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# Volunteering from Heart to Heart

Adi and Tzipi Atiram – Dance Instructors  
for Those with Special Needs

International Down Syndrome Day is observed on March 21 (3/21). The date was chosen to represent the triplication (trisomy) of the 21st chromosome which causes Down syndrome.

“Yemenite step”, “grapevine step”, “skip” – these are professional concepts used every day in folk dance sessions in Israel and around the world.

At one dance club in Rishon LeZion, different concepts are heard. A new dance is taught in an entirely different way. It is the proper way for a different reality. This dance class is the “Baby” of **Tzipi and Adi Atiram**. It gives special attention to

dancers with developmental limitations who suffer from Down Syndrome.



Adi Atiram



Tzipi Atiram

The Atirams have been teaching folk dancing to developmentally limited people for about 15 years. Four years earlier, they began to teach those who are wheelchair bound.

The story of Tzipi and Adi and delayed development dancers, started with their unprecedented success with wheelchair bound dancers in Rishon LeZion and continued in Ashdod. The Atirams were invited to a meeting with **Etti Madmoni z"l**, the former director of the AKIM branch in Ashdod. (AKIM is the Israeli national organization for people with intellectual disabilities and their families.) They were asked to organize and start a club for people with special needs. This was a new challenge for them. “Etti knew we had no knowledge of the field.” Precisely because of this, she wanted us to work with AKIM. She was very persistent and they gave in to her request, even though they had no idea what this project was all about... “We were actually thrown into the water; very deep water...”, Tzipi remembers.

Thus, for eight years they invested their hearts and souls in the Ashdod project. They broadened the horizons of their students, giving them the emotional experiences of folk dancing, performance, and an appearance at the Karmiel Festival.

When I came into the dance studio in Rishon LeZion, my first impression was that, externally, the dancers all resembled each other: full bodies, round faces, flat noses, and slanted eyes. But very quickly, led by Tzipi and Adi along with volunteer-dancers and parents of the dancers, I became acquainted with some of them and began to see the physical differences between them.



Tzipi Atiram  
and Tomer Garufi

**"With endless dedication, patience, sensitivity, concern and love for them - for the "children", as Adi calls them with a sparkle in his eyes as with the love of a father for his children – Adi and Tzipi have devoted the best of their energy and experience to them week after week"**

With endless dedication, patience, sensitivity, concern and love for them – for the "children", as Adi calls them with a sparkle in his eyes as with the love of a father for his children – Adi and Tzipi have devoted the best of their energy and experience to them week after week. With my own eyes, filled with tears, I saw them create this dance session from scratch.

I was astonished by the abilities of the dancers, who were so disciplined and thirsty to learn and to succeed. I was very moved watching them. The atmosphere was calm and exuded a pleasant feeling that made me feel very comfortable when I joined the circle.

I was excited to dance next to Tzipi. During all this, I couldn't believe my eyes – on her other side, was **Tomer Garufi** (35). I later learned that this was his permanent place in the circle.

An interesting additional key to the Atiram teaching method is "to flow" with the group. He says, "When I notice that even though I ask them to start with the left foot, almost everyone starts with the right foot, I flow with them by making a change to my original decision. Then everyone starts on the right foot".

**The secret to this successful method is based on a very important principle: i.e., look people straight in the eye when speaking to them. "I had a lot of problems at the beginning," Atiram reveals. "I learned that saying, 'You don't know' or 'You don't dance properly', was insulting to them. Some of them cried and I felt terrible. As a result, I don't speak to them in that way [anymore]. I learned through my mistakes to treat them as equals, with mutual respect."**

Among other things, this led to the need for Adi to collate all the practical material that was collected over the years, to consolidate all the written material and to produce and publish a handbook for the instructors.

Adi explains: "My dream is to spread it widely in order to expand the movement of 'dancers with special needs', all over the country. One of the reasons that the book was written was to prevent others from making the same mistakes that I made during my work."

The following are two short clips filmed at the 2024 Ashdodance Festival: <https://youtu.be/d-n9WnDq7Uk>, <https://youtu.be/mYwHQbrrlhE> .

Tomer Garufi doesn't speak. He was born with his umbilical cord wrapped around his throat. However, he understands everything. "Tomer uses 'gesture' language", his father **Gabi** explains. Gabi is a volunteer in every part of his being. Tzipi calls him, "Father of the year" while watching him communicate with his oldest son. "Just as there is sign language for use with the deaf, so there is the language of 'gestures' (transferring messages through movement, body language – A.L.)", Gabi explains.

My heart went out to Tomer during the dance session. He does not move away from Tzipi, dances close to her, and follows her every step with his watchful



Gabi Garufi, Tomer's father



eyes, meticulously and patiently following every movement. "You can see his desire to excel". Tzipi points this out with great composure.

**Vicky Lupo**, who is the same age as Tomer and appeared with **Anna Aronov** on the **Guy Pines** television program, also loves to dance. According to her mother **Aliza**, Vicky has dance in her soul: "She waits impatiently all week for the day of the dance session. It makes her happy. She expends energy and enjoys the social encounters. At home, when she hears music that she loves, she starts to dance".



*Israel Kadosh (39) and his mother Elian*

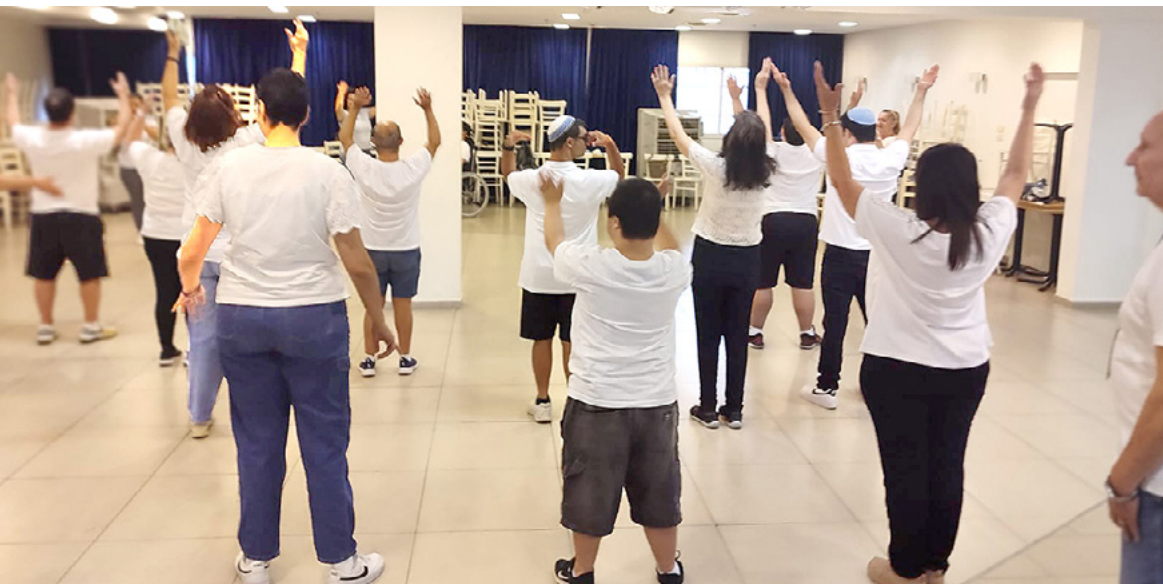
Thanks to dance, **Israel Kadosh** (39) and **Oded Naftali** (34) are friends outside the dance circle and are partners in some of their personal achievements.

Dance develops memory and the ability to study. It also builds self-confidence and a belief in oneself. It acts as a springboard to independent skills and to the dancer's integration into the social life of a community. Dance is a gift to worried parents. "As a result of learning the dances, Oded realizes that he has the capability to learn, possesses a developed memory and has started academic studies", says Gabi Garufi.

Thus, Oded and Naftali both have Bachelors' Degrees in the Social Sciences from Bar Ilan University. Israel Kadosh is studying in the same field. This is the first year of study within "Project Power", a project that integrates students with special needs into academia.

It should be noted that according to research undertaken by the Bar Ilan Education Department, which was published about two years ago and then presented to **Michal Herzog**, wife of the President of Israel, there is an increase in the intelligence of these students during the study year.

"Israel has been diagnosed as in need of rehabilitation, but not as being retarded", explains Elian, his mother, a volunteer with the Rishon LeZion branch of the AKIM Association. "And as such, he works in the local IKEA branch in Rishon LeZion. He is independent, operates



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a computer and a mobile phone, and I get great pleasure from him”, she tells us with a smile and with great pride.

Oded, Naftali and Israel Kadosh won two gold medals at an international swimming competition in Berlin, Germany. In a short conversation, Israel, with an embarrassed smile, tells me that he loves to dance as much as he loves basketball: “Even if my knee hurts, I come to the dance sessions,” he points out with satisfaction.

Three months ago, Oded, together with five other students, participated in the ceremony granting diplomas at Bar Ilan. When he served in the Israel Defense Forces, he was among those who received the “Outstanding Soldier” decoration from the President of Israel.



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“It all started with my love for folk dancing”, Tzipi tells us about the beginning of her road to dance. “I infected Adi with this ‘bug’ and to my delight, he later joined me at dance sessions”.

Adi fell in love with dance. He got strongly and very deeply involved, and invested time in learning the folk dances. He also attended dance sessions that included dancers in wheelchairs.

And from here, Adi’s road was a short one to passing an instructors course led by **Edna Kaveh**, at Givat Washington.

Subsequently, he took a professional course for working with the special needs population including the visually impaired and blind as well as those in wheelchairs, led by **Galit Ben Haim** and **Orly Baor z”l**, founder of the “Dance on Wheels” movement at Seminar HaKibbutzim. He also attended a course for children’s dancing with **Dr. Levi Bar Gil**. Within the framework of his studies in the magic world of dance to which he was exposed, he completed a course in choreography with **Shlomo Maman** at Tel Aviv University. (The completion of any instructors course grants graduates the privilege of membership in the Instructors Association, A.L.).





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It turns out that for Adi Atiram the knowledge of instruction wasn't enough. He turned to the creative side – the artistic side – the inspirational – and discovered that he was also a creator. He choreographed partner dances, circle dances, dances for children and dances that are suitable for people in wheelchairs and people with other special needs.

As a result of the experiences of this special and creative couple, the angels Tzipi and Adi, who work modestly and harmoniously like industrious ants all day, every day at their sacred work, the two felt ready to lead a folk dance instructors course for the special needs population.

As part of the course content, there was a very instructive lecture given by Gabi Garufi, a tech professional, because of his experience of coping daily with his son, Tomer. I was privileged to hear most of it. It opened my eyes to the problems of coping with developmental limitations of a newborn, from the moment of birth and then on a daily basis. Together with his wife **Dalia**, a successful academician, they have raised three daughters (two lawyers and a student), the younger sisters of Tomer. Gabi gave us some statistics. There are some 5000 households in Rishon LeZion with special needs children. Almost 50% of them are single parent families. That means that “the partner ‘got tired, disappeared’, and thus for the remaining parent, it was twice as difficult”.

In addition to the immediate contribution of dance to the students, which is expressed in the fun of the social meeting accompanied by music, there is also an improvement in the broadening of movement and a close connection to the instructors who so love them. The instructors have a goal which is outside of the characteristics acquired during their years of dance i.e., the integration of the students into the life of the community as independent people. This, of course, is on the same level as the feelings of the parents, i.e., those who feel as if a dream has come true.

The skills acquired by the children in their folk dance classes, as well as in the swimming and bowling clubs in which they participate, has helped them develop self-confidence,

higher self-esteem, and a belief in themselves and in their abilities. They have created human relationships and kept them up, learned tolerance, patience, self-discipline, respect for others, acceptance of others, and serve in the Israel Defense Forces. After that, they have a framework for daily life: work, extracurricular activities and higher education.

They all learned the significance of the value of money. They operate mobile telephones, a long process that wouldn't have happened without their cooperation and their motivation to achieve these things. They are "people larger than life", Garufi explains, as he describes the Atirams and their activities with enormous esteem. They are "professional revolutionaries, auto didacts, people who acquired their knowledge through trial and error over the years and then wrote about them."

These are just some of the titles describing the hallowed acclaim that this couple receives from the parents of the dancers and from the wonderful volunteers, all of whom I was privileged to meet at a dance session: **Ahuva, Yehudidt, Rosa and Moshe Kedem** and the AKIM workers.

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"We developed a close relationship, just like family, 24/7, we never argued", says Gabi, describing the interwoven relationships between Tzipi and Adi and the active good-hearted people who envelop the students with love.

In the nature of things, these dancers demand suitable movement, which requires changes in the steps and the original movements of the dances, as well as writing them down in an organized manner. "We received full understanding from the choreographers of these dances", Adi explains.

In addition, during the course of the year the Atirams also work on preparing choreographies for performances. "The knowledge I acquired in the course on fundamental choreography from Shlomo Maman helped me tremendously", Adi emphasized.

For example, within the framework of the Karmiel Dance Festival and Ashdodance, the audience received the students with great enthusiasm every time they performed.

It should be noted, that if it weren't for the sensitivity of the Karmiel artistic directors - first Shlomo Maman and now Gadi Bitton, and Avi Levy from Ashdodance, this wouldn't have happened.

I remember being present at the performance of a dance called, "Carmela", in memory of Orly Baor, that took place at Chanukah 2022 under the artistic direction of Shlomo Maman. In the films of the performance, you can see Tomer Garufi holding Tzipi's hand, as he did at the weekly dance sessions.

"Tomer's motivation to know all of the steps is rare", says Tzipi about her student, who is one of the outstanding and most ambitious of her students. Her voice trembled. "How can you not become emotional from the fact that, sometimes, when dancers are missing, Tomer, without saying a word, sits on the side and gives his place to someone else". This seems to be the only dance group that is short of female dancers.

"At the last stage, when I saw how beautifully Tzipi works with them, I stayed behind, as a consultant", listening as Adi openly flattered his partner while tears formed in his eyes. If it wasn't for the love and the encouragement, the appreciation, the respect and the admiration – first of all, between them and for each other – this project wouldn't be what it is today.

In the shadow of the October 7th catastrophe, in this painful period, with all of us hoping for the return of the hostages, it is heartwarming to see the emotional life work of Tzipi and Adi Atiram up close.



*And on a personal note: I was privileged to be immersed in "...two spirits in a short dance...", good, smiling souls, calm, patient and loving, returning to their world. I have decided – after digesting the wonder I've seen with my own eyes and the outcome of writing this article – to volunteer, to accept selfless love, and in the future – to prepare myself and participate in the instructors course in the field.* 