



Gavriel Azulay

“My connection to youth and love of horses led me to direct the horseback riding therapy program at the Ben Yakir Youth Aliyah Village. It is so fulfilling to see the change that this type of therapy brings to kids with social, emotional and learning difficulties.”

Gavriel Azulay, 38, grew up in Sderot, the youngest of seven sisters and one brother. Growing up he felt a deep connection to animals and to the land of Israel, and worked as a youth counselor with the Society for the Protection of Nature.

After serving as a paratrooper and a combat medic in the Israeli army, Gavriel traveled to nature reservations in America's Midwest. Upon returning to Israel he studied alternative medicine, specializing in nutrition, vitamins and minerals, and western healing plants.

His dream was to start a horseback riding therapy program in Sderot when he was approached by the director of the Ben Yakir Youth Aliyah Village and asked to lead their budding horseback riding therapy program. He and his wife Yael felt that this was an excellent opportunity.

"Many of the teenagers at Ben Yakir have had so many failures during their young lives. They are afraid to trust, afraid to try and have lost their belief in others. Working with horses gives these kids the chance to open up, to connect, to believe in themselves," says Gavriel with passion. "It is a process that takes time, but when we see the results of the horseback riding therapy, it is incredible."

Gavriel recalls a young Ethiopian boy who never succeeded socially, scholastically or physically. When Gavriel saw the boy's talent with horses he was amazed. "I encouraged him to get up on the horse and to ride,



a little bit each time. When he was finally able to perform some of the simple functions he was so happy that his smile could have conquered the world. I think it was the first time he really felt capable," says Gavriel.

The Ben Yakir Youth Aliyah Village, located near the northern city of Hadera, provides a warm, residential environment where new immigrants and youth at risk, ages 12-18, receive the intervention they need to heal and flourish. The Village has its own farm and petting zoo which are largely maintained by the students, and uses animals and horseback riding therapy to cultivate social and emotional development.