

Smiling Through Aliyah's Bureaucracy

By Edie and Mort Barr

Edie and Mort Barr made aliyah from Atlanta on March 30. Part 1 of their story appeared June 3.

Making aliyah is much easier today than it was 30 years ago when we first made the effort.

Nefesh B'Nefesh, based in Jerusalem, partners with the Jewish Agency for Israel (Sochnut) and is partly financed by the Israeli government. It is well structured to facilitate aliyah from North America and the United Kingdom.

We opened an online file with NBN in January 2015 and uploaded the requisite application information, including proof of being Jewish (a letter from our rabbi), U.S. passports, birth certificates and health declarations.

Further, to prove we no longer resided in Israel but left after two years in 1986 and lived full time in the United States, we had to supply a list of entries and exits to and from Israel and evidence of continuous employment in the United States the past 30 years.

We then contacted the Jewish Agency in Miami to manage the aliyah application and set up a personal interview. Although Atlanta does not have an aliyah desk, we didn't need to go to Miami; one of the Israeli representatives based at the Marcus Jewish Community Center met with us.

Approval under the Law of Return should have been automatic and rapid. But after 10 months and numerous phone calls and emails to Miami, the only feedback we received was that because we made aliyah 30 years ago and were classified as former A1 (a special temporary resident status for Americans to facilitate Israeli citizenship in three years without losing U.S. citizenship), our case was special and required review by the Professional Committee of the *Misrad HaKlitha* (Absorption Ministry) to determine our new status and rights.

So we appealed to Nefesh B'Nefesh to investigate on our behalf, and within three weeks our approval was granted in November.

We were given the status of *oleh* (immigrant) with most of the rights offered to *olim chadashim* (new immigrants):

- *Sal klitha*, a monthly stipend for six months to help with initial living expenses. For us, it totaled 29,400 shekels, or about \$7,500.



Here's what the Barrs' street in Ramat Beit Shemesh looks like when the jacarandas are in full bloom.



The synagogue across the street from the Barrs' home includes English in its services.

- Basic government medical insurance on arrival, although we are purchasing supplemental insurance as well.

- A 67 percent discount on property taxes on our apartment for one year.

- A modest reduction in import taxes for a new car.

- A free one-way flight to Israel on El Al with Nefesh B'Nefesh.

- A free taxi ride to our home in Ramat Beit Shemesh from Ben Gurion Airport.

- The ability to bring three suitcases each on the aliyah flight.

The two rights we needed most of all, however — exemption from Israeli income tax on our passive American income for 10 years and the right to bring in our household possessions from Atlanta without paying import duty — would need to be determined and managed by us only after we moved to Israel.

Apparently this was the Catch-22 penalty for having made aliyah 30 years ago but never having become citizens. Our in-between classification placed certain burdens on us.

It therefore made sense to make

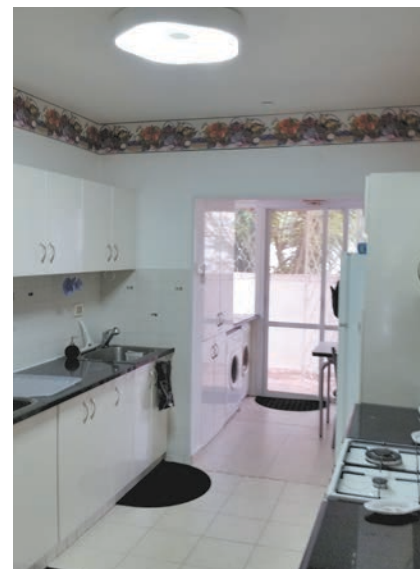
aliyah a few months earlier than planned so we could open the file with Meches (the Finance Ministry's import duty section) to gain clarity before we shipped our personal belongings.

Nefesh B'Nefesh helped us to get on an aliyah flight in March and greeted us at the Newark airport with special luggage tags, hats, flags and reassurance. NBN arranged that we would get our citizenship papers (*teudat zehut*) at Ben Gurion Airport when we landed.

It took less than three hours to process us at the airport in Israel; 30 years ago it took eight hours.

As we left the Ben Gurion arrival area, we were greeted by a group of young people with songs and words of welcome and encouragement. It was good to be home at last, this time as Israeli citizens.

For two millennia the Jewish people prayed daily to return to the land of Israel. Three times a day we petitioned the Almighty: "Gather us from the four corners of the world, bring us upright to our land, return in mercy to Jerusalem, Thy city, and dwell in it as Thou promised."



The Barrs have a sleek, modern kitchen.

On every Yom Kippur and Passover, we fervently voiced the hope that next year would find us in Jerusalem.

Now we are home. What a lovely ring these words have: We are home.

At the beit kneset (synagogue) on our first Shabbat after making aliyah, Mort received the Levi aliyah to the Torah, and when he finished, the entire congregation burst out in song with the verse from Jeremiah 31:16: "And there is hope for your future, says the Lord, and the children shall return to their own border."

When we opened a bank account at PAGI (Bank Poalei Agudat Israel, part of the First International Bank of Israel), the banker with whom we spent at least 1½ hours filling out paperwork said he had a gift for us. Where else in the world would that gift be a beautiful tallit carrying bag. What a country!

The Real Fun Begins

Want to know about the first set of administrative duties of a new Israeli citizen? The ups and the downs of Israeli bureaucracy?

We had our citizenship papers but not our new immigrant booklet, called *teudat oleh*. That is the official recognition of new immigrant status and is necessary for receiving your rights as an *oleh*.

To obtain it, we needed to go to the *Misrad HaKlitha* office in Beit Shemesh. We also needed to open a bank account before that visit so that our stipend could be deposited monthly.

To our dismay, the Absorption Ministry needed to send our records to the Beer Sheva office because that was where we had registered in 1984. We assumed the worst and worried



Edie Barr stands near the new rug that leads to the couple's apartment.

A friendly Finance Ministry clerk has helped the Barrs avoid import duties in moving their furnishings to Israel.



The Barrs live here in Ramat Beit Shemesh.

that weeks would pass before anything happened. To our pleasant surprise, in three days we had our booklet.

Surprise No. 1. Happy day!

Next, we had to register for our national health insurance at *Bituach Leumi* (National Insurance). This, we thought, would be a mere formality. Not so.

Even though the Jewish Agency had ruled that we would get our health insurance coverage immediately, the autocratic *Bituach Leumi* clerk in Beit Shemesh decided that we should be treated as returning citizens, ignoring our status as new immigrants, and that we must wait six months.

We had to provide many documents to prove we were actually living here now and were forced to fill out a four-page application in Hebrew. Our application was sent to the main office in Ramle to be evaluated. A black hole was about to engulf our health insurance.

We thought this would be easy. Surprise No. 2: It was not easy.

But Nefesh B'Nefesh again came to the rescue. We contacted NBN's government advocacy department, and it is correcting the error. We expect our approval to arrive any day now.

Next, we went to Meches in Jerusalem to see whether we were entitled to bring in a shipment without taxes. We were expecting all kinds of trouble. To our pleasant surprise, the employee there was so sweet and happy that we made aliyah that she just signed us up for the duty exemption, no questions

wonderful people at Nefesh B'Nefesh, we are on our way to a smooth *klitha* (absorption).

Giving Thanks

Exiled and scattered throughout the world for 2,000 years and suffering endless cycles of persecution and mass murder, climaxing with the Holocaust, we Jews miraculously resurrected a nation-state. We transformed deserts into gardens and created a democratic, technologically and agriculturally innovative oasis in a region in which primitive barbarism reigns.

Israel enabled an ingathering of exiles from all corners of the world, providing a haven for survivors of the Holocaust, refugees from Arab persecution, Jews from underdeveloped countries such as Ethiopia and over 1 million from the former Soviet Union. Out of this melting pot Israel has created one of the most vibrant and resilient societies in the world.

How exciting it was to celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut (Independence Day) as Israeli citizens. Watching the Israel Air Force flyby brought happy and proud tears to our eyes.

We give thanks to the Almighty for enabling us to be blessed and privileged to live in freedom in our resur-



Banks in the United States used to offer free toasters for new accounts. In Israel, this tallit bag is the reward the Barrs received for opening an account at Bank Poalei Agudat Israel.

rected ancient homeland. We remind ourselves that Israel's success defies rationality and by any benchmark must be deemed miraculous. What a privilege to be alive and here at this time. ■

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.

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