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"Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité"

The Gorillas, Chimpanzees and fellow members of the Great Ape group have feelings, sense of humor and high intelligence and they are perfectly capable to communicate with humans. Sounds good, but usually they end up very bad. As victims of poaching; as animal lab test subjects ; as exhibitions in cages. The activist Itai Roffman, is calling out to change the condition of all of those who are so very close to us. Together with his father, he plans to establish a Great Ape sanctuary in an open area, which will also include a treatment framework for people with special needs. They have already received the most important blessing for a successful journey. From Jane Goodall the admired Chimologist.

Only six million years ago, not that long in evolutionary terms, we were there too. - Hairy, walking on four, climbing trees and preferring bananas. But for some reason we left the rainforests and savannahs, stood upright, got dressed and invented the wheel. They were left a little behind, but not that much behind as we prefer to think. They are genetically close to us, they live in families, lead rich social lives, express happiness, sadness, anger and worry and are able to express abstract thoughts. They have a developed intelligence and a wonderful sense of humor. The Chimpanzees, Gorillas, Orangutans and Bonobo Apes, all of whom are known as "Great Apes", are in contemporary scientific definition - "Hominids", a taxonomic group (a method of hierarchal categorization in biology) which include humans too.

And in spite of that, we permit ourselves to kill, imprison and abuse them. They are hunted down in the wild for their meat, deteriorate in small cages in zoos, are forced to perform humiliating stunts in circuses and the worse of all – used in research. Even without getting into theories claiming that Great Apes are actually a kind of human-being, in the world of today the idea that there is no place for them behind bars is starting to take root. In New-Zealand there was even a law passed recently that forbids abusing them.

And still the situation is deeply inadequate. In the United-States, for instance, 1,600 chimpanzees are held in bio-medical research labs. When they are not on the operation table, they are trapped in small cages, their chests are tattooed with their serial numbers and even though they are naturally social beings – they are kept in solitary confinement. During the course of research they are infected with viruses: HIV, Syphilis, Hepatitis and other fatal viruses and, moreover, they are used in radiation experiments, heart transplant, in pharmacological and behavioral experiments and more. Many others are humiliated in the entertainment industry being forced into performing stunts that are contrary to their nature and dress them up in ridiculous outfits. Most of the chimpanzees used in entertainment were captured in the wild and torn away from their mothers (who were slaughtered) in their infancy. The training methods that they undergo are mostly painful and entail fear and punishment.

In Israel Great Apes aren't currently used in research, however, several dozen are kept in different zoos. Itai Roffman, a 23 year old Anthropology student and animal rights activist, and his Biologist father Dr. Ehud Roffman claim that the conditions in which the Great Apes are kept in Israel are humiliating and degrading. "They are Hominids exactly like us" says Ehud Roffman. "A recent scientific research shows that 99% of our genes have stayed identical to those of the chimpanzees, however we are stronger than them collectively." The father and son are asking to establish in Israel a Sanctuary or Hostel for them, who will be transferred to it from the different zoos. In the new place, in their words, the Great Apes will be able to live honorably, without imprisonment and without being forced to exhibition to the crowds.

The Roffmans came equipped with piles of documents, articles and CDs. In Israel today, they say, live about 50 Great Apes in zoological-parks and petting zoos. "The conditions in some of these places are horrendous", says Roffman senior. "They live in cement-blocks, sleep on the floors and worst of all they are on display. People walk in front of them all day, stare, throw items and foods that are not always suitable and sometimes they infuriate them. Privacy is deprived of them, so that we humans can stare at them".

Observations on Great Apes in captivity, mostly research labs show, that the severe psychological stress cause psychotic behaviors. "They rip their body hair, self-inflict unrepairable bodily damage" Dr. Roffman continues to elaborate; "there were even chimpanzees who managed to cut their veins with a sharp plastic object. They develop manic depressions, violent behavior, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders almost exactly like humans imprisoned in penitentiaries or psychiatric facilities."

Even anyone who has never heard of Darwin, can become impressed by the many results of studies conducted on Great Apes, that point out very familiar behaviors. "In the wild chimpanzees live in communities, very much like tribes with hierarchy and a leader," the Roffmans explain. "Every tribe has an army compiled of young males, who go out to battle other tribes armed with dangerous rock and stick weapons". "They make their own food, crush up food into mush, salads, mix food. They create toilet paper from leaves to clean themselves, brush their teeth with particular plants and have the knowledge of how to use plants to make medicines. The elderly teach the young about what's good to eat and what parts of the plants are toxic." They have religion, even though it's very primitive. Their 'Rain Dances' are documented in Goodalls' studies and books, and they have ritual activities reminiscent of those of the Masai-Mara and aboriginies. They also have a sense of humor – they imitate one another behind their backs.

"They understand languages and can learn to communicate in sign-language, including understanding of abstract terms, but they haven't developed speech because their vocal chords are different from our own." Anthropologically speaking most of their behaviors are human-like and this should not have to surprise. We were them and many basic things stayed the same, like the urge for warfare and on the other hand the music and art, and the use of tools that we have advanced. They are basically rather similar to prehistoric man prior to the discovery of fire. They have not evolved like us, because in their home range in equatorial Africa which, remained almost unchanged, - there was no need for essential transformation."

The individual who proved to the world to what extent the Great Apes' intelligence and capability to communicate can reach, is a gorilla named Koko. Koko was raised by US Psychologist Dr. Francine Patterson from a young age, she learned the American Sign-Language from her and today uses over 1,000 signs. She is able to hold and conduct conversation, express her thoughts, wishes and feelings. She

understands spoken language and expresses herself with body language and facial expressions too. Patterson claims in a fascinating documented film about their years together, that she has not taught Koko anything that wasn't imprinted in the gorilla to begin with. In her words, the extreme speed in which Koko learned her first signs (in about only two weeks), demonstrates that sign-language is the natural form of communication in Gorillas.

Koko loved books being read to her and discovered a preference to certain stories, raised a pet cat and chose a match for her from several males presented to her on video. She cried when she was sad, expressed her wish for a baby (but was unsuccessful in mating with her chosen partner in captivity), she described dreams she dreamt and played imaginary games.

Another Gorilla raised by Patterson, a male named Michael, learned sign-language too and had turned out to become a gifted artist. One of the things Michael told Patterson in sign-language was how he was hunted. He described how the hunters killed his parents and cut off their heads (their hands are known to be sold as souvenirs in markets across continental Africa). After Michael's death from a heart-attack, it was discovered that Koko and the other male Gorilla Ndume (who was brought in as a match for her and lives with her today), understand the concept of death and mourn just like us. They cried, refused to stay alone, asked for a small light to be left on at night and more. Koko spent a long time in Michael's room, smelling his blanket and when asked how she felt, she answered that she is sad and that she is crying. Here you have it, food for thought for when you next stare at a chimpanzee at a zoo near your home.

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The start of a beautiful friendship

Despite his young age, Itai Roffman holds a very rich resume in the field of conservation and humanitarian efforts. His affair with almost extinct animals, began at the age of 13, when he noticed that the big wetland, a habitat for species of amphibians, adjacent to his school was going to be dried up for some development project. He bombarded the city hall and Nature Conservation Authority with protest letters, whilst being drafted by researchers from the Tel-Aviv University to collect animals to the wetland as part of a campaign to save them.

The frog encounters just opened his appetite and young Roffman zoned in on other ecological organizations in Israel and abroad, as he offers his services to initiate and cooperate in nature conservation projects. One of the organizations he approached was Dr. Jane Goodall's institute (The Jane Goodall Institute), the renowned

chimpanzee researcher (see frame), an institute that focuses primarily on conserving the Great Apes and their habitats. Not long after his approach, a personal faxed letter from Goodall arrived for him. "She wrote she was happy to hear about my project initiatives and would be happy if I would join her efforts", he recalls. "I was only 18 then and it was amazing to receive a personal response from a personality like Jane Goodall." She sent me lots of info about Hominds, I read all her books and received lots of understandings and knowledge that I never had."

As time went by Roffman joined Roots & Shoots, an international program of the Jane Goodall Institute that encourage young people in the world to initiate projects for the benefit of humans, animals & the environment. Around this time, steps into the picture Itai's father Dr. Ehud Roffman, who has in the past served as a researcher at the National Institutes of Health in the United States and now is a partner in a company that has developed a new technology to purify drinking water. Dr. Roffman got involved as a propelling force joining the vigorous activities of the son. This activity included an educational project in the Israeli club scout movement "Working & Learning Youth" in the subject of chimpanzee abuse, work in zoological parks and petting zoos to collect material on the situation of hominids in Israel.

In 2002 Itai began a humanitarian project to bring together nations for peace in response to Goodall's advice. For this "national service" Itai chose Ragar Village internally divided by an imaginary line between Israel and Lebanon and it's citizens who suffer from poverty, unemployment and neglect by the authorities. Roffman moved to Kibbutz Dan and initiated educational projects to the children & youth in the village, collected donations for them, took village representatives to an international conflict resolution conference in Russia and very soon he's going to establish, with the assistance of The Jane Goodall Institute of Austria, a playground and garden for the children, who have never seen a sled or carrousel up close.

In the mean time, a warm personal connection was formed between Itai and Goodall, which was conducted via letters and calls - until two years ago they have met face to face for the first time. "Ms. Rachelle Hansen from 'The Fauna Foundation', which Goodall is on the advisory board of, operates a chimpanzee sanctuary in Canada, invited me to meet Jane, the Fauna staff and the chimpanzees and to lecture about my ecological activities in Israel at a university workshop and schools in Quebec under the title of 'The Power of One to make a difference'," Itai recalls the first meeting. "We sat down for breakfast". "I found her to be a very warm and kind person and very optimistic. She has later referred to me as a friend." As a result of the meeting and the visit at the Fauna Hostel, an idea started forming in the mind of young Roffman about establishing a place like this in Israel too.

About a year and a half ago Itai and his father started to formulate the vision for the sanctuary. The vision comprises of two parts: better the conditions of hominids and treating of special populations. The treatment issue is close to their hearts, as the Roffman's have family member, who suffers from developmental delay and communicational disability. "The rationale is like this," explains Ehud Roffman "because Autistics don't have communication with their environment and have an aversion to the norm, when you confront them with somebody in a similar level of inferiority to theirs, - with ones who are actually themselves different, it'll be easier for them to create contact."

But not only autistics - also retarded, mentally ill, sufferers of battle posttraumatic shock etc, may visit the center that will be established and there they can meet the non-human hominids. There may also be visits by normal people for mutual observations. "We are thinking of a big area, which will be divided into separate

living areas for the three types of Great Apes living in Israel. The hominids will live in privacy and won't be disturbed by audiences. The visitors will walk across the territory in special isolated paths with one-sided mirrors which will enable to only observe the Great Apes. There will be no more concrete block sleeping compartments and no exhibition yard in front of them. The Great Apes will stay wherever they want."

The contact with special populations will take place in special rooms which will be divided into two parts. On one side of the room will be the Human Hominids and on the other the Great Ape Hominids and in between there will be a partition to protect the mutual security, but it will enable to see and hear the other side optimally and to transfer items. I have no doubt both sides will be willing to make contact."

Their model is the chimpanzee sanctuary of The Fauna Foundation in Quebec, The place which was established in 1997 by Dr. Richard Allan and Gloria Grow, a veterinarian and dog hair stylist, which is spread across a vast area of natural surroundings, and is a five star home to chimpanzees who survived the biomedical research labs, most of whom were infected with AIDS. "They have almost complete freedom, privacy, full free access to food and particularly the right that no more pain will be inflicted on them. They have Psychiatrists and Psychologists there treating their traumas from years in research."

For the purpose of establishing a sanctuary and change of status of the hominids in Israel, the Roffmans are planning to found an organization named 'The Israeli Hominid Rights Foundation'*, to recruit a group of dedicated people and of course raise funds with financiers. The Fauna Foundation and The Jane Goodall Institute will give us an ideological umbrella. The Israeli Humane Society for Animals Tel-Aviv has already joined in the efforts for the initiative. The Israeli Autistic children's association "Negiot", which helps autistic children in northern Israel, has also shown the willingness to participate in the project. Yehuda Bar, the Director of the Safari Park in Ramat-Gan, who was presented by the Roffmans with the initiative in the past, has shown in their words openness to the idea that the hostel be established in or near the Safari park.

How will you convince the zoo owners to give you their Great Apes?

Itai: "We think that the little zoos, in which chimpanzees are kept in horrendous conditions, will be glad to let them go to the new hostel home. Regarding the Safari Park, the only place in Israel with three kinds of hominids, we know they will be happy to cooperate with us to better their living conditions."

Not only autistics - also retarded, mentally ill, sufferers of battle post traumatic shock etc, may visit for treatment and there can be interaction with healthy people. "We are thinking of an area, which will be divided into separate living areas for the three types of Great Apes living in Israel. The visitors will walk across the territory in special isolated paths with one-sided mirrors. There will be no more concrete block sleeping compartments and no exhibition yard. The Great Apes will stay wherever they want."

Nature returned

The Israeli Humane Society for Animals Tel-Aviv, believes, that it's time to help all the wild animals engaged in animal parks and petting zoos. "It's true that not all can be released back in the wild" says Gadi Vitner, spokesperson for the charity. "But the right thing to do is to transfer them to rehabilitation sanctuaries. It's about time that the country of Israel established suitable sanctuaries for their needs. The struggle for changing the status of Hominids won't be easy, and not only animal welfare organizations are needed but also human rights organizations. We are joining the international struggle - which Jane Goodall is undertaking for years now - to release wild animals from the suffering of cages, and we hope that the Israeli public will join the humane effort."

The Israeli zoos are not as much enthusiastic about the idea. In the Safari Park, 12 chimpanzees are kept on an area of one dunam, six gorillas in an area of 750 square meters and six orangutans are kept on an area of half a dunam. At night they sleep in cages. "If there is anything that can help special populations I am willing to cooperate," says Yehuda Bar, Director of the Safari, "but in the condition that monkeys remain monkeys and that we would not try to turn them into humans, that the safety rules be obeyed and that suitable equipment be in place. If there will be a body that finances this project I'll be the first one to partner up. However," with reservation Bar continues, "It can not be like in the wild, because we're talking about animals born and raised in captivity and that do not know anything else. In my opinion it's important to keep exhibiting them to human-beings in order to raise awareness to conserve animals, and I don't see any difference in this regard between Great Apes and any other animals. Of course if I had the finances I would better the conditions of Great Apes and all animals."

At the Biblical zoo in Jerusalem 15 chimpanzees are kept in a dunam sized yard and at night sleep in cages. "What is important is not the number of identical genes but the quality of them," said Shmulik Yidov the zoological Director of the zoo. "Between ourselves and a sunflower there is genetic identity of 80% and between ourselves and birds 90%. Regarding Great Ape behavior, I have no tools to contradict research that has been done on the subject, but there is research claiming that it's dealing with an imitation element."

Yidov agrees with the determination that there is a need to better the quality of life of Great Apes in captivity. He thinks that it's true for all animals and he points out that there is even a portion of humans that don't have their basic rights. "It is obvious that a life out in the open is preferable than a life in a cage, but what's important is also how the place looks and managed. There are many sanctuaries and shelters that look much worse than zoos, despite the good intentions. This happens mainly in the regions of origin of the animals, for instance Africa, where the infrastructures and physical conditions are bad."

A shelter, which is not situated in the land of origin of animals, is a kind of zoo in the eyes of Yidov. "Even though there are big natural areas there, they are still fenced in. There is no doubt that it is necessary, because you can not return captive animals to the wild, moreover, unfortunately nature is going towards disappearing. Forests are dwindling, there is a savage poaching of monkeys and apes and trade in their meat. I would gladly close all zoos if there was any nature left."

If a sanctuary for Great Apes were to be established in Israel, would you transfer your chimpanzees there?

"We transfer chimpanzees to other places all the time. There is natural breeding, which we tried to prevent in the past, but understood that it's their elementary right. For the babies being born we struggle to find good homes in zoos, sanctuaries and shelters. If there might be such a place here, we would be delighted to transfer chimps that we have no more room for at our place. But I don't think it can be established in our day, it's a far away vision."

Lilach Ben-Harush, the Director of 'Negiot', is a little more optimistic. "I know Itai Roffman through projects for the environment. He is a young and enthusiastic man with lots of connections with world wide environmental organizations. His idea seems big, but it can be materialized, it only needs financing. Regarding land availability for the project we have many possibilities up in northern Israel." Ben-Harush is also optimistic concerning the benefit that autistics will gain from the meeting with Great Apes. "Experience proves that the connection between autistics and animals bears fruit, even though at large the work with these kids is like a shot in the dark. Any path, even the seemingly most delusional one that can advance the kids is accepted by us."

Goodall, the mentor, also sees good things to come. "Throughout my whole acquaintance with Itai Roffman," she said this week, "he proved his great devotion towards animals and their wellbeing, whether in the frame of his work with Roots & Shoots project and whether on his own accord. Good sanctuaries are very much needed for homeless chimpanzees. If Itai is included in the project, there is no doubt that this is going to be yet another project that will enjoy from his unique capabilities and energies."

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Trial of the Apes

A theoretical law suit claim connects between Great Ape rights and dark human phenomenon like slavery

When one understands how high the intelligence of Great Apes is, and becomes exposed to their emotional complexity, it is difficult to accept their abuse in general, and in labs in particular. A theoretical lawsuit drafted by two American lawyers, Lee Hall and Anthony John Waters, represent the case of Evelyn Hart (www.personhood.org), a 7 year old chimpanzee, going to be sent to a biomedical research lab. Evelyn's life story is based on a real chimpanzee named Annie, who served in the beginning of her life in entertainment and eventually arrived at The Fauna Foundation sanctuary.

Both lawyers request in a compelling accusation claim, spread across nearly 40 pages, to release Evelyn Hart from the grave destiny of the lab, where she was sentenced to participate in research on viral diseases, in a claim that she has equal rights to those of humans and that it would never be even considered to sentence a human to such a life. "Evelyn Hart is a Person," it is written there. "It must be forbidden to force her imprisonment, torture and murder, because there is no moral or justifiable reason that separates between her and people who are justly protected under the constitution."

The two attorneys prove the personhood of Evelyn Hart in different ways, through definitions of personhood from the field of philosophy and school of thought such as self-awareness, self-control, concept of past and future, caring for others, curiosity and communication. They bring references of observations and research that prove Great Apes are gifted with these qualities and abilities. The Hominids, claim the pair, are equal to us in their right to life, liberty and protection from torture. Some of them go beyond the capabilities of mentally disabled people, and for these the law does protect them. Even babies born with only a brain stem and with no chance of ever living in conscience, are not exploited for deadly experiments, or as organ suppliers to save other babies.

The mental and physical suffering that Evelyn will endure in the lab, is comparable to the suffering of a human in the same situation, and in every constitutional test of the experiment, the liberty of the individual needs to stand before the interests of the state. Here it is obvious that the physical suffering, imprisonment, isolation, stress, injuries and even the threat to life which will result as a cause of this to Evelyn Hart, are a price that can not be asked of an individual for the better good of all.

Hall & Waters, explain that the scientific knowledge existing today about Hominids, does not allow them to be seen as property any more. The fitting comparison here is the relation towards black slaves in the United States at the time of slavery. These were widely known to be property and as a result of that, their masters did to them anything they wished, including scientific research. The vaccine for small-pocks in the US, for instance, was developed due to experiments conducted on slaves. Is the fact that a vaccine was discovered that saved millions, asked the lawyers, justify the use of human-beings in experiments?

But not just painful experiments, - is the imprisonment in itself, of Hominids, justified for entertainment purposes or even education and study of human-beings? Society, in the words of Hall & Waters, needs to confess its mistake, like they confessed regarding slavery and regarding dark régimes as the apartheid in South-Africa. And there is no need to get pulled into sarcasm. It does not refer to the right to vote for gorillas, about a drivers-license for chimpanzees or orangutans as prime-ministers. It talks about freedom from abuse, exploitation and imprisonment. That's all. []

* Those who are interested to take part or support the foundation are invited to call +972-545-409-296 or email eroffman@netvision.net.il

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