

Perspectives on Jewish Life in Diaspora Communities

Tisha B'Av is an opportune time to reflect on *galut* (exile) and what it means for the Jewish people. Different communities experience *galut* in different ways. We are honored to share the perspectives of a number of rabbis throughout the world as they reflect on *galut* in general, the specific challenges in their region and how they address them, and the relationship of their communities to Israel and Aliyah.

Introduction



Chief Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein
Chief Rabbi, South Africa

Every Diaspora community faces unique challenges and opportunities, which are deeply rooted in the particular circumstances and history of the country in which it lives. The South African Jewish community lives in the context of a young democracy born in the aftermath of the evil and the suffering of apartheid. As each Diaspora community seeks to navigate its unique circumstances, we should all do so using the Torah as our compass, as the Mishna states (*Avot* ch. 5), “Turn it over and over for everything is in it [Torah].” So in South Africa we are guided by the Torah values of the equality of all human beings, as the Mishna (*Avot* ch. 3) says, “Beloved is the human being created in G-d’s image”; the imperative of alleviating human suffering, as the verse (Tehillim 145:9) states, “And His compassion extends to all His creatures”; and the mitzvah of kiddush Hashem, among many others.

While every community finds itself in very unique conditions, it is vital for all of us to feel that we are part

of one entity called Klal Yisrael, which transcends the location, culture, language and history of any one country. Our identity cannot be defined by the nationality of a particular Jewish community in which we happen to live. Our identity transcends circumstances, and is instead defined by the bonds that bind every Jew in the world to each other. These bonds do not emerge from mere narrow Jewish ethnicity and culture — they are created by our covenant with G-d.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in his foundational essay, “*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” identified two distinct covenants between G-d and the Jewish people: the “covenant of fate” and the “covenant of destiny.” G-d entered into the covenant of fate with us while we were still subject to Egyptian slavery when He said, “I will take you to be a nation.” Through this covenant, we became a separate people with a shared and supernatural fate for all time, and from which there is no escape.

In the last 80 years, for example, we have seen the irresistible power of this covenantal shared fate as Nazi Germany sought to annihilate assimilated and religious Jews alike. And today, the covenant of fate binds all Jews, willingly or unwillingly, to the

State of Israel and to the events and pressures that accompany anything to do with it. Every Jewish community around the world has been thrust to the frontlines, facing the anti-Israel onslaught, which, in its milder form, can mean being denigrated and isolated, and in its most virulent form can actually pose a serious threat to life and limb.

Rav Soloveitchik explained that the covenant of fate binds us and imposes on us a moral responsibility towards one another’s welfare. Every Jew must stand in solidarity with — and help, support and protect — every Jew unconditionally, irrespective of political affiliation, religious observance, or any other criteria. The all-encompassing covenant of fate connects us all, giving expression to the very concept of Jewish peoplehood and unity.

The covenant of destiny goes beyond the covenant of fate, which simply binds us as a nation through force of external circumstances. The covenant of destiny — known also as the “covenant of Sinai” because it was entered into at Mount Sinai when G-d gave us the Torah — is about our shared values, moral vision and the Divine mission of the Jewish people. It comprises the Torah’s principles and values and calls us to a higher destiny,

one that transcends mere survival. It is about *why* we want to survive, and what our purpose and moral calling is. It gives us our mission, articulating the *raison d'être* of the Jewish people.

These two covenants bind Jewish communities throughout the world, scattered throughout the Diaspora, and of course, with Jews at the centre of the Jewish world — the State of Israel. We have all felt the pull of both of these covenants. Sometimes it is the pull of the covenant of fate, such as when Naftali Frankel, Gilad Shaer and Eyal Yifrach were kidnapped, or during one of the Gaza wars, or in the aftermath of any terror attack in Israel.

We also feel the pull of the covenant of destiny. I have seen this in such a powerful and positive way through the experience of The Shabbat Project, which began in South Africa in 2013, and which last year reached Jewish communities in 1,152 cities in 95 countries. During the course of this project, I have seen the spiritually magnetic connection between one Jew and another, and between all of us and our national mission and destiny, symbolised by Shabbat. The Shabbat Project has seen major Jewish communities across the world — from Sydney and Los Angeles to Paris and Buenos Aires — moved on a large scale. But it has also seen Jews in far-flung corners of the world reconnect with what it means to be a Jew, because Shabbat pulled on their souls. Whether it was Abir Schweizer from Conway, Arkansas, who wrote that when you keep Shabbat — even if you are the only Jew in the town — you are never alone in the world; or Faisal Benkhalid, from Karachi, Pakistan, who connected with the project alone in a hostile environment; or Keli Rae from Fernley, Nevada, who thought

she and her family were the only Jews in the town, only to discover seven other families.

It is the calling of all Jewish leadership to nurture and to strengthen, in all our Diaspora communities and in Israel, the idea of Jewish peoplehood, of the fact that we are a part of the broader Klal Yisrael, and that we are connected to our fellow Jews through these two great covenants.

The bonds between Diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jewry are important for both. One factor in the warm reception that The Shabbat Project has received in Israel — where it has been active in more than 100 towns and cities across the length and breadth of the country, uniting religious and secular around our shared heritage of Shabbat — is the fact that it is a project that connects with Jews throughout the world. It has resonated with Israelis' deep desire to feel part of a global community, which is Klal Yisrael. This explains the unprecedented embrace of the project by even the IDF, which sees itself not only as the defence force of Israel, but indeed of all Jews, wherever they may be.

During the three weeks of mourning in the lead-up to Tisha b'Av, we are reminded that *galut* has its roots in the fragmentation of the Jewish people, the shattering of unity and shared brotherhood and sisterhood. Therefore, *geulah* has its roots in restoring Jewish peoplehood, unity and cohesion. Let us do everything we can to bring Jews together, through our two covenants with G-d, so that we can truly become one united Klal Yisrael, who can merit the Final Redemption coming to our world — may it come soon, please G-d.

Communal Challenges and Solutions



Rabbi Arie Folger '02R
Chief Rabbi, Vienna,
Austria

Before World War II, Vienna had some 200,000 Jews which comprised most of Austria's Jewish population of 245,000. Of those, about 65,000 were murdered by the Nazis, while most of the rest fled. After the war, Austria took a long time to come to terms with its culpability in the Holocaust. Jews settled in the initially small reconstructed community despite not being welcome. Under such circumstances, it was hard to develop the community.

All that changed over time, as on the one hand, many Jews from southern Soviet republics, mostly Uzbekistan (Bukhara, Samarkan), Georgia (Gruzia) and Kazakhstan settled in Vienna. On the other hand, Austria came to terms with its role in the Holocaust and our community's president managed, through tough negotiations, to obtain funding guarantees that allowed Jews to develop the community and build, among other things, a state-of-the-art K-12 Jewish school, an old-age home and a sports center.

It is now much easier to lead the community into the future, but we do face some very specific challenges. We owe a debt to the prewar community, but we must beware of becoming stuck in the past. We could run all day from one Holocaust remembrance event to another, but that would irresponsibly sacrifice our present and future to the past. However, we clearly owe that debt to the past. We must thus carefully

balance Holocaust remembrance and preservation of historic sites with our responsibility to be part of and contribute to the Jewish future. Which brings us to the next set of challenges: presently, about 60 percent of Jewish kids avail themselves of the Jewish educational institutions. That is comparatively very high, but not yet enough; every Jewish child deserves to discover and study Torah and become inspired to be part of the Jewish future, but not every child has that exposure at present.

Furthermore, since our community is an amalgam of the descendants of Viennese Yekkes, Hungarian and Polish Holocaust survivors, as well as the above-mentioned later Asian Sefardi immigrants, we still have much work to do to strengthen Jewish unity and inclusion.

To address these challenges, our school has both Ashkenazi and Sefardi teachers, and the other Jewish schools also make an effort to integrate children of all families. Through positive programming we try to give the kids a decent Jewish education and we hope to increase the offering of additional hours of religious instruction. We also run programs to strengthen our bond with the students who are already receiving Jewish education, such as a Friday evening davening and dinner event we recently held for the three upper



The Synagogue in Vienna

grades of our community's school.

In parallel, we run other events specifically targeting kids outside the community's formal educational programs, such as Friday evening programs that target the Jewish students of the French Lycée, where we also offer two weekly periods of *limudei kodesh*, a highly unusual achievement at French schools, where *laïcité* (French secularism) usually requires a much greater separation of church and state. Austrian education law made this possible.

However, we are aware that too many kids fall through the cracks, and we expect to begin analyzing why some kids leave our Jewish high school — which provides a very good secular education too — and in which schools they end up. Our goals are twofold: we want to prevent kids from dropping out, and we want to reach out to those who did drop out.

In addition, we are also spearheading programs on the university level: courses in Jewish education for people studying education are being launched as we speak, and we intend to do more for students in other departments. We are also involved with the Jewish students' union, and there are a few additional initiatives in town, including a yeshiva for young men studying at university. I also detect a gap in our offering for young women and hope to find partners with whom to address this need.

Finally, we also run some important programs for adults, including some for people who are not strongly connected to the community. One leading program bringing those who are very active together with those who are quite less active to the same table is the Shabbos Project, which in Vienna is now entering its fourth year.

Vienna and Israel

Our community is strongly connected to Israel, and many students decide, upon graduating high school or university, to either spend a gap year in Israel, study there, or make Aliya. Even those who come back will maintain a strong connection to Israel, which is only a three-hour flight from Vienna. We have close ties with the Israeli embassy, attend each other's programs and participate actively. We run a program with Birthright, advertise some programs in Israel, and I regularly mention in my speeches that Israel is where we ought to be. We do not run any formal program to promote Aliya.

We should also note that there is a sizeable Israeli expat community in Vienna. One of our challenges is to attract that demographic, which isn't used to affiliating with a Jewish community, and parts of which even see itself in starkly secular terms. This is a work in progress.

There is a special kind of Aliya that our members participate in disproportionately: many Viennese Jews, obviously provided they can afford it, own a second home in Israel, which is used for vacation, or is rented out, contributing to *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* by increasing the available housing units. On Yom Tov, many of our synagogues empty out, and congregants spend the holidays in Israel. It definitely beats spending Pesach in Cancun, all the more so does it beat spending Pesach holidays in a non-kosher hotel, which, as I had to learn over the years, is unfortunately not so uncommon.

Planting the Light of Torah in the Heartland



Rabbi Dani Rockoff
Rabbi, Cong BIAV,
Overland Park, KS

The *galut* challenges in our area of Kansas City are in some ways similar to any place outside of Israel. We live in a very comfortable suburban American neighborhood, with nice houses and lawns, courteous locals, and little traffic and congestion. We have a very nice shul and community, and families can raise their children very comfortably. In this sense, we

experience the “rivers of Babylon” *galut*. We are a relatively established Jewish area outside of Israel.

In other ways, we have a unique *galut* experience in that we still “feel” what it means to live in *galut*. We do not have the full array of Jewish resources that are available in Israel, or even those available in larger Jewish metropolitan areas. There is not the abundance of kosher restaurants, yeshivot and kollelim. We have the basic resources but there is still the sense that we are far away from the Jewish centers of the world. Even with today’s air travel, the distance to Israel on a plane is still just one leg longer when it requires a stopover.

We address the challenge of *galut*

in our area by devoting communal efforts to our shul, day school, kollel, kashrut, and many other Judaic programs to strengthen ourselves and to provide a strong foundation for the next generation.

We are also in the unique position of, hopefully, being a “light unto the nations” in the *galut* by acting in a manner that is a Kiddush Hashem. Our community is very hospitable to travelers from around the world who come here for work or travel. We are frequented regularly by kashrut professionals and a surprising number of business professionals from Chicago, New York, and Israel.

Another unique opportunity we have living in our region is to provide

Kansas City and Israel - A Historic Connection

Our community has always been very supportive of Israel, especially political action. Ranging from Rabbi Simon Glazer’s role in advocating for President Harding to support the Palestine Resolution in 1921 (upholding the Balfour Declaration), to Eddie Jacobson interceding with President Truman to have the United States recognize the State of Israel, to today’s very active AIPAC efforts, our region has been an important juggernaut in pro-Israel advocacy. This is especially important as there is a disproportionate impact that Jews in regions such as ours can have in supporting Israel, compared with more populous Jewish areas.

Beyond political activity, we currently make sure that there are religious celebrations and recognitions of modern-day Israel. We hold a *tefillah chagigit* for Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim. We also have special programming

that reflects not just the culture of modern-day Israel but that highlights the religious experience and what it means to us today.



Aliyah is an important value in our community. Over the years, several families have made Aliyah, including a few former rabbis of our shul. We have hired *shlichim* to teach in the day school, and, for a number of years, there was a Torah Mitzion Kollel.

In terms of Aliyah as a priority, I have shared with the community that moving to Israel should be seriously considered. If an individual or family wishes to have a more

robust religious environment, Israel should be the top option. *Ki miTziyon teitzei Torah*, “from Zion, the Torah comes forth,” is an increasingly relevant term in the practical sense beyond an aspirational prayer. In addition, moving to Israel is the singular opportunity to realize the dream of generations of Jews who lived in the *galut*: to return to our people’s homeland.

For those who are not able to make Aliyah, our community provides a unique opportunity for individuals and families to contribute as Jews in the Diaspora. There are not an overabundance of committed Jews and resources, and therefore everyone’s contributions count. On the other hand, there is much great work that can be done to be *mekadesh shem shamayim* and cultivate the next generation of Jews, until the coming of Mashiach, may he come speedily in our day.

a portal of entry for converts to Judaism. The Gemara in *Pesachim* (87b) teaches:

אמר ר' אלעזר לא הגלה הקב"ה את
ישראל לבין האומות אלא כדי שיתוספו
עליהם גרים.

R' Elazar says: The Jewish people were exiled among the nations to add converts to their ranks.

There are many non-Jews who seek to join the Jewish people in

our area. Many of these sincere individuals and their families have made this inspiring commitment to convert. Several are among the most committed and active members of our community, and others continue to raise their families and contribute to the Jewish people in Israel or other communities. This is a very important role we play as a community in the Diaspora.

Rebuilding a Community from the Ashes



Rabbi Dani Fabian

Director of Youth Programs, Lauder Yeshurun, Germany

Approximately 200,000 Jews, most of whom were from Eastern Europe, lived in German DP camps after World War II ended in 1945. The majority of them could not imagine staying permanently in Germany or Eastern Europe and rebuild what the Nazi regime had destroyed. When opportunities opened up, those who could, left for the United States, and the vast majority in 1948 for the State of Israel. Of the 200,000 survivors only 15,000 remained in Germany. In the following years, around 15 Jewish communities were refounded in the major German cities, including Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich, as well as a few smaller cities. Given the fact that those who stayed were few in number, the question of religious denomination was solved by instituting the concept of the so-called “*Einheitsgemeinde*” — a unified, non-denominational community and shul that enables all community members to be part of the same community and to daven in the same shul. This

resulted in Jewish communities in which the majority of the members were non-observant Jews, praying together in a shul with an Orthodox liturgy. In the following decades, the Jewish communities were not thriving. Assimilation was taking its toll and many young Jews were finding suitable marriage partners outside of the community. Even with the immigration of Romanian, Hungarian and Czechoslovak Jews in the 1950s and 60s, Jewish life never recovered to anywhere near its former state, leaving the Jewish population in the late 80's at around 30,000 in around 20 Jewish communities.

With the beginning of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Jewish landscape in Germany changed dramatically. It was the German government's policy to spread the new immigrants to cities and villages throughout all of Germany, and also to confine them to these cities by limiting the eligibility of social welfare to those staying in



The German Community and Israel

The German Jewish community in general has very strong ties to the Land of Israel. Many Jews in Germany feel, even now, living in the country that initiated and executed the murder of 6 million Jews, that Israel is necessary as a place of refuge if things get dangerous again. German Jews of Eastern European background who lived in Germany for two or more generations therefore support the Land of Israel financially, feel strong solidarity with the State of Israel, and stand up to protect its political interests. Most Jews who immigrated to Germany from the former Soviet Union feel less connected to the Land of Israel, having consciously decided not to settle in Israel when the iron curtain fell.

Given Germany's leading role in today's world economy and the high quality of life, most Jews have settled in Germany without plans to leave. Also, the government's strong support not only for Israel but for Jewish life in Germany makes it possible for Jews to stay, imagining, and living a Jewish life in Germany. As a result, Aliyah rates are low in comparison with other European countries. If the political situation in Germany should change, most Jews would consider Israel their primary choice as a permanent residence.

the designated places. With virtually none of the academic degrees of the former Soviet Union being recognized by German academic standards, and with a foreign language to be learned, the immigrants could not find suitable employment for many years. Additionally, decades of socialism had done its part to destroy most of the Jewish knowledge and traditions of an entire generation. So while more than 100,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union immigrated to Germany and registered in the existing communities, or founded new communities in their respective new home towns, the Jewish population in Germany was faced not only with an opportunity but also with various challenges. How to build a Jewish identity and how to educate Jews who had experienced decades of social exclusion and disadvantages because of being Jewish? How to promote Jewish life in a country with now more than 80 Jewish communities, where more than two-thirds of the members were older than 50 and very few started new families? And who of the existing Jewish population would be

Today, most of these communities have been reduced in membership; integration of the children of immigrants into secular German life — with all its opportunities — has succeeded, and assimilation is taking its toll.

their role models?

Today, most of these communities have been reduced in membership; integration of the children of immigrants into secular German life — with all its opportunities — has succeeded, and assimilation is taking its toll.

Our contribution to the specific challenges of the German Jewish community is to provide authentic and inspiring Jewish experiences as well as Jewish education through suitable role models.

For more than seventeen years, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and its partner organization, Lauder Yeshurun, have run a large variety of educational and experiential formal and informal initiatives in Germany. Based in Berlin, the formation of a Jewish kindergarten, a yeshiva, a girls seminary and a Jewish school have had a positive impact on the Jewish population of Berlin and beyond for many years. Today's outreach initiatives such as JCommunity, Morasha and the Lauder E-Learning school enable children, teenagers and students, who often don't have any access to Jewish learning in their home towns, to participate in live online classes every week. Programs include weekend seminars, summer and winter Machanot, and trips to Israel and America to connect to other Jews worldwide and experience Jewish life. Over the years, all of these initiatives have enabled hundreds of Jews to embrace a traditional Jewish lifestyle, settling in various major communities worldwide as well as founding a traditional Jewish community in Berlin with more than 75 families and more than 300 members.

The Jewish Community of Brazil



Rabbi Saul Paves
Headmaster, Colégio Iavne and Community Rabbi, Kehillat Mizrachi
São Paulo, Brazil

Sao Paulo's Jewish community, far away in Brazil, is facing challenges and dilemmas similar to those faced by many small communities around America.

Chazara biTshuva and Kiruv

In the last two-to-three decades, we saw a growing movement of kiruv and *chazara bitshuva*. This movement, headed mainly by Chabad and Haredi rabbis, has had a strong impact in terms of stopping the increase of assimilation rates, and has succeeded in bringing many Jews back to Torah and tradition.

In these movements, the main agenda is Torah learning and keeping mitzvot. This focus strongly impacts how the community relates to Medinat Israel. In some cases, it involves the omission of talking about the State of Israel as a principle component of our *geulah*, or as the central aspect of Jewish life after the Shoah. In other cases, the community is exposed to an open policy against the establishment of Medinat Israel, with its secular leadership, a society that is not built and guided by Torah. The Haredi and Chabad rabbis consider Eretz Israel a holy place, a Torah place for its yeshivot, and the place where our gedolim, the great rabbanim, live and lead our people, and for the religious life that is possible there. At the same time, their relationship to the State of Israel is often neutral, at best.

High rates of Assimilation; Apathy and illiteracy about Judaism

Another main issue that we face in the Brazilian community is Jewish illiteracy. The high rates of assimilation and the exit from the Jewish community by many of our brothers and sisters indicate, at some level, apathy toward Judaism and

ignorance about our history, tradition and values.

In the last 25 years, we are facing a decrease of almost 50 percent in the total number of Jews attending day schools. These children are growing up in a completely assimilated atmosphere, with almost no knowledge about Judaism. Assimilation is a natural result for these children.

Fighting the Anti-Israel Campaign in Brazil

For many secular Jews of past generations, the State of Israel played a central role in their identity and connected them to the Jewish people. Leaders spoke about Israel with pride, as a model and example of achievement and the ability to overcome adversity. These speeches inspired Jews who felt a deep and strong connection to Israel, even without religious ties.

The latest military campaigns and the Palestinian propaganda have fostered a strong anti-Israel feeling in the media and public opinion. Although our leadership continues to promote the State, the ongoing media bias against Israel and popular empathy toward the Palestinian people has harmed the relationship between many Jews and the State of Israel.

These examples offer a general picture of our community. Like many other small communities, we lack a strong, organized and proactive Religious Zionist Modern Orthodox community. This type of community would be a strong representative of Medinat Israel, providing perspective and meaning as a historical, prophetic and national place for our People and our future.

A Religious Zionist Modern Orthodox community could operate as a bridge between different sectors in the community, strengthening Jewish feeling and giving Jews the sense of belonging to a broad entity of Am Israel. The lack of this kind of community intensifies the polarization between Jews and Israel, as described above.



The Increase of Aliyah from Brazil

National political scandals and an economic crisis strongly affected our community. In the last three years, dozens of families made Aliyah. The numbers are very high (an increase of almost 90 percent in 2016) and this new trend forced the Jewish Agency to reorganize the process regarding Brazilian Jewish Aliyah.

Many of these families were motivated by practical reasons. Jews from different backgrounds and affiliations find their way to Israel as their first choice when they decide that they have to leave Brazil. They choose to live there regardless of their ideological position on Israel or level of participation in Jewish community.

This new trend gives us the feeling

of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy:

וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָעַמִּים וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָאֲרָצוֹת אֲשֶׁר נְפוּצְתֶם בָּם בְּיַד הַזֹּקֵה וּבְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְחֶמֶה שְׂפוּכָה.

With a strong hand and outstretched arm and overflowing fury I will bring you out from the people and gather you from the lands where you are scattered"

Yechezkel 20:34.

At certain crossroads of history, Hashem makes us leave behind all theoretical and ideological debates and sharply takes us from *galut*, bringing back His people to the Land of Israel. G-d awakens us from our apathy and reminds us to direct our views and dreams to Jerusalem. His "strong hand" quickly overturns the lasting status quo of *galut*.



The Aliyah Challenge

Rabbi Daniel Korobkin

Senior Rabbi, Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto

How is one supposed to know when it's time to make Aliyah? There will always be a loose end here or there, whether it be a familial duty or a job-related challenge that keeps us in galut. If there never is a perfect time, how are we to know when it's the "right" time? This should, perhaps, be one of the most important existential questions that Diaspora Jews asks themselves on a regular basis.

A beautiful midrash tells us that when Yaakov first came to Egypt, he brought cedar saplings with him from Eretz Israel and planted them in the Diaspora community of Goshen. These trees would grow thick and tall over the decades, and would eventually be used to build the Mishkan once the Jews left Egypt. But why was it necessary to schlepp trees with us out of Egypt? Why couldn't the Jews have purchased cedar lumber from itinerant peddlers in the desert, just as they procured so many of the other materials for the Mishkan?

Yaakov wanted his children and grandchildren to grow up seeing the cedars of Eretz Israel in their backyards. He wanted them to see cedars swaying in the wind, buckling under the stress and burden of the elements, yet never giving up and always returning to their proud and tall state. He also wanted

his children to remember Eretz Israel daily; all they needed to do was to look in their backyards and see the cedars of Israel growing tall. This would remind them that no matter how settled they felt in Goshen, their destiny and homeland lay elsewhere.

This is the question that our congregation and congregations all over North America must ask: Where are our cedar trees? What elements in our daily lives remind us regularly that our destiny and homeland is in the modern State of Israel? When those cedar trees are clearly visible, the question of when is the right time to make Aliyah will become easier to answer.

Although every individual must answer these questions for themselves, I am proud to be living and serving the Thornhill, Ontario Jewish community, which has one of the highest Aliyah rates per capita in all the world. I am happy to report that our children are our most visible cedar trees. Our youth study in yeshivot and seminaries in Israel, and a high percentage of them serve in the IDF or do Sherut Leumi. Many of our families own second homes in Israel, and are spending more and more time there, as their financial and social conditions permit.

We annually host a group of bar and bat mitzvah children brought to us by the organization IDF Widows and Orphans. On the Shabbat that they're with us to celebrate their Bnei Mitzvah, we have them all stand on the bimah as we recite the MiSheberach for the *chayalim*, remembering that these children have lost a parent to the scourge of war and terrorism in Israel. There's not a dry eye in the house.

Every year in December, my wife and I lead a mission to Israel, not to do the "touristy" stuff, but to deliver thick Canadian winter coats to gemachs around the country, to see the latest advancements in our "startup nation," and to give chizuk to soldiers and those living in the shetachim. We come back strengthened and revitalized and with even greater resolve to connect to the people and Land of Israel.

Challenges abound today for the Jewish youth of the Diaspora. Once they leave for university, so many of them are being taught to distance themselves from Zionism and Israel. Fortunately, our community and especially the youth of our community are bucking that trend.

As I've told my congregants many times, my job is to turn off the lights after you've all made Aliyah. I'm looking forward to saving on that electric bill.

The Thornhill, Ontario Jewish community has one of the highest Aliyah rates per capita in all the world. Our youth study in yeshivot and seminaries in Israel, and a high percentage of them serve in the IDF or do Sherut Leumi. Many of our families own second homes in Israel, and are spending more and more time there, as their financial and social conditions permit.

