

A River Runs Through It

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Campers at Jordan River Village scale the climbing wall. Courtesy of Jordan River Village Camp.

Nine-year-old Hilla Pulvermacher from Jerusalem, who is an insulin-dependent diabetic, probably has no idea who Paul Newman was. Twelve-year-old Ayal Adler from Ashdod, who has colitis, probably doesn't either. Nonetheless, it was because of the late actor that they had the time of their lives for a week last summer.

Little could Newman have known as he looked out over Israel's Jezreel Valley while filming the classic film "Exodus," that 50 years later it would be the site for one of his Hole in the Wall camps for seriously ill children. The Jordan River Village Camp, the newest addition to the Hole in the Wall family, opened this past summer and serves young people of all religious and ethnic backgrounds suffering from chronic and genetic medical conditions. Campers come from Israel, the Palestinian territories and the entire Middle East.

Jordan River Village is a unique place. It is the only camp facility in Israel designed specifically for the needs of children ages 9-21 with chronic and terminal diseases and medical conditions. The 60-acre wheelchair-accessible campus in the Lower Galilee overlooks Lake Kinneret, and it is equipped with advanced medical facilities as well as the kinds of buildings and activity areas one would expect to find at a children's camp.

"Other organizations run programs for sick children here in Israel, but they send the kids to kibbutzim, hotels, and the like for holiday or camp experiences," noted Katia Citrin, the camp's chief executive officer. "Jordan River Village is the only camp site built exclusively for these kids."

"This wasn't my first time away from home at camp," Hilla recently told The Jewish Week by phone. "I had gone to a diabetic camp before, but there is no way that it compared to Jordan River Village, which was so much better in terms of the activities we could do."

A visit to the site reveals that it is at once both state-of-the-art and warmly welcoming. "It's all about creating an atmosphere of 'Yes!'" explained Marni Mandell, executive director of American Friends of Jordan River Village. Mandell was taking a reporter on a tour of the camp under a blazing sun as gardeners finished up last-minute landscaping last July.

Mandell proudly showed off the major areas of the camp, pointing out that each sleek, white building is accented with a different color from the camp's rainbow-hued logo. Parents and guardians check their children in at the front gates, and from that point on, only the campers and counselors have the run of the carefully and attractively planned outdoor and climate-controlled indoor spaces. These include a retreat center with a controlled multi-sensory "Snoezelen" room, and an arts and crafts center that is set up for activities that include woodworking and ceramics-making.

"My favorite activities were archery, horseback riding and the climbing wall," Ayal said in a phone interview. "It was the first time I had ever held a bow and arrow, and it was a lot of fun."

Hilla was excited about the challenges the adventure tower posed, and she also enjoyed the archery. "It was very physical. We were active all the time and there wasn't much time to rest," she recalled. "But I didn't mind it, and I didn't miss home at all."

“The dining hall is the center of life at camp,” Mandell said as she pointed out its adjacent music room and kosher kitchens, one of them designed for cooking lessons. As at every camp, the dining hall is the locus for loud singing and cheering, and the presentation of funny skits. “Each meal is a happening,” Mandell said.

The camp food managed to please its harshest critics—the kids. “The food was actually really tasty,” said Hilla, who has an insulin pump. “I also have celiac disease, but the camp made sure that there was plenty of food for me to eat.”

The 12 bright and cheerfully decorated dormitories house eight campers and four staff members each. A quarter of the 50 staff members are paid counselors, while almost a half are young Israelis doing pre-army or national service. The rest are volunteers, who must be at least 18 years old and speak either fluent Hebrew or Arabic.

The dorms are all just a couple of minutes’ walk from the medical center, which resembles a small pediatric hospital ward. Surrounding the nurses’ desk in the middle are a dialysis corner and various treatment rooms where children can receive chemotherapy or other treatments, staying overnight if necessary. Though set on a seemingly remote hilltop, the camp is located right next to the Givat Avni communal settlement, and is only a ten-minute drive from the Poria Hospital in Tiberias. The sole road on the campus provides direct access to the medical center for emergency vehicles.

While the adventure tower, with its zip line and climbing wall is up and ready for use, the neighboring sports center, which features a large gym, workout room, lounge and wheelchair-accessible pool, is still under construction. More than \$2 million of JRV’s \$27.2 million capital budget still needs to be raised to complete the camp, as well as a neighboring theater. The camp intends for the professionally equipped theater, which will be the biggest one in the region and open for use by professional and amateur performers, to be a cultural hub for the Lower Galilee community.

Hilla and Ayal were members of several groups of campers who inaugurated JRV last summer and fall. Some weeklong sessions will be devoted to children suffering from a specific disease, while others will accommodate campers with a variety of illnesses. Thanks to Israel’s mild climate, the camp will run practically year-round to host children with cancer, thalassemia and other blood disorders, Crohn’s Disease and other gastro-intestinal disorders, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, kidney disease, diabetes, hemophilia, HIV, mental illness, and genetic diseases such as familial dysautonomia, as well as other conditions. The camp’s capacity is 96 campers during any given session.

Parents of the inaugural campers have written to Camp Director Dani Steiner to express their gratitude. One thanked the camp for “the opportunity for our daughter to spend time with children like her, who understand what she is going through.” Another welcomed the chance for her child “to be somewhere where the focus of activities and discussions was not on the disease.” Their children are looking forward to returning to JRV next year, as campers can attend once annually free of charge.

“I would love to go back next year!” Hilla exclaimed. Her dad Amir, is all for her returning, as well. Initially unfamiliar with and apprehensive about this “American-style camp,” and concerned as to whether JRV was truly prepared to handle a diabetic child who constantly needs to check her blood sugar levels, he visited the camp to talk to the staff a few weeks in advance. “In the end, the staff proved that they could handle it, and Hilla and the other diabetic kids who were with her got good care,” he said.

Thrilled to see JRV serve campers for the first time this past summer, John C. Read, president and CEO of the Association of Hole in the Wall Camps said, “Jordan River Village is a positive force of cooperation in the Middle East providing life-changing support to children with serious illnesses on both sides of the river.”

Steiner agrees with Read about JRV’s potential for bringing people together, given that illness does not discriminate. Steiner, who wears a kipa and has extensive experience in both formal and informal pluralistic education in Israel and abroad, contends that while JRV has its unique Middle Eastern issues of pluralism to deal with, it can learn from similar challenges other Hole in the Wall camps face. “We designate a huge part of our staff training to dealing with pluralism,” Steiner said. “I have brought to JRV best practices from the U.S. and Jewish-Arab programs I have been involved with.”

Just figuring out how to celebrate Shabbat “was an amazing process with the counselors – who are religious Jews, secular Jews and Arabs. There are many good ways to deal with this if you take into consideration the common denominators of respect and love.”

To learn more about Jordan River Village go to http://www.jrv.org.il/eng_index.htm