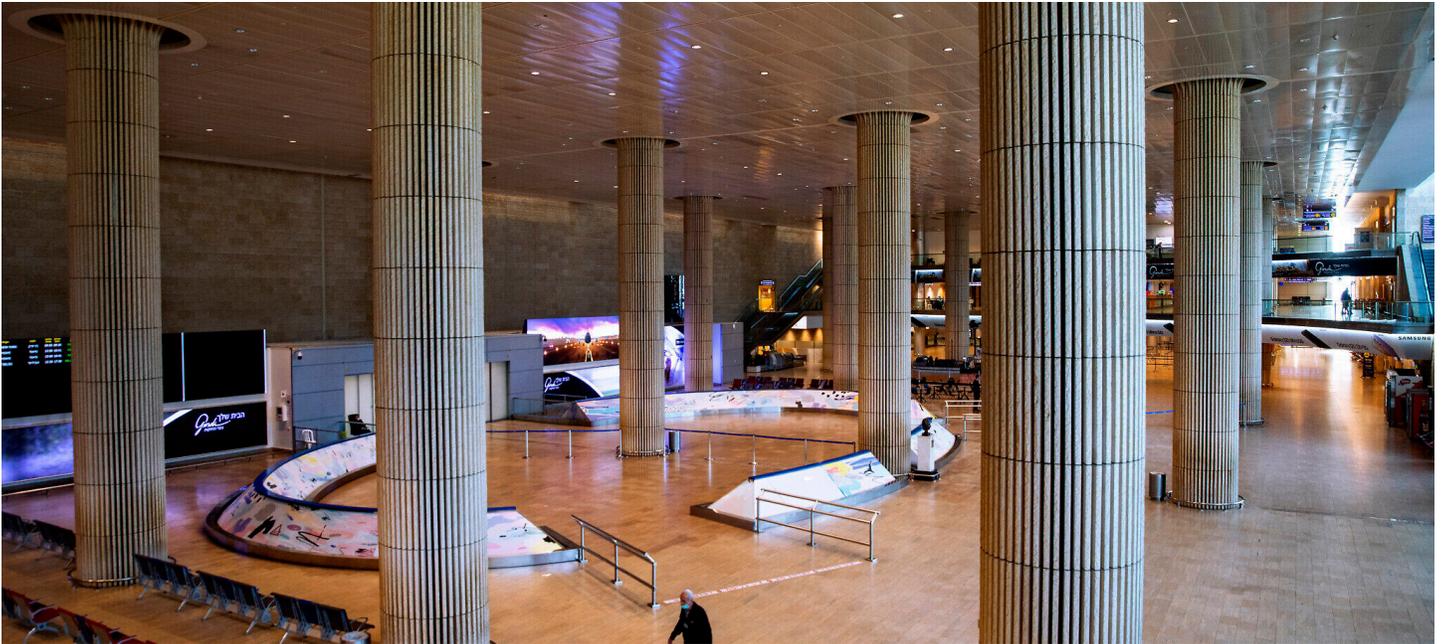


ALIYAH DURING A PANDEMIC

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ALONE, BUT NEVER LONELY

When we began our aliyah journey in August 2019, the obstacles seemed large, but conquerable — we had to sell our home, find new jobs, find a new community, improve our Hebrew. The initial forms on the Nefesh B'Nefesh website, the first phone interview with our aliyah advisor, the first rush to assemble documents and paperwork — it all felt a little unreal, like we were planning for something so far away we couldn't see it. In the words of Tehillim 126:1, *beshev Hashem et shivat Tzion, hayinu k'cholmim* — in our return to Tzion, we felt like dreamers.

The reality soon became clear, and the obstacles began to mount. Finding

more and more documents, filling out forms in Russian (Elizabeth was born in the former Soviet Union), digging up birth and death dates for long-gone relatives — all of this began to feel like obstacles were being sent our way. And the basic life issues were not getting any easier; we began to realize how difficult it would be to learn Hebrew, every meeting and webinar we attended about where to live seemed to leave us more confused than before, we frequently received contradictory information about financial issues (it turns out that paying taxes in two countries is really complicated), and we still couldn't find the right time to take a pilot trip. We decided to wait until after Pesach.

Wrong choice.

At that point, we began to hear rumblings about a new disease that was causing problems in China. We weren't particularly worried — we had heard it before. SARS, MERS, swine flu, avian flu, even Ebola — all had been publicized as world-ending pandemics that failed to materialize. A bad flu season usually caused hundreds of thousands of casualties worldwide — a tragedy to be sure, but one that did not compare to the horrific history of smallpox, polio, or the influenza epidemics of the past. We had conquered this sort of thing — it just didn't happen in first-world countries anymore.

Right?

By the time schools and businesses began to lock down in late March 2020, we had already completed our paperwork and had the all-important Jewish Agency interview — the final step in the approval process. All we were waiting for was the “Mazal Tov” letter — the email that states you have been approved for aliyah and inviting you to apply for your immigration visa. It was at this time that we began to receive “advice.”

Almost everyone who gives advice is well-meaning. They want to help. They want to contribute. They want you to benefit from their experience and their wisdom.

One of the constant complaints of the pandemic era has been the lack of clear instructions: when will schools open, what will the plan be, how will the government ensure safety, when will the vaccine be ready, how will we know what side effects will be risked. All these are important questions, and people feel justified in their rage against the system, or the government, or the authorities for failure to provide leadership and information in a timely fashion.

But here’s the thing: No one actually knows any of those answers. No one knows whether it is safe to open schools, or whether the safety measures being recommended are really enough, or how effective the vaccine will be. No one knows the answers because these are questions we have never had to address before. No one alive has dealt with a modern, world-wide pandemic. Caution is good and science provided some answers, but the big questions, especially at the beginning, simply had no answers. So everyone provided their own.

The advice we received was generally that we should wait. Wait to leave, wait to sell our home, wait to go to Israel. You can’t take a pilot trip, how can you go? You can’t get a job, how can you go? You can’t sell your home, how can you go?

These were important, and even urgent questions. Since the immigration visa is only valid for a limited time, applying meant that we were going. But how could we make such a permanent decision in times of such uncertainty?

It began to feel as though forces were marshalling against us, that the world was trying to stop us. Maybe we were being sent a message. After all, was this really so urgent? Couldn’t we wait a little? We had never felt such intense pressure in the past. What was driving us now?

Making aliyah was something we had discussed in the abstract for a long time. We had looked into moving to a different community in the U.S., but every time we did, it felt like we were just trading one type of difficulty for another. The decision to make aliyah was not borne out of a lack of options — we had a wonderful life and home in New Jersey, good jobs, and a Nabisco factory just down the road that made the whole town smell like cookies. But as the desire to make aliyah grew, we began to see the urging everywhere. The tefilla is filled with the yearning for Eretz Yisrael. Stories of political instability in Europe and the unrest from the growing pandemic increased the feeling that the world was changing. We knew where we wanted to be.

For more than thirty-five years, our family had run a Pesach program. For us, making Pesach involved packing for Arizona or Florida, selling our

chametz, and running around for ten days, keeping our 800–1000 guests happy. Completely unrelated to the pandemic, we made the decision to shut down the company for Pesach of 2020.

Our very first Pesach at home in New Jersey was not as we envisioned, with everyone packing the in-law’s home. It was instead each home alone, every family by themselves. Instead of 800 people at our seder, there were only three. And when we said, *hashata hacha, l’shana haba b’ara D’Yisrael* — this year we are here, next year in the Land of Israel, we knew what our decision was going to be. We had said it so many times — *l’Shana haba’a B’Yerushalayim* — next year in Jerusalem. Well, it was time to decide. Were we only saying it? Or did we really believe it? A few days later, our “Mazal Tov” letter arrived. There was no longer a question.

There were, however, plenty of obstacles remaining. Selling our home was no easy task, since preparing a home to be sold involves lots of infectious people wandering around your nice, disease-free house. Packing up the house, as well as choosing what to bring directly to Israel made for a difficult challenge. All the advice about what to bring and what to leave is contradictory, so feel free to do whatever you want.

Then there were the larger obstacles. The closer we came to the date of our flight, the more difficult things seemed to get. First the luggage rules changed. Since we were bringing everything with us (and not sending a lift), we needed every bag we could get. Then, El Al shut down entirely, leading to a scramble to replace the flights with other airlines. Every day, it seemed, our flight was changed. But eventually,

we had our confirmed date. Our house was emptied and sold. Our belongings were packed.

Driving to the airport was a strange experience. As much of our family as possible accompanied us, but the two of us were in another car with all of the luggage — a large SUV absolutely packed with fifteen very large duffels, and at that point, we barely remembered what was in them. The drive was nerve-racking, not because of any time crunch, or traffic, or bad weather. We had plenty of time, the roads were clear, the day was lovely. But it felt like another obstacle would rise up to stop us. The relief at getting there, at seeing our ticket confirmed and arriving at the gate, was the same as only one other.

As the chazzan for many years for Neilah, there is an incomparable lifting that occurs at the moment of *Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim*; there is a lightness that cannot be matched as the tefillah ends. It feels as though a great weight, one you didn't know was there, is suddenly removed. We felt that as the plane took off. It was really happening. We cried as the plane lifted into the air.

These were all the emotions. But the physical differences were tangible as well. Everyone at their airport wore masks of various kinds — face shields, breath masks with filters, air purifiers around the neck. There was no large gathering of families and photographers, no Israeli officials to welcome us onto the plane, no fanfare. We were gathered in a small area and checked by extra security, but everything seemed so subdued. On the plane, to the credit of all the passengers, there was as much restraint as could be reasonably asked on a twelve-hour flight. Only about

half the flight were Olim; most of the rest of the passengers were Israelis headed home, or boys headed to yeshivas. There was no attempt to make a minyan, that bane of every flight attendant; people davened in their seats.

Those who flew to Israel in the 90s may remember that it was common for the passengers to applaud upon landing in Israel, as it felt like an achievement. But that reaction had become uncommon; in the last ten years, it was rare to hear that reaction from passengers. This time, the applause was powerful.

But even amid that joy, the welcome we received at the airport was muted. The airport itself was almost entirely empty — no crowds welcomed us, no family was allowed to pick up their newly-arrived loved ones. We had the good fortune of having close family in Be'er Sheva who generously lent us their home for our two-week quarantine.

The most important word we learned in Hebrew was “*bidud*,” quarantine. While many words do not translate precisely (there is a reason even non-Jewish English speakers know about “chutzpa”), this word captures the essence of the idea far better

than the English clinical term from 1660's Latin. While the English word quarantine refers to the length of the confinement (the Latin “*quadraginta*” is a reference to the forty days Venetian ships would be kept from the dock if suspected of disease), the Hebrew term *bidud* refers to the status of those suffering it — they are alone. No one in or out, no one to provide aid, comfort, or entertainment. Solitude, police enforced.

But that's not what happened. People called, people Zoomed, people dropped off food and gifts and asked what they could do. People in quarantine themselves wanted to make plans to show us this beautiful country and wanted to know when we would be able to visit. People wanted to introduce us to their friends — maybe he has a job for you? Maybe your kids can play?

For a little while, we felt alone, foreign, in another land not our own, isolated from everything. To paraphrase Shemot 2:22, *geirim hayinu b'erez nachriyah* — we were strangers in a strange land.

Then we opened the door, and we were home. *Simcha l'artzecha v'sasson l'irecha*.

