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On a mission from God

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Avi Kuzi, who looks like Rambo and goes to Ramboesque extremes to rescue animals, is tramping through the trees and brush at Abarbanel, the country's best-known mental institution, looking for a runaway cat. The cat, a female named Kitzka, was being cared for by Holocaust survivors at Abarbanel under the supervision of their social worker, Hanna Yitzhaki, a zealous cat guardian who stays in close touch with Kuzi.

From behind a barred window comes the loud, hoarse, incoherent wailing of a patient who sounds like he's trying to break out of a straitjacket. Kuzi, focused totally on his work, charges on, followed by Yitzhaki calling, "Here, Kitzka, come to me, Ki-i-i-i-tzka, Kitzkaleh, come, my princess..."

After half an hour of searching by Kuzi, Yitzhaki, a white-uniformed Abarbanel cook, photographer Jonathan Bloom and me, Kuzi spots Kitzka, who's orange with tiger stripes, huddled in the high grass amid a network of pipes at the base of a wall. Ordinary people would never have seen her through such a thick camouflage. "Only Avi," says Yitzhaki.

After awhile, Kitzka walks out of her hiding place, limping on a wounded leg. Suddenly a black cat, the local bully, trots up and attacks her, they roll in the dust and Kitzka flees into the crawl space under a giant storage container. Kuzi goes to his van and takes out gloves, a lasso on a pole, a pair of flashlights, a cat trap and a blowpipe that shoots tranquilizing darts.

"Whenever I have a really hard situation, I call Avi," says Yitzhaki. For instance, she called him late one night a couple of months ago to save a cat that was heard whimpering underneath a downtown intersection in Tel Aviv. With a crowbar and large screwdriver-type tool, he pried open a manhole cover, climbed about 10 meters down the ridged wall of the sewer system, shone his flashlight and eventually saw the cat's glowing eyes. He went back up, prepared a trap, brought it back down, and at about three in the morning, two hours after he'd arrived, he climbed out and handed Yitzhaki the cat.

Kuzi, in his 40s, says he's rescued thousands of animals in his 15-year career. He keeps an album of photos of his most memorable adventures, including those that ended in failure and still haunt him. His company logo is drawn from a photo taken early in his career of him holding a dog he found in Jerusalem whose face had been chopped off by someone with an ax. He'd rushed that dog to a clinic and accepted the vet's advice to have it put down, but if he'd known then what he knows now, he says, he never would have agreed; he would have gotten the dog healed.

"I don't allow myself to forget that," says Kuzi in his North Tel Aviv apartment, his eyes tearing up. "It's at the center of my consciousness. It's the reason I do what I do."

His apartment is an informal rehab center for disabled strays he finds that no one wants. The current population includes four dogs, one of which had acid thrown in its face, another that's blind, another born without front legs; and seven cats, one of which lost a leg when the car engine it had crawled into got started up, another born without front legs, another whose balance is off and three that are blind.

"They've suffered all they're going to suffer, now it's time for them to have a good life," he says.

SEVERAL OF his most challenging rescues are detailed in the media clippings he keeps in his album. Once he rappelled 15 meters down an elevator shaft at Tel Aviv University to rescue a cat that had fallen in. Another time he rappelled two stories down the side of a Tel Aviv high-rise to free a hawk that had gotten stuck in a grating. Another time he rode a construction crane into an IDF minefield in the Arava to rescue a wounded camel.

So for him, the search last week for a cat belonging to Holocaust survivors at Abarbanel, a task that kept him running, crawling and climbing walls for more than two hours, wasn't all that extraordinary.

He himself, however, is. Kuzi is a larger-than-life hero - in his exploits, his physique, his intense personality and relentlessness to save and protect animals, which he sees as a calling from God.

Sitting in his living room near a bookcase lined with holy Jewish texts, Kuzi, who is very religious though in his own way, says: "My love for animals is rooted in the Book of Genesis. I try to be like Adam, the first man, who was created only after God created the snakes, the birds and all the other animals. God gave us the responsibility to watch over them."

His arms have scars and scratches - most of them, he says, from a monkey he coaxed down years ago from the tall eucalyptus trees of a Petah Tikva backyard. "When I saw him swinging up in the trees, I said to myself, 'How do I communicate with him?' Then I started making these sounds, and while I was doing it, I was saying inside, 'Come to me, come to me.' If you ask me to make those sounds now, I can't remember them. I don't know where they came from. But little by little the monkey came down from the trees, sat on my shoulder and I managed to get a leash around him."

He brought the monkey home, tied him to a 10-meter cable and let him go out the window and explore, but the monkey began launching attacks on the dogs in the apartment, so after a couple of months Kuzi gave him to the Monkey Park in Ben-Shemen. "Look at this - when I tried to keep him away from the dogs, he bit a muscle in my forearm. Here he took a bite out of my shoulder. Little bastard."

His cellphone rings. It's Miriam, another lady who adores and worries about stray cats - an "angel," he says, like Hanna Yitzhaki. "Miriam, don't worry, he's living like a king right here," he tells her. "He's so good, so sweet, you can stop worrying... They're sleeping together right now."

He's talking about Ginji, the off-balance, defenseless cat he found, on a tip from Miriam, cowering in a Ramat Gan hallway, and who now has his own cushion on Kuzi's third-floor balcony.

The apartment, where Kuzi lives by himself, is extraordinary. Despite the four dogs and seven cats, it's perfectly neat, spotless and odorless, the last because the windows are kept wide open. He made most of the colorfully-painted furniture himself out of old wooden pallets the supermarkets gave him. He made the facade that covers his front door, as well as the big lighting fixture on his living room ceiling, out of eucalyptus bark. The animal he identifies with most is the wolf, and the walls of the living room and kitchen are lined with framed photos of wolves, and he's painted large wolves' heads on the sliding glass doors of his living-room balcony.

All the dogs and cats live side by side peacefully, except for the occasional growling and barking that goes on between big, shaggy Cosmo, born to an orphaned wolf and a badly injured dog, and Shapira, a little Doberman who lost both eyes when a car hit him. "They're both males, so they bother each other," he says. "I think the only problem Shapira has in his life now is Cosmo, and the only problem Cosmo has in his life now is Shapira."

HIS VIEWS and habits regarding everything having to do with animals are extreme. Every now and then he goes into a pet shop, buys as many birds as he can afford and sets them free. A vegan, he refers to milk as "white blood," saying it's meant for the cow's calves, not for people. He sews pictures of wolves onto his

shirts. He will have nothing to do with leather products, showing me the "Vegetarian Shoes" brand on his hiking boots, which are made of synthetics.

He won't go to a restaurant where meat is served, or even, for the same reason, to a wedding or bar mitzva unless it's given by a family member. He doesn't hate meat-eaters, but he definitely hates hunters. And fishermen. "I can't bear to look at them," he says. A diver, he occasionally goes out to where the fishermen cast nets from their boats, then he dives under, takes out his knife and cuts the nets open. "When the fishermen pull the nets up, they must figure a shark was there," he smiles.

"Whenever I hear about a fisherman falling into the sea and drowning, I say, 'Justice was done,'" he goes on. He doesn't mean to shock, he's just being candid. "I was watching that movie, *A Perfect Storm*, with my family, and they were all crying when George Clooney [who played a fishing boat captain] drowns in the end. I was happy, I thought it was great," he laughs. "The only thing that worried me was that he wasn't going to drown."

Under the storage container at Abarbanel, Kitzka is cowering in a corner. Kuzi doesn't think she's in a life-threatening condition, explaining that cats can definitely get along with one bum leg, still he wants to get her to a vet. He slides the lasso along the ground under the container toward Kitzka, telling Yitzhaki, "Talk to her, try to calm her down."

Lying prone in the dirt, Yitzhaki calls, "Kitzkaleh, my beauty, come to me, we're going to take you to the doctor, come, Kitzka, Ki-i-i-itzkaleh, Ki-i-i-i-i-itzkaleh, come sweetheart, come, we want to help you..."

The cat keeps running away from the lasso, so Kuzi takes out a trap, places some tuna in it and holds it open along the side of the crawl space. Gradually, Kitzka creeps up to it, eyes the tuna warily and goes halfway inside the trap. Kuzi very quietly maneuvers his gloved right hand into the crawl space behind Kitzka and grabs her tail. Kitzka fights and yowls like crazy as Kuzi tries to get a glove onto his other hand so he can subdue the cat without getting his hands scratched to pieces. Kitzka, however, breaks loose.

"Ay-y-y-y-y," groans everyone involved. "I don't believe it," says Kuzi. "I was a second away."

Kitzka retreats under the container, and with people still at her, she scampers out and hides under a parked car. Kuzi heads out to his van. He comes back with the blowpipe that shoots tranquilizing darts. He goes up to the end of the car nearest Kitzka and tells Yitzhaki to stand at the other end. "Talk to her, Hanna," he says, placing a dart in the mouth of the blowpipe. This has been going on for nearly two hours, and he figures Kitzka is about at her wits' end.

As a boy growing up in a Tel Aviv apartment, Kuzi didn't have pets; his parents wouldn't let him. But he regularly brought home wounded cats, puppies and doves and nursed them back to health, keeping them under his bed for a week or two until they were strong enough to return to the streets. One day he came home from school and found that the puppy he was caring for was gone - his parents had thrown it out. "I turned the house upside down, I tore up the furniture," he recalls. "After that they realized they'd gone too far, and they didn't do it again."

In his parents' home he ate meat, fish and dairy products, but couldn't bear to eat any food that looked like it had once been alive, only things like schnitzel or meatballs. His epiphany came one night when he was lying in bed, and he doesn't know if it was a dream or a vision but he saw "a green valley. The valley began filling up with white animals - white cows, white chickens, white ducks, white turkeys, until the whole valley was covered in white. And then it all turned red, and I snapped back to reality and I was really shaken up. After awhile I calmed down and went to sleep, and I dreamed the same exact thing, and I woke up again in a panic. But this time I realized what I'd seen - it was the animals, the innocent animals, whose blood I'd been drinking all my life."

He doesn't remember how old he was, but he says that dream, or vision, changed his life. Since then he hasn't eaten any animal products. "But I still feel remorse for all the animals I ate before. I can't get rid of this feeling, and I don't want to," he says.

His other passion as a boy was sports, and he joined the IDF as an instructor of *krav maga*, rappelling and other skills, then trained to join a special combat medics' unit assigned to the West Bank. "Everything I'm doing now to rescue animals, I started out doing in the army. I saved soldiers' lives. I learned to improvise under pressure, to overcome fear in dangerous situations. Being in the army was a gift from God."

POLITICALLY, HE'S right-wing, a Land of Israel loyalist - "orange," like the bracelet he wears and the ribbon that hangs from his rearview mirror. He refers to the disengagement from Gush Katif and northern Samaria as the "expulsion." Along with a group of volunteer animal rescuers, he was in the middle of it.

"We rescued about 450 cats and a few dozen dogs from the rubble," he says, looking at the photos. "I lost nearly 20 kilos. We were going in day after day, working from five in the morning until midnight. We didn't violate the law - we had entry permits from the IDF. It was very hard for me to concentrate on my work while all this was going on. But we stayed there rescuing animals basically until the army closed the gates."

His cellphone rings. It's a moshavnik whose dog has gone missing. After getting some basic details, Kuzi asks if "somebody doesn't like dogs where you live." Hearing the reply, he says, "Then that's our lead." According to the owner, the dog used to sniff around a food processing company on the moshav, and the head of the company threatened to poison him. "The guy probably snatched the dog, put it in his car, drove off and dumped him somewhere," Kuzi says.

He tells the man that he receives constant information about missing pets, and that for NIS 350, he'll open a file on his dog and go after the ones he hears about that match its description. "If I return your dog to you, it's another NIS 350, but I give that as a reward to whoever reported seeing him. This is my profession, but I'm not in it just for the money," he tells the man.

Kuzi makes a living at it. He gets referrals from animal welfare organizations and local agencies. He does a lot of rescues for free, but also has contracts with the Environmental Protection Ministry and Israel Police, the latter employing him as its consultant on animal abuse cases. Pulling out a batch of police reports, he says that since 1996 he's been going out with the police on about 10 to 20 complaints a year, his job being to determine the cause of the animal's injury or death. He's seen horrific sights.

I ask if he ever confronts the suspects in these cases face to face. "I've seen a lot of these men, but I always go out there with the police. If I was by myself with one, I'd tear him apart. There's no way he'd walk out alive."

Before finding his calling, Kuzi traveled a lot and worked as an artist, an interior decorator and a sports instructor. In 1994 he stopped into the Let the Animals Live office in Tel Aviv to get a bumper sticker, and started doing some volunteer work, which led to a job offer to start up the organization's rescue operations. He did that for a little over a year until a new boss came in with whom he didn't get along, and he quit. "For months afterward I was in a depression," he says. The depression ended when he decided to go on his own, rescuing the animals that nobody else could or would.

He never formally studied animal husbandry or zoology or veterinary medicine; his understanding of animals, he says, comes from God-given empathy and intuition. "Where do you study how to get a monkey down from the top of a eucalyptus tree?"

His rescue skills are also part intuition. "You get into situations where you have to improvise all kinds of ways to get to the animal, you have to build tools out of what you've got, out of what you can find."

During his thousands of rescues, at times dangling from a rappelling rig high above the ground, he's never been seriously injured. "I'm very professional. I focus completely on what I have to do, because there are situations where if I lose concentration and make a mistake, I'm dead."

ONE PARTICULARLY scary rescue took place a couple of years ago in the Arab village of Jatt, where a cat had fallen 20 meters down a sewage hole being dug at a construction site. A construction worker threw food down to the cat for days and called all sorts of authorities to come rescue it, but none would. Finally, he got to Kuzi through Let the Animals Live.

"It was this real narrow hole," he recalls. "I started rappelling down, and at about three meters, my body's telling me that this is too dangerous. If I go all the way down and something goes wrong, say a rock falls and hits me in the head and knocks me out, I'll never get out of there."

So he came back up to the surface and tried to reach the cat with poles and lassos, but the hole was too deep. "I said I'm not going home without this cat," he continues, "so I went back down and just willed my mind to be still until my feet touched bottom."

A photo in his album showed him standing at the building site next to the concerned construction worker, who was grinning widely as Kuzi held a little gray-and-white cat in his arms.

At Abarbanel, Kuzi is inching up to Kitzka's hiding place under the car so he can get a clear shot at her hindquarters with a tranquilizer dart. Unfortunately, the black cat that had attacked her before picks that moment to trot by, and Kitzka gets scared and runs out. Yitzhaki grabs at her, misses, and Kitzka climbs up the high concrete wall separating Abarbanel from a row of tenement backyards. The cat starts walking along the ledge. Yitzhaki is worried she's going to jump over and be lost for good to her Holocaust survivor patients. Kuzi tells the social worker that's very unlikely.

"She's been over there before and come back, she's not going to climb over a wall to anyplace she hasn't been before," he says. Nevertheless, he swings himself atop the three-meter wall and walks along the ledge to see where the cat might have gone. Seeing no trace, he jumps back down.

"I think she needs to be left on her own for awhile, she's been through a big ordeal, and I think we've put enough pressure on her for now," he tells Yitzhaki. He says that if Kitzka doesn't return in a few days, he'll come back, find her and take her to the vet for her leg.

Thanking him, Yitzhaki puts a couple of bills in his hand, he thanks her and heads home.

Three days later, Yitzhaki still hasn't seen the cat. "This is terrible. We should have caught her. We'll probably never get her back now," she says.

The next day, she sees Kitzka. "I fed her, petted her, she was very affectionate. I picked her up, put her in a cage and took her to the vet. She's got a dislocated leg and is going to have to have surgery, but the vet says she'll be all right," says the social worker.

"I knew the cat would come back," says Kuzi. His job is done.

A lot of people, maybe most, don't understand such all-consuming devotion to stray cats. As for Kuzi's mission to wild animals of all kinds that are wounded, disabled and in danger, it's just uncanny. The bond he has with them seems supernatural - which is how he himself sees it. "It's not just that I love animals, it's more than that," he says. "They're part of my blood. They're an extra sense in my body."