

The Journey to Healing the Children of Majdal Shams

Yoav Keren | Updated: 16.01.25

The Golan Heights community of Majdal Shams was devastated when a Hezbollah rocket exploded in a sports field, killing 12 children. In the wake of this unimaginable loss, the Society for the Protection of Nature organized a trip for students from the village - young souls carrying the heavy weight of grief after losing their friends and family. Israeli journalist Yoav Keren joined the journey to witness their stories and the hope nature might bring.

Among the students was 16-year-old Rain, who shared, “Walking in nature with friends gives me peace. But back in Majdal Shams, I no longer feel safe.”

The blue trail winds its way up the Arugot Stream, weaving between Persian salvadora trees and clusters of common tansy flowers. From time to time, the path crosses the stream. At first, the water barely brushes the soles of your shoes, but as you continue, it rises to knee height. The weather is welcoming. A beautiful day for a hike in the Judean Desert.

After a short walk, we reach the *Galiche*, what hikers affectionately call the rock slide in the lower Arugot Stream, the entrance to a hidden waterfall. The guide's voice gives the green light, and within seconds, a line forms at the top of the slide, a narrow, slippery ravine that spills into a glistening pool below. In that moment, the curtain of sadness that had hung over the group began to lift, and in its place came the sparkle of youthful joy.



*Selfie in the desert landscape. Each student received a camera to document the journey
(Photo: Yoav Keren)*

When it's her turn, 16-year-old Lillian slides into the natural pool, and realizes that her glasses have vanished into the water. Immediately, four burly boys leap into the water, diving like river dolphins in a determined effort to find them.

Happy ending: The glasses are discovered at the bottom of the pool, completely undamaged. The boy who found them strikes a triumphant pose for the camera, flexing his muscles. The fact that they're still here, still alive, still laughing and having fun and fooling around trying to impress the girls with their playful antics, these small, carefree moments feel like a victory in themselves.



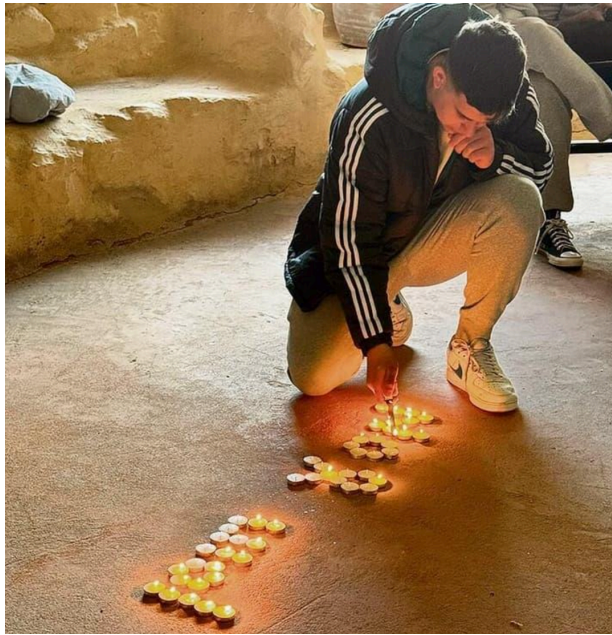
*Enjoying the water of the natural pool
(Photo: Yoav Keren)*

Alarm, an explosion, and smoke rising from the field.

I joined a group of 17 high school students from the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights for the third day of a four-day trip organized by the Society for the Protection of Nature as part of the "Nature Heals" project. Just five months earlier, these students had lost friends, classmates, and relatives when a rocket struck their community's soccer field, killing 12 children. Some students had been at the scene of the explosion, exposed to horrors that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

"I got there two minutes after the explosion," recalls Ward, a boy from the group. "I saw **Alan Abu Saleh**, the 12 year old brother of a close friend of mine. He was badly injured and unconscious. I grabbed one of the paramedics and led him to Alan. I felt relieved I could still help him." Alan was in the hospital for four months. The first thing he did after being released was put on his soccer uniform and return to the field.

"Then," Ward continues, "I saw **Amir Rabia Abu Saleh**, lying on his back on the concrete with his feet on the grass. Someone was checking his pulse. I asked if Amir was alive, and the answer was: 'He's dead.'" Amir was 16 years old when he was killed by rocket shrapnel.



Remembering the friends. "Heroes of Majdal Shams"
(Photo: Nur Hanun, Society for the Protection of Nature)

Amir was Lillian Salah's classmate and best friend. "We used to play basketball together," she says in English (like many of her friends, she doesn't speak Hebrew). "He also liked soccer, but he preferred basketball. We told each other everything. I'm proud to have been his friend."

Lillian, who had been outside her house when she heard the alarm and explosion, saw smoke rising from the soccer field. "The first call I made was to Amir, but he didn't answer. Later, someone in our group wrote that Amir had been killed. I didn't know what to do with myself."

"The next day, at the funeral, his mother hugged me, crying. She said: 'Lillian, Amir is dead—what will I do?' I didn't know what to say. I cried, too. Since then, every time she sees me, we both just start crying."

Hazem Akram Abu Saleh, another close friend of Lillian's, was also killed in the blast. "A month before he was killed, our families went to Crete together."

"Ask if it's close to Gaza"

I met them early the next morning at the Tel Arad campsite. Emerging from their tents into the crisp desert air, the students were bundled up in coats, scarves, and wool hats. In the field kitchen, camp staff were already busy preparing breakfast: omelets, hard-boiled eggs, chopped vegetables, tuna, and labneh drizzled with olive oil.



The campers settle in for the night on the grounds. "Understanding the magnitude of the responsibility"

"The campers are divided into three teams: a work team, a scouting team, and a self-care team," explained Raslan Ibrahim, coordinator of scouting classes in the Druze sector. "This way, they learn responsibility and gain confidence in themselves. Yesterday, I took the camp team aside and said, 'Tomorrow at 6:30, we'll wake up, brush our teeth, wash up, and head to the kitchen. Breakfast needs to be ready by 8.' I thought I'd have to wake them up, but when I went to the showers at 6:20, I saw all the campers there already, brushing their teeth. They understand what it means to take responsibility."

Raslan, who served 27 years as a soldier and commander on the Lebanese border, found a new path after retirement, taking a nature guide course with the Society for the Protection of Nature. Now, working with the children of Majdal Shams fills his heart.



Preparing food in the desert

(Photo: Yoav Keren)

"They already call me Uncle Raslan," he said with a smile. "I told them, 'I'm not just your instructor. I'm your friend, your parent, your brother. We're in this together.'" Having lost many friends during his military service, and knowing two of the children killed in the Majdal Shams explosion, he understands the depth of their pain.

After breakfast, the group gathered for morning assembly, wearing shirts and hats emblazoned with the motto they'd chosen themselves: *Forever Young*. They circled a picnic table with a bottle of soda and empty glasses placed on it. Nur Hanun, the expedition leader from the village of Julis, poured the soda into the glasses, raising a toast. "Wahed, Tanin, Talaata—Forever Young! Long live the work team! Long live the scouting team! Long live the self-care team! Long live the challenge! Keep walking this path, and you can conquer any peak you set your sights on."

As the SPNI Youth Director for the Arab, Druze, and Circassian Society for the Protection of Nature, Raslan was tasked with organizing the Resilience Journey. "We decided that students who were directly involved in the first wave of the disaster would participate," he said. "When I first visited the school to meet the group, they had so many questions and fears. 'Was it close to Gaza? Would there be shooting?' After a long, intensive conversation, they unanimously decided to go as a group. Then came the second wave—worried parents."

He described the process of reassuring the families. "We opened a WhatsApp group for the parents and had individual conversations about their concerns—'what's the security situation? Could there be desert floods? Who are the guides?' We even hosted a Zoom call to introduce the entire team. Then during the journey, I send them regular updates."

"I don't feel safe in Majdal Shams"

The "Nature Heals" project is an initiative led by Liali Melman, SPNI's Field Trips Director. . "After October 7, we opened our field schools to evacuees," she shares. But as time went on, it became clear that the youth were struggling the most. "They lacked structure, and without it, they were at risk," she explains.

SPNI teams also reached out to evacuees staying in hotels, witnessing firsthand the emotional toll the situation was taking on these young people. Moved by what she saw, Liali turned to SPNI's CEO with a proposal. "I told him, 'We must be the ones to provide them with a solution.'" Within a month, the first group of teens from the Gaza envelope embarked on a journey to the Ramon Crater as part of the "Journey of Resilience" program of Nature Heals.

The project later expanded to include evacuees from the north, who had been scattered across the country. "For many of them, this was the first time they had seen each other in six months," says Liali. The program's team members—female military teachers, servicewomen in their second year, and experienced adult instructors—undergo an intensive five-day training program at Oranim College, a key partner in the initiative. Notably, the Ministry of Education is hardly involved in the project.

Recently, the program welcomed children from Majdal Shams, marking the first time participants from the Arabic-speaking sector joined. Similar trips are now being planned for children from Arab communities along the northern border.



Selfie in the desert landscape
(Photo: Yoav Keren)

This journey is far more than just a trip; it's a space for healing and self-expression. The program incorporates activities and workshops designed to help children process their emotions, even when words are hard to find. **Slybi Dagesh**, a phototherapy instructor from Mar'ar, leads one such workshop. Phototherapy, or therapy through photography, uses the act of taking photos as a way to explore emotions and foster self-expression. Each child is given a camera and encouraged to document the four-day journey through their own lens. "Choosing what and how to photograph provides a glimpse into the depths of their emotions," explains Slybi. "It's a powerful way for them to express themselves."

Another meaningful activity is the mask workshop, held at the entrance to Nahal Arugot. Slybi distributes white plaster masks and colored markers to the participants. The children are asked to divide the mask into two halves: on the right, they use drawings and colors to represent their feelings immediately after the disaster; on the left, they depict how they feel now. "If we've managed to get them to open up and express their emotions, we've already accomplished 50 percent of the work," says Slybi.

Sixteen-year-old Raine Amasha shows me her mask. Both sides feature a tangled web of lines resembling curly hair, though the right half is denser. "It symbolizes the mess I had in my head

after the disaster,” she explains. “I was confused. I felt lost. Now I feel more peaceful, even though I still have a mess in my head.”

The right eye of the mask is surrounded by a blood-red frame, with tears streaming from it. The left eye also weeps, but beneath it, Raine has drawn an olive branch—a symbol of peace.



Raine Amasha. "The mask symbolizes the mess I had in my head after the disaster"
(Photo: Yoav Keren)

Raine was also a close friend and classmate of Amir, who tragically lost his life in the disaster. Her cousin, 12-year-old Izil Neshat Ayoub, was also among those killed. “I believe their souls are in a better place now. It helps me feel at peace,” she shares.

Still, that peace hasn’t eased her fear. “This journey—walking in nature with friends—helps my soul and brings me a sense of calm. But in Majdal Shams, I don’t feel safe. Not even after the ceasefire.”

I ask what would make her feel safe. “To move somewhere else. I told my parents that, and next year we plan to move to Italy.”

In the middle of the trip, at two in the morning, an alarm

Before the start of the hike, the baton was passed to the guidance team, led by **Magdi Faraj**, who also coordinates groups of SPNI scouts in the Druze sector. One of the students displayed

the planned route on a map, while 16-year-old **Angela Brake**, a guidance team member, shared her excitement about the experience.

“I really like hiking in the Golan Heights,” Angela said in a mix of Hebrew and English. “But I also love the desert, even though this is my first time here. Yesterday, Magdi explained the route to our team so we could guide our friends, tell them about the places we’re visiting, and make up games to keep them excited.”

The desert, however, wasn’t without its challenges. At 2:30 a.m., a missile alarm blared through the Tel Arad area—a missile launched at us by the Houthis from Yemen. Thankfully, it was intercepted by the Iron Dome. “We were with the children and calmed them down,” shared Nour the next day during a phone call. “Ten minutes later, the worried calls and messages from parents began pouring in. I reassured them that it was behind us and everything was fine. To ease their minds, I sent a photo of the students smiling.”

Later that day, after the hike, the group returned by bus to the Tel Arad parking lot. The camp staff, led by Raslan, began preparing dinner: schnitzels, fries, and salad. As temperatures rapidly dropped, Nour decided that the children wouldn’t sleep in tents that night but would stay in the permanent buildings nearby.

