

Reporter's notebook

Saving Nadrah

The Times of Israel accompanies the first Syrian heart patient in Israel — a four-year-old girl whose family put her life in the hands of the enemy — on the final stage of an unprecedented journey

By [Lazar Berman](#) June 13, 2013, 1:36 pm



On a sunny morning earlier this week, a Syrian woman and her four-year-old daughter walked out their front door, heading to the girl's final checkup at the hospital after a complex operation. They clambered into a car parked in the adjacent dirt lot. The little girl struggled briefly as she was buckled in, but settled down when her mother slid in next to her.

Any time a child recovers from surgery is noteworthy. But this story is truly unique — unprecedented, remarkable, heartwarming and inspiring. The Syrian mother and child were not in their war-torn homeland, nor were they walking through the tough streets of the refugee camps where hundreds of thousands of their countrymen had fled.

They were in the heart of Jerusalem, minutes from Zion Square and City Hall. And I was traveling with them to Holon's Wolfson Hospital for the little girl's last echocardiogram less than a month after her heart surgery.

The two Syrians had fled the brutal civil war, taking refuge in a neighboring country. The little girl, Nadrah (her real name, along with the location her family currently calls home — is being withheld to protect her identity), suffered from a congenital heart disease, single ventricle physiology. The malformation did not allow her blood

to be properly oxygenated by her lungs, giving Nadrah a bluish complexion. Untreated, she wouldn't see her 18th birthday.

Yet, here she was, giggling in the back of the car. Robust, ruddy, a little mischievous — and in Israel.

They had been brought to Israel by Shevet Achim, an Israel-based Christian organization that has been arranging for Palestinian, Jordanian, Kurdish and now Syrian children to come to Israel for almost two decades to undergo life-saving heart surgery.

One of the veteran members of the Shevet Achim community, who asked not to be identified, was driving us to the hospital. I began speaking to Nadrah's mother, "Raha," as the driver pulled out into the busy Jerusalem street. The atmosphere was somewhat fraught, as there was a lot riding on this examination. If everything checked out, they could finally leave Israel to join the rest of their family the next day. If not, the situation would be extremely complicated.

In part, because Raha was also nine months pregnant.

'He entrusted us with his family'

The ongoing conflict in Syria has shattered the nation, claiming over 70,000 lives and creating a mess for its neighbors in the Middle East. Jordan, for example, a country of just over six million, hosts over 500,000 Syrians, which has put significant pressure on the kingdom. Refugees have also streamed into Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq .

Israel has maintained that it will not allow refugees into the country, though it has treated a small number of wounded Syrian civilians in Israeli hospitals near the Golan Heights. But Nadrah is the first Syrian heart patient in Israel.

Raha refused to tell me where her family hailed from in Syria. She did reveal that her home city saw significant fighting, and she witnessed death and bloodshed. She, her husband, and their children fled Syria last year and they rented a house near a major refugee camp. The rest of her family, including her elderly parents, stayed behind.

Christian humanitarian workers in the refugee camps found out about Nadrah's condition. They contacted Shevet Achim, who sent senior members of the organization to meet the family. At first, Nadrah's parents hesitated. But as the girl's condition deteriorated, they decided to take the risk. "My husband put his faith in God," Raha said.

After some discussion with Jesse Tillman, a Shevet Achim staffer, and others, it was decided that Raha would be the one to accompany Nadrah on the trip as she would be best able to tend to her needs. Though the idea of traveling to an enemy country sounded frightening, she said, "there's no mother who doesn't want to do everything she can to take care of her daughter."

'I am so happy that you're bringing in Syrians,' said the Israeli border official. 'We need to do something for the Syrian people'

The next day, Tillman met them on a street corner. "The father kissed them on both cheeks," said Tillman, "then entrusted us with his family." They climbed into the van.

From there, the mother and child and the Shevet Achim staffers, along with an 8-year-old Kurdish girl and her mother also coming for heart surgery, drove to the border crossing. Getting through border control was slow as Raha and Nadrah held no passports, only Red Cross identity papers.

On the Israeli side, things moved more quickly. Still, the Israelis insisted on searching the car thoroughly, and a female guard took Raha aside for a pat-down. Raha seemed a bit nervous, but when the Israeli duty manager brought out popsicles for everyone in the unique party, she started to relax. “I am so happy that you’re bringing in Syrians,” the official told Tillman. “We need to do something for the Syrian people.”

The drive to Wolfson

We drove out of Jerusalem, with the hi-tech park at Har Hotzvim and the empty stone homes of Lifta looming on the slopes above us.

“I was afraid at the beginning,” Raha told me. “I was afraid because I was the first Syrian to come here. But I went into the hospital, and saw Arabs and all sorts of people, and I felt safe.”



Raha and Nadrah walk through the hospital with a Shevet Achim staffer. (photo credit: Lazar Berman/Times of Israel)

The doctors were the first Jews she had ever seen. She expected hostility from the Israelis because she was Syrian, but was pleasantly surprised at the welcome she received. “Everyone there treated me well, especially the doctors,” she said.

Shevet Achim staff coordinated a trip for her to pray at the Al Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount, and she relished taking in Jerusalem. “It’s nice to see how everyone lives together,” she said. They also took her and Nadrah to the beach in Jaffa, the first time they had ever seen the sea.

During the ride, Raha deflected questions about the civil war, or anything that even indirectly touched on politics.

“I am always thinking of my daughter, I just want her to get better,” she said emphatically. “That’s all I’m thinking about.”

Nadrah underwent heart surgery on May 8, Raha told me. The operation went smoothly, but she had to stay in the hospital for 10 days.

One day while Nadrah was recuperating, Raha took her daughter for a stroll down the hall. They didn't walk long, as Nadrah was still weak from her operation. They reached their room and walked through the door.

A man she had never seen before was waiting by Nadrah's bed. Raha noticed the pistol on his hip.

He began speaking in flawless Syrian Arabic. "I am Abu Salim," he said, "and I heard you were here. You don't know me."

Raha was in shock.

How did Assad's intelligence services track us to the hospital?

The Brother from Bat Yam

Meir Hazan, or Abu Salim as he's known in Arabic, escaped Damascus at the age of 17. He still speaks to his family in the Damascene Arabic tongue of his youth. He was sitting reading Yedioth Ahronoth at his Bat Yam home, as he does every morning, when he came across a story about Raha and Nadrah. He decided immediately to go see them.



Meir Hazan (Courtesy)

"For me, this was a human issue," Hazan said. "It doesn't matter what religion she is."

Raha didn't know what to make of him. Who was this Syrian man in her room?

It took Hazan a while to explain that he was simply a Syrian Jew who was living in Israel, and that she had nothing to fear. "She never imagined something like this would happen," Hazan recounted. "I swear to you, I had tears in my eyes. We were both very emotional."

She was deeply touched, Hazan said. "She told me, 'In Syria people are slaughtering each other, but you came here to visit another Syrian you don't know, and there is no hatred in your eyes.'"

Hazan had initially wanted to take the family for a drive to a local Syrian restaurant, but Nadrah's health wouldn't allow it. Luckily, in the Syrian tradition, he had prepared kubbeh, tabbouleh, pickled vegetables and other Syrian foods for them, and set them out in the hospital room.

They talked about Raha's family and their plight for more than an hour.

As they sat in the room, eating, Hazan looked up at her and said, "I want you to think of me as your brother." Raha assured him she did. "It doesn't matter where you end up after this," Hazan said, "but promise me you won't go back to Syria."

Raha said that her parents were still there, but she had no plans to return.

As Hazan stood to leave, Raha stopped him. Silence hung over the room as she hesitated. Finally, she worked up the courage to speak. "We're family now," she told him, a look of shame on her face. "Look, I don't have anything here. Nothing. I'm embarrassed to say it."

"I took out my wallet, and placed what I had into her hand," Hazan recalled. "I told her that if she ever needs anything more, she should call me immediately."

Raha called Hazan on Sunday to inform him they were planning to head back to their host country. He told her that if she finds her family in a tight spot again, she should not hesitate to contact him. Hazan also gave her the number of a friend where she was living whom she could call if she ever found herself in trouble.

She made him promise he would come visit them. He assured her he would.

"In the end," he told me, "we're all people."

Still touched by human stories

We pulled up to the hospital and took the elevator up to the cardiac wing on the second floor. Children from across the world ran around and babbled excitedly. A little Israeli girl showed off the bandages on her arm to a Kurdish boy from Iraq. Nadrah began playing with an African boy until they started fighting over who got to sit in the red chair, and both ran back crying to their mothers.



Nadrah plays with a young Kurdish boy while she waits for her examination (photo credit: Lazar Berman/Times of Israel)

After several hours of waiting, Dr. Alona Raucher-Sternfeld, a pediatric cardiologist affiliated with Save a Child's Heart, Shevet Achim's Israeli sister organization, called Nadrah in for her cardiac echo. Raucher-Sternfeld had been treating Nadrah since she first arrived in Israel.

Despite her extensive medical experience, she is still moved by her contact with Nadrah. “We’re medical professionals, true, but we’re still humans, still touched by human stories. This gives me hope for the future. I hope this is the beginning of true cooperation between our peoples, both medically and politically.”

The surgery gave Nadrah a chance at a normal life. “She can go to school now, play light sports,” Raucher-Sternfeld said. “She will probably be able to give birth.”

Nadrah ran into the examination room and lay down on the table. Raha eased into the chair next to her. On the kids’ show on the TV overhead, Israeli children sang about a little bird learning to fly. Nadrah giggled as the doctor began moving her instrument across her chest, checking to see if the fluid that had accumulated in her heart after the surgery had disappeared.

The doctor put down her instrument, and looked up. The room fell silent, everyone — Raha, the Shevet Achim staff, and me — waiting eagerly for her diagnosis. Was Nadrah going home?

A powerful revelation

The story of Shevet Achim’s founding, like many stories in this country, sounds too improbable to be true.

One of the group’s founders was volunteering in Israel in the 1990s, helping immigrants from the former Soviet Union acclimate. A Ukrainian family whose members were not Israeli citizens heard about his work and came to visit. The parents told him, “Our boy has leukemia, and the hospital wants \$64,000 to treat him. Will you help us?”

He had no idea how to help them. “I was too wishy-washy to tell them no,” he recalled, “even though we had about \$100 to spend on each family.” He said he’d look into it.

He drove over to the Hadassah-Ein Kerem medical center and asked around until he found Prof. Shimon Slavin, a renowned expert who ran the hospital’s bone marrow center. “He’ll die without treatment,” Slavin said, “and we can probably save him.” But they would need to come up with a way to pay for the expensive procedure. “I don’t like this situation,” lamented Slavin, “but this is the way advanced medical centers operate around the world.”

The man decided he would try to do whatever he could. “It hit me. We could save a beautiful child. I decided to pray, and share his story. And guess what? Around saving a child’s life, people from all backgrounds came together. Jewish, Christian, religious, secular.”

‘The Israeli government is clear that in life-or-death cases, it will do whatever is needed to get the patient treatment,’ noted a senior member of the Shevet Achim community. ‘I haven’t seen them deviate from that policy in 18 years’

Even Jewish mothers took up the cause. The Women’s International Zionist Organization (WIZO) marched over to the offices of then president Ezer Weizman, and with his help, convinced the hospital to bring down the price of the procedure.

“That boy learned he was as valuable as any other child,” the staffer recalled.

From there, the organization took off. It started bringing Palestinian children from the Gaza Strip, then expanded to Jordan. After Saddam Hussein’s regime was toppled in 2003, it began operating in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Israeli government and hospitals have been active partners in the life-saving project. “The government is clear that in life-or-death cases, it will do whatever is needed to get the patient treatment,” noted a senior member of the Shevet Achim community. “I haven’t seen them deviate from that policy in 18 years.”

In addition, not only do the hospitals agree not to charge the patients at the foreigner rate, they request only 50% of what the Israeli insurance system asks, simply covering the hospital’s cost to ensure they’re not draining money away from the Israeli taxpayer.

Still, there is a price to the endeavor. “It stretches the human infrastructure,” acknowledged the staffer. “These doctors could be in their private clinics, or with their families, instead of seeing the kids. But they are committed to the cause.”

He recalled one instance in which many of the heart specialists at the hospital had traveled out of the country for a Jewish holiday. A child patient from Gaza went into crisis, and the closest surgeon was out in the Mediterranean on his sailboat. When he heard about the Palestinian boy’s situation, he turned his boat around and headed for the hospital, cutting his vacation short.

“These families notice that in their own countries, the value of every human life is not often appreciated,” the Shevet Achim member said. “It is a powerful revelation for them, for the ‘enemy’ to be the first to treat their children as if they truly matter. And they go home and tell their story.”

Crossing the Middle East

Dr. Raucher-Sternfeld smiled. “She looks good. She’s going home.” Raha looked hugely relieved.

It was the answer they had been waiting for. The best possible news.



Dr. Raucher-Sternfeld (L) with Raha and Nadrah after the examination (photo credit: Lazar Berman/Times of Israel)

But before they could go, the family needed a discharge report with no mention of Israel or the name of the hospital, and they needed it within the next few hours. The doctors agreed to email the report, and said there was absolutely no problem cutting off the logo at the top.

But this wasn’t the last time Raha and Nadrah would be in Raucher-Sternfeld’s care. She told them that they needed to come back in a year for the second stage of the surgery.

For now, though, Raha and Nadrah would be reunited with their family.

Nadrah slept on the journey back from the hospital, and Raha just looked out the window. “I am happy,” she said. “Very happy.”

The next day, the senior Shevet Achim staffer drove mother and child back to their family. On the way, they joked about her holding her baby in until they arrived. “We had enough bureaucratic hurdles without throwing an undocumented Syrian baby into the mix,” he explained.

Raha’s husband, seeking to stay out of the sight of his neighbors, asked them to meet him on the same street corner he had last seen his wife and daughter. He gave the Shevet Achim member two boxes of candy, and a fur-lined parka.

“His joy and enthusiasm even extended to multiple kisses on the lips for me,” he said.

Other Syrian families, nervous about entering Israel, were waiting to see that Nadrah returned safely, with her identity protected, before agreeing to send their own children. Raha and Nadrah made it home on Wednesday, and on Thursday, the visa request for a second Syrian child was submitted to the Israeli government, with an invitation to the Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer.

Raucher-Sternfeld sees Raha as the real hero. “Eight months pregnant, she agreed to put her life in danger to travel to a place she had never been, an ‘enemy’ country, to save her child.”

“This mother crossed the Middle East for her daughter.”