



Yuval Mendelovitz among the canines at his rescue in Hod Hasharon. (Photos: Ohad Kab)

# Pet whisperer

Yuval Mendelovitz dedicates his life to dog rescue

• By ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

The way Yuval Mendelovitz puts it, the decision to open his dog shelter 12 years ago did not come from choice – he had to do it.

In June 2004, four-year-old Avivit Ganon of Tel Aviv was killed by her family’s American Staffordshire terrier. Five months later, regulations for the importation and possession of “dangerous” dogs came into effect.

The types of dog covered by the regulations were the American Staffordshire terrier (also called Amstaff), pit bull, bull terrier, Argentine dogo, Japanese tosa, English mastiff, Brazilian fila and rottweiler. The regulations prohibited the importation of these breeds, and of other dogs deemed dangerous.

According to the regulations, the owners of dangerous dogs already in the country had to be at least 18 years old. They had to hold a special permit and post a sign outside their home warn-

ing of the dog’s presence. Such dogs could be taken into the public domain only by people aged 18 or older who were capable of controlling them. A leash could not exceed two meters in length, and the dogs had to be muzzled.

Perhaps most significantly, it became mandatory to sterilize or neuter dangerous dogs, and such animals could be given or sold only to the security forces, the municipal veterinarian or a pound, at the latter’s authorization.

“Apparently, there was abuse going on with the pit bull that killed Avivit,” but nobody cared about that,” Mendelovitz says.

“Once [the government] made the law where they weren’t allowed to breed pit bulls anymore, people started to kill them. They were throwing them out of their homes. So I started to save them; I had something like 35 right away,” he says.

“I went around saving pit bulls all over the country,” he goes on. “Our God doesn’t work for just anybody! He says there will be pit bulls in the world, there will be pit bulls in the world! It’s very simple.”

This was the beginning of what today is known as Yuval Mendelovitz’s Dog Rescue, currently located in Hod Hasharon.

ON AN average day, Mendelovitz’s facility has anywhere from



Breeds legally deemed dangerous include pit bulls, English mastiffs and rottweilers.

15 to 50 dogs. (On the day we spoke, it was 17.) The most ever was 116. The dogs are all what the government deems “aggressive breeds,” mostly pit bulls and rottweilers.

The dogs are there for a few reasons: some no one wanted to take responsibility for; some were scheduled to be euthanized in other shelters (which often don’t have enough room and are incredibly over-extended); some were victims of abuse; and some were being used in illegal dogfights.

One day, while walking his own pit bull down the street, Mendelovitz saw a woman who had one of her own. She told him to be careful and to walk his dog on the other side of the street. At first, he was confused as to what the woman meant, but she told him her dog was dangerous and that she had rescued him from a life of organized dogfighting.

“I was surprised to hear that people in Israel were doing dogfights,” he says. “This got me go-

ing even more.”

Once he learned that dogfighting was rampant in Israel, stopping it became an integral part of his mission.

“When I find out that dogfights are happening, I go and take the dogs and do *balagan* [make a fuss],” he explains. “If we can go with the police, we do, and they arrest all the people. It’s illegal, but most times, the police either don’t care about it or they don’t know how to handle these people. They’ve started to ask now, and they do want to learn. Every time I meet someone from the police, they try to understand what’s happening, but I’m doing their job, essentially.”

Mendelovitz had hopes of working more directly with the police.

“If I had a badge, I could go to the dogfights and say, ‘Okay you did something wrong.’ But I can’t do that with the way things are now,” he says.

He doesn’t let a lack of police support stop him, though –

which often results in him fighting the perpetrators behind the dogfights. He doesn’t bat an eye.

“In the end, I will get the dogs because I love my dogs,” he says. “Everybody who knows me, knows that.”

Illegal dogfights take place all over the country, within every demographic: rich, poor, Arab and Jew, Mendelovitz says. There is a lot of money involved, and everybody wants in. It took him three years to catch one man who was running dogfights, and he believes strongly that if he had the police working with him, the man could have been caught much sooner.

AFTER LEAVING the moshav near Nahariya where he was raised, Mendelovitz, now 40, served in the Golan Brigade from 1996 to 1999.

“I’m a soldier and I protect my children,” he states. “I go to fights, I save them from abuse, I steal them, and I do all these things that the government should do. They should stop the fights and they don’t do it, so I do all the garbage work. I started the shelter because no one else wanted to take them, and no one else knew what to do with them. I knew how to handle them.”

He feels he understands the true nature of pit bulls, saying they are too often woefully misunderstood. Ironically, he claims, it is the stigma of aggression surrounding such breeds that leads less savory characters to abuse them and enter them into dogfights.

The laws certainly don’t protect them, and it could be argued that the laws don’t protect potential human victims either. By making their breeding illegal, everything becomes clandestine, thrusting these dogs further into the seedy underworld that seeks to profit from their abuse.

Mendelovitz knows first-hand the effects that abuse has on dogs that have an incredible capacity to be loving and loyal companions.

“Right now,” he says, “I have 17 dogs around me, and you don’t hear one bark. It’s very nice, very comfortable. People don’t know the true nature of the pit bull. I train them to behave in and out of the house. They don’t bite. I’m not a dog trainer; I just understand the mind of the animals. When I was a child, I lived with a lot of animals. I’ve been around them all my life.”

People adopt dogs from his shelter all the time, once they’re ready for adoption. When someone comes for a dog, he shows



Feeding the hungry pooches.

them a maximum of three. He says he uses intuition to make a match and views each adoption as a treasure that can rebuild a dog’s life anew.

“I understand where he [the dog] has been, who he was, and then we go from there,” he says. “Every dog has his own soul.”

The amount of time it takes to rehabilitate a dog, Mendelovitz says, depends primarily on two things: the nature of the abuse and the age of the dog. He trains them and rehabilitates them to behave in a manner that is safe for anyone, even families with young children.

He himself has a four-year-old daughter. The shelter’s Facebook page prominently features a picture of her lounging on a bed with several Pit Bulls beside her. He emphasizes that his dedication to the dogs comes at a high price in regard to his family.

“I love the dogs, but I also have a daughter, and because of what I do, she doesn’t see her father,” he says. “She’s amazing. She’s my best friend. She has her own pit bull, of course.”

you might call him something of a dog whisperer, or even a dog rescue vigilante.

“I work like the army,” he explains. “I have my own people on the ground who provide me

with information.... I do a lot of homework.”

Once he hears that people are abusing a dog, he watches them and observes how they live. The timeline for this reconnaissance

work varies, but after he has learned and seen enough, he goes in, often alone, and takes the dog. Sometimes, a couple of male friends will accompany him if a fight is likely.



Aiming high.

OVER THE past 12 years, Mendelovitz has moved 10 times. He survived a heart attack and the disintegration of his marriage. Throughout all of this, he never lost sight of his goal: to save dogs at any cost.

After watching numerous videos of Mendelovitz on YouTube,





Standing with police officers who had just completed a special operation to rescue a dog from abusive hands.

“I don’t carry a weapon on me because the government didn’t give me one. The police don’t go with me, but they don’t say I can’t go. But I go anyway,” he concludes.

Mendelovitz’s dog rescue service became a registered non-profit in 2008, but life is still far from easy. After having repeated requests denied for a vehicle to use during dog rescues, he became disheartened.

“The government approved me, but they don’t help me,” he complains. “They say, ‘You’re a good man and what you’re doing is good, but money we won’t give to you.’ Nobody takes responsibility. They know how to say nice things, and that’s it.”

He ended up acquiring an ambulance on his own, but is unable to afford gasoline.

“To keep moving and keep fighting is very hard for me,” he says. “I had to pay something like NIS 10,000 recently because of the dogs. We ruined the apartment and I had to pay for paint, damage and cleaning. So I have to always ask for help and fight.”

When asked to describe his

most recent dog-rescue story, Mendelovitz looks and sounds like an excited young boy on a playground, describing a triumphant moment.

He received a call from the army informing him that in a West Bank village there was a group of men stealing cars. Inside one of the stolen cars, the army found four dogs tied up. They apparently had been there for two years – they were unable to move because they had not walked for so long that their muscles had atrophied.

The dogs hadn’t been abused per se in the sense that they had been given food and water, and were not beaten. Yet being confined in a car for two years was the only life they knew. Perhaps the backseat of that stolen car would have been the only life they knew if not for Mendelovitz.

“There are men who talk and there are men who do. I don’t know how to talk; I only know how to do,” he explains.

“There are two people who wake up in the morning. One says, ‘What is the world going to give me today?’ He will get nothing. The other one says, ‘What

can I give the world today?’ He will get everything.”

MENDELOVITZ IS nothing if not a doer and has big hopes for the future of his shelter. He would like to move somewhere permanently, without the fear of nagging landlords or property damage due to the dogs. He dreams of a large plot of land where he could build a farm and take care of his canine companions.

Donations come, but they are few and far between. Simply put, he hopes for more and that those who have the ability will see the merit of his work and support it.

“I need help; I really do,” he says. “It’s hard to do this on my own. We are talking about dogs that are very good, have love to give and are good with kids, but nobody cares enough. I’ve been doing this for 15 years. I know what I’m doing. Why do you close the doors all the time? Open them!”

For more information on Yuval Mendelovitz’s Dog Rescue or to contribute, visit its Facebook page or call 058-686-6886.



‘There are men who talk and there are men who do.’

# On Israeli buses, size matters

A Transportation Ministry law raises the hackles of dog owners

• By Keren Preiskel

Can you take your dog on the bus? The answer is maybe or maybe not. It depends on the mood of the driver, the size of the dog and when the promised re-legislation takes effect.

In short, it’s a mess!

Until last year, the Transportation Ministry permitted dogs of all shapes and sizes to be taken on buses, provided that the person traveling with them bought them a ticket (full price within the city and half price with a minimum price of NIS 10 on intercity journeys) and that the dogs wore a muzzle. The system seemed to work well, and although there were some people who didn’t like or were afraid of dogs, the muzzles ensured that they posed no threat.

As someone who often used to travel with my pet Labrador mix on the bus, I never had any problems with her. She was always very friendly to everyone around her and behaved impeccably. The same cannot always be said of certain human passengers. Any regular traveler on Israeli buses can tell you that disturbances often include people listening to loud music, talking on their cell-phones at the top of their voice or putting their feet on the seats.

Somewhere around the middle of last year, comments began to circulate on Facebook that dogs were no longer allowed on buses. This rumor was proven to be true when an article by Dana Yarktzky appeared in Walla at the end of May, stating that the Transportation Ministry was no longer permitting large dogs on buses. However, a look at the ministry’s guidelines regarding taking animals on buses stated that it was permissible to take dogs of all sizes on buses. This caused no end of problems for dog owners because as far as they knew they were still allowed to take their dogs on the bus. And many bus companies were unaware of the change in

the law, so they continued to allow dogs on buses.

At first I thought it was a change in Egged’s policy, as the bus company’s website seemed to be the only transportation website that alluded to this prohibition. The website stated that only small dogs that could be held in one’s arms or sit on one’s knees would be allowed on buses. This was not a helpful distinction, as my dog used to lie across my knees when I was on the bus and weighs 30 kilos, which by no means fits the description of a small dog.

However, upon further clarification, it transpired that the ministry had changed its policy regarding allowing big dogs on buses without bothering to update its website or advising the majority of bus companies or the public. Not only did this change inconvenience large numbers of dog owners, but it was also penalized owners of large dogs while still allowing small dogs on buses.

There is no logical reason why large dogs should not be allowed on buses when small dogs are. The majority of veterinarians will tell you that small dogs are far more likely to bite than large dogs, as they feel more threatened. A dog does not take up any more space than a shopping trolley, baby carriage, suitcase or wheelchair, so there is as much room for a dog on the bus as there is for any of these.

Appalled by this change to an already overly stringent law (in the UK, dogs are allowed on public transport without a muzzle and without a ticket), I decided to start a petition to protest this. I advertised the petition on Facebook and was soon contacted by other incensed dog owners who wanted to help. One of them started a group on Facebook called Klavim Gdolim Be’autobusim (large dogs on buses), where we advertised the petition.

Within two months, we had more than 4,000 signatures. The



outrage of owners of large dogs in Israel had obviously reached the Transportation Ministry. At the beginning of July, Transport Minister Israel Katz announced that he intended to change the clause in the regulations prohibiting taking large dogs on buses and that “freedom of movement has been restored to people.” Another article was published in Walla by Yarktzky welcoming these changes.

In spite of these declarations, it appeared that the delight of the dog owners was premature. While some people have reported being allowed to take their dogs on buses, the ministry website still states that it is prohibited to take large dogs on buses, which creates another problem. Although some bus drivers might allow large dogs on buses, they cannot be forced to do so, given that the website still cites it as forbidden. Therefore, dog owners are placed in a kind of limbo. One bus driver might allow the dog on the bus but the next one might not, thereby creating a problem of getting to one’s final destination with the dog. While it is not overly problematic if one is traveling in the same city, if one has traveled to another city with a dog, there is the risk of not being able to get home with one’s pet. This is an untenable situation, given that

Katz announced that he would rescind the law.

Several people have contacted the ministry through its Facebook page to protest the lack of consistency between their words and their actions and to attempt to find out why no change had been made. A ministry employee responded to all the messages as follows: “I am aware that the website has not been updated yet. This is because the legal department is working on formulating the new legislation to allow dogs of any size on buses. As you are aware, the Knesset is now in recess and, according to our estimates, after the Jewish holidays, with the start of the next plenum, this legislation will pass and come into force.”

That was the ministry’s response in August. Yet a month earlier, the minister had announced that the law would be changed, making it sound like a fait accompli. He was obviously aware that nothing would be implemented before the summer recess, so why did he make such an announcement before the recess? This only created false hope, and the lack of consistency has left dog owners feeling confused, restricted and somewhat cheated. Months have passed since the start of the current plenum, and de-

spite repeated appeals by myself and others, we have received no answer or even acknowledgment, and the Transportation Ministry section on animals remains unchanged.

I have not attempted to take my dog on a bus since then, as I can’t take the risk that I won’t be able to get back with her. Gone are the pleasurable days of our taking the bus to the dog beach in Tel Aviv. An irrational change in already overly stringent laws and a failure by the minister to keep his promise have robbed me and many others of such simple pleasures and rights.

Even though the laws are far more draconian here than in my native London, I accepted that I had to put a muzzle on my dog (much to her chagrin) and buy a ticket for her as a condition for being allowed to travel with her on public transport, which is, after all, there to serve the public. However, this discrimination toward large dogs and, even worse, empty promises to rescind the law are unacceptable and must be challenged. Ministers should not be allowed to get away with making empty promises to their constituents for whom they are supposed to be working.

To sign the petition (in Hebrew): [www.atzuma.co.il/allowdog-soneggedbus](http://www.atzuma.co.il/allowdog-soneggedbus)