

## ALIYAH DURING A PANDEMIC

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## A LEAP OF FAITH

It is a struggle that many grapple with, and in particular those of us in the world of *avodat hakodesh* — rabbis and Jewish educators. By virtue of our profession, we have a drive to educate and to impassion our congregants and students with the Torah and Jewish values we so strongly maintain, including our intense connection with Medinat Yisrael. In our capacity as Jewish leaders, we are given the platform to share our love of Israel and it is truly invigorating to be able to share that passion with others and to inspire them. And yet, there is a great dichotomy in the soul of the Jewish educator: We live to share these values with others and yet we crave to live them ourselves.

Every year on Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut, there was a void we felt being so far away that a short ceremony and blue and white cupcake could not fill. When you find yourself checking the *Times of Israel* far more often than *The New York Times*, and are moved to tears by hearing HaTikvah and seeing the Israeli flag, it is a constant reminder of where your heart lies. Each time we left Israel after rabbinic missions or student trips, there was an emptiness inside, an aching to be home.

But many people feel this ache and there are reasons why they don't make the jump. For us, there were several reasons why it took so long.

We lived a very fulfilling life in

Charleston as rabbi of a warm and growing shul and Judaic director of the school. We had formed intense relationships as our congregants grew in their Judaism. We witnessed monumental steps as *baalei teshuva* embraced a new life, and officiated at their weddings and the births of their children. Far more than we inspired them, they inspired us, and in building a Torah community together, we had become a family. It was unfathomable to leave.

But with our oldest daughter in 8th grade, and without a Jewish high school in town, we faced a fork in the road. We could send her away, as many do, we could look for a different pulpit in a bigger city, or we could fulfill our lifelong dream of aliyah.

Aliyah had several challenges: Neither of us had careers that segued into the Israeli market. We did not have good connections in Israel and our careers were so much a part of our identities. We had no idea how we would support a family in Israel or if we could ever feel professionally or even spiritually fulfilled. For months, we went back and forth.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik speaks so beautifully about the concept of “missing the moment” in his *Kol Dodi Dofek (Fate and Destiny, Pg. 25)*, particularly in regard to Yishuv ha’Aretz. If we were ever going to give aliyah a shot, we knew that now was our time to jump, lest we miss the moment.

And so, after 12 years in the American rabbinate and nearly 20 years in Jewish education and administration, we arrived at the difficult decision to leave behind the careers we loved to move to the place where our hearts resided; in essence, taking a leap of faith into the unknown.

We used the word, “bittersweet” in our aliyah announcement to our community and it was truly the fitting word to describe our feelings. There was so much excitement about fulfilling a lifelong dream, but it was accompanied with a giant pit of uncertainty in our stomachs and a great many tears. Even after making our announcement and embarking on our plans, we questioned our sanity many times.

Several months later, the COVID pandemic broke out and Jewish professional opportunities disappeared. The Jewish Agency and Israeli government offices closed, making our aliyah timeline uncertain. Nefesh b’Nefesh cancelled their

charter flights and El-Al grounded their planes.

There could not have been a better time for cold feet. Our shul asked us, a good number of times, if we would consider delaying our aliyah. Our passion, training, and experience was primed for a life of *avodat hakodesh* in the Diaspora and perhaps COVID was a necessary wake-up call for us to remain in the life that we already knew.

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Each of us had our moments of doubt and we strengthened each other. *Bitachon* became a very real concept.

With much *hashgacha pratit* and several deviations from our original plans, we made aliyah in August. We have not regretted it for one day. Within a short time after our arrival and with tremendous *Siyata D’shmaya*, we found new jobs, our children began making new friends, and we have experienced some of the beauty of life in a Jewish country.

We watch our children learn on Zoom and despite all the technological barriers, there is a *temimut* (wholesomeness) in their education that we had previously rarely seen.

There is a *yirat shamayim* that we see in our 7-year-old son’s rebbe in his love of introducing first graders to the world of Torah. Our hearts swell with pride as our daughter participates in *daglanut*; as we hear them speak Hebrew with our neighbor; as we watch our son recite *Pirkei Avot* by heart; and as we see our children hike the land and look at the views surrounding us. They learn in school about Hashem giving the land to Avraham, and Yehoshua conquering Eretz Yisrael, and then they walk on that very land when they go to the candy store or on a simple errand. We feel Erev Shabbat here in a way we never did in America; with Friday being the day off, the country takes its collective break from the hectic workweek. We feel the bustle in the air as the bakeries fill with people buying challah (amazingly subsidized by the Israeli government so that everyone can enjoy), religious and non-religious preparing for Shabbat, each in his or her own way. We planted trees in our yard and marveled in excitement when our stubborn pomelo tree finally began to bloom on Tu B’Shtat. We drive past streets, highways, and communities and are thrilled at the names: Kibbutz Galuyot, Mesilat Tzion, Menachem Begin, Lamed-Hey. We see Yad Hashem here in a way that we never did before.

With all its magical moments, aliyah is not always smooth, and aliyah during COVID has certainly had its challenges. There are two messages from Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook that helped provide perspective as we charted our new life in Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria (*Moadei Ha’Reiya*, pg. 151), one of Rabbi Kook’s leading students, relayed the

story of a wealthy Polish Jew who consulted Rabbi Kook about making aliyah. He explained to Rabbi Kook that in Poland, he had significant profits from his successful businesses and that if he moved to Israel then his financial portfolio would dramatically diminish, and as such aliyah was not feasible for him. Rabbi Kook responded that the balance sheet of aliyah is assessed on a much greater scale than the trivial numbers generated by his business portfolio. This is symbolized by the destruction of Sichon the King of Emori, who lived in Cheshbon just prior to our entrance into the Land of Israel. The lesson is that the Jewish people needed to establish a new orientation to Cheshbon — calculation. In destroying Sichon the King of Cheshbon we made a bold statement that our capacity to inherit the Land of Israel does not rest in the hands of accountants and financial advisors, but rather in The One from whom we will one day be accountable for our true *din ve'cheshbon*.

Each time we told people we were making aliyah, we would look at each other and wait for the inevitable comment to come: *Mazal tov, that's so nice. So, what will you be doing there?* People would warn us that jobs are scarce in Israel, that there's a lot of *lachatz*, stress, and tell us that if we were lucky enough to get jobs, that the salaries are low in Israel, and how could we possibly support our family?

Interestingly, we have found that when we meet new people in Israel, the first question they ask is not about our jobs. They ask about our children, where we made aliyah from, where we live now, and what we like about Israel. We have heard from countless people that *parnassah* in Israel is *me'al ha'teva*, miraculous, and we have seen

it ourselves. The *cheshbonot* in this country are different than in America.

Prior to getting married, if a single, career-minded person consulted only his accountant and financial planner about the implications of marriage on his bank account, he probably wouldn't get married. Likewise, if a person came to a decision about having children, sending those children to Yeshiva day school, buying kosher food, and purchasing a home in a Jewish neighborhood purely based on financial considerations, none of those decisions would have been made. Why should aliyah be any different?

The second message of Rabbi Kook that helped provide perspective on aliyah comes from Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon, one of the drafters of Israel's Declaration of Independence and the founding editor of the Torah journal *Sinai*. In an article published in *Sinai* (*Sinai* 5, Pg.43), Rabbi Maimon explored the reasons we do not recite a birkat hamitzvah upon making aliyah. He writes that he asked Rabbi Kook this question. Rabbi Kook responded that aliyah is just the beginning of a much bigger mitzvah, as noted by the Ramban in his commentary to the Sefer Hamitzvot (*Hasagot*, 4:1):

שנצטונו לרשת הארץ אשר נתן הא-ל יתעלה  
לאבותינו לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב ולא נעזבה  
ביד זולתנו מן האומות או לשממה.

*That we were commanded to inherit the land which God gave to our fathers to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob and not to be left in the hand of others from the nations or to desolation.*

Each individual's aliyah therefore lays the way for the fulfillment of this broader mandate, but no one person completes the task. Likewise, on this question of birkot hamitzvah, the

Rashba (*Teshuvot HaRashba* 1:18) writes that we do not recite a beracha on something that is not completely within our control to complete. Since there are many external factors that impact our ability to completely inherit the land, Rabbi Kook explained that it is not yet time to recite a birkat hamitzvah.

If there is anything we have learned from our experience, it is that aliyah is a process. Arriving in Ben Gurion airport with a temporary *teudat zehut* in hand is not the end of the story, it is only the beginning. Aliyah means a life of living in a country where, to some extent, you may always feel like a foreigner. Where each conversation with the phone company, the bank, tax office and post office will feel like a challenge. As in our case, it is not easy to find a profession that is as fulfilling, both spiritually and financially, as one might find in the States. But that's the beauty of Rabbi Kook's message. Each difficulty mastered is a part of our own process of *kibush Eretz Yisrael*.

We miss our community greatly and keep in touch with many people. We would be lying if we did not admit that we miss the ability to be *mashpiah*, to educate and to inspire as we were able to in our previous life. There may always be that piece that's missing and that was our small sacrifice to live the dream. But as we look around at our birthright, the mountains and valley surrounding our home, the place that Moshe Rabbeinu only dreamed of entering, every sacrifice feels well worth it.