

**A volunteer, who transported sick Palestinian children to
Israel's hospitals, wonders if her dream of coexistence
has been destroyed forever
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A convoy of ambulances moves along the border fence between Israel and Gaza. January, 2023. *Photo by Getty Images*

**I volunteered, transporting sick Palestinian children to
hospitals — it hardly seems possible anymore**

A volunteer wonders if her dream of coexistence has been destroyed forever

I volunteer with [The Road to Recovery](#), an Israeli NGO that transports sick Palestinian children from checkpoints around the country to hospitals in Israel. When possible, I drive from my home in the Ella Valley of Israel to the Tarkumia checkpoint, close to Hebron, a mere 15-minute journey, to pick up children. I have always felt that small acts of empathy go a long way towards

healing the decades-long hatred, that person-to-person contact helps bridge the gap between the two nations. Additionally, I have also always believed that Israelis and Palestinians can make peace, that we all want the same thing at the end of the day — to live quietly, to break bread with our families each evening around the kitchen table.

I was not born here. I arrived in Israel at the age of 16, because my parents wanted to live here. I knew nothing about Judaism, let alone Zionism. I learned about World War II in school. I had heard about Anne Frank but had very little idea what the Holocaust was. I knew nothing about the history of the Jews, or even the history of my own family.

As an adult, I worked with *Newsweek* in its Middle East bureau, and considered myself privileged to be able to speak to people on both sides of the conflict. When I say people, I am referring to those of us who are trying to go about our lives peacefully and respectfully, people like me and you who raise children, who care for our families. I spoke to Palestinians in Hebron, I spoke to Jews in Gush Etzion, I spoke to grieving parents on both sides. I once interviewed a woman in Nablus who had just been released from prison for assisting in a suicide bombing, and a teenager patrolling the barren hills of the West Bank with a gun in a holster. I thought I understood.

I don't attend demonstrations, nor am I affiliated with any political groups, but I did participate in an intensive three-month workshop organized by The Bereaved Parents Forum, an NGO that promotes understanding between the Israeli and Palestinians. The idea of the workshop was to both learn about and acknowledge each other's narrative, but I ultimately came out of those three months with a sense of gnawing pessimism. It was not enough. I met people from Jenin who had spent hours crossing through checkpoints to get to our joint weekends, I met three young women from the West Bank who spent a lot of time giggling together and sending text messages. In one activity, we switched identities and the Palestinians praised me for being a good Arab, and everyone laughed.

I admit, it was probably easier for me to open my heart to those contesting this troubled land. Unlike my husband, Raz, who remembers selling his own toys and teddy bears to raise money to buy fighter planes for Israel after the Six Day War in 1967, I lived an uncomplicated life. My home was never contested, I never had to sit in a bomb shelter .

Perhaps this is why I naively stuck to the idea that I could make a difference, even a small one; The Road to Recovery seemed like the perfect way for me to make that difference. I have driven babies and children, accompanied by their mothers, fathers or grandparents to Sheba Hospital in Tel Aviv, often early in the morning when it's pitch dark outside. On these journeys we have conversed in broken Arabic and broken Hebrew and it was enough. Some journeys have been totally silent, the parents exhausted, or worried.

A few months ago, during an early evening emergency pickup, the exhausted mother of a toddler had a panic attack as we turned onto Highway 6. I stopped the car by the side of the road and put my arms around her. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she mumbled. An hour later, I dropped her off at the entrance to the Pediatric ER of Sheba Hospital and I will never forget the little boy, in his mother's arms, turning his head to me and waving goodbye weakly. That same evening, I gave a five-year old boy and his parents a lift back to Tarkumia. It was late, and I didn't want my passengers to make the long walk through the checkpoint to the parking lot, carrying their son and numerous bags filled with clothes. I drove through the checkpoint and stopped by the parking lot. They knew not to leave me alone there, so the father stood by my car while the mother went to get a taxi. I was grateful, and so were they.

But when I was asked this week to drive to the Tarkumia checkpoint to pick up a sick child who needed urgent treatment, I said no. I felt sick to my stomach with fear. Two days earlier, on October 7, I was awoken at 6:35 in the morning by loud explosions as Hamas missiles began falling. Soon after, the sirens began. I watched online as the horrific events began unfolding and as the hours went by, the world as I knew it fell apart.

Returning to anything remotely resembling hope suddenly seems impossible. I can no longer see the horizon of reconciliation. Last night my entire village

stood in silence, heads bowed, at the entrance to our normally quiet community, as the funeral procession of a young man who grew up here traveled out to the local cemetery. Meanwhile, the foundations of my house shudder and shake as Gaza is pounded again and again by Israeli forces, and Hamas missiles continue to fall.

Unbelievably, a number of volunteers with The Road to Recovery have been kidnapped into Gaza: Haim Perry, Vivian Silver, Oded and Yochke Lipshitz, Tammy Sohman. The daughter and grandchild of Moshe Lotem, another volunteer, are among those kidnapped, according to the letter. I am devastated, I no longer feel safe.

“We are praying hard,” says the newsletter sent out this afternoon to volunteers, “together with the families of our volunteers who were kidnapped on Shabbat by the savage terrorists of Hamas.”

As another hard, sad day draws to a close, I wonder if the road to any kind of coexistence can be rebuilt.

By Joanna Chen October 14, 2023

“I volunteered, transporting sick Palestinian children to hospitals - it hardly seems possible anymore” by Joanna Chen, Forward, October 14, 2023.