

I Came to Support, But I Was Uplifted

By Avrohom Wagner



When I was invited to attend Chai4ever's *Chol Hamoed Pesach* Day of Fun and Adventure at The Funplex in Mount Laurel, NJ, I thought it would be a waste of my time. As a close friend of a Chai4ever family, I am well-acquainted with the great work Chai4ever does for families suffering from parental illness, and I know all about the events they hold for them. What could I possibly gain from actually seeing one?

From the moment I walked through the door, I began to realize how wrong I had been. Just the sight of the refreshments carefully laid out in advance of the parents' and children's arrival shattered my perceptions. Words and numbers simply cannot do justice to the vision of food, snacks and drinks of all kinds neatly prepared for over 1,000 people. The logistical planning that has to go into an event like this was brought home to me in a way that no abstract knowledge could have accomplished.

When the families began to arrive, I watched as they were each greeted and given a pass for unlimited rides and arcades. (I had never before heard of having unlimited arcade games, but watching the kids play excitedly, without a care, I wonder why it isn't the standard. Just one more example of Chai4ever going the extra mile.) Volunteers were standing ready, and they whisked the children off to the roller coasters, go-karts and games. I saw parent after parent visibly relax with the knowledge that their children would be enjoying themselves for the next few hours.

Taking a stroll through the facility, I was struck by the difference between the families I had seen walking in and those who were playing inside. The same people who had looked so stressed and careworn a few minutes before were now happily *shmoozing*, bowling, playing games or just taking it all in. The atmosphere of caring, togetherness and pure joy was unmistakable.

"When I'm with a Chai4ever group, I never have to worry about people staring at me with pity or making well-meaning but hurtful comments," one father told me. "I feel like I'm with friends, and I can just enjoy my family."

There was also a powerful sense of secu-

rity. From the Hatzolah members standing by with an ambulance, just in case, to the calm competence of the ubiquitous volunteers, it was clear that Chai4ever was ready to handle whatever might happen. I know from personal experience how challenging trips can be when medical difficulties are a factor. Chai4ever was clearly determined to ensure that none of their families would have any concerns on that account.

The greatest part of the experience, of course, was watching the children run and play. Once again, I found my preconceived notions woefully insufficient to the reality. Take a group of kids who are under stresses that no child should ever have to face due to family illness. Give them a dream of a *Chol Hamoed* trip in a facility operating way under capacity, so that there is little to no waiting on line, and what do you get? Believe me when I tell you that if you have never been at a Chai4ever event, and you think you know the answer to that question, you are so wrong. You really cannot fathom it if you haven't seen it.

The day finished with a concert. Music is really not my thing, so I thought I would leave early. I am so glad I didn't. The *ruach* was completely absorbing, like nothing I have ever experienced. Seeing seriously ill parents and their children dancing together with true *simchas Yom Tov* moved me to tears. I was especially touched by watching the volunteers dance around one wheelchair-bound father, a *rebbe* who suffers from multiple sclerosis. As he rejoiced with them, and they with him, the *chizuk* flowing in both directions was electric. I left the room uplifted, inspired, and incredibly moved.

I know it's somewhat oxymoronic for me to sit here and try to describe to you a gathering that I keep saying is indescribable, but what can I do? After seeing some of their work firsthand, I am more determined than ever to do whatever I can to help Chai4ever. The pain, isolation and stress of parental illness are crushing, and our community is fortunate to have an organization that works tirelessly to mitigate and alleviate them.

Visit www.chai4ever.org to learn more about what they do and how you can help.

Ezer Mizion: A Hand in the Dark

Making the Difference Between Wheelchair-Bound and *Simcha*-Bound

It wasn't easy to make it to the wedding. I arrived home from work much later than I had planned. There was supper to prepare and homework to do with my kids, but frozen pizza and a big sister who actually knew the math better than I did solved both problems and I made it in

time for the *chupah*. I was patting myself on the back when I saw Adina. Adina? She managed to come? Together with her husband? Yes, they were both walking in together. Did I say walking? Let me qualify that. Adina's husband has advanced Parkinson's and, though he can struggle with a walker for short distances, he is wheelchair-bound much of the time, a real challenge for someone who loves people and *simchos* and lives on the fourth floor...

We sat together, Adina and I. She is a dear friend and neighbor and I was so happy to spend time with her. As the last strains of wedding music began to wind down, I stood up to make my way to the bus stop. A long trip awaited me. I was not looking forward to it.

"Wait," Adina called out. "Would you like a ride?"

"It's not too conventional," she chuckled. "But much easier than the bus trip. If you wait a bit, the Ezer Mizion

ambulance will be coming soon to pick up my husband. There's room for companions if you don't mind sitting on a bench."

We met her husband in the lobby. He was glowing. He told his wife that he had actually "danced" with the *chosson*, wheelchair and all. People kept coming up to talk all evening. He felt human again. It had been months since he had gone anywhere except to doctors' offices.

Of course, he appreciates the Ezer Mizion trips to the clinic. Without them, his physical condition would deteriorate considerably. "But Ezer Mizion also recognizes a man's spirit," he said, his grin lighting up his face. "I'll remember this evening for weeks."

The "limousine" arrived. The driver helped him in, all the while singing *chasunah* songs with his patient, trying to extend the *simchah* a bit longer. As we were driven home, Adina mentioned that Ezer Mizion is an organization that realizes that, for people like her husband, it is just as important to help them get to weddings in the evenings as to get to doctors appointments in the morning.

Tonight, he was not wheelchair-bound. He was *simcha*-bound.

Ezer Mizion's Transport Division drives the frail, the elderly, the disabled, and the ill to treatment centers, therapy clinics and doctors appointments, but it doesn't forget the dreams they have: a trip to the *Kosel*, a grandson's *bar mitzvah*, visiting an equally disabled relative, a fun day at the beach... Dreams...

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For further info, call 718. 853.8400 or visit www.ezer-mizion.org.

