

# Aliyah Journal

By Gila Arnold

Part One

The Arrival

The day we made aliyah was like a wedding, with some three hundred guests of honor. There were sobbing mothers and grandmothers, smiling photographers, shouts of mazel tov, music and dancing. True, there were also suitcases (lots of them), overtired children, and a long flight on an airplane. Still, on the day that we made aliyah, the wedding comparison kept running through my mind – what better way to describe a Jew returning to his homeland, and making a lifetime commitment to it, for better or worse?

In this column, I hope to talk about our aliyah experience, both the “before” and the ongoing saga of “after.” I want to start by describing those critical moment in between from when we took off from JFK as citizens of America and landed in Ben Gurion as Tshavei Eretz Yisrael, citizens of Israel.

Our Nefesh b’Nefesh charter flight left New York this past summer on Tu B’Av (July 30), the very day the Jews in the desert stopped dying as punishment for not wanting to enter Eretz Yisrael. The scene in the airport was emotional as the olim said goodbye to their families. It was the moment I had been dreading most, although putting things in perspective did help; when my ancestors, roughly four generations ago, left their families to come to America’s shores, their goodbyes were for life. Now, as I prepared to leave those same American shores, my goodbyes were only until I would be able to get an Israeli cell phone, and with the knowledge that my parents were

coming to visit in a few months. Nevertheless, it was still tearful, and I’m sure it was very poignant when, as we were turning the corner through the terminal gate, my four-year-old looked back one last time at the group of grandparents and great-grandparents still waving to see, as my mother likes to put it, “whom he was leaving behind.” Of course, at that moment I was busy looking at what I was leaving behind, as a security clerk cheerfully confiscated all my carefully packed tubes of toothpaste and hand lotion.

Once we boarded the plane, the atmosphere changed dramatically. It is standard for people to clap as a plane lands, especially in Israel. But this was the first flight I was on where people clapped as soon as the plane took off! The air was so charged with excitement and anticipation that it was unbelievable. (The air was also charged with crying babies and shrieking kids, but that just added to the excitement, especially when you realized the screaming baby wasn’t yours—although the kid who tried running into the cockpit was mine.) People kept wishing each other mazel tov and flashing giddy grins at perfect strangers as we all shared in the enormity of what we were doing. Even the flight crew joined in the spirit. The pilot gave us a special welcome and one of the non-religious flight attendants came over after the men were finished *datening shacharis* to ask if he could put on *tefillin*.

The Nefesh b’Nefesh staff helped us fill out our paperwork, and my husband and kids officially changed their names to their Hebrew ones. But the paperwork part of the flight was surprisingly short. Most of the time we talked, we ate, and – gasp! – we even slept. Before we knew it, the big moment had arrived.

I cannot adequately describe the feeling of landing in Eretz Yisrael for the first time as an *olah*, of looking out the

window at the land spread out in all its majesty beneath you and realizing that now it is truly yours, that you are about to do what generations of Jews could only dream of and *daten* for. All the months and months of discussion and doubt, of sweat and anxiety, melt away in that one moment of absolute clarity, when the plane touches the ground and you know you are home. I only wish I could have bottled that feeling for the future, to take in small doses as the need arises, because it was too much to absorb all at once. My husband Meir and I smiled at each other; after years of planning, we had actually done it. The kids wiggled in excitement as they waited to get off the plane. My husband was wearing *Shabbos* clothes for the occasion.

Together, we walked off the plane and down the steps, to the whirl of TV cameras (the first and likely the last time in my life I felt like a celebrity). As our feet touched the land, our family thanked Hashem for giving us the *zechus*, the privilege, to see this day. Then Meir bent down and kissed the ground – the ground that on that very day, the 16th of Av, began to be treated with some of the holiness of the *shemittah* year.

Waiting at the entrance to the airport were hundreds of well-wishers singing and clapping and waving Israeli flags. I didn’t know any of them, and no one had come specifically for me, yet everyone had come for me, and for the future of our country embodied in each of the new immigrants. The excitement was infectious, and we each fed off each other; we, the tired but ecstatic new *olim*, and they, the *olim* of many years, the native born Israelis, the American teenagers here on summer programs, all of us laughing and crying and dancing in circles from the sheer joy of it all, for the ingathering of the exiles taking place before our eyes.