

Meet the Israeli Volunteers Who Offer Rides and Hope to Sick Palestinians

The Road to Recovery organization collects Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza borders and takes them to Israeli hospitals for treatment. Haaretz goes along for a ride

Dina Kraft

It's almost 6:30 A.M. and the sun is rising quickly over the [Sha'ar Efraim](#) checkpoint separating Israel and the West Bank. Amid the rush of Palestinian workers heading toward vans that will take them to jobs inside Israel stand the Alwaneh family, including 3-year-old Kais clutching a "Bob the Builder" backpack.

The father, Samir Alwaneh, 41, smokes a cigarette, his face tense. The family is waiting for a driver from Israel – someone they have never met before – who will collect them and take them the 32 kilometers (20 miles) to Israel's largest hospital, Sheba Medical Center, near Tel Aviv. It is time for another surgery for Kais, who was badly burned in a fire last year, leaving his face severely disfigured and his hands as stumps. This will be his fourth surgery and is meant to help repair damage to the skin around one of his eyes.

The family looks up to see Orli Shalem, 56, driving up in a blue hatchback. Shalem, a member of Kibbutz Ma'abarot, is with Derech Hachlama (The Road to Recovery), an organization boasting some 1,400 Israeli volunteers who drive Palestinians from border checkpoints – both in Gaza and the West Bank – for medical treatment inside Israel.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians are treated in Israeli hospitals every year, most for cancer or heart problems, and many of them are children. There are between 30 and 60 rides given per day; without them, the Palestinian patients and their families would be left to foot the cost of taxis to the hospitals, which can cost anything from 150 to 400 shekels (\$41 to \$110) each way.

"It's a small way of helping, but it is some kind of help, and a way to show we care so they [the Palestinians] can see there is not just the brutal, threatening side of Israel," explains Shalem as she heads west to the hospital.

Shalem and the Alwanehs had exchanged a quick and limited greeting of "Shalom" when they met, since Shalem does not speak Arabic and the Alwanehs do not speak Hebrew. It is a common problem.

A Road to Recovery volunteer transporting a Palestinian family to an Israeli hospital for treatment. Courtesy of Road to Recovery

Tami Suchman, 71, from [Kibbutz Beeri](#) near the Gaza border, started volunteering as a driver five years ago. In the past she would try to talk to her passengers as much as possible, even if it meant pushing through the language barrier with hand gestures and facial expressions. "But these days I prefer to speak less," admits Suchman.

“What is there to say after we agree conditions are bad?” she asks. “We both want things to be good, but understand that it’s going to take a long time till things get better. For me personally, I feel guilt. I find myself apologizing for the situation that I’m ashamed we are even in.”

“I don’t justify what they are doing – for example, with the burning kites,” Suchman adds, referring to the recent incidents that have set thousands of dunams of kibbutz fields ablaze, “but I understand where it comes from.”

This language gap can feel like a metaphor for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. Road to Recovery was founded in 2006 with the hope that, amid the seemingly intractable conflict, the human connection and goodwill forged in these rides might eventually help break down walls, both psychological and real, between Israelis and Palestinians.

It was established by Yuval Roth, who had become active in the Parents Circle Families Forum – which brings bereaved families from both sides of the conflict together – after his brother was killed by Hamas terrorists in 1993. It was at one of these meetings, in 2005, that he met a Palestinian woman whose brother was ill. She asked Roth to drive him from a checkpoint for treatment in Israel – and that one ride developed into a nonprofit that is now on the brink of expanding inside the West Bank as well, offering Palestinians rides to both sides of the checkpoint. Legendary Canadian singer Leonard Cohen was the project’s first donor.

Road to Recovery describes itself as an apolitical organization, drawing volunteers from across the political spectrum – including retired army officers and even a small number of Jewish settlers. For people like Shalem, however, the act of volunteering is also a political one. She opposes the Israeli occupation and says the rides are one of the few ways she has found to express that opposition in a practical and, she says, hopefully helpful way.

Alwaneh says the round-trip rides to the Israeli hospitals are a big help. And the medical care his son has received in Israel has moved him, noting: “Their treatment of Israeli and Palestinians is the same there – they treat Kais like a boy, like any other boy.”

Neely Gardin, 53, opens the gate that leads from her house to her car on a narrow street in a Tel Aviv suburb. This is her first day as a volunteer driver and she has given herself extra time to get to the Efraim checkpoint. Once there, she will rendezvous with Shalem – who will help if there are any problems – and the Palestinians she is driving to hospital.

She’s never been to a checkpoint before and says she does not know any Palestinians from either the West Bank or Gaza. She is not a particularly political person, she points out, but heard about the organization and just knew she wanted to help out.

The dawn sky grows lighter as she navigates her car past olive groves, open fields and, eventually, the sprawling Arab-Israeli city of Taibeh. The checkpoint comes into view and she calls Naim Albeida when she parks.

Palestinians need permits to enter Israel, and the permit system can be cumbersome and slow – final authorizations from the Israeli army usually only come a day before a patient’s appointment at the hospital, and if they arrive too late the patient cannot travel. Albeida, a

Palestinian who lives in the West Bank, oversees the logistics for the Palestinian patients, working as a link between the PA, the Israeli army and Road to Recovery.

Gardin follows Albeida's instructions and finds her Palestinian patient at the border. She greets Rami, 32, a cancer patient who has finished his treatment but is going to Israel for some tests. He is accompanied by his wife and mother. Neely and Rani start chatting in Hebrew and he tells her about his young daughters, showing her some photos.

"The thing that struck me most was how normal, how everyday, it all felt," Gardin tells Haaretz afterward. "It's very important to see that the person who stands on the other side [of the border] is a human being. We know that theoretically, but until we are with someone real, that remains only an idea. We forget everything that we have in common, because we are all so focused on the conflict, each side wrapped up in their own justifications."

'An angel, not a person'

Kais Alwaneh heading into Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, after being dropped off at the hospital by Orli Shalem, June 2018. Dina Kraft

Albeida has only been a Road to Recovery staffer for a few months. But he's been helping out as a volunteer since 2010, when he stumbled upon the organization while looking for ways to help a neighbor find an affordable way to get to an Israeli hospital.

When he first heard about it, he admits not believing that such help could really exist. He called Roth, who told him, "Sure, no problem."

"And I said, 'No problem? What do you mean no problem?'" recounts Albeida – who even traveled with his neighbor to see with his own eyes that it was all real.

"I met the volunteer at the crossing and I thought to myself, 'She's like an angel, not a person,'" recalls Albeida, who lives in Kafr Jayus, near the city of Qalqilyah. Every day after that, he started communicating with Roth, helping to coordinate the rides.

It was not easy: He was working in construction, often receiving urgent phone calls while he was atop a ladder or up scaffolding. He says he lost two jobs because of those phone calls. "It interfered with my focus on the job, but what could I do? There were medical emergencies going on," Albeida explains.

He credits his fluent Hebrew not only to 25 years working on construction sites in Israel but also to a woman named Dalia, whom his mother befriended when he was a young boy. His mother worked as a cleaner in an Israeli hospital, where Dalia was a nurse.

"I learned early on that not all Israelis are soldiers who come into our homes and arrest us. They are also people living their normal lives," says Albeida. "I know the occupation is what ruined lives on both sides."

Albeida adds that he noticed the Israeli volunteers' desire to connect more deeply with Palestinians, so now he hosts lunches at his home once a month for people on both sides of the border to get together. "After the meal we sit and talk, and discuss our shared future," he says.

Kais Alwaneh heading to Sheba Medical Center, June 2018. Dina Kraft

After about an hour's drive, Shalem pulls up at the Sheba Medical Center. Kais is whimpering in the backseat. Seeking to distract him, his mother, Hanna, tickles him and covers his burned face with kisses.

Shalem watches as the family walks toward the hospital entrance. "Goodbye, and good luck," she calls out.