



FOLLOWING THE DREAM OF OUR PARENTS

As I (Avi) bowed down to kiss the ground of Eretz Yisrael for the first time, with gum melted in the concrete to my left and a cigarette butt to my right, the dream began.

It was in February of 1992, I was in 4th grade, and I was preparing for my first family trip to Israel. We were going to visit my brother and sister who were both learning Torah in Israel for the year. It was the year following the Persian Gulf war, a year when my parents worried about their son as he sat in his room in *Yeshivat HaKotel* wearing a gas mask during scud missile attacks. In hindsight, it could be that my parents' decision to make this family trip was due to the concerns of the year before, and realizing that life is too short.

I was only in 4th grade, and I was already going to Israel! This was a

thought that was hard to fathom. I was almost certain that my first time to visit Israel would have been for my gap year in Yeshiva, yet somehow, I merited visiting Israel at such a young age.

As the plane landed, my parents continued to remind me of what I was about to achieve. Setting foot on our *Eretz Hakedosha*, something our grandparents could only have dreamed of, you will now fulfill. Walking down the aircraft steps onto the tarmac of Ben Gurion, my father said, "Avi, let's kiss the holy ground of Israel," and without hesitation I got down on all fours and kissed the holy ground. Baruch Hashem this has been a continuous practice of mine ever since.

The dream has been nagging at me for the last 30 years and finally the plan is to make it a reality.

Aliyah holds a very special place in our family. My father, Rabbi Shaya Kilimnick *zt'l*, served as a rabbi for 50 years. He inspired the communities of Little Rock, Arkansas for seven years and the Beth Sholom community in Rochester New York for 43 years. There was not a Shabbos that went by when he did not stress the importance of Eretz Yisrael. He was lovesick for his homeland, and he knew what his *tafkid* was as a rabbi: It was to pound into the heart and soul of every congregant the need to have Israel in mind 24/7. During the intifada in 2001, my father decided that our shul would sing *Hatikvah* at the conclusion of Shabbos morning davening to show solidarity with Israel. It is now 20 years, and we continue to sing. To my father's credit, many of the children who grew up in our shul have decided to make Aliyah. Almost every family in Congregation Beth

Sholom has a parent, child, sibling, or close relative who lives in Israel. I am fortunate to have worked side by side with my father for nine years, and in following his path I have tried my best to continue his legacy, to share the beauty of Israel with all those who step foot in our shul.

Besides for the nature of our shul, *Eretz Yisrael* also holds a very sacred place to my parents. Rabbi Shaya *zt'l* and Rebbeitzin Nechkie Kilimnick met in Eretz Yisrael soon after the Six-Day War. They both decided to spend a few months in Israel like so many others after the miraculous victory of 1967. My parents spent their first date walking the majestic streets of Yerushalayim and spending time at the Kotel. There is no better beginning than the one they were bestowed, and through their *hakaras hatov* to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, they tried to bring as many Jews as possible to experience the serenity of a Shabbos in Yerushalayim, a trip up Masada, a year learning in Israel, and helping others build a family in Eretz Yisrael. My parents understood the centrality of Israel in everything that they were able to accomplish over their 50 years of leadership.

For the last 11 years, I have been able to walk just a little bit in my father's shoes. I have seen the impact of what a rabbi can accomplish if his heart is set on the goal. I have been blessed to be his student and I try to emulate his love for the land. As a rabbi, you often begin to think that you are destined to be the Moshe, to see Israel from a distance, when everyone else is making their way into the land. My father was the Moshe Rabbeinu in my life. No matter how many times he was able to visit, he did not fulfill what he always wanted, he never made Aliyah.

I remind myself that it is important for a community rabbi to realize that you don't have to be a Moshe, you can be a Yehoshua. The decision to make Aliyah is liberating, it serves as a real feeling of *cheirus*. Not because you are letting go of the responsibility to tend to your flock, but because a rabbi can feel without any doubt that this is the best form of leadership you can ever give to your flock.

With the world working on constant communication in the sphere of remote contact, a former rav of a shul can continue his *hashpa'ah* (influence), he can show firsthand what Israel has to offer. I would like to believe that there is no end to what can be accomplished when a community rabbi decides to make Aliyah.

Yet, the reality is that it is very hard to leave. We just returned from our pilot trip; We had no idea how difficult it would be. Besides for the rude awakening that living in Israel is very different than visiting, there was also the moment when you realize that you have to say goodbye to a community that you love, to a shul that you grew up in, taught Torah in, and celebrated simchas in. There are real relationships that will be missed, and to not see each other in person every week is a hard pill to swallow. To shed a little *dan likaf zechus* on the *cheit hameraglim*, the problem with sending 12 spies by themselves is that you feel lonely when the people that are close to you are not with you in Eretz Yisrael. If only the *meraglim* would have brought with them a nice Rabbinic mission, a shul tour, the entire report would have been different.

All joking aside, this is the most difficult part about making Aliyah.

It is saying goodbye to the Jews you love; this is a sacrifice that cannot be overlooked. The only comfort is to know that you plan to work together to make the dream of Aliyah possible for everyone. Just like the *mikdash me'at* will find its way back to Eretz Yisrael, so to, all Jews will eventually find their way back as well.

Every passing year, our people are blessed to see more and more Jews take that next step and make the move. Just a few years ago, as a Shana Bet student in *Sha'alvim*, I remember staying in Israel for Pesach and having almost no one to visit and nowhere to go. Now, I have more friends in Israel than in America, and I have a sister and brother who have made Aliyah as well.

I (Esti) have never been a stranger in Israel; my entire father's family has lived in Israel since they had to migrate from Afghanistan in 1950. I have been waiting to come back home for years, and *be'ezrat Hashem* I will soon be surrounded by my sister, aunts, uncles, and many cousins, with my parents soon to follow.

Aliyah is a decision that comes with so many questions. For someone who has always lived a very simple and comfortable lifestyle, Aliyah creates challenges that one may never have had to consider before. The luxury of being familiar with one's surroundings is in jeopardy. Besides all the preparations every *oleh* must endure, there is also a healthy shift in perspective and expectation that one should attempt to make. This perspective could represent a level of *hisbatlus*, surrendering of one's self worth, seeking a higher regard for humility, or finding the child within. Whichever angle one may choose, we

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TRIBULATIONS: THE PROCESS OF MAKING ALIYAH

After university, Judaism became my central focus. I went to Israel to learn in yeshiva, and being a young man of age, started dating. I found a beautiful young woman in Israel, and we got married. We had our first child, Yochanan, at Hadassah Ein Kerem. Soon afterwards we went to America for what was supposed to be less than four years of semicha at RIETS/Yeshiva University and then back to Israel, for Aliyah. Four years turned into five, six, seven, all while our responsibilities, obligations and family grew bigger. I became a rebbe at Yeshiva University and a rabbi at the local shul. My wife became a manager at B&H Photo and a rebbetzin. Our children attend a wonderful yeshiva day school. We have a community of

friends and marvelous neighbors. Are we really going to make Aliyah?

But saying goodbye to all of the above is not my main concern. In my mind, there is a dichotomy between what I hope my career will be *and* what is best for my family. I have the ambition, strength and aptitude to be a leader for the Jewish people. The unique opportunities at Yeshiva University have enabled me in this journey. I have learned to operate and develop Jewish communities. Being a Jewish educator and rabbi in America is fulfilling on many levels. Yet that ambition has been equally met with another juxtaposing force. My precious children. I believe the future of the Jewish people is in Israel. Consequently, the best I can do for my family is bring my children to Israel.

And that is just one of the multitudes of reasons Jews make Aliyah. Now you can start to understand my difficulty, my internal dilemma: self-fulfillment of the altruistic desire to lead and educate our people *or* my children's future.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai teaches that there were three cherished gifts HaShem gave the Jewish people. All three gifts are only acquired through tribulations: Torah, the land of Israel and the World-to-Come (*Brachot* 5a). There is an intuitive logic to this fundamental teaching. Anything worthwhile takes effort to grasp (where effort is synonymous with tribulations). Often our wants and desires must be sacrificed in order to attain something greater. If we sacrifice our luxuries, we can attain

Torah, Israel and the World-to-Come. Many sayings of Chazal seem to indicate as much: the way of Torah is bread and salt, drinking water in measure, sleeping on the ground and a life of trouble... (*Pirkei Avot* 6:5, *Midrash Tanchuma*, Noach 3). Resh Lakish explains that we only attain Torah if we kill ourselves over it (*Shabbat* 83b). All these statements of Chazal and many others imply that physical hardships and forgoing luxuries are necessary to attain Torah. I will add that when we think of gedolim, we do not think of great wealth. Rav Aryeh Levin lived in Israel in a home that could fit into my bedroom. By extrapolation, the land of Israel and the World-to-Come also requires the same approach.

All the amenities and luxuries that have come with our growing responsibilities and obligations must be abandoned in order to attain more “cherished gifts.” The ambition for our careers should be released for the future of our children. That is a parent’s role. We plant the proverbial carob tree for the next generation without thought of our own selves (*Taanit* 23a). After all, all parents forgo their own ambitions, on some level, for their children. As Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai teaches, “the land of Israel is only acquired through tribulations...” or so it would seem.

The notion of tribulations takes on a different meaning when you consider the following two events: Over the last few years, my mother was becoming increasingly sick. There were good stretches and bad, in hospitals and out, alternative therapy and traditional medicine. Prayers. All this culminated at the end of October in Chicago with her death. Both of her parents are still alive and part of me feels she left

before her time. Two days after her death and a day after her burial, my son Meir Nechemiah was born. Sitting shiva on a hospital floor in New York, waiting for a baby to arrive, was quite an emotional contraposition. That was the most intense week of my life. My son is a light in darkness, a comfort to my loss (and Nechemiah brought the Jews to the land of Israel). The Gemara says that the death of an individual creates a “*din*” against the family for a year, but if a male child is born it heals the family immediately (*Yerushalmi, Moed Katan*, 3:7). It is an interesting duality between having a “*din*” and the *process* of healing.

When my mother died, of the many conflicting thoughts that came to my mind was that now I could make Aliyah. I no longer had to worry about being summoned to Chicago — that already happened. I wish I could have my mother back, but without her, I am more at peace with moving to Israel.

Second, I am a rabbi of a shul in Washington Heights, New York, that gets about 250 holy Jews every Friday night. Most of these shul-goers are young, single professionals. So, as I fill my Shabbat table with guests, conversation often leads to the shidduch crisis and other such woes of the frum dating system. One such Shabbat, after a very heated conversation about the difficulties of shidduchim, my wife dreamed up the most clever, innovative approach to these problems. We are now beginning a startup to address the shidduch crisis, called GamZuli.

Starting an initiative now seems ridiculous. Isn’t it better to wait until we are settled in Israel or push off a move until the initiative is established? Given the nature of the work, and my ability to promote, it

might make more sense to stay in America another year. But that is just the thing. There will always be those opportunities, those chances that seem to suggest against Aliyah, or at least push off the possibility of Aliyah (the next best thing). There is a reason that HaShem has given us this opportunity now. Maybe this opportunity only came because of our imminent plans to make Aliyah. Why? Because Israel is acquired through tribulations.

Tribulation is not just giving up amenities and luxuries (although that is a component of Aliyah). Tribulation means removing the focus from yourself, your career and focusing it on the other, in my case, my children. But tribulation is not just giving up a righteous career (although for me, making Aliyah involves just that). Tribulation means a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to provide a way forward. This could mean the death of opportunities, or the death of a loved one (a mother or a Jew fighting for the Land of Israel). Blessed is He who gives life to the dead. This is because Israel is acquired through tribulations, and tribulations are all of the above.

The *sugya* that quotes Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai is all about tribulations. If you read the entire *daf* you find there are many instances of understanding tribulations and justifying their occurrence. At the beginning of the same Gemara is the famous teaching about overcoming your evil inclination (*Brachot* 5a). When your evil inclination comes at you, first you ought to incite your good inclination to overcome your evil inclination. As Rashi explains, you go to war against your evil inclination (try to resist). If that doesn’t work, then you ought to

learn Torah. If that doesn't work then you ought to say Shema. If that doesn't work then you ought to think of the day of your final judgment. But wait, if you are going to tell me that the best strategy against the evil inclination is to think of your final judgment, why not just do that first?

Another question arises: later the same *daf*, we find the statements of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan that learning Torah actually takes away tribulations. That seemingly goes directly against the teaching of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai mentioned above. What does Torah do — take away tribulations or is it only acquired through tribulations (maybe you can acquire Torah with tribulations but once you *have Torah* then you do not have tribulations)?

The underlying answer for all these questions above, the essence of this *sugya* and my personal dilemma (career against children), is that

tribulations are a process. Depending on where you are in any process, those tribulations may affect you differently. There are times when the tribulations we face are destructive, and we ought to approach these tribulations with a mind to overcome them to subdue our evil inclination. There are times when tribulations act as reminders to correct our direction. Sometimes our troubles are to show us that HaShem loves us (see the same *daf*). No matter what, tribulations are always opportunities to grow.

The reason the Gemara does not first teach "your final judgment" in the struggle overcoming the evil inclination, is to teach us to develop our own abilities to handle our tribulations. We need to develop the smaller skills in order to handle the greater difficulties. As our tribulations become more challenging, accordingly is our potential for growth. Says, Ben Hey Hey, "according to the labor is the reward (*Pirkei Avot* 5:23)

Giving up responsibilities and obligations, amenities and luxuries is one type of tribulation that is hard to relinquish. Giving up my ambitions and desire for career success is yet another level of tribulation, which only compounds the first set of tribulations. The tribulations of the loss of a parent and the serious work it takes to get an initiative off the ground are yet another level of tribulations. The tribulations to move forward in life.

We are constantly troubled, and Chazal were only too keen to be aware of that, to teach us for the future. But our tribulations are necessary in a process of growth. Our Torah, land and future are only acquired through a process of growth. Tribulations are that process. We, the Jewish people, are constantly moving forward. Forward to a time in the not-so-distant future when we all live in Israel. It will be a process to get there.

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are motivated by Chazal in how they embraced Eretz Yisrael at their arrival.

Rambam states in *Hilchot Melachim* Chapter 5 Halacha 10:

גָדוֹלִי הַחֲכָמִים הֵיזֶר מִנְשָׁקִין עַל תְּחוּמֵי אֶרְץ
יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִנְשָׁקִין אָבָנִית וּמִתְגַּלְגֵּלִין עַל עֲפָרָה.
בְּכֵן הוּא אָזְמָר (תְּהִלִּים קְבָטָו) "בַּרְצֹו עַבְדֵיךְ
אתָ אָבָנִית וְאַתָּה עֲפָרָה יְחִינָנוּ":

Great sages would kiss the borders of Eretz Yisrael, kiss its stones, and roll in its dust. Similarly, Psalms 102:15 declares: "Behold, your servants hold her stones dear and cherish her dust."

It is difficult to imagine that our greatest sages would expose

themselves in such actions that are frowned upon by the social code of dignity and respect. Yet, when it comes to Israel, nothing is off the table and while we feel the sky is the limit, we also know that the ground and the dirt are the limit as well.

Upon entry to Eretz Yisrael, we are reminded by our *gedolei chachamim* that to be in Eretz Yisrael is to return to our core and foundation. You kiss the stones, you roll in the ground, because for the first time you are back to your source. Just like **Adam HaRishon** was formed from the **adama** (earth), so too, all *Am*

Yisrael was, is and continues to be "formed" through the land of Israel, **Eretz Yisrael**. Israel is there to humble us, and remind us of where we come from, it brings out the sweet child within, a child who so eagerly bent to kiss the land because he was taught that he is back home.

This summer, our family looks forward to taking that first step together on the tarmac of *artzeinu hakodesha*, and without hesitation, we will follow the call of our father, to kiss the holy land, the land that will finally be home.



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 baze* — 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 כפיהם אלא ב"ט ממשום שאו שרים בשמחה י"ט וטוב 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 "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.

