

# Our Aliyah Adventure Begins

By Edie and Mort Barr

Our efforts to live in Israel to help build the Jewish homeland began in 1982.

Edie was the president of a Hadassah chapter in New Jersey and a delegate to the Hadassah national convention in Jerusalem. Mort decided to accompany her and research job opportunities in Israel.

While Edie was happy being an armchair Zionist in the United States and helping build the land through her work in Hadassah, Mort was determined to be part of the ingathering of the Jewish people.

When we returned home after the convention, we started an Aliyah Club. Our little group had meetings each month with guest speakers arranged through the Jewish Agency for Israel and an organization called the North American Aliyah Movement, affiliated with the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel. Each time we concentrated on a different aspect of life in Israel, from school systems to housing to health care.

By 1984, we were ready to go with our daughters ages 1, 4 and 6.

Both of us had found employment in Beer Sheva: Edie in computers as the assistant director of the computer lab in the mathematics department of Ben Gurion University; Mort in chemical marketing at Bromine Compounds, a subsidiary of Israel Chemicals. We had friends from graduate school who were living in Omer, a little town outside Beer Sheva with beautiful private homes. They helped us find a home to rent and settle in.

Israel gave us A1 temporary resident status, a special status provided to Americans because at that time you could forfeit your American citizenship when overtly accepting Israeli citizenship under the law of return. With this status, you passively received Israeli citizenship after three years, enabling dual citizenship.

We loved the lifestyle in Beer Sheva. The weather was pleasant all year. Bureaucracy was tolerable, and the full workday was 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., including time for lunch and *aruchat esser* (late breakfast). We had Friday and Saturday off.

Because we both had good jobs, we did not suffer from the typical financial woes of new immigrants.

We made one big mistake, however, which caused us to return to the United States after only two years and never become Israeli citizens: We



This view of the Judean Hills is taken from one street up from the Barrs' apartment.

did not live among other Anglo immigrants.

Living with other English speakers would have provided us with a natural support group. Instead, we did not integrate well because of language, religious and cultural barriers, creating emotional difficulties.

We weakened and returned to New Jersey in 1986. We decided that we would try aliyah again when we retired, having learned from our mistakes.

In 2002 we heard about a community being built in the center of the country where many Anglo immigrants were settling. It was in Ramat Beit Shemesh (Beit Shemesh Heights), which is midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. We bought an apartment in anticipation of moving there when we retired. In the interim, two of our daughters (and their families) lived in it for periods.

In 2008, two years after moving to Atlanta, we fully retired. We started coming to Israel four to five months each year: two to three months for the fall holidays and two to three months for the spring holidays.

But our elderly mothers in Atlanta needed our help, and we were unable to make the full move. Still, the extended visits enabled us to get acquainted with the community, make friends and adapt before making aliyah again.

Our Ramat Beit Shemesh neighborhood has many immigrants from South Africa, and they are a warm, friendly group with a culture remarkably similar to ours. There are also im-

migrants from Australia, England, Canada, the United States and even India.

Our synagogue, which is directly across the street from our apartment, has a rabbi from Far Rockaway, N.Y. Divrei Torah are delivered in English, as are most announcements.

Many retirees live in our neighborhood, and we belong to two senior social groups: the Maor Seniors (we live on a street called Nachal Maor) and the 55Plus Club.

There is also an English-speaking women's senior group called Oleh B'Gil. All of those groups run social events, lectures and trips, and the local government runs special programs for seniors.

The local joke is that "here in Ramat Beit Shemesh, one can hop on a bus and in five minutes you are in Israel."

Beit Shemesh is in the foothills of the Judean Hills about 1,000 feet above sea level. That's similar to Atlanta, although the views here are more breathtaking and offer a sense of holiness. The winters are milder and shorter, and the summers, while brutally hot, are less humid.

Beit Shemesh is rooted in Tanach and is first mentioned in the Book of Joshua as a city in the territory of the tribe of Judah on the border of the tribe of Dan. Later, in Joshua 21, Beit Shemesh is mentioned as having been set aside as a Levite city.

We overlook the Elah Valley, where David slew Goliath. You can imagine the battle scene as described in I Samuel 17: Saul and the men of Israel mass-



Edie and Mort Barr stand in their garden in Ramat Beit Shemesh, where they moved at the end of March.

ing on one side of the valley, the Philistines stationed on the opposite hillside, and the ravine between them.

Beit Shemesh is mentioned in I Samuel as the city to which the ark of the covenant was returned after the Philistines captured it in battle. We are a short drive from an area near Latrun where the Maccabees defeated the Seleucids en route to the miraculous victory of Chanukah.

In 2010 one of our daughters and her family made aliyah to Ramat Beit Shemesh. Now we had family in Israel as well as friends and community. After our mothers died, we started thinking about making the move.

We had been involved in many charitable communal organizations in Atlanta, and we passed our responsibilities along to others. This year marked exactly 30 years from the time we left Israel in 1986. It was time to return. ■

*Edie and Mort Barr made aliyah from Atlanta on March 30. Mort, who retired as the director of technology at Colgate Palmolive, is a former executive director of Congregation Beth Jacob and the founder and former CEO of the Jewish Interest Free Loan of Atlanta. Edie, who retired from a career as an activities director in assisted living and volunteered at the Naturally Occurring Retirement Community, Berman Commons and at the Carlton, is a former president of the Mount Scopus Group of Greater Atlanta Hadassah, served on the GAH Board and was active in the Beth Jacob Sisterhood. Next week: the experience of making aliyah again.*