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By: Keren Shmilovich

**Go on a family vacation together in a place where there is no disability.**

**Keren Shmilovich, mother of five children, including Chof, who lives with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, visual impairment and uses a walking stick, shares about the only time her family was able to finally go on vacation. She shares unforgettable experiences, full of fun and activities and medically safe, provided to the child and his family, free of charge at Jordan River Village.**

Disability. One word that means so much. There is external disability and internal disability, physical disability and mental disability. Dealing with a disability, of any kind, is challenging, sometimes breaking and sometimes simply tiring, but it turns every small moment of success into a huge sense of victory that gives the fuel to continue the next challenge.

Today, as a mother of five children, I know that there are many moments of crisis, but family, mutual concern and "togetherness" make the difference. Before the birth of Chof, my fourth daughter, I thought I knew everything about birth and raising children. Of course, every child is different but the basic formula was known to me, or so I thought. Chof was born after I arrived at the hospital when she was in fetal distress, they took her out without a pulse and without breathing and only after the intervention of the doctors were they able to save her. At that moment we realized that we were entering a long, new and unknown process.



*Chof Shmilovich on the climbing wall at Jordan River Village*

Today, 12 and a half years later, Chof lives with cerebral palsy, epilepsy, visual impairment and uses a walking stick, she is a bright girl who knows what she wants. Today I know how impossible the path she took was, and how miraculous it is.

We are a big, loving and supportive family. We all live the difficulties that Chof endures, and of course also all her successes. Her siblings are supportive and loving and also influenced by everything that entails. We are a family with disabilities.

One example of this is the fact that we hardly ever go on family vacations, it's hard, it's cumbersome and it requires a lot from all of us. That's why we decided to give up. That was until we first heard about Jordan River Village, a place where there are no disabilities.

I first heard about the Village from friends we met through Chof, who face the same challenges. We've been to a number of beach days in the past, and she really enjoyed it, but we've never been to a place that's meant for all of us, as a family.

At Jordan River Village we had a first family experience of its kind from which we returned, all of us, excited and happy. We flew down the zipline, climbed a climbing wall, swam in the pool, laughed and went wild. All around us were families, like us and just as I felt, I saw in everyone's eyes that this was a special experience. This feeling that I felt, perhaps for the first time since Chof was born, of liberation, that she is taken care of here with close medical supervision, entertainment and attractions tailored to her but no less to her siblings, with volunteers who are busy all day keeping our smiles on our faces.



*Jordan River Village Campus (photo courtesy of Jordan River Village)*

The sessions at Jordan River Village are free of charge, and are intended for children who are dealing with a long-term illness or disability. Coming to the Village changed my life, reinforced to me the importance of family time, and doing things just for fun. We all came away from the holiday in the Village, Chof, her brothers who finally met other children like them who have a brother or sister with a disability, and we, the parents, too. We got to know an amazing group of other parents who share our struggles and we got to have pure and real family time. We left the disability out.

### **Safe, fun and unforgettable experiences**

Jordan River Village is a unique camp for children living with chronic, genetic, life-threatening diseases and various disabilities. The Village offers unforgettable experience all free of charge, full of fun and medically safe activities, to the child and their family. It is one of 16 camps

around the world that are members of the international organization founded by Paul Newman in 1988 in the United States.



*"The activities encourage mutual support and help and strengthen the child's feeling that he is not alone in his situation"  
(photo courtesy of Jordan River Village)*

Jordan River Village in Israel was established in 2000, at each independent session about 64 children attend, divided into groups of 16 children and eight counselors. The counselor team consists of young people in a year of service and national service, and volunteer counselors. The children enjoy wonderful accommodations in modern buildings adapted to their needs.

Each session and the activities focus on the child himself and not on his illness. The goals of the activity are to raise the self-confidence of the child and provide him with safe, enjoyable and unforgettable experiences - as any child. The activities encourage mutual support and help and strengthen the child's feeling that he is not alone in his situation. In all activities emphasis is placed on achievement and not on competitiveness. The Village is located in the Lower Galilee, on Givat Avni next to the Golani Interchange, and covers an area of 64 acres with a breathtaking view. The types of diseases and the criteria for admission for sessions are determined by a special medical committee.



*Shmilovich Family at Jordan River Village*