

Going Home:
Fulfilling the
Aliyah Dream



A Call to American Jewry:



**WE HAVE BEEN
SUMMONED!**

In a historic decision made a few months ago, the Israeli government ended its fifty-five-year-old agreement with the American Jewish community, and started to directly support *aliyah* programs in the West. To understand how remarkable this decision is, it is important to view it from a historical perspective. In 1950, David Ben-Gurion reluctantly signed an agreement with the American Jewish community in which the Israeli government committed to not invest in or promote Western *aliyah*. This was done to allay the American Jewish community's fear of being accused of dual loyalty. Instead of promoting North American *aliyah*, Israel would help build a sense of Jewish identity and pride among American Jewry and work to create a palpable connection between American Jews and Israel; in return, Israel would receive political and financial support. This agreement survived for

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decades, throughout leadership changes both in the United States and in Israel.

But recently, it has become apparent that a sense of Jewish pride and identity among American Jewry is no longer a given. Recent reports—such as the *2007 National Survey of American Jews* by Professors Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman—have shown that there is a disconnect between American Jewry and Israel. Statistics reveal that Jews under thirty-five years of age feel a great apathy towards Israel. In fact, 57 percent of American Jews in that age group said that they would not consider the annihilation of the State of Israel a personal tragedy. Furthermore, 80 percent of American Jewry have never stepped foot in Israel. These sobering figures display major chinks in the armor of this almost sixty-year-old agreement.

In 2007, when the Israeli Cabinet made the unanimous decision to start investing in Western *aliyah*, it effec-

tively ended this agreement and launched a new era in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel.

Amazingly, though a disconnect indeed exists among American Jewry, there is still an unprecedented resurgence of *aliyah* spanning all denominations. Beyond the nearly 18,000 North American *olim* that Nefesh B'Nefesh has helped bring to Israel thus far, more than 20,000 Americans

Nefesh B'Nefesh (NBN) Olim Affiliation Breakdown:

Families	Singles
70% Orthodox	40% Orthodox
21% Conservative	52% Conservative
9% Reform or Other	8% Reform or Other

have contacted the organization requesting *aliyah* assistance for the immediate future. Realistically, we can expect that the current average of 3,500 North American *olim* per year

will increase to more than 5,000 in the near future.

Between 1948 and 2000, approximately 100,000 Jews made *aliyah* from the United States. It is reasonable to expect to bring that same number of people to Israel in the next ten to fifteen years. This formidable, yet eminently achievable, goal would be a remarkable, historic gift for Israel's very core and essence.

American *olim* hit the ground running, buying homes and cars, paying income tax and contributing professionally to the State of Israel.

After the first 10,000 Nefesh B'Nefesh *olim* arrived in Israel, Israel Business Information Services conducted an independent study of the economic effects American *olim* have on Israel. The economic infusion of these *aliyot* was valued at half a billion US dollars; the study noted that American *olim* hit the ground running, buying homes and cars, paying income tax and contributing professionally to the State. The implications of multiplying this effect ten-fold are dizzying. However, while the economic impact is indeed impressive, the spiritual, ideological and entrepreneurial contributions of American *olim* are just as important. Thus, 100,000 new *olim* could have a tremendous effect on the State of Israel and could transform it significantly.

In order to increase *aliyah* from its current rate of 50,000 people in ten years to 100,000 in the same period of time, we must create an atmosphere that supports and strengthens the passion for Israel that already exists within the Diaspora. In order to change history, the American Jewish community needs to create an atmosphere that fosters *aliyah*.

There are five main challenges in creating and nurturing an environment necessary for American *aliyah* to grow:

- It is important to realize that any *aliyah* wave will be lay-driven. While this may be surprising to some, out of the 100,000 American *olim* who arrived in Israel between 1948 and 2000, the number of communal leaders who made *aliyah* is negligible. Many people have made *aliyah* in spite of rabbinic or communal pressure *not* to. This is nothing new. In our Amidah prayer, it

states: "*Vetechezna eineinu beshuvcha leTzion berachamim*, Let our eyes see the return to Zion in compassion." Rabbi Yosef Breuer questions why Chazal use the term "*vetechezna*," which is derived from the root "*chet, zayin, nun*" (vision), a word used throughout Tanach exclusively for prophecy. His answer is that we are not asking God to give us a *navi* (prophet) to lead us, or a leader that

we will follow, but rather we are asking God to let us have the vision, and let us have the courage to return to Zion. This prayer is particularly relevant in our time: although most Jewish leaders are not moving to Israel, *aliyah*



Pinchas Roth and Jennie Rosenfeld and their daughter Neshama land in Israel as new *olim* in August 2008. Photos courtesy of Nefesh B'Nefesh

is, reassuringly, growing with or without them.

- Israel should not be portrayed exclusively as a charitable cause. Such a portrayal has an adverse effect on our children's perception of Eretz Yisrael. In the nineteenth-century, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer pleaded with the *va'adot* (organizations) in Europe that

collected money for Eretz Yisrael to cease their practice of collecting *tzedakah* only for the poor and the sick and for the reconstruction of destroyed buildings. He demanded that they start collecting for *Shivat Zion*—for *aliyah*—insisting that it was important for the children. He reasoned that if children are exposed only to a poor, sick and broken Israel, then their perception of their homeland will be tarnished, making it difficult for them to yearn, dream and pray for returning to Zion. Unfortunately, the organizations refused and Rabbi Kalischer died without ever seeing a qualitative difference in his community's perception towards Israel.

- American Jewry needs to be more open-minded when reacting to issues in Israel. Every aspect of Israeli life needs to be distinguished on its own merit. To illustrate this point, consider the mitzvah of *Brit Milah*. When making

a *Brit Milah*, one would expect to say the blessing of *Shehecheyanu* ("Thank You for bringing us to this moment"). However, the halachah states that we don't recite the blessing because one can't selfishly recite *Shehecheyanu* while a baby is crying in pain. In Israel, however, the halachah is that one *should* recite *Shehecheyanu*. Rabbi Chaim Drukman, commenting on an insight of the Vilna Gaon, explains that the reason for reciting the blessing is because in Israel, one experiences so many simultaneous contradictory experiences and intense emotions. One is accustomed to simultaneously feeling fear and joy, hope and despair—and so, when one is blessed with a joyous event, that happiness should be cherished. Anyone who

lives in Israel understands the art of compartmentalization. There is a significant amount of frustration in many areas of Israeli life, be it political, social or religious. But one must look at the bigger picture. One must be able to compartmentalize in order to be able to listen to the frustrating daily news, yet at the same time feel a deep appre-

The OU's Home Away from Home A Place for Teenage *Olim*

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

With American *aliyah* on the rise, a growing number of English-speaking teenagers are facing difficulties adjusting to Israeli society. In some cases, the inability to adjust socially, academically or emotionally can lead to frustration and depression, and sometimes even to drug and alcohol use.

Responding to this need, the Orthodox Union (OU) created a place where teenage *olim* could meet with peers who “speak their language” in a wholesome, enjoyable setting.

Housed in the Seymour J. Abrams Orthodox Union Jerusalem World Center, NESTO (Native English-Speaking Teen *Olim*) offers a drop-in center for former Americans, South Africans, Australians, Canadians and Brits. The center is equipped with computers, bean bag chairs and ping pong tables. “These teens feel like outsiders,” says Sarra Horwitz, assistant director of NESTO, who is an American *oleh* and a former NCSY advisor. “It’s very hard to leave friends and family. They have problems making friends in school and [fitting into the Israeli] culture. We provide them with a place where they feel at home.”

NESTO draws dozens of teens each week, who participate in educational and recreational group activities including *tiyulim* (trips), sports, *chesed* projects and *Shabbatonim*. “Friends bring friends,” says Horwitz. “We conduct team-building exercises to show how each individual’s strengths are integral to meeting a group goal.” NESTO also invites lecturers to speak about Jewish-related topics and issues related to self-esteem.

Because of the language barrier, many English-speaking teens find that high school presents not only social, but also academic hurdles. “Many were good students in

America,” says Horwitz. “Here they are average or below.” In order to graduate, every Israeli high school student is required to take the *bagrut* (an exam) in Hebrew. To alleviate the scholastic stress, some families decide to home-school their teenagers and have them take the American SAT instead. “The problem with [being home-schooled] is that [the kids] don’t develop social skills,” says Chaim Pelzner, the Israeli-born NESTO director who holds a master’s in education from Bar-Ilan University and worked for the OU’s Joseph K. Miller Torah Center in Kharkov, Ukraine. NESTO is helping these youth deal with the academic stress through NESCHOOL, a program that matches Israeli student tutors with NESTO members. The tutors help them with daily homework assignments while strengthening their Hebrew skills and knowledge.

Best of all, NESTO works. Horwitz tells the story of a girl who wanted to move back to America so she would “not have any problems.” She didn’t want to learn Hebrew or make Israeli friends. But lately, thanks to her experience with NESTO, she’s changed her tune. “She’s been coming in with Hebrew words she’s been learning and asking me questions on [Hebrew] grammar,” says Horwitz.

“NESTO helps these teens find their own footing so that they can move on,” she says.

The NESTO staff maintains contact with its “graduates” after they complete high school and go on to yeshivah or the army or to join the Israeli workforce. “They know they can call on us if they need to,” says Pelzner. “It’s still their home away from home.”

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ciation for living in the holy country. One must be able to see the broader reality of Israel with all of its diverse, and sometimes confounding, components. The challenge for every person is to be able to recognize that “*this* is a gift from God, and certain frustrations are the result of man’s manipulation.” These frustrations cannot, nor should they, tarnish the gift itself.

• We need to understand our history and our nation’s true roots while maintaining our loyalty to and appreci-

ation of the United States. We must realize that as an American Jewish community we have matured; the insecurity Jews felt in the past about dual loyalties should no longer be a concern. We must be able to say “We are loyal to America; we are patriotic; we have *hakarot hatov* to this remarkable country for the freedoms it has given us,” while at the same time have no qualms about saying “The homeland that our hearts yearn for is Eretz Yisrael.” We are too concerned with

how our loyalties will be viewed. Ironically, America is the one country where one can be proud of his roots. We can be patriotic to a country that has been welcoming and nurturing while recognizing that our Homeland is of ultimate value.

• The fifth and last challenge is the hardest: We must regain, retain and sustain our marvel in the magic of *nissim*, miracles. In the last sixty years we’ve experienced truly miraculous events in which we clearly saw *Yad*

Hashem, and we need to regain that sense of wonder and sustain it. Chazal tell us that when we come to our Creator after 120 years, we will be asked the following questions: “Did you have a family? Did you conduct business ethically? Did you set aside time for Torah learning? Did you long for the *Geulah* (*Tzipita leyeshuah*)?”

The Ran quotes these questions but modifies the last one to “Did you long for the *Geulah* ‘*beyamecha*, in your day?” Rabbi Shimon Schwab discusses why the Ran added the word “*beyamecha*.” It seems that each of the first three questions can be measured quantitatively. “Did you have a family?” (Yes, here’s a family picture.) “Did you conduct business properly?” (I did, look at my IRS forms.) “Did you set aside time for Torah learning?” (Here’s my palm pilot—look at my learning schedule.) But the final question poses a difficulty: How does one quantify if he waited for the *Geulah*?

The Ran suggests that the real meaning of this question is, What actions did you take in your life to move the *Geulah* to the next stage? In a similar vein, the Chofetz Chaim explains the phrase “*tzipita leyeshuah*.” “*Tzipita*,” he says, is derived from the Hebrew word “*tzofeh*,” a scout. It is the scout who moves the troops, not the general in the headquarters who is busy studying the maps and creating the strategies. The *tzofeh*, looking out, takes the lead. Anyone can say “We want *Mashiach* now,” but were you a scout? Did you run to the next mountain, to the next stage of history?

In the last sixty years, our community has expended much effort in analyzing the degree to which we embrace the gift of *Medinat Yisrael*. But because of our preoccupation with analysis, we have failed to create a strategy for getting to the next stage in history.

We must take action and be passionate in order to enable the miracle of Israel to move forward! To sustain the marvel of Eretz Yisrael and get to the next mountain, we must be the scouts.

We have been given a window of opportunity. The only way we can achieve historic milestones is by ensuring that the American Jewish community introspects about its approach to *aliyah* and its connection to Israel. The challenges listed above must be internalized for us to succeed.

Whether or not our Jewish communities are up to confronting such an attitudinal shift, we can still marvel at the magic of living during these fascinating times. We must have a sense of appreciation that we are privileged to live at a truly inspiring and marvelous moment.

Will history be kind to us when it records our actions? Will this chapter be looked upon with awe and respect by future generations? This remains to be seen, but for now we must concentrate our efforts on making the most of this extraordinary chapter of our history. We have been summoned! ■

Five-year-old Eitan Weiss made *aliyah* with his family from Long Island, New York, in July 2008.



Coming Home

For me, the excitement began from the minute we chose to go to the airport. I kept thinking about the soon-to-be *olim*. “It’s one more month before they get here,” or “this is their last Shabbat in North America,” went through my mind. As the date of their arrival approached, the anticipation grew.

The night before their arrival, I kept checking the clock. “They’re boarding the plane now,” I thought. I prayed that they arrive safely.

By the morning, I felt as if someone had run an electrical current through my entire body. Whereas excitement had filled my prayers the previous day, on the day of their arrival, tears of joy flowed easily.

When my husband and I arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport, we found hundreds of people already there. Busloads of well-wishers, from Jerusalem and other cities, had signs, balloons and flags ready to give the *olim* a very warm welcome. We were treated to a lovely breakfast in Terminal One. Then a radio broadcaster interviewed us and photographers took our photos. Music played, and the atmosphere was lively.

At 8:40 AM, an announcement was made that the plane had landed. A cheer erupted from the crowd. We walked outside and waited for the plane. Some minutes later, we heard another announcement: “Look to your right.”

There it was! El Al/Nefesh B’Nefesh Flight 777! Another cheer of sheer delight was heard. Israeli flags were waved. I hoped that those on board could sense our excitement.

We waited as ramps were wheeled up to the doors of the plane. As the doors opened, another round of cheering took place. Music blared and flags were waved.

To me, the highlight of the day was the reunions that took place between the new *olim* and their relatives and friends. Our *macheteneste* was on board. The hugging, the kissing, the tears—words are not adequate to describe the emotion. It was like being at 210 weddings taking place at the same time.

On the way home, I thought of how fortunate I am to be able to live in Israel. For a Jew there is no place like it. My *neshamah* knows that it will be nurtured here. It is immersed in holiness. In Israel I can be a real, authentic Jew. I can live and work among Jews. I can see the beauty of the Land every single day. I can taste its delicious food, smell its fragrant aromas and feel the serenity of being at home.

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