

Ministries Help Fulfill Prophecy, Jews Make the Long Pilgrimage Home

Yael Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), noticed something unusual at the Ben Gurion Airport, Israel's main international hub. As passengers disembarked from their flight to Ukraine, she could not help but stare at one man. Weeping as he walked off the plane, the man bent down to kiss the ground.

That in itself would not be unusual for a Jewish person who has made *aliyah*: immigration to the biblical homeland of Israel. IFCJ and other organizations frequently facilitate such flights. But the circumstances of this man, Oleksandr Moroz, a 40-year old engineer from Ukraine, were different.

"I just had to walk up and ask him what his story was," Eckstein says. "He told me that it had been a very emotional journey for him for many, many years. He told me he was forced to change his name 15 years ago because of the persecution he underwent in eastern Ukraine. He lived in hiding for those 15 years. He told me, 'Finally, I can live as a Jewish person again and not be worried about my life being taken.' Many of the people we help can relate to that."

IFCJ is one of many organizations helping Jews make aliyah in accordance with Isaiah 11:11-12, which reads: "In that day the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, who shall be left, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He shall set up a banner for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth."

In fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, Jewish people are immigrating back to Israel in droves. When Israel officially became a state in 1948, its population stood at a little more than 600,000. At present, there are more than 6.5 million Jews living in a country of nearly 9 million people.

But much more work remains before Israel sees complete prophetic fulfillment. Jewish Voice Ministries says the mass return of the Jews to their rightful homeland is "yet another important sign that the Messiah's return is approaching."

In response, many organizations not only provide Jews from around the world with flights to Israel, but they also help them assimilate into society once they arrive in-country. Donations to these agencies enable them to help immigrants in financial need to make the journey. And no matter which organization is responsible—IFCJ, Ezra International, Operation Exodus USA or the Jewish Fund—one irrefutable truth has become evident: Helping Jews make *aliyah* transforms lives.

Changed Lives

With 90 staff members and more than 500 volunteers, Ezra International has helped more than 70,000 Jews with this process over the past 2½ decades. At the time of publication, the organization is actively working with 42,000 more Jews who live in 18 countries to help them reach the Holy Land.

Before they make aliyah through any organization, individuals must provide documents proving their Jewish descent. Volunteers and sometimes staff members on the ground in each country, like those from Ezra International, often help individuals find the proper documentation. They also assist with transportation, as the trips to and from the documentation agencies can sometimes prove challenging for individuals who live in remote areas.

Once the trip to Israel takes place, the work has only begun. Aliyah-focused organizations work tirelessly with the Israel-

based Jewish Agency for Israel to help individuals and families integrate into Israeli society. They help these new immigrants obtain employment, find suitable housing and learn to speak Hebrew.

Ezra International founder and President Mel Hoelzle has witnessed plenty of aliyah stories, both heart-warming and gut-wrenching. In his efforts through Ezra International since the early 1990s, Hoelzle has seen firsthand God's mercy, healing and power.

While on assignment years ago in Ukraine to help a family make aliyah, Hoelzle encountered a 6-year-old girl who couldn't walk and whose family couldn't afford the medical care she needed. The girl wore braces but still needed support to get around, and Hoelzle says her doctors in Ukraine had given up hope that the child would ever walk again.

Once Ezra International helped the family make aliyah, it also directed them to medical facilities and doctors who could properly diagnose the problem with the little girl's legs and lay out a plan for treatment. After surgeries, the healing process began.

Hoelzle is proud to report that she now walks normally and even participates in a gymnastics program.

"When I was in the Ukraine with them, I carried that little girl to a van that helped them get to the airport to make aliyah," Hoelzle says. "And then, when I was in Israel sometime later, I met with the family again, and this little girl ran and jumped into my arms. Praise God! It was a tremendous blessing to me just to be part of something like that and to know that what we're doing helped make that happen."

Safe Harbor

For many, life in Israel brings much-needed peace of mind.

With anti-Semitism accelerating throughout the globe, many Jews still living in the former Soviet Union—in places such as Ukraine and Azerbaijan—fear for their lives daily and endure heavy persecution.

Hoelzle says anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews has also amped up in countries such as Venezuela, France and Germany. More than 300,000 Russian Jews migrated to Germany over the years, but the heat of persecution in that country is now rising to epic proportions, Hoelzle says. His organization and others are working feverishly to get them out of these hostile situations, leery they may escalate to something similar to 1930s Germany before World War II.

Take Roman from eastern Ukraine. A young government lawyer, Roman—considered a pro-Ukrainian official—was kidnapped by rebels on his way to work in May 2014 after riots broke out throughout the country. He and his manager at work were held with sacks over their heads for two days in a secret location. During that time, rebels tried to extract information from them—information they did not have.

“It’s lucky for me they didn’t know I was Jewish,” Roman told the IFCJ. “Otherwise, I’d be dead.”

The two were eventually released, and Roman and his wife, Alexandra, decided they needed to leave their home before something more tragic befell them. They agreed it was time to make aliyah and contacted the IFCJ.

After the vetting process, the IFCJ put the young couple on a Fellowship Freedom Flight, and the two now live happily in Kibbutz Ein HaShofet in the Menashe Heights region, approximately 30 miles from Haifa.

The couple are only two of more than 750,000 Jews the IFCJ has assisted in making aliyah since 1985, when Eckstein’s father, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founded the organization. The IFCJ works in 37 non-Western countries and has 46 paid staff and

more than 3,000 volunteers to help facilitate the process. Eckstein says it relies heavily on donations to help “make biblical prophecy come to fruition.”

That’s important, because although anti-Semitism plays a significant part in the aliyah decision for many Jews, it’s not the only factor. Some are motivated by the idea of fulfilling a role in the end times.

Debra Minotti, president of Operation Exodus USA, shares the unusual testimony of a Jew named Ariel. Ariel says it had always been his family of five’s plan to migrate to Israel based on what the Bible says.

“We’re making aliyah based on many reasons,” Ariel says. “But if I had to state just one, I’d say that my wife and I have a strong feeling that it’s just time. I can’t say with certainty why it’s time, but I suppose it’s a feeling based upon a combination of Scripture and a keen observation of world events. There is so much evidence from Scripture that is chillingly relevant to what is happening today, such that anyone who is truthful with himself simply cannot ignore it. It feels as if something big is going to happen, and it only makes sense if one takes the time to learn about the forces at work today that are actively seeking to destroy Christianity and America.”

Considering the source, Minotti says such a testimony came as a shock to her.

“This is coming from a Jewish person,” Minotti says. “It’s unbelievable. Ariel goes on to say that he and his family are religious Jews, but they are not strictly observant. He says he actually feels more comfortable ideologically with believing Christians than he is with the people he grew up with. What he said is so profound. He could easily say, ‘Yes, I want to go to Israel because it’s my homeland.’ Many others do. But more and more, Jews are beginning to open their hearts

to those who agree with them that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is calling them back. Many of them are raised with Zionist beliefs. But also, many of them are saying, '*Hashem* [a Hebrew term for God] is calling me back to Israel.'"

Promised Land

For others who dream of making aliyah, Israel represents a land of prosperity and potential—as it first did to the Israelites freed from Egypt millennia ago. In recent years, the opportunity to live in such a financially and technologically burgeoning country has become more and more attractive.

President Sol Lizerbram says the Jewish National Fund has been helping people make aliyah since Theodore Herzl created it in 1901. Along with its affiliate, Nefesh B'Nefesh, the Jewish National Fund has raised money and purchased land in Israel over the past century-plus.

But instead of directing them toward settling in the population hubs in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the organization is concentrating on moving them into the northern and southern regions of Israel—in particular, the Negev and Galilee regions, which offer new, vibrant communities with meaningful work and available, affordable housing.

"We give them the tools to be successful," Lizerbram says. "We make sure that there's good education for the children, employment, housing, schools, recreation and even a social life to enjoy. We make sure that everything is in place for them so that, when they get there, it's an organized, exciting environment.

"Our focus is on Israel's north and south because 90 percent of Israel's population is in the Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem corridor. Years ago, Ben Gurion said the future is in Negev, and he was correct. With technology, farmers have figured out how to grow crops in the sand with no dirt. Many high-tech

companies like Dell and Intel are moving there. So that creates reasons to move there, and it's less expensive than the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem corridor. We're helping to build new communities and enhance ones that are already there. Our focus is to help build and create an environment for people who want to make aliyah."

Lizerbram says many are moving to Israel "because it's a fabulous life."

"We like to say that in 1901, Jewish National Fund's focus was on buying land and planting trees to build the nation," Lizerbram says. "Today, Jewish National Fund is planting people in Israel. And we do that with our affiliate, Nefesh B'Nefesh. Israel has become a very exciting place. It's called a startup nation. There's so much innovation in pharmaceuticals, technology, cyber-security and other areas. For young married couples or unmarried people, it's very exciting to move there. When you create these new communities, it's not just building a house. It's jobs, fire and police stations, schools, hospitals and libraries. You have to build the entire ecosystem, and that's what we're doing."

For some young American Jews, who have lived their entire lives in the U.S., just one trip to Israel convinces them to make aliyah.

"Ever since I can remember, it has been my dream to live in the Holy Land," says Naomi, who has a husband and three children. "I come from a Zionist family with parents and grandparents who fostered a love of Israel. I made my first trip when I was in high school and from that moment, when I prayed at The Western Wall, I knew that someday I would return to live there. We want to be together in a place where we can live with other Jews, send our children to religious school and worship in the land that God gave to our people. While it is a scary thing to pick up and move from the only home we've ever known, we believe strongly that we belong in our real

home, the land of Israel.”

So does Moroz, who wept and kissed the ground when he first landed in Israel. He says making aliyah not only helped him, his wife and his 74-year-old mother escape persecution in eastern Ukraine but has afforded the couple an opportunity to fulfill another dream. Though they always wanted to start a family, fertility problems and fear of persecution in an unstable situation proved overwhelming hurdles. But the promised land is a place where one biblical couple—also racked by infertility—had children and grew into a mighty nation. Moroz looks forward to a fresh, life-changing start of his own in Israel.

“We don’t have any children and actually hope that the reproductive medicine in Israel will eventually help us,” Moroz says. “Our chances there are much, much better. We look forward to trying.”

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