

# Learning the Ropes of Recovery

## Overcoming obstacles

The September afternoon sun is cooling down as I make the scenic drive through the Aminadav forest, close to Jerusalem's Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital. The landscape is breathtaking: miles and miles of thick, green trees surrounding me from both sides of the mountains as I carefully maneuver my car down steep slopes and winding roads. I never knew such beauty existed in this city before today, but then I never knew the event that I'm about to attend existed, either. I'm on my way to a mother/daughter retreat run by Jerusalem's Beit Natan organization. As I drive deeper and deeper into the forest, leaving civilization as I know it behind, I wonder exactly what's waiting there inside the rich foliage.

When I arrive, I find about forty women gathered around wooden picnic tables and benches, laughing, talking and enjoying light refreshments. Lighting has been set up for when it becomes dark, a portable bathroom stands on one side, and an ambulance (the only reminder that some of these ladies are indeed sick) is parked in a nearby clearing. Add to that two security guards, and it looks like whoever organized this event has thought of everything. My eyes wander to ropes hanging in various arrangements from sturdy oak trees. Are the women actually going to swing on these, I wonder. This promises to be very interesting.

What strikes me the most is how happy and upbeat these women seem, despite their personal struggles with cancer. There are all types and all ages, the real Israeli cholent pot: religious, non-religious, traditional, chassidic, American, Israeli, Russian. Some women are presently sick and undergoing treatment; others are in remission; then there are those considered cured who continue with Beit Natan, passing on support and *chizuk* such as they once received. As they hug and greet each other warmly, there's absolutely no other sound in this beautiful, serene setting. All is still and restful. It feels like we've left the whole world behind.



The program begins with activities organized by Etgar (in English, Challenges). This organization works with many different groups, including the handicapped, terror victims or people missing limbs, and provides intriguing, challenging activities using ropes, hooks and other equipment. Exercises are designed to push people forward and even beyond their struggles.

The women split into groups and make their way to an activity; upon completing it, they'll rotate to another one. I attach myself to a group and eagerly anticipate what's to come. In preparation for the bridge activity, which is yet to be introduced, the *madrichah*, Michal, has everybody sit on the stony ground, amongst the twigs and leaves, and write notes with wishes for themselves and each other for the coming year.

The daughters, ranging from age eleven upwards, are shy and reserved. They don't talk much. This is the first time they've done anything like this, and they don't know each other yet.

One lady sees me scribbling in my notebook. "Write warm words about Beit Natan," she instructs me. She has no words to describe it herself, so she wants me to do it instead. Well, I think to myself, *I hope I can do it justice.*

Michal then explains the bridge exercise. Each person is given a helmet and harness-type contraption, with holes for the legs that they step into and fasten around the waist (they've brought pants under their skirts for this). Two ropes with clips are attached to the waist belt. Between two large trees stretch two long ropes, one above the other, the lower one about a meter off the ground and the higher one about a meter above it. A plastic bottle, its top cut off, swings from the end of the top rope.

Each mother and daughter pair

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stands with their feet on the bottom rope and their hands, plus two clips attached from the waist-belt, holding onto the top one. In this position, they need to reach the other side and place their note in the plastic bottle. When they come to a place they cannot pass, like a huge tree, they need to remove the clips carefully — one at a time, so they won't fall — and find a way to pass the obstacle. It looks easy, but it's not!

As I watch these women, old and young, many of them quite sick, yet so eager to participate, I realize that they are already willing to meet challenges with plenty of fighting spirit. I see a thirteen-year-old girl constantly by her mother's side, lovingly helping her every step of the way. Another has her mother roaring with laughter by bouncing up and down on the rope in the easier places and almost falling. A fifteen-year-old girl races off, puts her note in the bottle, then returns to help her mother. Each one finds her own way of getting around the thick tree trunk in the middle, and it's beautiful to see how the daughters care for their mothers. One unbelievable lady, who has bone disease metastasis, is up there, laughing the whole way through, and is greeted by a round of applause

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when she finishes.

The second exercise involves two ropes dangling like large double skipping ropes between two trees. In the middle is a kind of swing seat for someone to sit in, and various ropes and pulleys are attached to it and strung up on each tree. On either side of the seat there is a plastic bottle hanging from the end of the rope. The women draw lots to see who will be the lucky one to be in the swing. The rest of them form two groups, one pulling from the right, the other from the left, until the person seated is swinging high in the air.

Whichever group pulls the hardest draws the swinger to the bottle on their side, where she can place the note. They repeat this fun activity several times, each time with a different person in the swing-seat. This exercise inspires good teamwork, sore muscles, and plenty of laughter.

While I’m sitting on a bench observing this fascinating scene, a chassidishe lady in a navy-blue turban comes to sit next to me and tells me her story. She’s here today with her eighteen-year-old

daughter, who’s thoroughly enjoying all the activities.

“My daughter Esty\* was sixteen at the time of my diagnosis,” says Shaindy,\* a stylishly put-together and obviously intelligent woman.

“I was just several months after birth, my neck was swollen and food kept getting stuck in my throat.” Following trips to many different doctors, she was diagnosed with a type of lymphoma, a malignancy of the lymph glands, and is now two years post very intense treatment.

“My husband and I decided to be open with the family,” she continues. “We needed their help. Esty, who had little experience running the house because I always did it, just took over. She grew up overnight.” Shaindy is happy to share this time with her daughter today because Esty deserves a break, she says.

Her husband, too, once he’d recovered from the shock, was there for his wife with whatever she needed. “It really brought us together,” smiles Shaindy, who lives in Meah Shearim with other members of her Chassidishe group. “I’m very lucky.”

Shaindy radiates strength and *simchas hachaim*, as do most of the women here. But it wasn’t always that way. The women don’t necessarily come in with

joy and fortitude. It’s something that Beit Natan, through its various inspirational programs, works very hard to give these brave women.

“Beit Natan,” Shaindy enthuses, “has provided the most amazing emotional support. I was struggling with my sickness, not only physically but emotionally. To have people to talk to, who understood my fears or were going through the same thing, was wonderful.”

Support groups at Beit Natan are comprised of women matched according to stages of disease and treatment. “I went every single week,” says Shaindy. “Even if I’d spent the entire day in the hospital and was exhausted, I never compromised on it.”

Once the exercises are over, everyone is invited to sit down again on the ground, and the notes are read. There are many kinds of requests. One person asks for more patience and strength to care for her family. A young girl wants a cat. Another lady asks to be less fearful. The *madrichah* then asks for feedback on the exercises they’ve completed.

A vibrant, newly married girl declares that it was fun. “Usually my mother and I go shopping together or to the Kosel,” she laughs. “We certainly don’t do things like this.” Another mother says she wasn’t afraid on the rope because her daughter was right next to her. One woman affirms how wonderful it was to have her daughter together with her all the time, and another reflects how the exercises mirrored family support with the sickness. The girls helped their mothers with the ropes, as they do when they’re sick.

The discussion then moves on to the challenge of actually walking the ropes. The women talk about the easier and harder parts, just like the disease they're battling. During the easier stages, they could relax a little, joke around, and even jumped on the ropes; they were less afraid. In the more difficult places they needed to work harder, to concentrate more, to be serious. All this reflects the different ways of dealing with their fear.

The *madrichah* points out to one young girl that she left her mother and went on ahead, and asks her why. This makes the girl think about it. The group summarizes by agreeing that their daughters are learning by example how to cope with life's difficulties. They're getting tools that have strengthened them in their own lives. They're really growing up. Listening to them talk, I find myself becoming teary-eyed. I'm amazed at how quickly and easily they've all formed a bond.



As evening descends, a soft, warm wind brings the smell of the sizzling barbecue closer. We cross over the pathway to the wooden tables that are adorned with an abundance of food: salads, *pitot*, rolls, hamburgers, chicken wings, and hot dogs, all laid out attractively and with careful thought.

I sit down to eat with a few women at one table and there I meet Lisa\*, who's in

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her forties and has been living with cancer for a number of years. Her hairless head, underneath a headscarf, testifies to the month of radiation she's just finished, in between teaching swimming and taking care of her home and three children.

Her lovely eleven-year-old daughter, with long brown hair and deep brown eyes, sits beside her, and the two generate positive energy and closeness. Although less religious than most of the women here, Lisa and Adina\* fit perfectly into this warm, welcoming environment and are well loved. Adina talks to me openly about her feelings.

"I see the situation," she says, with the maturity of a thirty-year-old, "as a different way of living." Her mother, eager to hear her daughter's thoughts, encourages her to continue. "Sometimes I need help with my homework, but then I help my mother around the house instead, so it's a bit awkward in school for me the next day."

She's had art therapy, which helped because she was able to express her feelings and feel understood. When I ask her how she felt about coming today, she answers chirpily, "It's nice to spend this time with my mother. I don't have too much of that."

Initially, when Lisa became sick, she didn't feel that she needed a support group, but when she experienced a relapse of her illness, she changed her mind. A special group exists for women in her situation. In addition to support meetings, they have sessions on parenting and all the issues that may arise when one is a chronically ill mother. For example, is certain difficult teenage behavior normal, or is it exaggerated because the teen has a mother with cancer?

"I was very empowered by Beit Natan's three-day winter retreat," Lisa adds. "They had obviously put careful planning into the program, and it was extremely professional. I worried about being brought down emotionally, but actually, the opposite happened. It was uplifting, emotionally, spiritually,

The "soul" child behind Beit Natan is Mrs. Chaya Heller. "If it was a 'brainchild,'" she laughs, "it would never have happened."

Beit Natan, under the auspices of Harav Yisrael Ganz, *shlita*, is a non-profit organization that provides social, emotional, psychological and spiritual support to women and the families of women coping with cancer. Services include early detection educational programs, a hotline with recovered patients, and support groups and retreats lasting from one to three days.

Women trust Beit Natan and its process. It's a wellness center, a safe place; a home away from home. The focus of the organization is that by being more open about the disease and accepting the *nisayon* from Hashem with love, one can develop *middos* and grow through her illness.

Things are progressing constantly as Beit Natan enters its twelfth year. There are now monthly groups for husbands, given by Rabbi Aaron Friedman. And today's mother/daughter retreat is the first of its kind.

"We've made great strides," Mrs. Heller says. "And it's always been my dream to have parent-child groups because I believe that cancer is a family affair."

She sits quietly in the moonlight, watching mothers and daughters entwined in happy moments, singing and dancing. She's had many dreams over the years. Today, she's fulfilled another one!

physically and socially."

Leah\* and her daughter come from an Israeli *yeshivishe* background and live in a suburb of Yerushalayim. Leah looks trim and put together in her neat clothes and blonde *sheitel*. Her daughter Brachi\* is seventeen and studying special education in one of Yerushalayim's high

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schools. Leah’s first bout of cancer was ten years ago; last year she relapsed for the first time. Initially, she was reluctant to join Beit Natan, but with much persuasion from a friend, she agreed — and she’s very happy she did.

How did her daughter feel about joining in today’s event? “I just left a note about it on the kitchen table,” Leah answers, “and I let her decide.” Well, Brachi has come along with her mother, happily and enthusiastically.

“She took over the house when I

became sick again,” explains Leah. “She refused to accept help even though she was finishing the school year and had major tests.”

I ask Brachi how that was for her. “I didn’t feel I needed help,” Brachi tells me in a quiet, modest voice. “I was able to cope, so why burden somebody?” So where does she get her support from, I wonder. “Mostly from my family,” she says. “We talk about things a lot, and we’re very close.”

Doesn’t she ever feel afraid? “No,” she answers, “I don’t; it’s part of my life. My bitachon helps me the most because I know that even if things don’t turn out the way we’d like them, it will still be good.”

I am speechless! I have talked to girls wise beyond their years, who possess a faith and acceptance that takes most of us years to obtain. I feel humbled and honored to meet them.



Night has fallen, and it’s completely dark now as we walk further into the forest to a wide, open area. Chairs are

arranged in a circle and the talented Kalifa sisters are seated with their guitars and keyboard in the center.

Previously shy and reticent girls link arms and sway slowly from side to side. Amidst singing and clapping, they rush to dance; everyone is up at the end, even those initially hesitant. Brachi is having the time of her life dancing with Adina; only a few hours ago they were strangers. Others, who may never have crossed paths if not for this evening, have already formed a deep connection.

Out here in these quiet, peaceful surroundings, it is possible to forget everything: illness, treatments, stresses at home. Here, these women wrap themselves in love, *tefillah*, support, and Hashem. There is no sadness amongst the crowd, only joy. I sit, teary-eyed, watching these amazing women and their daughters dancing together, and I see the deep bond of *ahavas Yisrael*. It permeates the group, cemented in a chain of strong, secure links that, G-d willing, will never be broken! **B**

\* Names changed to protect privacy

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