



ERETZ YISRAEL IS WAITING FOR YOU

At separate times, both of us had the privilege of spending three months in Israel in Grade 10 on a Bnei Akiva program called Kfar. Those trips were the first time either of us had been to Israel. Just before we were about to return to South Africa, a madrich of Shmuli's gave each of the *channichim* (participants) a rock — a piece of the holy ground — with a message written on it: "Eretz Yisrael is waiting for you."

The land of Israel and the Jewish people really do have a unique relationship. Rav Soloveitchik (*Reflections of the Rav*, "The Singularity of The Land of Israel") explains that the *loshon hara* the *meraglim* spoke of when describing

how we would not be able to conquer Canaan was a result of misunderstanding how Eretz Yisrael is existentially connected to Am Yisrael. The spies were sent as tourists to see the land before we would settle it, just as one needs to see one's spouse before the marriage. They were not sent to judge the suitability of the *shidduch* but to develop excitement and anticipation. Marriage is a relationship in which one needs to be emotionally invested; it's not just a practical union but more of an alignment of destinies. Juxtaposed to *chet hameraglim* is Miriam's mistake in thinking Moshe was just a regular prophet. He, too, had a unique relationship with Hashem, which was connected to his singularity as the

prophet that brought down the Torah, and that meant he could not behave as regular Jews do, or even as a regular prophet. Similarly, the spies ignored the uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael and thought that it was like any other land, and based on reconnaissance, practically speaking it would be quite the challenge to conquer it. Those Jews who believed their report were unfortunately not worthy of living in such a transcendent land. Our land is somehow "married" to us!

History testifies to how Eretz Yisrael waits for seeds planted by Jewish hands. For centuries, our holy land languished, mourning for her "husband," not yielding to any other nation, until the *chalutzim* arrived and started cultivating the swamplands

of Emek Yizrael — the Valley that Hashem Sowed! The Land was waiting for us.

Our married lives started in Israel but we both knew after a few years of study we would be returning to South Africa to serve the community. We were tremendously excited to reunite with our families, live in the familiar surroundings where we grew up, and give back to the organizations that had been so instrumental in our growth. Over the more than ten years we spent in South Africa, we built a young adult shul; taught in the largest religious Jewish day school; and guided many community members, especially university students. We watched and beamed with pride as our young *talmidim* became *madrichim*, and our students became parents. We savored accompanying them through influential life-cycle moments and sat with them through some dark times as well. Personally, we grew as people as much as we were part of other people's growth.

South Africa is a wonderful place. The weather is fair and the people have a natural friendliness to them. Our immediate family are there and the work we did was meaningful and fruitful. Unlike Europe, South African Jews do not feel threatened by anti-Semitism, and in spite of a faltering national economy, the Jewish community has built organizations and infrastructure that protects and uplifts itself in remarkable ways. Life is comfortable and public holidays are plentiful! Kids generally have good manners and people are eager to learn, give and grow.

Despite all this, even after more than a decade there, we never saw ourselves as being home. It is strange how the place where you were born and grew

up can feel somewhat foreign and almost someone else's. Our children were getting older, and we felt now was the time to seriously look at returning to our real home. We would have ideally left earlier but we didn't feel ready.

After extending our date of departure to allow for the community and ourselves to better prepare, January 2022 was looking like the time we would be saying *lehitra'ot* to Johannesburg; but COVID made it clear to us how unclear things are. Bnei Akiva's December Summer Camp dates were audaciously set and communicated, only to be canceled a few days before the start. We went into overdrive trying to be included in the December 15th, 2021 Aliyah flight, while nervously hearing of fellow passengers who came down with Corona and would not be able to board the plane after so many months of planning. After being in contact with someone who tested positive, we thought that we too might not be able to fly; but after isolation and negative PCR tests, the relief transformed into exuberance.

After officiating a wedding, final packing was done and we left our local community for an international one. It's amazing how more than ten suitcases were not sufficient to fit what was left over, even after sending a lift and selling or giving away so many things. Little did we know how those suitcases would accompany us on different legs of the trip from our house in Johannesburg to our apartment in Carmei Gat, Israel. Leaving for the airport needed a logistical mind, a strong back and a brave heart. Tears were flowing but there was excitement and a sense of purpose and resolve in the air.

As we stood in the check-in queue, we heard traditional African music downstairs in the arrival hall, as Miss South Africa returned from Eilat after controversially competing in the Miss Universe pageant. The BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel), which originated in South Africa, together with certain members of the South African government, did not want her to compete in Israel and, defiantly, she took part. Our Aliyah flight would bring the total number of year 2021 olim from South Africa to the highest since 1994, the year when apartheid fell. There was a feeling of pride as more than seventy of us expressed the ultimate support for *Medinat Yisrael*, choosing to live there.

From the time COVID had arrived in South Africa, we had all managed to stay clear of catching it. The only PCR tests almost all of our family members had taken were in order to be eligible to take part in a Shabbaton or board our Aliyah flight. Therefore, it was particularly surprising, while sitting in our quarantine hotel room in Tel Aviv, hearing the news that two of us had tested positive for COVID when we arrived at Ben Gurion airport. At that point, we did not realize the journey those germs would take us on. Eventually, we were moved in ambulances (as a precaution — we were asymptomatic and felt fine) to a COVID hotel in Jerusalem, while some of us still had to remain in quarantine once we arrived at our new home in the South of Israel. After nearly three weeks, we were finally free to explore the Promised Land as a family and work through the bureaucracy of immigration. The community of Carmei Gat were warm and welcoming and we felt cared for with food and furniture. We could

say the people who cared so much for us were complete strangers, but in truth, we are all distant relatives, deeply connected through a sense of responsibility, *shekol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh* — all Israel are responsible for each other (*Shevuot* 39a). Despite how busy everyone is, our Israeli neighbors found time to help us build cupboards and took us to buy mezuzot.

This sense of shared responsibility is expressed by another mitzvah that is done each day in Eretz Yisrael, even by Ashkenazim — *Birkat Kohanim*. A strange *minhag* of not *duchening* developed many centuries ago in Europe, and the reasons are quite unclear. The most famous justification is that of the Rema, Rav Moshe Isserles, who explains in the Shulchan Aruch (OC 128:44):

נהגו בכל מדינות אלו שאין נושאין כפים אלא
בי"ט משום שאז שרוים בשמחת י"ט טוב לב
הוא יברך משא"כ בשאר ימים.

We do not perform Birkat Kohanim except on Yom Tov, because only then we are in a joyous state, and a "a good heart is the one that blesses."

The Kohanim need to feel relaxed and free spirited to bless the people, and somehow in the Diaspora we do not feel that on a daily basis.

Sefardim have continued to do *Birkat Kohanim* while residing outside of Israel, but according to *Ashkenazi minhag*, there is a difference whether you are in Israel or outside of it.

Is there a difference in how much *simcha* we feel while living in Israel?

Many people would argue that life is more difficult here and Israelis find it more challenging to make a living and probably live with more fear and anxiety! Nevertheless, according to the Global Finance website, Israel is ranked twelfth on the list of the happiest countries in the world. This is a trend found year after year and I've always wondered why.

I would like to suggest that the *simcha* experienced in Israel is a sense of being where we are meant to be. It is a recognition that despite the hardship and challenges, we are in the place where the ultimate future of our nation will manifest. There is a feeling of continuity, of *kiyum*, of everlasting existence, our *makom*. The Chazon Ish explained, "For one who knows the light of truth, there's no sadness in the world." With such knowledge life is filled with meaning and purpose, obstacles are opportunities to grow, and achievements mean as much to the wider community as they do to the individual, because what we do matters to everyone. This joy can be achieved anywhere, but it seems it is so apparent that the Kohanim are assumed to feel it when they bless *Am Yisrael* in Eretz Yisrael.

Our first few months here have been a series of ups and downs. There are pros and cons to each decision and every scenario. Is it better for our children to be immersed with Hebrew speakers or do they need more support that can be found with English-speaking friends? Should we live in a more expensive area with less space but a more familiar community or in an area where there is more value for money but less people like you? Is it legitimate to move in a different direction from the active Rabbinate to make *parnasa*, or should we remain in *chutz le'aretz* working full time for the community? There are many more questions and choices, and an underlying answer to these conundrums is to do our best and live with *bitachon*, trusting that Hashem will protect us and guide us, especially because we are in His Palace. Of course, that is easier said than done.

As we were unpacking our lift, we found the stone that the madrich had given Shmuli in 1998. The Land has waited for it patiently. It took many years, but it has returned to where it came from. So have we.

The stone that the madrich had given Shmuli in 1998

