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Home on the range, in Israel

By [MEREDITH PRICE](#)

Nestled atop the Judean hills a few kilometers south of Jerusalem lies a peaceful patch where the loudest noise for miles is the neighing and whinnying of horses. In front of a small building with an office, a kitchenette and a bathroom is a wide open space the color of sand with one central, circular enclosure. A gentle breeze stirs dust into the gated metal ring ahead and sleeping dogs, lying in patches of scattered shade between rows of horse stalls, lift an ear in suspicious greeting.

Wearing a pair of faded Wrangler jeans and a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, Anthony Lipchitz, the owner of the family-run King David Stables, leads a spotted Arabian horse named Cleo slowly out of its gate.



Whipless horsemanship.
Arik Lipchitz, second-generation Israeli cowboy.
Photo: **Meredith Price**

Lipchitz, minus a pair of leather chaps and a Texas drawl, truly fits the persona of a genuine cowboy. From his quiet demeanor, patient explanations and ease with the horses, it is easy to believe that he was raised on a ranch.

"I was born into horses," he says slowly, taking off a pair of dark sunglasses. "I come from a long line of horsemen on both sides of the family. My grandparents in Australia and Lithuania all had horses, then my parents in South Africa raised horses and now me and my four children and grandchildren all have horses in Israel."

Since he made aliya 35 years ago from South Africa, Lipchitz has been training and breeding horses, but the King David Stables found its current home on Moshav Shores over a year ago. Everything from beginner to advanced lessons in Western riding, summer camps for youth, horse boarding, breeding and therapeutic riding are offered. King David Stables is also one of the few places in Israel that offers Yoga Chi Kung, a combination of breathing and muscle movements on horseback designed to reduce tension and improve coordination.

"Our specialty is in horsemanship. We have a different approach than most other places in Israel because we focus on natural horsemanship, which means you'll never see a whip or any artificial equipment around here," says Lipchitz, who instructs the one-on-one Yoga Chi Kung lessons a few times a week. "I teach it because it's for old people to teach," he says with a smile, tipping his wide-brimmed hat slightly further up on his forehead.

In the dry, orange space ahead of the office flanked by rows of stalls, most of the movement is that of dogs and horses. The only people in sight are Lipchitz's son, Arik, and Josh Kalman, an aspiring young cowboy. As the 12-year-old Kalman drags bags of hay to the horses, a cloud of dust whirls up from the circular arena and a white minivan pulls into the dirt path leading up to the entrance.

"That would be our Ethiopian kids," says Lipchitz, as five excited youngsters jump out of the vehicle and walk briskly from behind the office to the central circle, anxiously awaiting their ride. Around here, safety is strictly enforced. They know better than to break into a run around the horses or start shouting, but their excitement is so great it fills the entire grounds with a sense of anticipation.

"They come once a week for therapeutic riding as part of a program to reward the best kids in their class," says Lipchitz, carefully tying Cleo's rein to the metal gate before greeting the children.

While Arik, who will be co-instructing with Anthony, gets helmets for everyone, Kalman quizzes me with horse trivia.

"Did you know that horses can't throw up?" he asks. I shake my head. "Well, they can't, and that's why their food always has to be fresh. They can die from rotten food."

This is but one of the many things Kalman says he has learned while working with the horses and helping out at the stables.

"He just started with us this fall," says Lipchitz of the eager young Kalman. "He's doing well, but he has a lot more to learn."

AFTER THE therapeutic lesson ends, another stable regular appears. Joan Shrensky, who has been taking Yoga Chi Kung lessons for a little over a year, says the calming effect of the horses has helped her through a difficult year.

"I've always been hyperactive and I never knew how to slow down," says Shrensky. "When I was diagnosed with cancer last year, I decided it was time to take a break. I could never get into regular yoga, but on horseback the energy is so powerfully soothing that one time I almost fell asleep."

In remission now, Shrensky also started a new tradition of bringing each of her seven grandchildren to ride once a week for the year following their eighth birthday.

In the summer months of July and August, the calm serenity of springtime days similar to this one transforms into buzzing activity. Over 500 kids from all over the world come to learn how to ride and take care of horses during the two-month period. In the camp, a big emphasis is placed on communicating with the horses, and the instructors spend time every year in training of their own in the United States.

"Arik goes every year to learn in clinics abroad, and we pass that education on to our students," says Lipchitz in his charming, South African lilt. "Our camp is very intense, and it's not for every kid because it involves long days with a lot of hard work, but for the ones who really want to learn it's a great experience."

Vigilance and safety are such an important and basic element in all types of horseback riding that Lipchitz says the first three words they teach new riders are safety, safety and safety.

"We don't allow any violent behavior around the horses - no shouting, no running, no cursing, no smoking and certainly no abusive behavior." Inexperienced riders also practice on the ground for 15 or 20 minutes before they actually get into the saddle.

As Lipchitz discusses his educational policies, two more horse owners, Daniella Ashkenazi and Debbie Dumanis, stroll into the arena. Ashkenazi, who started riding horses as a mid-life hobby, says being on horseback not only lowers stress but has taught her a tremendous amount. She spends as much time as she can with Cleo, her spotted Arabian mare.

"I have learned how to take care of horses, how to respect them and how to ride properly," she says, adding that much remains to be learned.

"I rode as a child, but as an adult it's a completely new experience. The connection with a horse is something special," says Ashkenazi as she gently feeds Cleo a bag of her favorite treat - chopped carrots.

"She recognizes me even though other people ride her, and she has started talking to me, too," she says, giving Cleo's sleek neck a fond pat. "Life takes on a different pace here. The rhythm and energy of the horses forces you to slow down."

Dumanis, a native of Indiana who boards two of her own horses at the King David Stables, Red Rose and Juliette, agrees that horses have a lot of peaceful, positive energy.

"Just being at the stables and spending time around them is relaxing," she says.

Nearly 10 years ago, Dumanis and her husband started riding after their eldest son, Guy, attended a summer camp in the United States and came home wanting a horse. Since then, it has turned into a family affair and all four of Dumanis's children now take lessons.

"On weekends we practically live here," says Dumanis. Last year, they decided to breed Juliette. Just before Pessah, she gave birth to a colt they named Whisper.

"She is like my first granddaughter," says Dumanis, who jokes that her husband claims she was more excited about Juliette giving birth than when she gave birth herself.

"Are you ready for a ride?" asks Lipchitz as I fumble with a helmet and glance nervously up at the tall Arabian patiently awaiting me. Arik helps me into the saddle and reiterates the basic commands: Pull left to steer left, right to go right and back to stop.

After a few minutes, the odd bounce feels natural and I relax into the scenery of the surrounding national park.

"There are kilometers and kilometers of trails around us," says Lipchitz. "We're lucky to border so much protected land."

Other than an occasional battle over snacking on ground shrubs, which Cleo is strictly forbidden to do, the ride goes smoothly. Up since before dawn working around the stables, caring for the horses and giving a few lessons, Lipchitz still looks energetic.

He hands me some carrots to feed Cleo as a treat and explains that soon it will be time to start preparing the horses for the end of another long, hot day - making sure they have everything they need before "hitting the hay" themselves.

While the sun beats down on the dusty, yellow stables and verdant hillsides of the King David Stables, Cleo slowly chews her carrots, occasionally closing her enormous black eyes against a gust of wind. In the distance, a neighing horse raises its voice in the hot afternoon air as the day slides slowly away.