

Coming Home

In December 2018, my husband died. He had been ill for many years. I nursed him at home.

In the weeks following his death, I pondered my future. I was retired, not wealthy but not poor, in reasonably good health. I began to rehearse possible scenarios: travel the world? I found flying a singularly unpleasant experience now, I did not fancy hotels, and I liked sleeping in my own bed. Move to another part of Canada? I lived in Victoria, British Columbia, the Riviera of Canada, where the weather was never too hot, never too cold, never too rainy, where people were laid back and informal. My townhouse was a half a block from the sea. I could remain in Victoria, where I was comfortable, had a network of friendly acquaintances, sang in choirs, played recorder and ukulele with performing groups. My life was easy, predictable, without surprises. Why was I thinking of making a major move? Adventure....It was my last chance at adventure. My future became clearer and more exciting.

Major move, well and good. But where? Not the States: too similar to Canada. Not Europe: I had left it years before. Not Africa: too complicated. Not Asia: too complicated. Not Latin America: too violent. My future was taking shape...

I had visited Israel a number of times. My son lived in Beer Sheva. He had made Aliyah many years ago, as a student. Now he was a respected professor of microbiology at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

Israel offered me a very different culture, myriads of places to explore, a worldview unlike my own. I spoke no Hebrew, nor read nor wrote it. I thought I could learn it in 6 months. Within a week, having wrestled every aspect of the move that I could visualize, I started my Aliyah application.

Nefesh B'Nefesh offers on line a detailed process of gathering all the documents required. Obtaining copies of my birth certificate from Paris, France took inordinate efforts. The French bureaucracy could apparently not fathom how such an important document could have been lost in the Shoah. When finally, I received not the two copies I had asked for, but one, a handwritten note was attached: "don't ask again."

It was time to contact Nefesh B'Nefesh. I met my guide on line. He was helpful, patient, did not seem to mind my thousand questions. At some point in the process, I met the Shaliach in a face-to-face interview in Vancouver. I was asked a number of routine questions, such as "Why are you moving to Israel?"

"Now that I am old," I replied, "I want my last chance at adventure."

"Adventure?" said the Sheliach, "I can't list that as a reason! How about joining your son? How about Zionism?"

"Adventure," I insisted. "I am moving to Israel for adventure."

Sensing a lost battle, the Sheliach moved on.

Part of my mental homework was of course how my life was going to unfold once in Israel. Where would I live? Would I move to Beer Sheva? Would I buy or rent a flat? I decided to select central Israel. I needed good services, a place where English was understood, where public transportation was readily available, where I could walk to where I needed to go, since I was not going to buy a car.

Poring over the map, I selected 5 cities: Tel Aviv, Herzliya, Rehovot, Raanana, and Kfar Saba. I found the email addresses of their municipalities and outreach coordinators, and contacted them all by email. Three people from Raanana responded presently, in perfect English. I had found my place. I repeated the same process with the Israeli health baskets. Maccabi responded quite fast, in perfect English. Things were looking up.

I placed a zoom call to my son.
“How are you? And by the way, I am moving to Israel...”

I began a sustained correspondence with two people from Raanana. The woman was charming, an American, a long time resident of Israel. She was the outreach arm of her synagogue. The other was an Englishman, also in Israel many years.

The man was a fountain of information. I needed a lawyer, a real estate agent, an accountant perhaps. After many cordial email exchanges with him, I began to have second thoughts. I was talking to him over the Internet. He was recommending all these people. What if he were the Russian mafia? I called my trusted Nefesh B’Nefesh guide, gave him the name of the man I was suspecting. When he stopped laughing, he told me the chap I was suspicious of was the Nefesh B’Nefesh representative in Raanana!

I sold my house and my car, I gave away most of my possessions, having decided to take only my clothes and other personal necessities with me. I began the long round of good-byes. My decision made, I had no regrets. Except leaving Rivian, my friend, my sister, part of my soul. We were never going to hug each other again. We swore to Zoom visit once a week. This pledge we have kept, every Thursday, no matter where we are.

The flight from Victoria B.C. to Toronto is six hours long. I slept over at an airport hotel. I boarded the flight to Tel Aviv. Perhaps because I was alone, not a youngster, I was treated with incredible care by the flight attendants. I slept most of the way.

Arriving in Tel Aviv in the early morning hours, I was taken to the Immigration office, where my name was duly recorded in Hebrew. Ensued a long conversation with the person in charge of the spelling. I wanted it one way, he wanted it another. We finally agreed it was easier to let me have my way.

My son was waiting for me. I had arrived, three suitcases in tow.

I had rented a flat and secured an Airbnb in Raanana from Canada. I was ahead of the game. I had to wait a few weeks until the flat was ready for me. The flat was ideally located, in central Raanana. I immediately befriended a neighbour on the same floor. She became a truly close friend.

My son was incredibly helpful in helping me navigate the first two weeks: opening a bank account, and understanding how things work in Israel. I went shopping for furniture with my daughter-in-law's help.

Within weeks I was invited for Shabbat dinners by my Englishman and his family, and by my American born contact.

Now I bent to the task of developing a network. I had noticed that lots of people were waiting around at the bank's, waiting to be called. I made a point of going there most days, sitting down next to someone and saying:

"I just arrived from Canada, I am alone here, and I need friends."

A man came over. He said:

"I couldn't help overhearing that you are from Canada. May I have your phone number? My wife is from Canada."

His wife called me. We became fast friends.

Within weeks, I had a plethora of invitations to tea and such. The calendar said November, December.

A few months later, Covid struck. I was at a large Purim party when the first serious warnings came over the radio. Nobody paid real attention. Rapidly however, severe measures were afoot. My whole network of friendly acquaintances fell apart. Six weeks of isolation began. I had to construct a network all over again. Time passed. Life went on.

On October 7, 2023, the worst pogrom in Israel's history was allowed to happen. On October 8th, Israel's civil society stepped in and became a disciplined, efficient fighting force. In overwhelming numbers, army volunteers, returning Israelis, mothers and fathers united in participating in an effort unmatched in history. Looking after each other is in the Israeli DNA. Helping strangers in distress, making certain friends and neighbours are fine are a knee jerk reaction from the population. Thousands show up at the funerals of people they do not know. Police close the streets of cemeteries in order to contain the crowds joining to make a point: in Israel, truly we are one family. We argue, we fight, we disagree to the point of rupture but when threatened, we are one. After the bombing stops, everyone calls friends, family, neighbours nearby to find out whether help is required.

October 7th fractured the country. We are fighting on all possible fronts. We are suffering grievous injuries. Our people are dying in slow attrition. Our fellow Israelis are still held in desperate conditions. Our illusions of invincibility and deterrence have evaporated. However,

we have an immense advantage over the enemies baying at our door: we know what we are fighting for.

My Aliyah has been immensely successful. Why?

- I came with no expectations
- I was open to experience. I was curious about everything, everyone and anyone
- I am interested in how people make sense of their lives
- For three years, I tutored Israeli high school teachers of English to help with language proficiency. I requested helping out with Jewish, of course but also Arab, and Bedouin teachers. It gave me a glimpse into communities I would not have encountered otherwise
- I was relentless in forging a network of friends
- I joined groups and activities uniquely Israeli
- I keep travelling the country with groups, to places I would not know of
- I am still making laudable if disappointing efforts to learn Hebrew
- I have come home
- I live in gratitude
- And...I have Nefesh B'Nefesh at my back.

Nefesh B'Nefesh has been incredibly helpful to me, always within reach. Thankfully I am able to solve whatever issue that comes up on my own now. However, when a problem crops up that I cannot solve, Nefesh B'Nefesh is there, my light in the storm.

Jews are the yeast of the world. Agents of change and progress, their contribution to all aspects of human endeavours is immense. The Jews were a force to the good wherever they settled in the long centuries of their dispersion.

Israel's rebirth is a unique experiment in human history. Jews are the only aboriginal people who returned to the lands from which they were driven. Hebrew is the only ancient language to be revived in current times as a living, evolving, modern expression of a free people.

Israelis have yet to internalize deeply how to be Israelis. Today's Israel is a mental and spiritual construction site, mirroring the physical building burst of its growing cities.

Under siege from its rebirth, surrounded by determined enemies, Israel navigates the paradox of being in a state of constant war while maintaining an ethos of ethics, peace and happiness at home. In the cauldron where Israel lives, Israelis push and pull, curse and pray, argue and fight, as they struggle unknowingly towards the birth of a new identity fueled by hope.

In its current crucible of mental deconstruction, in ferment, in flux, Israel seeks to forge its soul borne on the wings of the basic tenets of a just society. Being a light unto the nations takes time...

I am relentlessly optimistic about the future of Israel. I know I have a 50% chance of being right.

July 24, 2024