

Climb Every Mountain

India's spirituality and landscape help rewrite relationship between the disabled and their families



Tzlil Uriel (left) and her sister Shaked Uriel were part of the trek to the Himalayas by 11 Israeli brothers and sisters with their siblings having Down syndrome

:: Faizal Khan

They came, climbed and conquered. Eleven Israelis travelled to India three years ago in one of the most unlikely expeditions ever undertaken to the Himalayas. Each of them was with a sibling having Down syndrome, a chromosomal arrangement at conception that leads to developmental disability. They came from unrelated families across Israel and their goal was to trek together to the heights of the Himalayas and conquer the world's fear of disabilities.

In Israel, it is a journey usually reserved for its young men and women, who choose destinations in India like Hampi, Pushkar and Manali to unwind after their release from a mandatory military service. The siblings with Down syndrome went further. Their destination was the hill state of Uttarakhand known among climbers and pilgrims for its landslides and floods as much as its majestic peaks and religious sites. "It was unbelievable. Never before have so many boys and girls with Down syndrome and completely unknown to each other dreamed something so remarkable," says Israeli filmmaker Yonatan Nir, who has chronicled the group's awe-inspiring journey in a new documentary titled *My Hero Brother*.

Mind and Nature

It all began from the personal story of Enosh Cassel, one of the three Israeli producers of *My Hero Brother*. In 2011, Cassel took his 29-year-old brother Hannan, who has Down syndrome, for a holiday in Nepal. "It is sometimes very difficult to understand what my brother wants," says Cassel. "He was very stressed when we were staying in the capital Kathmandu. He refused to eat and didn't sleep. But



The Israeli siblings met with Indian families with kids having Down syndrome at the India Gate lawns in New Delhi before they returned home



The team took the 11,800 ft high-altitude trek from Lohajung to Bedni Bugyal in October 2013

when I took him to the countryside, everything changed," he says. "I realised after spending three weeks with him in Nepal that he felt better whenever he was close to the nature."

Once back in Israel, Cassel and his brother were interviewed on Israeli television Channel 2. The interview set off a stream of enquiries and congratulatory messages from Israeli families having children with Down syndrome. Many of the callers told Cassel they wished they had the courage to take their brothers or sisters on a holiday like he did. "And I thought what a shame it would be if the experience was only mine," says Cassel, who then decided to do something that would become a turning point in the emotional Israeli-India story. He called his friend from the army Itamar Peleg, who would later become a producer of *My Hero Brother*. Peleg owned Travelog, a travel company in Tel Aviv that organised a trek for disabled Israeli soldiers to India last year.

"Enosh (Cassel) and I thought we could organise a trek of Israelis with siblings having Down syndrome," says Peleg. After a search and contact that lasted for almost a year, ten Israelis – eight men and two women – having siblings with Down syndrome said they would join the expedition. With Enosh and Hannan making themselves available for the trek, the team strength rose to 22 brothers and sisters. India was chosen as the destination. "India is a land of spirituality. The people are friendly and the landscape is amazing," says Peleg. "It is also a popular destination for young Israeli backpackers."

Beyond the Summit

The story of Cassel and Hannan's trip to Nepal was already known to the director, Nir, who had watched the news report. "I was touched by their journey," says Nir, who received a call from a friend of Cassel and Peleg's telling him there was a film in it if he was interested. "I immediately felt connected to the story." In August 2013,

Peleg met Cassel and Nir and they decided to make a movie on the journey. Two months later, the 22 siblings, three film crew members and a physician left Tel Aviv for New Delhi after a warm farewell by a cheering crowd of families at the Ben Gurion airport.

Their first stop was the Jim Corbett National Park and the first activity an elephant ride. Ruet Zakshevski, 32, one of the trekkers with Down syndrome who was with her 27-year-old sister Moran, wasn't impressed. "It will bite me," she complained about the elephant ride. A week later, the high-altitude trek began from Lohajung, about 300 km from Uttarakhand, capital of Dehradun, to Bedni Bugyal. It wasn't easy. The climb wasn't the only challenge. Once they took a break, the boys and girls with Down syndrome would refuse to get up. They also suffered altitude sickness. "Why do we have to climb a mountain? My leg hurts," Tzlil Uriel, 27, who came with her sister Shaked Uriel, 25, questioned. The team kept the spirits of its members high with jokes. "Whatever happens in India, stays in India," a brother taunted his sibling.

At one point Golani Cherhi, 34, was unable to continue the walk. His 29-year-old brother Harel, who had just completed a special ops training in the Israeli army, intervened: "This is not a commando unit. He can get on a mule." On October 10, 2013, they reached their destination. It was 11,800 feet in the Himalayas where the peaks roar to altitudes above 25,000 feet. The team members cheered, hugged each other, pitched the Israeli national flag and posed for photos. They were heroes, all of them. "We didn't have to go all the way to the summit. The mountain came down to meet us," Peleg said philosophically. ■



Director Yonatan Nir (left) and co-producers Itamar Peleg (centre) and Enosh Cassel (right) plan to release the film