



‘This is what I learned at Magen David Adom’

Nothing could have prepared paramedic Maayan Lanzman for the chilling experiences that awaited her as a member of Israel’s rescue mission in Haiti following the island’s devastating earthquake. But eight years of intensive work with Magen David Adom trained her to cope with the difficult challenges and fateful decisions she faced

By Shalom Zamirin



Nothing in the world - not past experience, not briefings on the way to the rescue mission, not even live reports from the scene of one of the world’s biggest natural disasters in recent times - could prepare her for the profoundly difficulties of working in Haiti after this year’s

massive earthquake decimated the island nation.

Paramedic Maayan Lanzman, 23, of Rishon Lezion, completed countless courses and enrichment programs during her eight years of intensive activity with Magen David Adom as a paramedic and as a shift officer at MDA’s National Medical Dispatching Center. She rescued victims of horrific traffic accidents and dealt closely with the terrible injuries from attacks during the second Intifada in the early years of this century. But when she tries to describe the scene in hard-hit Haiti, she struggles to find the appropriate words to convey her feelings.

The journey to Haiti capped off a hectic day that began with a routine shift at Magen David Adom and ended on a ruined soccer field on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. In the morning before she left for work, she saw a television news flash on the disaster that hit Haiti. But Maayan was on her way to Tel Aviv and nothing seemed farther away than the Caribbean island. During her

shift, her mobile phone rang. “There’s been an earthquake in Haiti,” said the voice on the other end of the line. “We’re going there. Are you coming?”

“I’m coming. Did you even have to ask?” she replied with a grin.

I’ll tell you why they had to ask. It’s far away, it’s dangerous - whatever people might say, lightning definitely does strike twice in the same place. And aside from that, we don’t have enough troubles of our own?

“Not really. My only hesitation was whether it was right to go, on such short notice, from the standpoint of my workplace. You simply don’t think about all the rest. I’ve been doing what I do best since the age of 15. All the time, everywhere. That’s what they taught me at Magen David Adom. And that’s the way it should be.”





It's difficult to connect this pretty and gentle young woman with the stark brutality of one of the most devastating earthquakes in recent times. But after just a few minutes of conversation, it becomes clear that she is made of sterner stuff. At the age of 15, when her friends were interested mostly in having a good time, Maayan joined Magen David Adom. She started as a volunteer, took every possible course, and continued as a paramedic during her compulsory military service. Today she is a field worker and shift manager at MDA's National Medical Dispatching Center.

"I wanted to contribute, to take part in something meaningful," she explains. "That's not something that most people are doing these days. To save lives - and that's something I've done several times." Thus, the trip to Haiti was a natural continuation along the path Maayan chose many years ago.

You didn't know what you were getting into.

"Of course not. Even those who thought they knew quickly understood that they didn't really know anything. The scenes we saw in Haiti were simply beyond anything we could imagine. We had never seen, much less been in, a movie like this one. All we knew was that there had been an earthquake and that we

were coming as an emergency team, as a rescue force to aid the injured."

The beginning gave little indication of what was to come. Getting organized in Israel was quick and efficient, the flight was long and tiring. The aerial view of Haiti was misleading: "Everything looked green and peaceful. Pastoral, and not just from the air, even after we landed. On the way to the field where we set up our hospital, we were still wondering if maybe people hadn't exaggerated in their descriptions. There were people in the streets and we didn't see real destruction. Then the wounded started to arrive, but we didn't know and didn't see where they were coming from. Some time passed before we started going out on the field, so that we could see and understand what really happened in Haiti. And it was hell. There's no other way to describe it. Hell. Suddenly we understood what was meant by a city that was there, and then disappeared. We were in a safe and protected place that was suitable for setting up a field hospital. But believe me, five minutes from the hospital the city had been wiped out."

And then the work began.

"In the field, it was a little more complicated. We came to nothing. You must understand this. Nothing. No infrastructures, no buildings, no electricity. Nothing. American soldiers unloaded our planes at the airport and then we went to a factory owned by a Jewish resident of Haiti. We set up a space that looked like a fenced-off soccer field. Trucks carrying containers with our precious supplies went ahead of us.

"You need to picture the situation. Nighttime, total darkness and we're in the middle of nowhere with a backpack and a sleeping bag. It's hard to believe, but a few hours after that we already had a hospital and took in



our first casualty. We split up into shifts and got down to work. Eight hours of work, eight hours rest and then back again. It worked out that you sleep once every two days. Because when you finish a shift in the morning, and it's extremely noisy, and very hot and sticky - it's impossible to sleep. So between shifts, you help out in other departments, go out on patrols and rescues - in short, totally busy around the clock."

Gradually, Maayan and the rest of the Israeli team were exposed to the true dimensions of the disaster. It was only then that they fully realized the importance of the Israeli delegation and its participation in this enormous humanitarian undertaking.

"At a certain stage, in the midst of all the chaos, I went to the Dominican Republic's improvised field hospital. Hell is not the word. Everyone was lying on the floor, used bandages on the tables, and the local staff and volunteers were trying to give treatment that was in fact impossible to give. At least, not under those conditions. The situation was truly desperate. It was impossible to move around on the streets. People immediately realized who we were and begged us to take them with us, to give them care. People grabbed our pants and refused to let go. 'Take me, take me.' It was awful."

Not something they had prepared you for.

"Prepared us? Who knew what was waiting for us there? How could it be possible to prepare for those kinds of situations? There were some people on the team that went through the tsunami in Thailand and were at other



earthquake sites. But no one had witnessed scenes like we saw in Haiti. Remember, in countries that were struck by major natural disasters, the disaster took place in a defined geographic area, and the government remained functional and there were emergency services. There was someone to turn to.

"In Haiti there was nothing. Desolation. Emptiness. The entire country collapsed and nothing was left."

Despite the difficulty, try to describe the picture or the experience you'll take away with you from Haiti.

"Everything was difficult. Show me a picture and I can tell you the entire story. I think the toughest experiences were with the children who were hurt. They were lying there and the feeling was one of total helplessness."

Maayan pulls out her laptop and shows dozens of photographs from Haiti. In one striking photo, she is standing beside an infant with a distended stomach and huge pain-wracked eyes. Maayan is silent as she passes her finger gently over the photograph. Slowly she begins to relate the story. "In the middle of the night they came and asked me whether I knew how to use a BIG bone injection gun that allows the administration of medicines and fluids when intravenous access is not possible. I went over to the tent and saw three doctors crowded around an infant in critical condition. They were familiar with an older version of the device, and this is where the knowledge I gained at MDA really helped out. I've been familiar with this device for several years and I've used it more than once.

"So I explained to the doctor how the treatment should proceed, I guided his hand and in no time, the device was in place. But that's not the end of the story: The blood test showed that the baby had a rare blood type - O negative - and that there was internal bleeding and she urgently needed a transfusion. By a stroke of fate, that's my blood type. So I gave blood. To my great sorrow, the treatment she received managed to keep her alive for only a few more days."

Her family understandably turned into great fans of Israel.

"The truth is that her father was with her for one day and then he disappeared and never came back. Like many other parents that left their children in the hospital and never came back."

If there was one difficult thing that no one could have prepared the team for, it was the need to make a large number of crucial life-altering decisions, one after another.

“When you learn about disaster medical care in theory, and then encounter it in practice, it’s a totally different thing. Haiti was a school for disaster medicine. There, we had to make difficult moral decisions, which were unlike anything we knew or heard about. All’s well and good until the moment of truth, and it’s impossible to prepare anyone for this.”

For instance?

“Who will be admitted to the hospital and who will not. Who can be saved and who doesn’t have a chance. You know what? Who will live and who will die. Because if they don’t get into the hospital, there’s no alternative choice. There’s no other hospital. And if someone is admitted to the hospital, until when should they be treated? We had to decide when to stop, to know when to say ‘Enough.’ To understand that this patient’s story is over because you can’t invest everything in one patient when there are so many others that can be and should be saved. And it’s up to you to decide - to decide how to invest and allocate the limited resources at your disposal (medical equipment, hospitalization space, medical personnel, time) in the correct and most effective way - as opposed to regular emergency medicine, in which you invest all available resources and where time also plays a part, although it is measured differently. Can you understand being in this position? Under these constraints?”

It’s extremely difficult, but it turns out that it’s not impossible. Maayan and her colleagues made one tough decision after another, paused and then went on. To the next case, the next casualty, the next fateful decision. And in the background, everyone - from the volunteers to the cooks - was wondering whether we made the right decision, did the right thing. “I’m certain,” says Maayan, “that the answer is yes. This experience changed something within each and every one of us. But the bottom line is that I’m convinced that every one of us views it positively.”

You’re proud of the mission you took part in.

“Everyone who was in Haiti felt they were part of something big. Of course we were proud of our mission. And journalists and U.S. military personnel came to see us and our work.

One interesting thing was that from the very beginning, there were exchanges of patients among the various field hospitals. And it was like a one-way street - we got all the most difficult cases and sent out the ‘easier’ cases and those who just needed observation.”

I assume that it was impossible to survive in such a hell without taking a break to relax a little.

“Toward the end, we went in groups to a seaside hotel to refresh ourselves. A total revolution, unbelievable that just 90 minutes away was total destruction and bodies in the streets, and here was an enchanted place. Truly paradise - a Caribbean island like you see in the movies. Azure sea, clear skies, gorgeous beach, tall coconut palms. Okay, we only had four hours there but those four hours undoubtedly hit the spot. Balm for the soul.”

And then you came home. Was it too early? The right time?

“I have mixed feelings about that. From the standpoint of emergency medical work, operations and life-saving treatments, births - there’s no doubt that we did our part. But on the other hand, it’s impossible to say that there’s not a lot of work still remaining to be done. I’m speaking of routine medicine, rehabilitation, training in setting up hospitals and clinics and much more. Haiti needs to be strengthened, but our delegation did its part. Yes, we finished at the right time.”

Would you go again under similar circumstances?

“Without even thinking twice.”