with such compassion. I told myself that if this stranger believed

in my potential, there had to be something inside me that I was unaware of. Do you remember asking me what my dream was, and I told you that I had always wanted to be an optician? “Believe in it and it will happen,” you encouraged me. “You have to try.”

“So the next morning I went to a shwarma shop the size of a cubicle and told the owner that I was ready to work from dawn until midnight. “You have been sent from *shamayim!*” the man replied. “My only worker quit on me last night.” He tossed me a company uniform and I got my first job.’ Within a few weeks, Lior had enough money to buy a suit, a pair of decent shoes and get a good haircut. Then he bought a bus ticket to Rechovot, where his family lived. It turned out that they had moved. A neighbor gave him their new address, and after a second bus ride he was standing outside his parents’ door. His father cried when he saw him and his mother fainted. His siblings gathered around him. They had searched for him for years without results. ‘We were filled with regret over the mistake we’d made,’ they told him. ‘All we could do was pray.’

“His mother begged him to stay and live with them, so he to looked for a job in Rechovot. He entered the most expensive eyeglass store in the city, part of a national chain, and asked to speak to the owner. ‘You need an appointment,’ the man behind the counter said. ‘I’ll sit here as long as necessary,’ he replied.

“Let me tell you my life story,’ he told the owner a half-hour later, ‘then you can decide whether or not you want to hire me.’ He told him his story. ‘Please give me a chance!’ he begged. ‘Will you be a partner in my journey?’ The owner was touched and said he could start work the following day. After a month, he was promoted to assistant manager. The number of sales increased and the owner was delighted. When the opportunity arose to open a new branch of the same chain, he put Lior in charge. ‘I sat down with the board of directors of the parent company and told them about your hard work and potential,’ he told him. ‘They were so moved that they’ve decided to give you a break in life and agreed to finance your schooling so you can become an optician.’

“Look what power you have!’ Lior told me. ‘A few months ago I was sleeping in a public park. Now I’m the manager of a new store. I’m making a good salary and saving up to buy a car. I’m closer than ever to my family. I cover my head, went back to keeping Shabbat, and one day I hope to get married and establish my own traditional home.’

“A story like this,” Tova tells me, “gives me the strength to continue.” ●

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