



A DISCUSSION ABOUT ISRAEL AND ALIYAH

Introduction: We asked four panelists to provide insights and guidance about Aliyah. This roundtable discussion recognizes that Aliyah is a very personal decision and each family has its own set of factors to consider. Yet these insights are valuable, not only for those considering Aliyah, but even for those who can't, at this time, see it as a possibility, and for those who are already living in Israel.

Rebbetzin Meira Davis is Director of Rebbetzins' Programming at RIETS. She served alongside her husband, Rabbi Edward Davis, at Young Israel of Hollywood for 36 years.

Rabbi Chaim Eisenstein is a Ra"m (Rabbinic Faculty) in the YU Israel Kollel and the Rabbi of Beis Medrash Mevakshei Emes in the Mishkafayim neighborhood of Ramat Beit Shemesh.

Mrs. Aliza Pilichowski is the Mayor of Mitzpe Yericho.

Rabbi Larry Rothwachs is the Director of Professional Rabbimics at RIETS and Rabbi of Congregation Beth Aaron in Teaneck, NJ. He accepted the position of Rabbi of the new Maromei Shemesh community that is being built in Ramat Beit Shemesh.

Please provide some background about your connection to the Land of Israel and Aliyah

Rebbetzin Davis: In 1935, my mother's family fled from Germany to Palestine, where many of her European relatives had emigrated earlier. That sealed her love for Eretz Yisrael even though they later needed to emigrate to the United States for *parnasa* purposes. My mother, AH, inculcated a strong love for Israel, Zionism and Israeli

culture in her children. My husband and I had planned to make Aliyah at the conclusion of 10 years in his first Rabbinical position in Richmond, VA. In anticipation of this move, we spoke only Hebrew to our children. Ultimately, we were faced with some special educational needs which could not be addressed in Israel at that time. We moved to Hollywood, FL and became very invested in the physical and spiritual growth of our small new congregation and community. Two of our four children who now reside in Israel made Aliyah when they finished

their seminary programs. The other two made Aliyah with their families when their oldest children were entering second and third grades. Two of our grandsons whose parents and siblings reside in the United States made Aliyah after the army portion of their yeshiva's hesder program, with their next brother following in their footsteps this summer. A few years ago, my sister made Aliyah and recently remarried to a long-time American Oleh. They are all very happy and fulfilled living in Israel. My husband and I spend three months a year in Israel, though have not officially

made Aliyah.

Rabbi Eisenstein: During the first few years of our marriage, my wife and I thought that we would be spending the rest of our lives teaching Torah in America until the coming of Mashiach. We dreamed about the prospect of living in Eretz Yisrael, but never considered it a reality. Then I got an offer to teach at Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh, and it was a great opportunity, so we made Aliyah with our three young children and have been living here for the last 19 years.

Mrs. Pilichowski: My parents dreamt of making Aliyah for as long as I remember. My father would sing “*shirei am*” with us and listen to Israeli singers like Naomi Shemer and Uzi Chitman on our record player. My mother would long for us to be on a kibbutz and become true *chalutzim*. Making Aliyah was a part of our connection to Am Yisrael. My parents fully integrated the emotions of “*Am Yisrael al pi Torat Yisrael b'Eretz Yisrael*” (The Jewish people observing the Torah of Israel in the Land of Israel). When my husband Uri and I met, we knew that we wanted to live in Israel and raise our family here. We were privileged to study in Israel right after we got married before moving to America where we lived in Los Angeles and Boca Raton. Both of these communities, under the leadership of Rabbi Steven Weil and Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, developed deep connections to Eretz Yisrael. It was always understood that we would one day come back to Israel. We spoke to our children daily about the excitement and belonging that we longed for in Eretz Yisrael. When an opportunity provided itself, it was a natural progression to move back to Israel.

Rabbi Rothwachs: My wife and I both thought about Aliyah when we were newly married and planning our future together. However, as our professional

careers evolved, first in Jewish education and then in the rabbinate, we ultimately came to the conclusion that remaining in the U.S. was the most appropriate choice for our family. We recently announced that we hope to make Aliyah in a few years. While there is certainly some personal motivation involved — two of our married children are living in Eretz Yisrael and a third has plans to do so soon — we have decided to move in this direction at this time, as we have been offered an opportunity to spearhead a new community in Israel. Being able to fulfill our personal dream by making Aliyah, live closer to children and grandchildren, and continue to engage in community building, presents us with an opportunity that we have decided to seize.

Please provide some general observations that may be helpful for someone considering Aliyah.

Rebbitzin Davis: Learning Hebrew can help with an ultimately successful Aliyah. It can be the key to communicating with one's surroundings, understanding the culture, feeling more connected to the people and the Land, and feeling an overall sense of belonging. Our grandchildren who are being raised in predominantly non-Anglo areas speak English with very strong Israeli accents. The ones in heavily Anglo communities speak English with American accents, even the younger ones who were born in Israel.

The more planning that is done in every area, the more successful the Aliyah experience can be. Prepare your family, with conversations about some of the big challenges: six-day work and school week, no Sundays off, time zone differences, missing family members who are far away, lower salaries, adapting to a new culture,

educational system and healthcare system, finding desirable and affordable housing, security concerns. Lowering expectations and being flexible helps.

It's important that family in Israel and outside of Israel are familiar with WhatsApp and Zoom, which can provide incredible and meaningful "visiting" opportunities with many family members and friends.

Rabbi Eisenstein: We have to start with the perspective that Eretz Yisrael is the best place in the world to live. No matter which stream of Orthodoxy speaks to you, there are opportunities for growth that are unparalleled elsewhere. For growth oriented people, there are so many diverse communities with a focus on Torah and spirituality.

That said, making Aliyah does come with challenges. First and foremost is *chinuch*. The education system here is significantly different than in the U.S. That in itself would not be a reason to forgo Aliyah. However, if one is coming with children between the ages of 9 and 17, there is a significant concern that the child will have a difficult time adjusting. I personally have told families not to come in certain situations because of this issue. Other families have moved here with pre-teens and teens and were successful. It is really important to do a lot of research and speak to mentors and rebbeim who have experience with this before deciding on Aliyah when one has children this age.

Second, in Eretz Yisrael, we merit to live in the palace of the king. In the palace of the King, there is a different emphasis — there is more of a focus on spiritual matters and less of a focus on materialism. We sometimes see ads in magazines by developers or other proprietors who try to present the possibility of living an American lifestyle in Eretz Yisrael. For the most part, that is not true. The homes are often smaller, cars are often more

expensive and the salaries that people earn don't usually allow for that same lifestyle. All in all, it is a worthwhile sacrifice to be able to live in the palace of the King. Yet it is important for those considering Aliyah to be aware that they will be living a more modest lifestyle in Eretz Yisrael.

When we made Aliyah through Nefesh B'Nefesh, they showed us a PowerPoint presentation about Aliyah that gave a more realistic view of what to expect when making Aliyah. One of the points that was made — which brings us to our third point — is that we should be aware that we are moving to the Middle East. Everyone is aware of the security challenges in Eretz Yisrael and the prospect of terror, *chas veshalom*. HaKadosh Baruch Hu gave us Eretz Yisrael as a place where we have the opportunity to reach great spiritual heights while also being in a place where there is a lot of tension, surrounded by people who want to destroy us. That reality creates a hardened culture that also requires adjustment. It is a culture that pervades many parts of life, from the schooling of children through professional life, and even daily interactions in the supermarket and on the bus. Israel life is truly like a *sabra* that is hard on the outside and soft on the inside. It is a challenging adjustment, but one that is worthwhile in order to achieve the spiritual heights that come along with living in Eretz Yisrael.

Mrs. Pilichowski: Aliyah is, like its namesake, an elevation. It is a privilege to live in a time where it is “easy” to make Aliyah. Uri and I had always imagined that we would move to Israel and our lives would be significantly more challenging than our lives in the United States. But in reality, it is all about one's perspective. When we moved to Israel, we had friends who had a fantastic opportunity to move to Germany. They decided,

quite quickly, that an international experience for their children would be a great educational experience. When I juxtaposed this to what I heard from many friends about their hesitations about moving to Israel, there was a striking contrast. After thousands of years of our parents and grandparents crying for the day that they could touch the Kotel, we are still hesitant about moving. There are definitely challenges when making Aliyah, but one's perspective is the overriding rule.

How should the topic of Aliyah be addressed in the Diaspora community? What does it mean to be a Zionist living in the Diaspora?

Rebbetzin Davis: As someone who guides *rebbetzins*, and someone who has struggled with this personally, I can say that this is a challenging issue for many Rabbinic couples who feel they should make Aliyah, while weighing the important role they play in growing higher levels of *Yiddishkeit* in their communities and in outreach efforts.

In discussing this topic with one of my daughters who lives in Israel, we thought that each person knows what his or her considerations are when it comes to making Aliyah and can make an honest decision of what is best. That doesn't make someone less of a Zionist if they live in the Diaspora. We can still support and love Israel from afar.

Rabbi Eisenstein: I think it's important to recognize that there are people who try very hard to make Aliyah and for whatever reason are not able to do so. On the other hand, every Jew in the Diaspora should be dreaming, praying and open to the opportunity to come to Eretz Yisrael.

One of my great *rebbeim*, Rav Abba Bronspiegel, *zt"l*, would often tell a story of a late 19th century *rav* in

Europe who went to live in Eretz Yisrael, and his congregation felt that he was leaving them behind. Before he left, he told the apocryphal story of a Jew in Poland who was running away from a government official who constantly tormented him. On his way out of town, this official caught him and asked where he is running, to which the Jew replied that he was going to celebrate a holiday called “Yom Pleitaseinu” (the day of our escape). The official ran in to town and saw that no other Jews were getting ready for a holiday, so he went over to one of the other Jewish townspeople and asked why Yankel said that he is celebrating Yom Pleitaseinu. This other Jew was sharp and figured out what was happening, so he answered that Yom Pleitaseinu is a personal holiday. Each Jew has a day when he gets a message to celebrate Yom Pleitaseinu and Yankel just got that message. This *rav* told his congregation that his Yom Pleitaseinu has come, and it was time for him to go to Eretz Yisrael. We all have to look out for the call of our Yom Pleitaseinu, which may take time to come, or which may come to us in a very subtle way, and when it does come, try to take advantage.

Mrs. Pilichowski: The term Zionism was born in the Diaspora. In many ways, Zionism is more alive in the Diaspora than in Israel itself. I feel that my upbringing in the Diaspora heightens my appreciation for my life in Israel. Yesterday, as I was driving through traffic in Jerusalem, I lamented the extra time that my trip was taking. I looked out the window at the Temple Mount and stopped my train of thought and recognized that I am living the dream of our people. Sitting in traffic in Jerusalem! Thousands of people trying to move around a flourishing city, watching the construction of more roads, infrastructure, housing, and culture all around me is invigorating! We are living in the Zionist fulfillment

of our dreams. Being a Zionist in the Diaspora is powerful, but being in Israel and being in the front seat is an even greater opportunity and I am grateful for this gift.

Rabbi Rothwachs: When publicly addressing the topic of Aliyah, I prefer to differentiate between our national/communal obligation, on the one hand, and one's individual obligation, on the other. From a national/communal perspective, there is great value in promoting Aliyah and I believe that rabbis in the Diaspora should be clear and unapologetic in their messaging. There should be no discomfort, nor hesitancy, in proclaiming the message that the future of the Jewish people is in Eretz Yisrael, and thus, as a community, we should be able to plan passionately and, when appropriate, self-reflect critically. That being said, the question of Aliyah for individuals is a very personal one, and must be respected as such. There are many different factors that are relevant to the question as to whether one should make Aliyah, and, if so, when. This reality must be met with respect and individuals who choose to live outside of Israel should be supported and their personal choice validated. Nobody should be made to feel guilty for living in the Diaspora or feel that they are less Zionist because of it.

Should I date/marry someone who doesn't have the same approach as me to Aliyah?

Rebbetzin Davis: It depends on how strongly you both feel about your positions, what each of your concerns are and if you are willing to be open and flexible. You are never going to fully agree on everything with your future of current partner. Figure out if this is a make it or break it condition for you or perhaps something you are willing to compromise on. Certainly it is easier if

you are both on the same page from the beginning.

One of my daughters was speaking with her soon-to-be husband the night before the wedding and she had no interest in making Aliyah, while he was determined to do so. He asked her to express what she felt was holding her back from going. She explained that her primary concerns were learning and using the language as well as having no family there. They compromised. They would wait to make Aliyah until their oldest child was going into first grade (which they missed by a year). That would give them time to establish some work experience and savings. By the time they actually made Aliyah, the family part was less of an issue, as by then, two of her sisters and one brother as well as her husband's brother were already living in Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Eisenstein: When it comes to dating in general, it is more important to focus on ideals than on the details. Like talmud Torah, chesed and other attributes that people look for in a spouse, they shouldn't be hyper-focused on which yeshiva they will send their kids to or which community they will live in, but on what their ideals are. The details can be worked out later. The same is true regarding living in Eretz Yisrael. If they have the same ideals, even if one envisions making Aliyah right away and the other a few years later, they can build off of those ideals. They might make Aliyah right away, or five, ten, twenty years later, but if they share the same ideals, it will make for a healthy relationship. When looking for a spouse, one should be looking for someone to strive with in Torah, davening and chesed, but also in a longing for Eretz Yisrael.

Mrs. Pilichowski: I don't know if there are cut and dry rules for who to date or marry. I strongly believe that in a committed relationship with mutual

respect (which I think is the most basic and most important part of any marriage), a couple can find the right path and make the right decisions. I am reluctant to say that living in Israel is the only path for everyone.

Rabbi Rothwachs: If an individual comes to the conclusion that living in Eretz Yisrael is essential for their future and a "nonnegotiable" point for discussion, then this needs to be shared openly before dating. In this type of situation, it would, in my opinion, be unfair to enter a relationship without disclosing this expectation, creating the potential for resentment down the line.

All of that being said, if one would ask me if making Aliyah should be on his/her list of "dealbreakers," I would advise them that this not be put on the list of critical goals while choosing a life's partner. Unlike other important values and personality traits, this is an area where there should be flexibility and openness. If the couple discovers that they are compatible and aligned in the most important of ways, I would be confident that they will ultimately decide how best to resolve any disagreements in this regard.

How does one navigate family conflicts relating to the decision to make Aliyah, both in terms of the nuclear family (e.g. one child is resistant to Aliyah) or the extended family (e.g. parents or siblings who might be hurt)?

Rebbetzin Davis: If the issue is in the immediate family, this is a difficult situation which requires a lot of patience and discussion with those not on board — specifically having them articulate their concerns and/or fears of making Aliyah — which can be very real and valid. Some issues may

be resolved beforehand with creative thinking and further information for the child, while validating their concerns. An older child may opt to stay in America in a mutually acceptable arrangement with a trial period that could be extended depending on how it is working for everyone. We really need to daven for Hashem's help and guidance.

Regarding the extended family, the concerns should be acknowledged, not dismissed. Healthy communication, sharing feelings and listening to and validating each other's positions can pave the way to creation of ways to keep in stronger touch with each other and to promote understanding by all. Propose some means that can allow more connection on a regular basis, such as monthly family Zooms.

On a personal level, our nearest child lives 200 miles from us in Florida. None of our other children are closer than 1,100 miles from us. Four of them have made Aliyah. Our other four children and their families are in the northeastern United States. Three of our northern grandchildren have made Aliyah independently. My husband and I feel *bishvili nivra* WhatsApp, which enables our entire family, wherever they are, to share texts, news, pictures and videos at any given moment — a treasured gift. With additional audio-visual technology, i.e. Zoom, FaceTime, Google options, we can “visit” and “see” each other in real time. A true bracha. For me, this reinforces the much greater sacrifice of people who made Aliyah years ago and the difficulty for their out-of-Israel family to be in contact with each other.

Mrs. Pilichowski: Moving anywhere is very difficult and can have detrimental effects on both the nuclear and extended family. That being said, it can provide other opportunities. Most decisions are not black and white,

including leaving family. My advice to families that are even considering Aliyah at any point, is to open the conversation and always keep it on the table. It is important to share with both your children and your parents and siblings your love of Israel and why you long to be in Israel. One of my close friends thought that I was crazy for moving to Israel. She encouraged me to stay in the United States where life was just “easier.” After lobbying her point for many weeks, she said, “I know that you won’t ever listen to what I am saying, because your heart is in Israel.” After she expressed this, she recognized that some decisions are more important than a logical analysis. One of my colleagues who was relocated outside of Israel and was deeply saddened by her departure told me, “When someone comes to Jerusalem, a piece of Jerusalem is left in their soul that they have to return. It is like a magnetic pull. I know that I will be back, because my soul will make me come back.” Understanding that this is our home will always pull us back. Express these feelings always to the ones you love and will miss and more importantly, express them to yourself so that you know that you will come home.

Rabbi Rothwachs : Making Aliyah when a child, especially pre-adolescent or adolescent, is not on board, carries the potential of significant risk. I would certainly not recommend uprooting such a child(ren) without first seeking objective advice from qualified professionals, including mental health counselors and Jewish educators. In some cases, the underlying cause of the child’s resistance may be anxiety due to the anticipated changes or fear of the unknown, in which case, the issues could perhaps be properly managed. At times however, the presenting resistance may run much deeper and, if not appropriately honored and correctly addressed, the potential results can be

catastrophic. In certain cases, it would most certainly be a reason to put Aliyah on hold.

If the resistance presents from beyond the nuclear family, while there may be profound sensitivities at play, prospective Olim need not necessarily put their plans on hold. On the one hand, it is quite understandable that members of one’s extended family may find it quite challenging to support their loved ones’ plans to move to another country. Some may even dramatically react to such news with painful expressions of abandonment. While such reactions must be received with understanding and sensitivity, appropriate boundaries must be established when making major life decisions. In my experience, even when the initial resistance may be quite intense, reconciliation and acceptance ultimately follow.