

Welcoming Israel's Newest *Olim*

By RON RUBIN

Having spent earlier sabbaticals here in Israel, I knew the subject of *aliyah* loomed as a background issue but hardly expected the untold ways it would recast itself.

Jerusalem's stylish German Colony, where we rent a furnished apartment, has seen an influx of French-speaking *olim* – so much so that when one of the Hildesheimer Street *shul's* *Simchat Torah* honorees came forward, a chorus of "La Marseillaise" rang out. I once heard the congregation's black-frocked *rav* trying to explain a complex Talmudic point and then wondering aloud in Hebrew whether he should add some French to his vocabulary.

The *aliyah* theme surfaced again in a friend's e-mail announcing he planned to arrive the following month on a flight sponsored by Nefesh B'Nefesh (NBN), the *aliyah* service organization.

"Scary," he wrote, "but better scared than sorry."

After making a mental note of his December 27 arrival date, I was reminded once more of *aliyah* at the premiere showing of the film "Refusenik" at the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival. This moving account, showing both the heroic Jews trapped in the Soviet Union desperate to emigrate to Israel a generation ago and the daring activists in the United States who took up their banner, held personal meaning for me.

In 1968, I wrote one of the first books on their struggle (*The Unredeemed: Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union*), and on three occasions visited these Prisoners of Zion. Whatever tears I shed during the movie were dwarfed by how I felt when Sharansky, Levin and some fifty other survivors of the Gulag (some now aided by canes and walkers) came onstage

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afterward to a five-minute standing ovation.

As though some master plan were at work, the next morning an ad appeared in newspapers inviting readers to welcome NBN's 31st chartered *aliyah* flight at Ben-Gurion Airport.

Two more experiences underscored the theme of *aliyah*. Less than a week before the trip to the airport, the Daf Yomi class I attend at the Hildesheimer *shul* finished the tractate *Ketubot*, the last few pages of which glorify the land of Israel to the extent of allowing husbands and wives to divorce spouses who refuse to settle there.

The world of the dreamers who trekked across Europe three centuries ago to board boats sailing to the Holy Land came alive, only a day before the NBN welcoming ceremony, during a tour to Tiberias run by the Orthodox Union's Israel Center. I saw the *shul* founded by the followers of the Baal Shem Tov, and in the city's old cemetery, the tomb of Rav Yisroel of Shklov, one of the students of the Vilna Gaon who made the precarious journey.

It was 5 a.m. and still dark when my wife and I boarded one of three chartered buses parked in front of Jerusalem's Binyanei Ha'uma for the ride to the airport. Among the passengers, many of whom carried homemade signs, were joyous teenagers, teenagers and twentysomethings, parents with infants in tow, and Shulamith and Yehoshua Neaman, the seventyish couple who had led the previous day's Tiberias tour.

We sat behind alumni of an earlier NBN flight – a couple from Portland, Oregon, and their three babies – who'd made *aliyah* as they were becoming more religiously observant, because to their mind the choices were either a larger Orthodox community in America's Northwest or Israel. They were traveling to the airport to welcome a 21-year-old woman from Seattle who had just finished a pastry chef's course.

Arriving at El Al's Terminal 1, I went upstairs where a *minyan* was underway. What impressed me

was the relatively large numbers of boys in the room who were in their early teens. I learned from their *madrich* (guide) that these 120 students from Kfar Saba's religious high school had set out early in the morning to fulfill the *mitzvah* of greeting Israel's newest arrivals.

At 7:30, the crowd of about one thousand ran outside to the tarmac and formed two parallel lines abutting the makeshift gate where the *olim* would pass. Fifty *chayalot* (female soldiers) waving Israeli flags stood at the front of the rows under the bright sun. Israeli music blared, a young man blew into a long, curved *shofar*, hand-drawn signs bobbed up and down, guitars sounded. Everyone was pressing to get a glimpse, or touch, or reunite with the new arrivals. It was a scene of joyous, triumphal pandemonium.

The first of three buses shuttling the *olim* from the plane drew closer, circling again, seemingly teasing the crowd to shout harder and wave more strongly. Finally, the heroes stepped down from the bus greeted by hugs, kisses, tears, *mazal tov*s, and handshakes. Fatigued, but apparently sure they had done the right thing with their lives, the newcomers smiled, cried, kissed loved ones, and even tried capturing the moment's emotions with camera photos of their own.

The 200 arrivals were a cross-section of age, dress, and religious observance. One couple came from Venezuela, a few from Canada. Some were Holocaust survivors; others were already preparing to serve in the Israel Defense Forces. The eldest was a woman of 93, the youngest a girl of three and a half months.

Anna Solomon, 24, born in Toronto and holding an MA degree in mathematical finance, felt she was living out her grandparents' dream. "My parents wanted to come," she said, "but couldn't do so after the war." Jeff and June Glazer were uncertain whether their three children in Teaneck, New Jersey, would follow their example.

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Among the young, the pull of Israel was especially powerful. Atara Mark, 20, from Plainview, New York, aspired to teach English and was headed for Bar Ilan University. "It's all my parents' fault," she joked. "My father wanted to jump on the plane with me."

Simona Kogan, 25, who edited a website back in Metuchen, New Jersey, planned to settle in Rananna. "I feel very connected here. I could be Jewish in America, but my Jewishness is more fulfilled by being in Israel."

Jeff Daube, 57, a schoolteacher from Riverdale, New York, was excited at the prospect of launching a new career as the Israel representative of the Zionist Organization of America.

The lesson of the new *olim* is that an intense love of Israel and a deep desire to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* will surpass the pull of family, friends, habit and culture. Like the Soviet Jews who risked the Gulag, the pilgrims to Tiberias who risked persecution and poverty, even the French in my community who were far from certain the beachhead they established on Hildesheimer Street would be a success, these Jews came here because they see Israel as their home – and a glorious place in which to live.

May they be inspired by the spirit that drew them to Israel to accomplish great things for *Klal Yisrael*.