

## Living in the Land

### **Solving Israel's true PR Problem- American aliyah - must be a priority for hasbara. Book review.**

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There is an oft-kvetched complaint amongst Jews that Israel needs to improve its PR. While that may be true, it has nothing to do with Israel's inability to prove its case on BBC and Tiktok and much of the rest of the media. As current events have shown us, the world will hate Israel and Jews no matter what we say or what we do and no matter what our enemies do to us. Trying to change blatant antisemitism is a fruitless effort. That being said, Israel has one PR problem that it would be worthwhile to try to fix, namely Israel's PR aimed at Jews in America.

Since time immemorial, Aliyah to Israel has always had a reputational problem. Since the very beginning of Jewish history many have defamed Israel with all sorts of claims: it's too small, it's too hot, it's only for the rich, it's only for the poor, it's too dangerous, it's too bureaucratic- pick your favorite. Even some religious Jews throughout the ages have found religious justifications for abandoning the Holy Land. This has always stemmed from the fact that living in Israel is always a challenge, and most people seek the path of least resistance. For far too long Aliyah was dismissed by most Jews as not a practical option.

There are also other factors contributing to Israel's reputational problem. When the modern State of Israel was formed, an agreement was signed between David Ben Gurion and Jacob Blaustein, the leader of the American Jewish establishment at the time which stipulated that the Israeli government would not push American Jews to make Aliyah in exchange for American Jewish financial and political support of Israel. As a result, for the last 75 years, no major Israeli government-initiated efforts to promote Aliyah have been made in the US. The only ones who even broach the subject of Aliyah amongst American Jews (aside from Israeli real estate agents) are people who made Aliyah in the past, but for various reasons decided to move back to the US.

While the number of people who moved back is a small fraction of those who succeeded, they nevertheless play an outsized role in shaping people's perceptions about Aliyah- usually in a negative way. Why should that be?

Imagine a young aspiring biology student dreaming of becoming a doctor one day. He decides to do some research about his dream job, so he goes to a forum of medical school

dropouts to get their perspective on medical school. Before speaking to any doctors who actually completed medical school and succeeded in their career, he decides to call it quits. A fool you say? Well many frum Jews in America are making exactly the same mistake. Many American Jews know and love Israel, but give up on their dream after getting advised by returnees or those who know returnees first hand.

Certainly no one can judge other individuals for choosing to return to America. There are fine, good Jews have returned to the US for a host of good reasons. Its impossible to judge them without understanding their circumstances and being in their shoes. That being said, it is completely unreasonable to base one's entire perspective on Aliyah on people who are no longer there and in many cases are naturally bitter about the fact that it didn't work out for them. While their perspective is important, it needs to be taken with a large grain of salt. If one is to do their due diligence one should hear perspectives of several people who have succeeded in Aliyah before dismissing the notion outright. Certainly those who have returned should not be shaping the conversation about Aliyah.

One recent book attempts to change all of that.

Yoel Berman's "Living in the Land" interviews real frum (observant, ed.) people from the US who made Aliyah and succeeded. This book levels the playing field in an arena that until now was almost exclusively anti-Aliyah. He collected 50 essays from olim who did their research, set expectations properly, got good advice, learnt from others' mistakes, succeeded and want to share their Aliyah success with others.

This book is chock full of practical advice, fascinating perspectives, both disappointments and unexpected positive surprises that serves two purposes: to inspire those that are still dreaming of Aliyah and as a guide to those who are ready to take the first step in exploring the possibilities.

Some memorable anecdotes from olim in Living in the land:

"In the realm of Limud HaTorah, when times get rough and the learning became challenging, I knew I just had to persevere and go on learning. Although it may have been hard at the time, it was worth the price, and as time went on, it got better and easier. It's the same with nisyonos (difficulties, ed.). They can be hard, challenging, and frustrating, but we know that this is the nature of nisyonos, and that Olam Haba doesn't come without overcoming hardships. Eretz Yisrael is no different; its on the same list. It is acquired through yissurim (suffering, ed.), but, just as in the case of Torah and Olam Haba, it can be acquired with time, and it is worth every bit of the effort," ....

"While in the United States for a wedding, my wife met for the fist time some of my nieces who were living there. They could not believe that we managed to live in such a small apartment in Yerushalayim, and one of them started boasting about their much larger living quarters in America. My wife told her that she did not have anything to boast about, since

we could buy three American sized houses for the price of our little piece of Yerushalayim. I later explained this with the following comparison, succinctly differentiating for a friend between those two pieces of real estate, "How many lemons can you buy for the price of one esrog? Yerushalayim is not just real estate!..."

"When I approached people for advice about moving to Eretz Yisroel, each one gave his own reason why it wasn't practical. One person told me that it would be hard to find parnassah (employment, ed.) and that giving up a great job in New York would be irresponsible. Another said that moving would be hard on the kids and I would be risking having them go off the derech. Yet another suggested that the language barrier would be difficult to maneuver...With everyone pointing to a specific issue without concern for the other issues, it seemed that there was no one universally accepted reason not to move.."

"Also, I firmly believe that Mashiach can come any day. I surely do not want to get caught up in the rush hour when throngs of Yidden from all of the world will be trying to come here to Eretz Yisrael when he arrives. I want to be settled here before he comes. I want to have enough time to get dressed in my best to greet him, and be able to absorb the highlight of the most magnificent moment of the world's existence."

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