

Becoming Israeli: From the euphoric to the everyday

By Akiva Gersh

MAKING ALIYA is often a profound emotional and spiritual experience, especially for Jews who are not running away from hardship or danger, but rather consciously choosing to become part of the historic return of the Jewish people to their homeland. As time moves on, the euphoria may not altogether disappear, but it is joined by a plethora of other emotions and experiences, ranging from the inspiring and the hysterical to the frustrating and the challenging.

When I made aliya, it was euphoric. I had brought my acoustic guitar on the plane with me to make sure it didn't get damaged with the cargo. As my wife, Tamar, and I were beginning to descend the stairs to the tarmac below, the thought suddenly entered my mind to take my guitar out of its case and play a song for this overwhelming once-in-a-lifetime moment. I took out my guitar and, without any conscious thought as to what song to sing, "Am Yisrael Chai" burst from my lips. More than that, it burst forth from deep in my soul.

There I was, arriving in Israel as I had many times before, but this time not merely to visit, not only for my annual recharge that would give me the strength to live another year outside of Israel. This time, I was coming to live for the rest of my life. To plant my roots in the land. To change the course not only of my life but of my future children's lives as well, and their children's and their children's. To be part of the greatest and most miraculous migration the world has ever seen. I had no return ticket home. This time, a one-way ticket was all I needed to take me home. I landed at the bottom of the stairs and continued to strum and sing as I



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walked between two rows of IDF soldiers who had come to celebrate with us.

Their smiling mouths opened up and began to sing with me. Our voices joined together in what, for me, was 2000 years of Jewish history declaring loud and proud: "Am Yisrael Chai" (the people of Israel live). That was 2004. Since then, there have been many other euphoric moments living in Israel as well as emotional and inspiring moments. At the Kotel praying with thousands of other people, viscerally feeling

what it's like to be part of a nation standing together. Hearing Eichah on Tisha B'Av with a small group of battle-tired soldiers on the Gaza border during Operation Protective Edge. Hiking in the Negev in the middle of the night with only the full moon to illuminate the ancient desert floor. Crawling through 2000-year-old caves with my students, teaching them about Jewish strength and pride. And so many more.

But there also have been many other kinds of moments. Frustrating moments,

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like trying to explain to the Jerusalem Municipality that I didn't mean not to pay my *armona* (property tax) for three years, I just didn't know that I had to. And therefore they should cancel the 5,000 shekel fine they gave me – which they didn't. Complicated moments, like watching my children go off to *gan* (nursery school) even though they still didn't fully understand Hebrew. Scary moments, like moving my sleeping children into our protected room during an air-raid siren because of rockets coming toward our town from the Gaza Strip.

Living in Israel has been anything but stagnant, anything but monotonous. From walking in the middle of car-free streets on Yom Kippur, to delivering pizzas to soldiers on the Gaza border, to making embarrassing mistakes in Hebrew, to watching my 5-year-old son stand up during a nationwide siren to remember Israel's fallen soldiers and thinking to myself, "He's only five years old, and he already gets it." The powerful and complex moments that I have in one month in Israel would take years to occur anywhere else in the world.

Coming to Israel made me a citizen of the first independent Jewish state in over 2000 years. It also made me an immigrant, some-

thing I never thought in my life I would be, something I somehow didn't realize I would become upon making aliya. It forced me to reflect upon my own grandparents' immigrant experience.

They left Poland for America in the late 1930s, a decision that, most importantly, saved their lives, but also forever made them foreigners in a country that, to me, was simply home. As a kid, I didn't fully understand my grandparents and, at times, was even embarrassed that they spoke differently, dressed differently, and acted differently from my friends' fully American grandparents. Now, I was the one speaking differently, dressing differently, and acting differently.

Trying to find my way and make my way in a country that wasn't supposed to be foreign (this is the Jewish state after all, right?). But, in reality, it partially was. I was simultaneously fulfilling my greatest dream of coming home to Israel and, at the same time, living on a different planet. At the very least in a very different culture. I had spiritual memories of this place, memories from time immemorial, yet I was unfamiliar with many of the cultural norms that made Israel – Israel. It's been 13 years since the day I sang "Am Yisrael Chai" with those soldiers in that moment of euphoric bliss. I've had the full range of all kinds of other moments ever since. Moments that have made me wonder why my wife and I didn't go west instead of east and move to northern California, and moments that have broken my heart with the deep realization of never having done anything in my life as incredible and as important as moving to Israel. ■

This essay is an extract from 'Becoming Israeli,' a reflection of those moments. It is a collection of blogs and essays written by over 40 English-speaking olim (immigrants), who together give an inside look into the never-ending joys and challenges, inspirations and frustrations, which we have experienced along our journeys of aliya. <http://www.becomingisraeli.com/>



**Becoming Israeli:
The Hysterical, Inspiring and
Challenging Sides of Making Aliyah**
By Akiva Gersh
Rimonim Press
187 pages; \$15.42