



ALIYAH DIARY

A Shared Choice

Laura Ben-David

You know those things that stir the deeply intense, raw emotions that Zionism inspires within us? Singing Hatikvah. Watching the movie 'Exodus.' Finding an unexpected El Al plane anywhere in the world. Hearing the Yom HaZikaron siren. Seeing IDF soldiers doing, well, just about anything; especially at a formal IDF ceremony... I am particularly susceptible to these emotional triggers; they are no less powerful after more than a dozen years of living in Israel. Perhaps, they are more powerful.



An Israel Defense Forces swearing-in ceremony at the Kotel. (PHOTO: IDF)

Attending my first 'tekes siyum' or basic training completion ceremony, I expect to be moved. And I was.

I was stunned at the vastness of the field and the hundreds and hundreds of soldiers standing in formation, waiting to march onto it. I pulled out my camera as I spotted James, our cousin and our very own 'lone soldier', the one whose presence brought us to this army base in the north of Israel. Immediately the music started, and the soldiers all marched in, unit by unit, grinning broadly.

As I took in the proceedings I gazed at the faces of these hundreds of new soldiers, clearly immigrants from all over the world. I looked proudly at the many Israeli flags waving above them in the early evening breeze, bright blue and gleaming white. The sun slowly dipped behind the westerly mountains casting a wonderful golden glow. The band was playing 'Jerusalem of Gold.' I was crying.

Ceremonies can be long and boring; filled with speeches and more than enough pomp and circumstance. One might imagine that the strict discipline of the army would render a ceremony that much more rigid. I know I speak for just one ceremony, but, really, think about all the Israelis you know. The only time I imagine you will get thousands of Israelis standing at attention, silent and motionless is during the Memorial Day and Holocaust Day sirens. And then it's only for a maximum of two minutes.

The guests were relaxed; the soldiers slightly less so. My camera was clicking away as I tried to capture the excitement; the timelessness; the immense pride on every soldier's face. Not just the soldiers, but their officers. And their families. And the guests from the local *kibbutz* who came to show support. And the Nefesh B'Nefesh Lone Soldiers Program team who come to every. Single. Ceremony. It doesn't get old. Not ever.

Then the soldiers did something remarkable. They were down on their knees, and a soldier stood and called out words that are the title of a very popular Israeli folk song: "*Ein li erez acheret!*"

Suddenly an officer shouted, "English!" A soldier from America stood at attention and translated, "I have no other country!"

The officer shouted, "French!" and the line was repeated in French. Then Spanish. Russian. German. Italian.

Chinese. Finnish. Ukrainian. Amharic. Kuki. Each line was received with resounding applause since everyone, soldiers and guests alike, understood the commitment and sacrifice behind each foreign-born soldier's decision, who was not born with the obligation to serve, rather chose it.

The officer shouted, "Arabic!" An Arab Israeli soldier stood up and called out the translation in Arabic to thunderous applause. We thought nothing could surprise us more... when the officer called out, "Yiddish!" A bearded, young, religious soldier stood and recited his line to equally resounding applause.

Clearly, the symbolism of the final two languages was planned. And served its purpose well. Arabic and Yiddish are spoken by two rather opposite segments of Israeli society: Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews. While they are from Israel, as opposed to most of the other soldiers at the ceremony, they traditionally do not serve in the army. In that way, the Arabic and Yiddish speakers had much more in common with the rest of the soldiers than you might have thought.

You see, they, too, left their comfort zone and made a choice: they chose Israel.

Laura Ben-David is a photographer, public speaker and Israel advocate. Inspired by her Aliyah experience, Laura began writing and never stopped. She is the author of *Moving Up: An Aliyah Journal*, a memoir of her move to Israel. She has spoken worldwide about Israel, Aliyah and other topics, often with beautiful photographic presentations. Formerly the head of social media at Nefesh B'Nefesh, Laura is the director of marketing at Shavei Israel and a marketing consultant.