



## **From a boy who drinks - to a fighter: “Yeha’alem in Amharic means to dream, and here in Israel is the fulfillment of the dream”**

Vered Goldman | Ynet Activism | 11.24.2018 |

This article first appeared in the Israeli news site, Ynetnews.com, on Nov. 24, 2018.

*He changed his name to feel Israeli, drank alcohol after nearly losing his mother, and was sure that nothing would come of him. After returning to his original name, he is now on his way to a commanders’ course - and dreams of helping people in distress. Look at the story of Yeha’alem and the man who led him to this change.*

As soon as you finish the steep climb that leads to Yemin Orde Youth Village, somewhere between Ein Hod and Ein Hud, something in the atmosphere changes. The green surrounding, the mountainous landscape, the graffiti walls. Everything leads to this soothing feeling that says it will be all right.

Yeha’alem Farada (21) did not believe that he would really be all right. For him, this was another common Israeli expression. “I immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia at the age of seven,” he says. “I quickly changed my name to Israel, without a specific reason, it was the name the authorities gave me and I felt it suited me, precisely because that was what I felt most distant from - to be Israeli.”

The attempt to integrate with the children in Petach Tikvah was not the most difficult obstacle that he would have to face as a child. While the boy with the Amhari name fought for his identity, he saw his mother at the beginning of the struggle for her life. “My mother was diagnosed with leukemia,” he says. Without continuing the sentence, I hear his voice crack.

“My mother was the backbone of the house, I saw her fighting for her life and I could not concentrate or study, I did not know where I was, and after a year when she started to be okay, I decided to leave home.”



Very soon the drinking came. The booze that young children often get excited about served as a refuge for Yeha’alem. “I started to drink a lot, at first it was with my friends on weekends, and over time I increased the amount, I drank every day,” he says. With a broken heart worried about his mother and a drinking problem at a young age, he reached the door of the office of the director of Yemin Orde Youth Village – Shmuli Bing (40).

“I started here on my left foot,” says Yeha’alem. “My behavior was not good, I brought the alcohol here, drank during the week, I was caught and sent home, and from there the whole process began.” In an embrace that Yeha’alem and Shmuli give each other, one can see the closing of the circle before one even

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knows what the beginning of the road was like. Yeha'alem looks at Shmuli with shining eyes, and Shmuli gives him the look of a proud father. We sit down in his office, and from the moment he brings us back to the beginning, he does not take his eyes off Yeha'alem, as to hint that he is not only telling the story, but also reminding Yeha'alem of it.

Shmuli is not aware that the guy sitting opposite him is no longer called Israel. He is no longer afraid not to fit in, he no longer feels like an outsider. Not so long ago, the educational frameworks gave up on him. He found himself wandering the streets, drinking beer bottles when people were just sitting for lunch. At school they sent him home, but at Yemin Orde Youth Village they sent him to write an essay. "the beginning was hard. Yeha'alem didn't learn, In our language, we use the term 'from punishment to correction' - so one of the things that we say to the children is' go out and look.



Write an essay. I read Yeha'alem's essay, and among other things he wrote: 'I want to start a business where I will employ poor people who have little knowledge and I will help them develop.' I did not care whether it was real or not, I did not know him, but I fell in love with him and said to myself: 'This is a child with tremendous potential'. You see a huge dream that is not self-centered, a child who wants to succeed in order to change the world of others".

### **"My role is to offer opportunities - his role was to take them"**

Shmuli: "One time Yeha'alem left. He was fed up, and he did not feel he had a chance anyway. Yeha'alem, who was then called Israel, was sure that the best future he could expect included to be an IDF dropout. A kind of 'brilliant future' of a child who expects nothing from himself and those around him. His mother had recovered and was back on her feet, and again it seemed that nothing mattered anymore."

"I had a lot of conversations about my drinking problem with Shmuli," Yeha'alem says. "In one conversation, he asked me how much I drink, and advised me to try to reduce the amount. Slowly I began to drink less, until I stopped to drink at all. Today I barely drink beer on a Friday night." This change led to additional changes. He began volunteering at Kav Lachayim, and mentored a child with disabilities. "It helped me gain perspective. I was a kid who loved to complain, for whom everything was always hard. I saw a kid in a wheelchair, laughing and joking. He was happy with his life and had many more problems than me."

Despite the good feeling that volunteering offered him, Yeha'alem still doubted whether he wanted to give back. "Only after my third invitation I went. I did not want it. I felt that the army was not a framework that could fit me. I heard bad things about the service, that it's hard and you're being told what to do. I wanted none of that" he says.

"Shmuli made me try. So I went and after the screening tests I was summoned to the Combat Intelligence Collection Corps. I wasn't sure what it meant but thought it was something I could try."

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“Do you already know that you’re going to do the commanders course?” Shmuli asks him.

“Yes, in a week and a half.” “And what about an officers course?” Shmuli asks. “At the moment I do not believe I’ll be an officer,” Yeha’alem says, looking down. “Two months ago, did you believe that you were going to be a commander?” “No, I did not believe it,” Yeha’alem answers and understands the message.

**- What do you say to people who call you Israel?**

“I don’t let them call me that,” he says. “Until recently, I was my own enemy. The army symbolized the opening of a new page for me. When I enlisted I left ‘Israel’ behind with all his problems and returned to my original self - the child who immigrated from Ethiopia and went a long way to become a combatant in the IDF who serves the people and believes that he has the ability to contribute. And besides, that’s the name that my mother gave me, and it symbolizes everything: Yeha’alem in Amharic means dreaming or the World to Come. To dream is what I am doing now, and the World to Come - meaning the Land of Israel, the world to which Ethiopian Jews dreamed of coming. I’m here, and I’m fulfilling the dream.”

