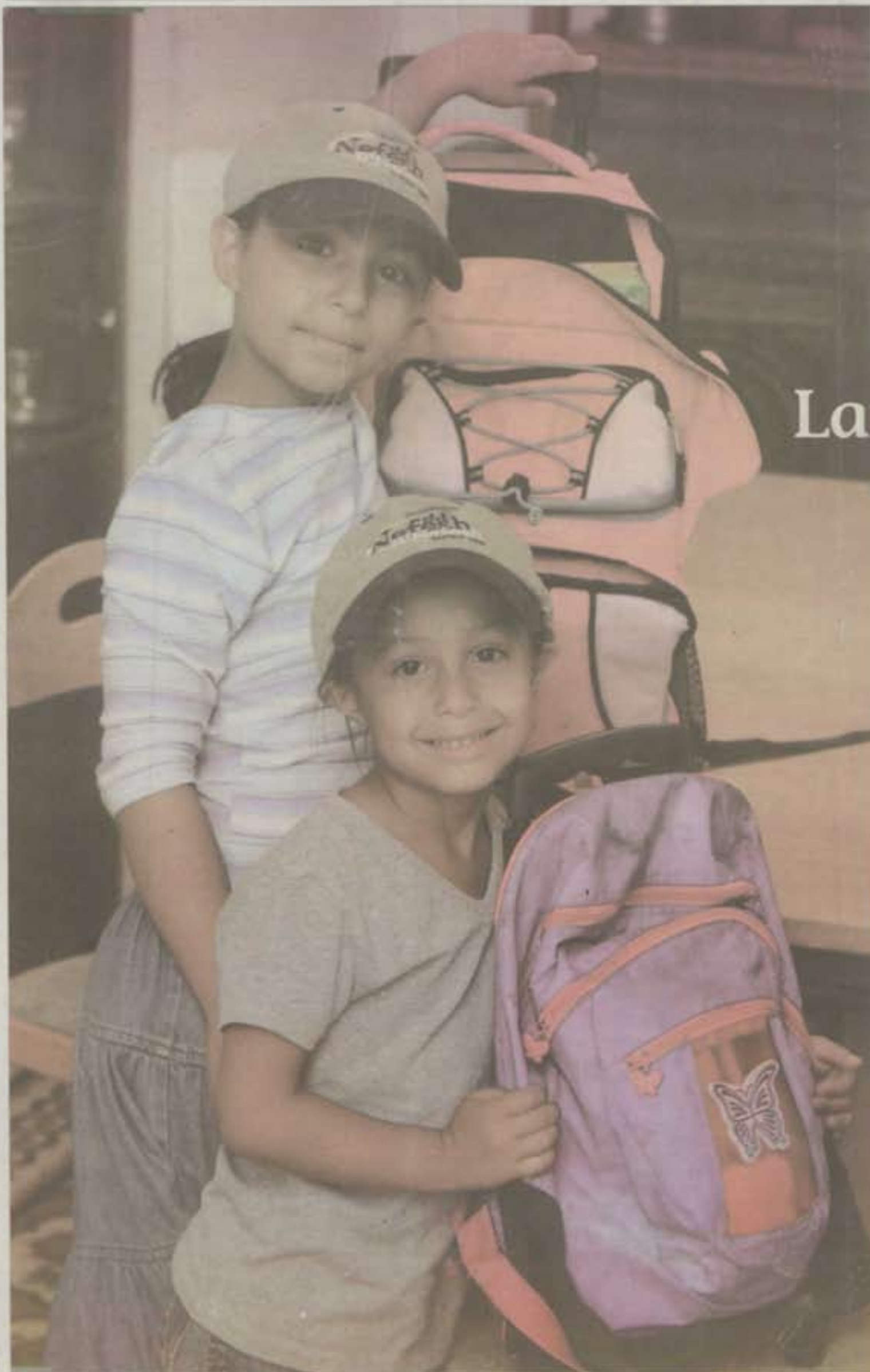


# IMMIGRATION

14



(Illustrative photo:  
Sasson Tiram / Nefesh B'Nefesh)

## Language of life

Educational reform  
aside, politicians and  
immigration officials  
are looking for an  
overhaul of the way  
Hebrew is taught to new  
immigrant children

BY RUTH EGLASH

When David and Claudia Miller began preparing to make aliya four years ago, the Denver-based couple gave little thought to how their children, Carli, then 11, and Molly, seven, would master a new language when they arrived in Israel.

"We were told [by aliya counselors] not to worry and that our kids would be speaking Hebrew perfectly by Hanukka," says Miller, who arrived here with his family in August 2004 and settled in Kfar Saba. "We just believed them [the experts] that the kids would learn Hebrew at school, perhaps with a few extra lessons, and make friends with little problem."

However, this was far from what actually happened. On September 1, when the girls arrived at their new school, "it was like we were the first olim [immigrants] this school had ever encountered," recalls Miller. "We had met with the principal beforehand, but when we showed up, they seemed very surprised to see us and had no idea what to do with us."

That was only the start of the problems. Although the girls were supposed to be given a certain number of Hebrew lessons

per week to enable them to catch up linguistically with their peers, instead of a professional Hebrew-language teacher, the school assigned them a soldier who just happened to be working there as part of her national service and who had a few spare hours to sit with the girls.

"It was totally ineffective," claims Miller. "They had one or two hours a week where she would go over some grammar with them, but she did not give them any conversational skills, which was the key to them fitting in socially."

Miller also says that even though the family confirmed with the Immigrant Absorption Ministry that it was entitled to NIS 600 (about \$150) a month per child to provide Hebrew-language support, the money was handed directly over to the school, which could decide for itself how to spend it.

As the school year progressed the situation deteriorated. Carli and Molly were having trouble communicating with other children in their class, let alone being able to follow what was being taught in the other subjects.

By Hanukka, after some three months at school, the two were nowhere near fluent and to compound the situation, a new immigrant from the former Soviet Union joined the school, says Miller, and the soldier went off to tutor that child.

"We had to pay out of our own pockets to get the kids private tutors," recalls Miller. "The principal implied that we were rich Americans and could afford it."

At the same time as their hours of Hebrew-language instruction were cut, Molly's teacher made matters worse by refusing to address her in Hebrew, says Miller.

"She preferred talking to her in English," he says, adding: "I guess you can't blame her, she had 35 kids in her class and just wanted to make sure that Molly could understand what was going on around her."

By the summer, Carli had made some progress with the help of a few bilingual friends, but Molly, about to enter second grade, was still far behind. The Millers decided to sign their younger child up for a special ulpan summer camp for three weeks.

"She learned more in those three weeks than she did during the entire school year," he says.

"I don't mean to be critical, but when potential immigrants go to the aliya office or wherever to get information about life here, everything is presented to you in a rosy way. We did ask about the Hebrew for the girls, but it was sort of glossed over and the kids were certainly not speaking Hebrew by Hanukka. It could not have been further from the truth."

Miller does acknowledge that part of the problem could have stemmed from the fact that the family chose to live in Kfar Saba and not in a place such as Jerusalem, Beit Shemesh or Ra'anana, where there is a large community of English-speakers that could have helped the children with the transition and local schools that are more familiar with English-speaking immigrants.

"Obviously, there is strength in numbers and we did not have that network to support us," says Miller. "In hindsight, we probably should have gone to one of the 'Anglo' areas, but we really wanted to live among Israelis and be part of Israeli society."

He laments, however, "that was probably quite naive of us, because even though our passports say we are Israeli, we will never really be identified as such and will most likely always be Americans."



The Masri family's arrival in August. Nefesh b'Nefesh now advises people to start teaching their children Hebrew before they arrive here.

MILLER'S EXPERIENCE as a new immigrant and his consequent conclusion about remaining on the sidelines of Israeli society due to the language barrier is what stands behind a recent call by politicians, immigrant groups and educators for a complete overhaul of the traditional ulpan system, especially as it relates to children.

"Learning Hebrew is the key to a successful integration and absorption in Israel," says Erez Halfon, director-general of the Immigrant Absorption Ministry, which demanded recently that the

funding for its proposed reform of the education system and is hoping to take those funds from the ulpan budget, explains Halfon, adding: "We will fight any such cutbacks and if the ministry does not agree to make the necessary changes, then we will approach the Finance Ministry and take on this responsibility ourselves."

In terms of teaching Hebrew to immigrant children, Halfon says that they should not be integrated into the school system until their Hebrew is good enough.

"They should spend their first year here

least 18-20 hours a week during the first six months and, I would say, they should even have to pass a proficiency exam before being able to rejoin the regular classes."

Elkin points out that during the 1990s, when there was a large influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union, children from first grade through high school would spend up to their first year here learning intensive Hebrew in ulpan classes strategically placed in each city or locality. As the aliya slowed down to a trickle toward the end of the 1990s, such classes were getting harder to sustain and Hebrew language had to be taught to new immigrant children on an individual basis.

"The system was not updated to accommodate the changes," continues Elkin, who comes from an educational background and who worked for the Jewish Agency before entering politics. "Instead, they just closed down the ulpan classes, took a teacher who had nothing to do for a few hours and told her to teach the immigrants Hebrew. It is clear that now we are paying the price."

AS ELKIN'S committee has spent the best part of the past year hearing about the fate of immigrant children who fell through the cracks of the education system, the Education Ministry itself has started to make a U-turn in its approach to teaching Hebrew.

On a recent November morning, Elkin, along with several other MKs, visited one of the ministry's newly established ulpan classes in the Keshet Elementary School in Modi'in, a town situated some halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The children, mostly new immigrants from the US, Britain, South Africa and France, spend four mornings a week learning Hebrew in one of its three Hebrew-language classes. Divided according to age and previous knowledge of the language, they rejoin their regular classes - some in

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Education Ministry, the body mainly responsible for the ulpan system, make essential reforms in the way it teaches Hebrew to all new immigrants. Halfon also says his ministry will fight the Education Ministry on proposed budget cuts to the entire system, with the possibility of transferring the responsibility to his office.

At a recent meeting of the Knesset's Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs Committee, Education Ministry director general Shlomit Amichai confirmed that budget cuts to the adult ulpan system were imminent but promised that there would be no changes to the ulpan program for children.

The Education Ministry needs to find

learning the language. In recent years this has not happened and we are already feeling the results," he says, referring to numerous reports over the past year that suggest close to 40 percent of immigrant youth drop out of school before graduation and that drug and alcohol abuse is nearly twice as high among teenagers not born here.

"A big part of the problem is the language," points out MK Ze'ev Elkin, chairman of the Knesset Subcommittee for the Absorption of Children and Youth in the Education System. "If a child does not learn Hebrew properly within the first year of aliya, it is likely that his absorption will not be successful."

"There needs to be a minimum of at

## Who needs to speak Hebrew anyway?

English-speaking immigrants do not always feel the same urgency as other groups of newcomers to learn Hebrew when most Israelis can converse in English, but does that apathy (or is it laziness?) leave us feeling like outsiders in the long term?

Yoel Gan Or, director with his wife, Orly, of Ulpan Or, a private Hebrew learning program in Jerusalem, says that even though English speakers can live here quite easily without picking up the language, at some point it could become a major barrier to integration into society.

"We get many older people coming to us for help," he begins. "They tell us that they 'managed to get by with what they had,' but now they have grandchildren and want to be able to communicate more proficiently with them, and the language gap is suddenly very visible."

"Not knowing the language can also lock people out of the culture," continues Gan Or, who claims that his ulpan's unique program, which was developed by his wife based on a Scandinavian model, can improve one's Hebrew by a whole level within two weeks. "We have so many customers who have been here for years but who never watched an Israeli [TV] show or can't understand even a basic Israeli joke; it's a real shame."

Gan Or also recalls a case this past summer with several US-born teens living in what he calls an English-speaking "ghetto" in Hashmonaim. The girls had made aliya about 10 years ago with their families but because they had spent their whole lives mixing only with other English-speaking children and never fully integrated into an Israeli environment, their Hebrew was very poor, certainly not good enough to graduate high school with top grades.

"One family was even about to return to the US because the daughter was not progressing well enough in school," says Gan Or. "This past summer, we created a summer ulpan for them based on our training methods and now they are at a comfortable level and ready to rejoin regular schools."

"It makes me angry when people move here and then don't make the effort to learn Hebrew," says Gideon Tankus, an Israeli native who spent 40 years living in Canada and recently resettled in Zichron Ya'acov with his English-speaking wife. "There needs to be a better way of motivating English-speaking immigrants, especially those who come with young families and are too busy to learn properly."

Tankus, like the Gan Ors, noticed that the current system facilitated by the Education Ministry had some serious pitfalls and decided to take matters into his own hands.

His wife, who had been traveling to Hadera from Zichron Ya'acov to attend ulpan, was the impetus for Tankus's efforts, as were several other new and veteran immigrants who, he felt, were in dire need of Hebrew-language instruction.

Over the past year, Tankus petitioned the local municipality to set up an ulpan in Zichron Ya'acov, and three ulpan classes are now operating in the town – two for adults and one for children. Those utilizing the service are a mixture of old and new immigrants, he says.

"We have students who have been here for five years and others who've been here for 22 but never had the need or opportunity to learn Hebrew," he says. "Now, with the new ulpan they will have the chance to really fit in." —R.E.

other Modi'in schools – for the other two mornings a week.

"This is the program's second year," explains principal Ronit Chen, who adds that even though the six months to a year spent learning Hebrew here may be somewhat unsettling for the children, who are already attempting to overcome the difficulties of moving to a new country, in the long term "this gives them a big push for the future."

"These classes give the children the basic language skills to understand what is going on around them and also gives them the confidence to ask their regular teacher for help," said one of the ulpan teachers.

While Elkin claims that it was his subcommittee that forced the Education Ministry to reinstate such ulpan classes, Udi Bahat, head of the Education Ministry's Department of Immigrant Absorption, explains that it is actually due to the increase in group-based aliya from the US, Britain and France facilitated by aliya organizations Nefesh b'Nefesh and Ami.

"Today we have had several types of aliya," says Bahat, who has been working with Elkin's committee to look at how to improve the existing system. "While immigration from Ethiopia is concentrated in absorption centers, the large groups of new immigrants from the West, usual-

ly arriving in July and August, have also allowed us to set up a more comprehensive ulpan system in certain areas."

During the last academic year, he says, several ulpan classes, similar to those in the 1990s, were set up in Jerusalem, Beit Shemesh, Efrat, Modi'in and even Ramle, a downmarket town not far from Ben-Gurion Airport, with plans to expand to more areas soon. In addition, the ministry has also increased the hours of Hebrew language instruction for immigrant children in areas with a smaller immigrant population.

"Modi'in is doing it right," observes Elkin. "But that was partially due to the mayor, who agreed to take it on. What is sad is that the private ulpanim have made real developments in how Hebrew is taught to new immigrants, but the Education Ministry still refuses to adopt any of these new methods."

Halfon agrees, pointing out that teaching Hebrew to new immigrants is not among the priorities of the Education Ministry.

Dr. Michael Yedovitzky, of the Jewish Agency's education department and a fellow at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, is critical of the new ulpan class model. He points out that in addition to not being far teaching enough to be effective, it still begs the question of "who is teaching Hebrew and how they

40 percent of immigrant youth drop out of school before graduation and drug and alcohol abuse is nearly twice as high among teenagers not born here



Ulpan Or chose to model Scandinavian language instruction when setting up shop. (Courtesy)

are teaching it."

After the age of five or six, a child stops learning a language through cognitive channels and more effort has to be made to teach a second language, explains Yedovitzky, an expert on Hebrew-language instruction.

"A child who immigrates between the age of five and 12 has still not developed his mother tongue enough and cannot learn a new language with ease," he says. "The result will be a generation of people who are semi-lingual."

At the heart of the problem, says Yedovitzky, lies the fact that there is still no developed method for teaching Hebrew as a second language, as compared to places such as the US, where teaching English to new immigrants is a profession in its own right.

"The state has to invest more funds into the study of Hebrew," he says, pointing out that 80 percent of the population is either first- or second-generation immigrants. "Language is not just for daily use but it is the main channel of communication between a person and the rest of the world."

At the Education Ministry, Maya Sharit, who helps to train teachers interested in teaching Hebrew to new immigrant children, admits that the state has yet to develop a tried-and-tested method for teaching Hebrew as a second language. However, she defends the current program, saying that the ministry's ulpan teachers get extensive training and support from her department and that new



Meirav Masri made aliya with Nefesh B'Nefesh in August. Here she is seen on her first day of school in Modi'in. (Gasson Tiram / Nefesh B'Nefesh)

*'If a child does not learn Hebrew properly within the first year of aliya, it is likely that his absorption will not be successful' – MK Ze'ev Elkin*

materials are being developed all the time.

IN JERUSALEM, former Toledo, Ohio resident Barry Leff, who made aliya in July with his wife and three of their five daughters, is in the midst of experiencing the new (old) system firsthand.

Leff's middle child's teacher recommended recently that she be pulled out of regular lessons in order to attend one of the newly created ulpan classes in Jerusalem.

"We lived here for a year seven years ago, so my oldest daughter, Deborah, 11, seems to be managing okay with the language and the younger one, Catherine, six, is not struggling so far, but for Aliza, the nine-year-old, the move has been especially tough," says Leff. "We did send them to an ulpan summer camp but we did not have any preconceived notions of how they would fare in school. We thought it best to just wait and see what was recommended."

While Aliza could roughly follow what was being taught in class, she was finding it much harder to express herself, which was why her teacher recommended the ulpan class. Based in the Efrata School in Baka, this class takes place twice a week, with the children joining their regular classes the rest of the time.

While it's too early for Leff to comment on whether the ulpan class will give his daughter a stronger basis in the Hebrew language, Nefesh b'Nefesh's Avi Silverman observes that the "Hanukka myth is starting to be dispelled."

An adviser on education and community for the aliya organization, Silverman points out that parents are beginning to realize that while some children do pick up the language very quickly, others move at a much slower pace and need more preparation before moving here.

According to Silverman, Nefesh b'Nefesh, which over the past five years has facilitated the aliya of thousands of families from North America and Britain, now advises people to start teaching their children Hebrew before they arrive here.

On-line ulpanim, private tutors or even just hanging Hebrew words up around the house are all suggestions that the organization now makes to families to get their young ones familiar with the language.

Upon arrival, continues Silverman, the organization tries to make its participants aware of the benefits offered by the government, including the newly established ulpan classes.

"People need to be aware of what is on offer and then need to consider where they want to live based on that," he says, adding that families should ask themselves whether they want to be in an "Anglo" community and get the benefits of the group ulpanim or be in a place like Kfar Saba where it is more Israeli but there is less support.

Sadly, for the Miller family the Education Ministry's changes and Nefesh b'Nefesh's advice comes much too late.

"I really feel like we failed them in some way," admits Miller about his children. "Carli still does not feel academically where she should be and is constantly worrying that she will not get into the high school of her choice, and Molly was at a critical stage in terms of learning to read and her English in that regard has really suffered."

"If there was a system of how to teach Hebrew to immigrant children then we certainly did not feel it. My only advice now is that people should not be as ideological as we were when choosing a community."

## Into the melting pot, or not?

The question of whether new, or even veteran, immigrants should continue speaking to their children in their native tongue or should adopt Hebrew often arises when attempting to help children adapt linguistically.

"I noticed that my children were not speaking at all and felt that if I started talking to them in Hebrew they would feel more confident in kindergarten," says one veteran immigrant from North America, whose children were born here. "I know that their English will be weaker in the long term, but it seemed more important at the time to make sure they fitted in with their Israeli friends."

According to Dr. Michael Yedovitzky, an expert in Hebrew-language instruction, "a child whose language skills are not properly developed can have his confidence seriously damaged," and that is why it is so imperative to give children the correct tools to learn to speak the language of their immediate surroundings.

However, he warns that abandoning the child's mother tongue, the language he or she hears and learns during the first few years of life, is not a good idea but rather, continuing to speak and develop that language even after making aliya will actually have a positive effect.

"There is a process of naturalization of the brain, which means that between the age of three and five, instrumental language comes into play and a child learns to speak through his surroundings," says Yedovitzky. "The second or new language, after the age of five, only comes from learning in a classroom and the two are achieved by completely different processes, with neither one endangering the other."

In fact, he points out, continuing to speak and work with new immigrant children in their native tongue will only help them to develop the tools needed to learn the second language.

"There is a lot of proof that learning two languages simultaneously is actually very positive," he says. "If a child develops his mother tongue, it will be much easier for him to learn a second language."

Yedovitzky also says that for a parent to speak in a language other than his or her native tongue could seriously damage the relationship between the parents and the child.

"Parents should continue to develop the mother tongue with their children but slowly they can start doing activities together in Hebrew to make that into a normative language at home as well," he says, adding that it is a good idea to invest in both languages with private tutors and extra classes.

— R.E.