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# RIDES OF HOPE

*College professor Shimon Schocken uses mountain biking in remote areas of the Israeli wilderness as a tool to teach life lessons to juvenile inmates.*

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*Written By J. C. F. Schiller  
Photos By Raphael Rabinovitz*

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**O**n a rocky slope in the Judean Desert, the front tire on Alex's mountain bike slips into a crevasse, launching him into a tumbling skid along the hard, scorching terrain.

Suffering only minor injuries in the mishap, the youth, who spends most of his time locked inside an Israeli juvenile detention center, rises and begins jumping up and down on his bike — cursing violently. He throws his helmet up in the air and his backpack goes ballistic in another direction. He runs to the nearest tree and begins breaking branches and throwing rocks, cursing.

“And I'm just standing there, watching this scene with complete disbelief, not knowing what to do,” says Shimon Schocken, an avid mountain biker and computer science professor at the Efi Arazi School of Computer Science at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Israel. “I'm used to algorithms and data structures and super-motivated students, and nothing in my background prepared me to deal with a raging, violent adolescent in the middle of nowhere.”

After the outburst, Alex, then 17, sat on a rock and informed Schocken and his fellow riders he had no intention of continuing. Waylaid 20 kilometers from the nearest road, Schocken knew they had to get going before the sun set. He told Alex to rest for a few minutes.

“Go away you maniac, psychopath,” Alex said.

“Relax, Alex,” Schocken said. “Here's a piece of chocolate.”

“Arrrggg!” the hungry youth groaned, enjoying the chocolate before rejoining the group for the rest of the ride.

Until 1995, Schocken was clawing his way up the ladder of the American scientific community as associate professor and director of NYU's undergraduate program in information systems. But his heart wasn't in it. So he returned to Israel and joined the founders of IDC, Israel's first private, nonprofit university, in order to search for his soul in the land of his lineage. Ironically, he found it in a ragtag group of juvenile offenders at a high-security detention center in the middle of nowhere, which led to his founding “Rides of Hope.” A way to teach valuable life lessons, Schocken takes groups of Israeli juvenile detention center youth on challenging bike rides to remote locations in the Israeli wilderness. The venture not only enables him to help the youth, but also to pursue his passion for mountain biking — an outdoor sport that connects him with his heritage.

“When I'm on my bike, I feel that I connect with the profound beauty of Israel, and I feel that I'm united with this country's history,” Schocken says. And also, for me, biking is a matter of empowerment. When I reach the summit of a steep mountain in the middle of nowhere, I feel young, invincible, eternal. It's as if I'm connecting with some legacy or with some energy far greater than myself.”



It was in 2006, during one of his usual rides, that Schocken first felt compelled to ask to speak with the warden of a juvenile correctional facility, one he had ridden by many times, surrounded by barbed wire, electric gates and armed guards.

He told the warden he wanted to start a mountain biking club and take 10 youth on rides in the summer once a week. The warden, amused, told Schocken he was a nut, and explained that these youth were serious offenders and should be locked up, not out at large. Nevertheless, two months later, the warden agreed.

"I had the tremendous pleasure of introducing these kids to the world of total freedom, a world consisting of magnificent vistas ... as well as close encounters with all sorts of small creatures coming in all sorts of sizes, colors, shapes, forms and so on," Schocken says.

Despite all the splendor, the initial rides were extremely frustrating. Every small obstacle, every slight uphill, would prompt the boys to stop in their tracks and give up. "I found out they had a very hard time dealing with frustration and difficulties," Schocken says. "But that's one reason why they ended up where they were. And I became increasingly more and more agitated, because I was there, not only to be with them, but also to ride and create a team. And I didn't know what to do."

It took several such incidents to figure out how to handle the unruly boys. Schocken tried harsh words and threats, but that got him nowhere. "That's what they had all their lives," he says. "And

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at some point I found out, when a kid like this gets into a fit, the best thing that you can possibly do is stay as close as possible to this kid, which is difficult, because what you really want to do is go away. But that's what he had all his life, people walking away from him."

That's what Schocken did with Alex, who arrived alone in Israel at age 8 after someone put him on a boat in Odessa, Ukraine, and shipped him off to the Promised Land. He ended up in south Tel Aviv and spent his youth roaming the streets, then the next decade in the slums and state prisons, becoming a prominent gang member.

"This kid was probably abused, abandoned, ignored and betrayed by almost every adult along the way," Schocken says. "So, for such a kid, when an adult that he learns to respect stays close to him and doesn't walk away from him in any situation, irrespective of how he behaves, it's a tremendous healing experience. It's an act of unconditional acceptance — something that he never had."

Originally, Schocken's vision was to create a team of "winning underdogs." He had Lance Armstrong in mind. It took two months of frustration to realize the vision was misplaced, and it dawned on him that the purpose of the rides should actually be to expose the kids to one thing only: love.

"Love to the country, to the uphill and the downhill, to all the incredible creatures that surround us — the animals, the plants, the insects, love and respect to other fellow members in your team, in your biking team, and most importantly, love and respect to yourself, which is something that they badly miss," Schocken says.

Along with the youth, Schocken underwent a remarkable transformation, too. Coming from the cutthroat world of science and high technology, he used to think reason, logic and relentless drive were the only ways to make things happen. He was calculated, rational and a staunch perfectionist.

"And before I worked with the kids, anything that I did with them, or anything that I did with myself, was supposed to be perfect, ideal, optimal," Schocken says. "But after working with them for some time, I discovered the great virtues of empathy and flexibility and being able to start with some vision, and if the vision doesn't work, well nothing happened. All you have to do is play with it, change it a little bit, and come up with something that does help, that does work."

One of those principles is focus. Before each ride, Schocken sits with the youth and gives





Above: Shimon Schocken

them one word to think about during the trip, such as "teamwork," "endurance" or "perspective." Perspective, he says, is one of those critically important life-coping strategies that mountain biking teaches. And he adds that the outings go smoother when the boys are focused on something, because so many things can go wrong on a ride.

"I tell kids when they struggle through some uphill and feel like they cannot take it anymore, it really helps to ignore the immediate obstacles and raise your head and look around and see how the vista around you grows," Schocken says. "It literally propels you upwards. That's what perspective is all about. Or you can also look back in time and realize that you've already conquered steeper mountains before. And that's how they develop self-esteem."

After each ride, Schocken and the boys sit together and share their special moments of the day. One youth said a ride on a ridge overlooking the Dead Sea reminded him of the day he left his village in Ethiopia with his brother. They walked 120 kilometers until they reached Sudan — the first place they could get water and supplies. As the boy was speaking, Schocken noticed everyone was looking at the boy like he was a hero, probably

for the first time in his life. "And this was just the beginning of our ordeal until we ended up in Israel," the youth said. "And only now, I'm beginning to understand where I am, and I actually like it."

History and context play key roles in many of the rides. "In Israel, the single tracks that I ride are thousands of years old," Schocken says. "I feel deeply connected to these places, and this feeling transcends time. All the kids that participate in the program, as well as me, are first or second generation in Israel. But our ancestors walked on these hills 2,000 years ago."

The group has visited a Kibbutzim community established by Holocaust survivors. They've explored what's left of Palestinian villages and discussed how they became ruins. And they've seen the remnants of Jewish, Nabatic and Canaanite settlements that are 3,000, 4,000 and 5,000 years old.

"And through this tapestry, which is the history of this country, the kids acquire what is probably the most important value in education, and that is the understanding that life is complex, and there's no black and white," Schocken says. "And by appreciating complexity, they become more tolerant, and tolerance leads to hope."

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