

Aliyah Marks 'Homecoming' for American

Many people ask how I came to the decision to make aliyah to Israel. For me, it wasn't so much a question of *if* I wanted to move, but rather, *when*.

More importantly, it was the incredible connection to Israel that my family always encouraged throughout my life.

I grew up in a modern Orthodox house, behind a white picket fence, just outside of Boston. I went to Jewish day school, synagogue, and was part of many Jewish youth groups, but the central theme to my childhood was Zionism. Any time someone moved to Israel, or joined the army, my parents had cause for celebration, always telling me and my sister how jealous they were and how much they wish they could "return home."

My parents used to take my sister and me on trips to Israel, showing us apartments they had rented, kibbutzim on which they had volunteered, and introducing us to old friends. While we did the "touristy" visits as well, they were never from the perspective of the tourist. Rather, we traveled on the public buses, stayed overnight with friends, and entered and exited the country on our Israeli passports.

As we got older, it wasn't enough for us to just come to visit. We had to do something constructive for the country while we were here.

My sister and I volunteered on kibbutzim, on army bases and in schools, all the while improving our Hebrew every day, having just jumped into a world where there was no English. We learned to get ourselves around the country, always asking for directions and discovering new bus lines. Getting us to this comfort level was something our parents aimed for.

They sent us alone for months at a time, with a list of numbers we could call if we needed help—and that was it. Why? That's what they did.

My mother, Anne, came to Israel in 1974 at the age of 17. She spent summers, semesters, years in Israel before she made aliyah, living here for seven years after. My father made aliyah three weeks after graduating university, having been only once. Their volunteering on kibbutzim and service in the army formed their connection and strengthened their love for this country that was their home away from home.

Although I had come with my parents, I didn't fall in love with Israel until I spent a summer here by myself. I started my trip with a whirlwind experience on Birthright, and then extended my stay to live in an absorption center in Jerusalem and to volunteer in a kindergarten. After that, I spent a week sleeping on a friend's couch in Tel Aviv, meeting new people and spending hours on the beach.

Then, I followed in my parents' footsteps.

I returned to my mother's adopted family on their kibbutz—a family that is still my closest family in Israel—and volunteered for three weeks cooking in the kitchen, making cheeses and packaging milk bags for the kibbutz store.

I remember vividly having a major breakdown a week or so before my flight. I didn't want to leave Israel. I was happy. I had found my home—a home I had been searching for my whole life. I was at the kibbutz and had just finished a day's work when I ran out searching for my adopted grandmother, someone I knew I could cry to, someone who would understand.

Instead, I found my adopted grandfather who works at the kibbutz store and I unloaded all my feelings in three minutes of tears. He had been through the same thing with my mother several times, and knew to take me home. There, he and his wife sat me down and calmed my nerves.

I made a plan to email my parents and tell them I wasn't coming back to the States and that they shouldn't come to the airport to pick me up. In response to these emails, neither of my parents was shocked, nor did they tell me to come back and to first finish college.

They said ok.

They understood my feelings. They told me to take my time figuring myself out. They asked me to think about making a plan for the future.

In the end, I got on the plane. I cried the whole 13-hour flight. But I went back to the States. The next semester at school was one of my worst. I cried most of the time, received bad grades, and by halfway through, I had not gotten Israel out of my head.

So I decided to go back.

By then it was too late to apply for a semester abroad, but not too late to take a semester off. Once I had done my research, found a program and convinced my parents that it was a good idea to drop out of school, I was on my way.

The program I had found gave me all the freedom I wanted. It placed me in an Ulpan class to further my Hebrew speaking, gave me internship experience working with special needs children, and set me up with a job working as a waitress at the Hilton Hotel. Other than that, I was living in a Tel Aviv apartment with five other girls and having an incredible time.

At the end of those six months I was determined to finish school within the next year so I could come back as soon as possible. Because of this motivation, I completed a year and a half's worth of classes in only 12 months.

While it was a very stressful year in America, I jumped into it with the idea that it would be my last.

Three weeks after my graduation, I was on a plane back home, to Israel. Since then, every single day has been an adventure. While not all of it has been easy or fun, I know more and more that I made the right decision.

Even though I know that making aliyah was the right choice for me, I understand those for whom it is not the right decision. Not everyone can, or for that matter wants to, pick their lives up and move across the world. It seems as though this decision is what unfortunately divides people today.

Maybe this has been a result of the lack of options on how to develop a connection to Israel if you don't have parents like mine. How lucky that today there is Israel Forever, an organization that helps people connect to Israel without lifting a finger.

And, just maybe, by sharing my whole story with you, it will encourage others to appreciate the little steps that help us each ignite that spark of Israel love, *Ahavat Yisrael*, we sometimes take for granted.

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