

Living in Israel, Working in the States

BY DODI TOBIN AND CHAIM I. WAXMAN

Until recently, evidence suggested that an American's success at *aliyah* depended upon his willingness to disconnect from the United States. For example, *olim* who sold their homes in the United States were more likely to remain in Israel than those who held on to them "just in case." Although this observation is still true, a new pattern has emerged indicating that having a foot in the United States may actually enable a successful move. Specifically, we refer to the growing phenomenon of American *olim* who continue to work in the United States.

In case you doubt the prevalence of this phenomenon, try booking an El

Al flight from the United States to Israel for a Thursday evening or from Israel to the United States on a Saturday or Sunday night, especially in business class. These flights are packed with regular commuters. While no precise fig-

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ures of these commuters presently exist, a good guesstimate would be several hundred or possibly even several thousand.

While commuting from Israel to the United States is more common today, the idea is not entirely new. Moshe Schilit struggled with the deci-

sion to commute after he and his wife, Shoshanna, made *aliyah* in 1986. A computer programmer, Moshe had originally planned to commute for no more than a year, after which he would begin a computer job in Israel that he had already accepted. Ultimately, his company in the United States made him an offer that the couple felt they could not refuse. Today, Moshe is still commuting—he is in the United States three weeks out of every month. "A lot of people thought it odd," Shoshanna admits. "It was not common back then. We didn't plan it this way ... but that's the way it worked out."

Some *olim*, such as Lenny Solomon, the CEO of Shlock Rock, have no choice but to commute. Lenny's work, by its very nature, takes him on tour around the United States and elsewhere. When he's on tour, it's a "travel marathon nightmare."

"I perform in concerts all over the country ... doing musical outreach," says Lenny, who lives with his wife,

Dr. Tobin is a psychologist in private practice in Beit Shemesh and Jerusalem, and the former director of social services for Nefesh B'Nefesh.

Dr. Waxman is a professor of sociology and Jewish studies at Rutgers University. This article is part of a large-scale study on the phenomenon of American olim who commute.

Gillian, and their four girls in Beit Shemesh. “We spread Jewish awareness and pride through our music. It’s informal Jewish education. The message is ‘Be cool; be Jewish. Stay involved; keep learning.’ To do that in Israel, I’d have to be fluent in Hebrew, which I’m not.”

He realizes that unless he makes it “really big,” he’ll be commuting as he now does “at least until I’m fifty.... There’s no other option,” he says. “I am unable to recreate the profession I have in America here. I would have to work much more, with less satisfaction. It would be incredibly disappointing for me to have to become a Bar Mitzvah or wedding player. It might happen one day, but I’m hoping it won’t.”

American *olim* are certainly not the only transnational commuters. However, the phenomenon of American *olim* who work in the United States appears to be unique. Evidence suggests that there is no other group of transnational commuters who travel such a long distance and in such great numbers. Out of the approximately 3,000 American families who have made *aliyah* in the past ten years and have remained in Israel, perhaps as many as 30 percent have a family member commuting to work in the United States.

This trend is only possible because of recent technological developments, including improved airline services for business-class travelers, which make travel more tolerable; innovations in communications and the growing role of telecommuting. “Outsourcing has become more popular worldwide, so more companies are allowing people to do their jobs off-site,” says Daniella Slasky, the director of employment at Nefesh B’Nefesh, an organization that promotes North American *aliyah*.

Gilad Weinberg¹ is a recent *oleh* who has taken full advantage of this corporate trend. Gilad, who lives in Ramat Beit Shemesh with his wife, Batia, and their four children, began a “virtual relationship” with his company even before he made *aliyah*. For several months Gilad worked at home three days a week. When he and Batia

became serious about *aliyah*, he approached his supervisors with the following proposition: He would work at the office 25 percent of the time and at home 75 percent of the time. The company was willing to try it. Gilad currently travels to the United States about twice a month for three days and manages to participate in about 75 percent of the company’s meetings.

Commuting to a job in the United States can be advantageous to a new *oleh* family, ensuring steady income and sidestepping the stress of professionally “starting over.”

“When you make *aliyah*, not only are you going through the trauma of immigration, but you are also unemployed,” says Slasky. “The comfort of having a job that you can take with you is significant. For many commuters, the situation is only temporary, with the American job serving as a ‘bridge’ for six months or a year, ensuring the fami-

ly an income until a job is found in Israel.

“The fear of being unemployed is so strong,” Slasky adds, “that employ-

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ment is often the critical factor in determining whether someone will actually make *aliyah*. So many people say to me, “The only way I’ll come is if I have a job.”

Professional growth is another motivation for commuting. Some commuters indicated that they are better



Lenny Solomon, who lives with his wife, Gillian, and their four daughters in Beit Shemesh, has no choice but to commute to the United States for his job. Lenny is the CEO of Shlock Rock, a Jewish rock and roll band whose mission is to encourage Jewish pride, identity and awareness.

able to do what they were trained to do in a cultural environment that is familiar to them. In addition, because the United States is larger and more developed, the potential for professional growth is much greater here. Indeed, evidence indicates that the desire for professional growth and development is one of the major reasons American *olim* give up on *aliyah*. It has been estimated that in years past one-third or more of American *olim* have returned to live in the United States.² However, in recent years, the rate of returning *olim* has declined, and it is entirely possible that the commuting phenomenon is at least partly responsible for the decline.

Contemporary American *olim* are different from their American predecessors who arrived in the pre-state and early-state years. Whereas the latter tended to be young and single, today's *olim* are mostly married with young children. In addition, in today's *oleh* families, the heads of households have completed their education and bring with them several years of work experience. Today's *olim* are also unique in regard to the occupations they choose, and it is this uniqueness which probably accounts for the relatively large number of commuters to the United States. Overwhelmingly, the commuters are professionals—accountants, physicians, lawyers, computer specialists and other high-tech professionals—and there is a greater demand for their services in the United States. Data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) and the US Census Bureau starkly demonstrate that there is a higher rate of professionals and managers among American *olim* than among Jews who remain in the United States. Among American *olim*, 82 percent of those with known occupations are in professional or managerial positions. These individuals are more likely to commute because their jobs are usually flexible and do not require them to be available nine to five, Monday through Friday. Thus, it seems that commuting and telecommuting allow thirty-some-

thing-year-old seasoned professionals to seriously consider *aliyah*. And so ensues an interesting cycle—Israel gains more citizens, but fewer employees.

Physicians, in particular, are highly represented among commuter *olim*.

“This is the sacrifice we have to make in order to live in Eretz Yisrael. But I want my children to know that it's not normal for their father to be away ten days every month. It's not how it's supposed to be.”

According to Slasky, doctors choose to commute because “the salary difference [between Israel and the United States] is significant, as opposed to other professions where there is less of a gap.”

Doctors who wish to practice in Israel must first obtain an Israeli medical license. Licensing includes examinations and an unpaid internship, a process that can take several months or longer. For many American doctors, particularly those with experience, this may seem to be more trouble than it's worth, especially since doctors in Israel are held in lower esteem than their American counterparts.

Debby Jotkowitz, a dermatologist at Hadassah University Medical Center in Jerusalem, and her husband, Alan, a senior physician in the Soroka Medical Center in Be'er Sheva, decided to forgo higher salaries and prestige for a higher ideal when they made *aliyah* in 2001. “One of the goals of *aliyah* is to contribute to Israeli society, and that was most important to us,” says Alan. “Practicing medicine in Israel also enabled us to integrate into Israeli culture in a way we couldn't have done otherwise.”

Modern travel has impacted the workplace so that even those with Israel-based jobs may be spending more time traveling for work. Three years ago, Ari Solomont, his wife, Sara Beth, and their four children, moved from Boston to

Chashmonaim, a *yishuv* situated midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Ari, who had served as regional director of the New England Region of NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth), the Orthodox Union's youth group, for ten years, was appointed international director of resource development at Ner LeElef in Jerusalem, a position he loves but which requires him to travel to the United States for ten days each month. While not overjoyed that Ari has to travel, Sara Beth feels that “this job is ... really him.”

The commuting phenomenon can also be viewed as having positive financial consequences for Israel. The commuters earn their money abroad and spend the bulk of it in Israel. But what of the impact of commuting upon the emotional well being of the marriage and family? The Schilits, who live in Beit Shemesh and have four children, three of whom were born after Moshe was already commuting, made a point of normalizing their situation from the outset. “Everybody creates their own ‘normal,’” says Shoshanna. “I recently read an article about husbands who cope with wives stricken with breast cancer. They said that the adjustment period is hard, and then they come to some kind of reality that they call the ‘new normal.’ This [commuting] is our ‘new normal.’”

“It's a way of life. Period,” says Moshe. “Sometimes it's easy, sometimes hard.... [Our kids] know it's our way of life and they don't question it.”

Shoshanna contends that maintaining routine is essential. “We don't stop school; we don't stop homework; we don't stop tests; we don't stop bedtime routine.... It's normal for Abba to be in and out ... but we still do what we have to do.”

Shoshanna is extremely positive about the benefits of her husband's commute, which include material ease as well as being able to visit relatives overseas and to send their kids to summer camp in the United States. But Shoshanna, who is a commuting “veteran” of nineteen years, emphasizes that

getting used to this lifestyle takes time. For many new *oleh* families, simultaneously adjusting to a life in Israel and to a commuting arrangement is a real strain. On the one hand, most women whose husbands commute to the United States don't have to worry about spending money, and don't have to work. This enables them to focus their energies on setting up a home, adjusting to a new culture and meeting the needs of their children. In addition, many couples report that when the com-

“The biggest challenge for me is knowing what my wife is facing,” says Ari. “What she is doing shouldn't be done alone. She's not a single mother.”

Avi Silverman, a director of social services at Nefesh B'Nefesh, views commuting as “doable” but a “totally *bedieved* [ex post-facto] situation.” “I wouldn't rule it out if it's necessary, but you have to know all the permutations of what a marriage is going to be like,” he says. The recognition that many new *olim* are grappling with challenges aris-

sessions express resentment about the commute and the challenges they are left to face alone. Silverman voices some of the sentiments he hears from some of the wives: “If [the commute] had been in five years and I was settled, it would be okay. But I'm not settled. I'm trying to get my kids settled; I don't have a *chevrah*. I'm still figuring out where the supermarkets are while [my husband] is back in the [United States] where everything is easy and familiar. He brought me here to deal with all of this alone?”

These reactions are in line with studies of families in the United States who were forced to relocate because of the husband's job. In the studies, the wives and children in these families were found to harbor anger about the move.

How do the husbands feel about leaving? According to Silverman, some carry guilt that they have caused something akin to a “divorce” within the context of a perfectly good marriage. Their wives serve as “single parents” while they are gone—going to *semachot* alone, making Shabbat alone. The commuter spouse also has to deal with coming in and out of his family's life, a life that seems to be running smoothly without him. “How much do you [the wife] bring him into your life, how much do you keep him out of your life?” Silverman asks. “How much do the children accept him again, how much do they need to keep their distance because it hurts so much when he comes and goes? These are all serious questions.”

Commuting fathers may have to miss many special events in their children's lives, including birthday parties and *siyumim*. And then there is the inherent loneliness the commuter feels while working in the United States. “I fill my days with volunteer work; I don't have much time to ‘pine away,’” says Shoshanna. “Moshe is very busy too, but when he comes home [when in the States], he comes home to empty rooms.”

Sara Beth concurs. “I can imagine it's very lonely for [my husband]. He



Ari Solomont, his wife, Sara Beth, and their four children moved from Boston to Chashmonaim three years ago. “At night when the kids [all need] me at once, and Ari isn't around ... that is probably the hardest thing for me,” admits Sara Beth.

muters are home they are able to spend more “couple” time than they were prior to making *aliyah*. The commuters also tend to take active roles in regard to household chores and are highly engaged with their children. Still, many would be hard-pressed to deem the arrangement ideal.

“This is the sacrifice we have to make in order to live in Eretz Yisrael,” affirms Sara Beth. “But I want my children to know that it's not normal for their father to be away ten days every month. It's not how it's supposed to be.”

ing from the commuting life has prompted the Nefesh B'Nefesh Social Services Department to set up a support group for commuter families. The group offers support, validation and assistance in coping with a range of issues that stem from the commuting lifestyle.

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Silverman observes that some of the women who come to the support

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able or you can make the best of it. You have that choice. How do you want to live your life?”

It seems obvious that in order to successfully navigate the demands of a commuting life in Israel, you need a solid marital foundation. In Moshe’s view, a strong marriage is so vital that he cautions, “If your wife is not sure about it or [is] questioning it, I would say, don’t even think about it. You’re going to fail.”

And what of the impact of commuting on the children? “I think in the beginning everyone has a rocky time. They don’t know what it means that Abba is going away for a week or two weeks or even a month,” says Silverman, but “the kids get used to it. Kids are malleable. If they see that their parents are *shalem* [complete], kids can deal with it,” he says. “Once the parents bring in tension, it filters down.”

Realistically, the full impact of commuting on these children will only be known in years to come.

Unlike twenty years ago, when the Schilits spoke once a week at three dollars a minute, the technological advances of today enable commuters to keep in constant contact with family members via telephone and e-mail. Ongoing contact no doubt lessens the feeling of abandonment amongst all family members. Shoshanna says that she and Moshe are in touch two or three times a day.

“Moshe makes time to learn with the boys on the telephone, as often as needed.... We feel that the telephone is in place of the psychiatrist’s couch. We

don’t need counseling because we are communicating. We feel investing in the telephone calls is good for our marriage, and good for our connection.” **JA**

Notes

1. Name has been changed.
2. Chaim I. Waxman, *American Aliya: Portrait of an Innovative Migration Movement* (Detroit, 1989), 169-185; Yinon Cohen and Yitchak Haberfeld, “The Number of Israeli Immigrants in the U.S. in 1990,” *Demography* 34, no. 2 (May 1997): 206.

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never knows where he will be sleeping ... he spends a lot of time in the car by himself [in the States], while his reality is here. That's got to be hard.”

For Ari, feeling lonely is a good sign. “If you start to like the fact that you are waking up alone, then it’s time to stop commuting.”

Although commuter couples face significant challenges, several women report that the experience contributes to their personal growth. “We bought an apartment in Rechovot, and I fixed it up,” says Shoshanna. “I ran everything: I dealt with *kablanim* [contractors] and *shiputzim* [renovations]. All these were ‘empowerment experiences.’”

“Know where your bank account is and where your life insurance papers are and how to turn the gas on and off,” adds Sara Beth. “If those are things you’ve relied upon your husband for ... you figure it out. You have to find the inner strength.... You have to try to see the good. You can either be miserable and make everyone around you miser-