



## ALIYAH DIARY

# Through Our Children's Eyes

Batyah Cohen

**B**enji and I met in Israel. We were both in different programs and through an odd series of events, we were introduced, started dating and eventually got married. Returning to Israel has been a focus of conversations throughout our marriage, but it was never “the right time” for various reasons.

In January 2013, before our eldest's Bar Mitzvah, we took the whole family to Israel. For us, it had been a long fifteen years since we had been there, and it was our children's first time in Israel. Seeing the land through our children's eyes, witnessing their wonder at being in the place where our history comes alive, was deeply inspiring. It made us realize that fifteen years was simply too long to be away from home.



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We only waited four years for our next trip. In 2017, we spent the entire summer in Israel and celebrated our daughter's Bat Mitzvah there. Our kids went to various programs and we saw them bloom and feel good about themselves as Jews, living in a society that supports our religion unapologetically. After that trip, we began serious family discussions and created a timeline for our Aliyah.

Our kids were teens, and so they needed to have a voice in these discussions. Tzadok was entering his senior year of high school with plans to go for

a gap year and make Aliyah (which he eventually did in the summer of 2019). Pelah and Meir asked to be allowed to finish high school in Chicago. Benji and I readily agreed, as everyone says, “don't move kids in high school.” That left Naomi (entering 7th at the time) and Danya (entering 2nd grade).

By this point, Naomi had already expressed her desire to live in Israel and we began to look into high school options for her. We also realized that we'd have to move before Danya entered high school (7th grade in Israel) to make it less traumatic for her. Once Naomi firmly decided to attend Ulpana Amana as part of the Naale initiative, it became time to shift from Aliyah “in theory” to practical preparations. Pelah graduated high school earlier this year, and Naomi completed her first successful year at Amana, so it was finally time for us to come home.

Everyone's family dynamics are different and how and when you choose to include them in the process is different for each family. Similar to any significant life event – marriage, having kids – the fact that you're making Aliyah shouldn't be a surprise to your family. Benji and I have been talking about Aliyah for years, and it is no secret that it's been our dream. Once we decided to commit to a date, we told our families about a year in advance to give them time to absorb our leaving and to be able to include them in the process.

For my family, the pandemic brought a silver lining as it prepared them for our move abroad. My family does not live nearby, and so when the Covid pandemic arrived I began regular Face-Time sessions with my parents and siblings. It brought us closer and made us realize these sessions can continue no matter where we are in the world.

For Benji, whose family lives locally near us in Chicago, our move is significantly more impactful. Even during the height of the pandemic, we got together regularly with his mom and siblings outdoors. While some in the family are thrilled to have an “excuse” to visit Israel, others have feelings of loss. It's been important to acknowledge all the powerful feelings involved in this decision and to speak about them together.

When deciding to make Aliyah, we knew that some of the people we are closest to would not be coming with us and that we would not be able to attend every future *simcha*. These are difficult realities. But we also remember, as challenging as these decisions and conversations are, that we are making Aliyah so that our children won't have to make these challenging choices in the future.



● Adapted from the *ChicagOlim Chronicles* feature of *Kol Shabbat*, the weekly email newsletter of *Mizrachi-Religious Zionists of Chicago*.

**Batyah Cohen** made Aliyah in August 2021 from Skokie, Illinois to Modi'in with her husband Benji and their five children: Tzadok (21), Meir (19), Pelah (18), Naomi (16) and Danya (11).