



Photo: Nefesh B'Nefesh

Passengers deplaning from the Nefesh B'Nefesh flight, the largest airlift of North American olim in at least twenty-five years.

# The New Olim

Even as the intifada rages, growing numbers of North Americans are making the ultimate statement of solidarity through aliyah.

By Jonathan Udren

“We’re not coming for a week, we’re not coming for a mission, we’re coming to move our families,” says recent *oleh* Rabbi Yehoshua Fass.

Rabbi Fass, his wife, Batsheva, and their two young children are all part of the new surge of North American *olim* (immigrants returning to Israel). This past year, 1,608 *olim* arrived from North America, a considerable boost from the previous two years, which each saw roughly 1,400.

“While the numbers [of *olim*] may not be that impressive, the increase

Mr. Udren, a resident of Jerusalem, is a freelance journalist and editor.

in percentage is significant,” says Andrea Arbel, advisor to the director general of the Immigration and Absorption Department at the Jewish Agency for Israel.

For those fleeing political instability or poverty, arriving from countries such as Argentina or the former Soviet Union, the reasons for leaving are obvious. Since North Americans live in relative economic and political security, the current rejuvenation in their immigration to Israel—especially during these difficult times—begs the question, “Why now?”

According to Knesset Member Natan Sharansky, the increase in world

terrorism may be the catalyst. He believes that in the aftermath of September 11 “people are starting to understand that Arabs and Jews are only a small part of a bigger struggle.” “If we’re all struggling [to protect] our values and our freedom,” Sharansky says, “then why not be involved in that struggle in Israel?”

Sharansky also attributes the increase to growing feelings of solidarity with Israel. “We are now...struggling with terror [as well as] an economic crisis, but I believe people are coming to feel the satisfaction of being personally involved in the future of the Jewish people and to build a bond between

the Land and the Jewish people.”

Arbel agrees. “There was a remarkable increase in *aliyah* as well as unprecedented charitable giving [to Israel] after the Six Day War, which became known as the Six Day War Syndrome. Some say that the recent increase in *aliyah* and overall support for Israel is reminiscent of what happened then.”

Ironically, for the Fass family it was the murder of fourteen-year-old Naftali Lanzkron by a suicide bomber that triggered their *aliyah* this past July.

“I was working as a rabbi in Boca Raton, Florida, when I found out my cousin was killed at a bus stop outside Petach Tikvah,” explains Rabbi Fass. “It was a pivotal moment for my wife and me because it made us examine where our lives were going. Soon after that, I said, ‘I’m going to Israel, and I’m going to carry his flag. Someone has to show that we believe in Israel, and we want to build it.’ And thank God, my wife said ‘Let’s go.’”

Rabbi Fass soon realized that by transplanting his family he was not only fulfilling his dream of returning to the Jewish homeland, but throwing Israel a lifeline at a pivotal point in its history.

“Arafat has often been quoted as saying, ‘The womb of the Arab woman is my strongest weapon,’” says Rabbi Fass. “If the number of *olim* doesn’t increase, thirty years from now, we’re not going to have a majority of Jews living in Israel.”

Since the *intifada* began in September 2000, *aliyah* in general has plummeted. Whereas in 1999 a total of 76,766 *olim* arrived, in 2000 the number dwindled to 60,192 and in 2001 to 43,477.

Yet even before the outbreak of the *intifada*, North American *aliyah* was seemingly going out of style. While 2,503 North American *olim* arrived in 1995, the number continued to drop steadily until 2000 when only 1,401 came.

Realizing the pressing need for *aliyah*, Rabbi Fass began researching

whether the steadily declining numbers of North American *olim* were a reflection of American disinterest in *aliyah*. He discovered, however, that this was not the case.

“The dismal numbers...did not truly reflect the many yearning to make *aliyah*,” says Rabbi Fass. “The response we got from a lot of people is ‘We also want to go. [But] we’re young, we’re paying off student loans, we’re paying off tuition for our kids.’ Who has the money to coast for six months while taking *ulpan*? No one is going to go

*“If the number of olim doesn’t increase, thirty years from now, we’re not going to have a majority of Jews living in Israel.”*

and burn their assets completely.”

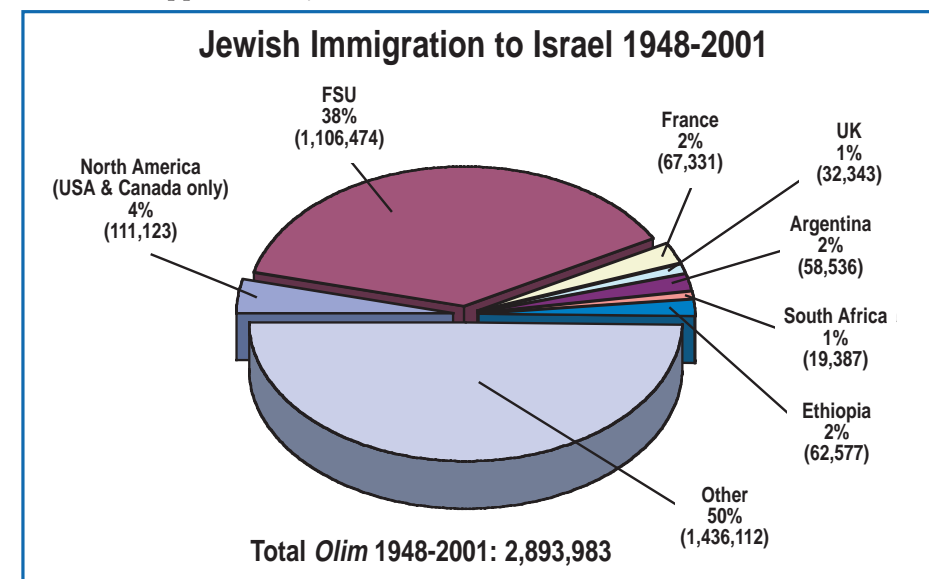
Rabbi Fass’s solution was to start an organization dedicated to raising and distributing funds to aid North American *aliyah*, thereby linking his family’s *aliyah* to that of hundreds of others. As the co-founder and executive director of Nefesh B’Nefesh, or Jewish Souls United, he collected and distributed approximately \$2.5 mil-

lion that helped fund 532 of the past year’s *olim*. About 400 of them flew to Israel on one plane on July 9 in what was the largest airlift of North American *olim* in at least twenty-five years. Of the new *olim*, eighty-three percent identify as Orthodox, fifteen percent consider themselves Conservative or Reform and two percent are unaffiliated.

“We had twenty-two different states represented on our plane, and a goodbye dinner or event had been held [in honor of the *olim*] in every one of those states,” says Rabbi Fass. “[This group] brought *aliyah* back to the Shabbat table; it put it back on the agenda. It sends a message to a lot of individuals that they can do it; *aliyah* is not a fad that went out in the ‘70s.”

Indeed, *aliyah* seems to be in vogue again. When planning the first mass *aliyah*, Nefesh B’Nefesh decided to advertise in thirty Jewish newspapers. However, after placing only ten ads their goal was accomplished. “The response was overwhelming,” Rabbi Fass says.

Even before Nefesh B’Nefesh began sending Jews to Israel last summer, the numbers were already rising. In May 2002, before any Nefesh B’Nefesh participant had made *aliyah*, 334 immigrants came from North America, a sixteen percent rise over the same period in 2001. This increase is despite not only



Charts: Shai Carmel. Information courtesy of the Jewish Agency for Israel.



the security situation but the downward spiral of the Israeli economy. *The Jerusalem Post* recently reported that one in five Israelis lives below the poverty line, and according to the Bank of Israel, the unemployment rate for 2003 is expected to soar to twelve percent.

Nefesh B'Nefesh helps new *olim* overcome financial barriers to making *aliyah* by provid-

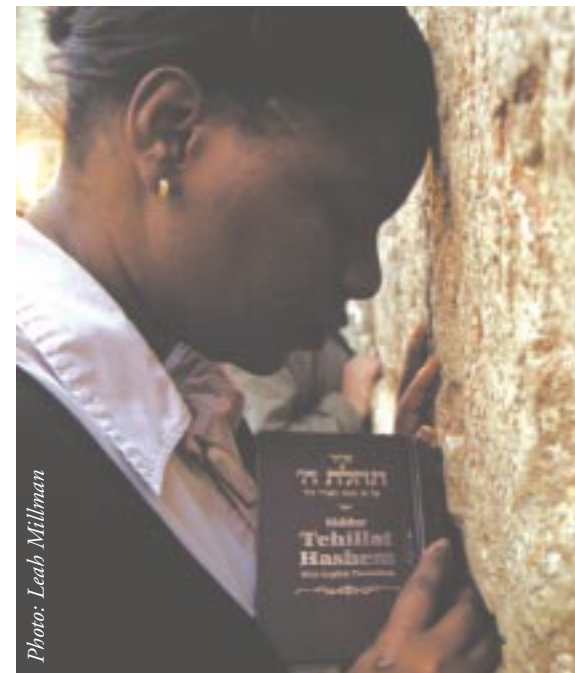


Photo: Leah Millman  
A convert to Judaism, Zeeva Chana Pace made *aliyah* shortly after her first trip to Israel. Being at the Kotel, she says, is the "closest I ever felt to holiness."

ing grants—with the help of the Jewish Agency and the Absorption Ministry—ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000.

Steve and Ester Accarzidi, previously from Monsey, New York, were part of

the historic Nefesh B'Nefesh airlift. Not only did they arrive like "kings and queens," according to Steve, but the funding helped them settle successfully in Kochav Yaakov, a small settlement located two miles south of Ramallah.

"I prefer to say four miles north of Jerusalem," says Steve. "People thought that we were crazy for moving so close [to Arabs]," adds Esther, "but it's so quiet; the highlight of my day is going to the grocery store. I haven't heard any military activity since we've been here."

For the Accarzidis and their two young children, a sharp and painful message on an already tragic day pushed their *aliyah* intentions forward.

"It was September 11, just hours after the Twin Towers fell, and we were driving out of our [apartment] complex," says Steve. "A guy in a car next to me yelled out the window 'Die,' pretty much 'Die Jew,' because I was wearing my *kip-pah*. I caught up to him and knocked on his window to ask him if what he said was directed at me. He hesitated, and

then said, 'I want you people out of my country; you're the ones who caused this.'"

Soon after that, the Accarzidis found out about Nefesh B'Nefesh,

which helped finalize their departure date. And according to Rabbi Fass, that initial planeload, which included the Accarzidis, is only the beginning; his organization plans to help bring 2,000 more American *olim* this coming summer.

The Israeli government seems to be following suit, extending its hand to help North Americans overcome the financial burden of *aliyah*. On December 1, a new law took effect that offers all new immigrants—not only those from countries "in distress"—a benefits basket totaling between 35,000 and 50,000 shekels (approximately \$7,400 and \$10,500), depending on the size of the family. The benefits package was introduced in conjunction with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's goal of bringing one million new *olim* to Israel over the next ten years. Considering the drying tap of former Soviet Union immigration, this move focuses on finding new sources of *olim*, namely from North America and Europe.

While Nefesh B'Nefesh assists with finances, other *aliyah* organizations help North American *olim*—and potential *olim*—in different ways. Tehilla, which just celebrated its twentieth anniversary, runs pilot trips to Israel, helping prospective *olim* find jobs and a place to live. Additionally, Tehilla spon-

## OU Puts *Aliyah* Back on the Map

"Israel. We Care. We're Going," reads a sign hanging in the Orthodox Union offices in New York, promoting a solidarity trip to Israel. The OU has long been known for supporting Israel in a variety of ways. Now, in a joint venture with Nefesh B'Nefesh, the OU is helping people from North America make *aliyah*. "Seventy-five to eighty percent of families [making *aliyah* with our group] come from OU *shuls*," says Rabbi Yehoshua Fass, executive director of Nefesh B'Nefesh.

For over twenty years, the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center in Israel has been running an *aliyah* counseling service where potential *olim* can get information about a number of things including jobs and mortgages in Israel. However, this latest initiative encourages hundreds of OU member *shuls* to promote *aliyah* from within the United States. "*Aliyah* is something that should be on our communal agenda," says Rabbi Moshe Krupka, national director of community and synagogue services for the OU. "Our *shuls* are the fertile ground in which *aliyah* can take root."

OU *shuls* are being asked to raise funds to help sponsor a family for *aliyah*, the cost of which could be as high as \$18,000 per family. Nefesh B'Nefesh hopes to sponsor three or four families for every family subsidized by an OU *shul*. "Having each *shul* attempt to sponsor one family—selected by Nefesh B'Nefesh for funding—will help us facilitate the dream of *aliyah* for that many more families," Rabbi Fass says. "Additionally, it allows *olim* to feel that they are supported by their communities in their noble choice and not viewed as being dissonant. Finally, it allows *aliyah* to be discussed openly in *shul derashot* and around the Shabbat table."

Nefesh B'Nefesh approached the OU with the idea of forming an alliance between the two organizations. "We certainly applaud everything Rabbi Fass has done," says Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the OU. "Last year he probably brought more people to Eretz Yisrael at one time than anybody in recent years." And the efforts are paying off. "The Israeli receptivity...has been overwhelmingly positive," elaborates Rabbi Fass. "What is unique about North American *aliyah* is that the *olim* are not running from religious persecution or economic distress. It shows the world that Israel is a primary choice. And it goes without saying that it is the ultimate expression of solidarity."

One thing that makes Nefesh B'Nefesh so attractive to the OU is that its expectations are reasonable. "Nefesh B'Nefesh carefully screens applicants to determine if they are being realistic [about making *aliyah*]," says Rabbi Weinreb. "The organization tends to focus on those whose life circumstances are such that they can adjust to life in Israel. Generally that would mean retirees, younger people and those with businesses that could easily transfer to Israel. Families with teenagers usually find the adjustment more difficult."

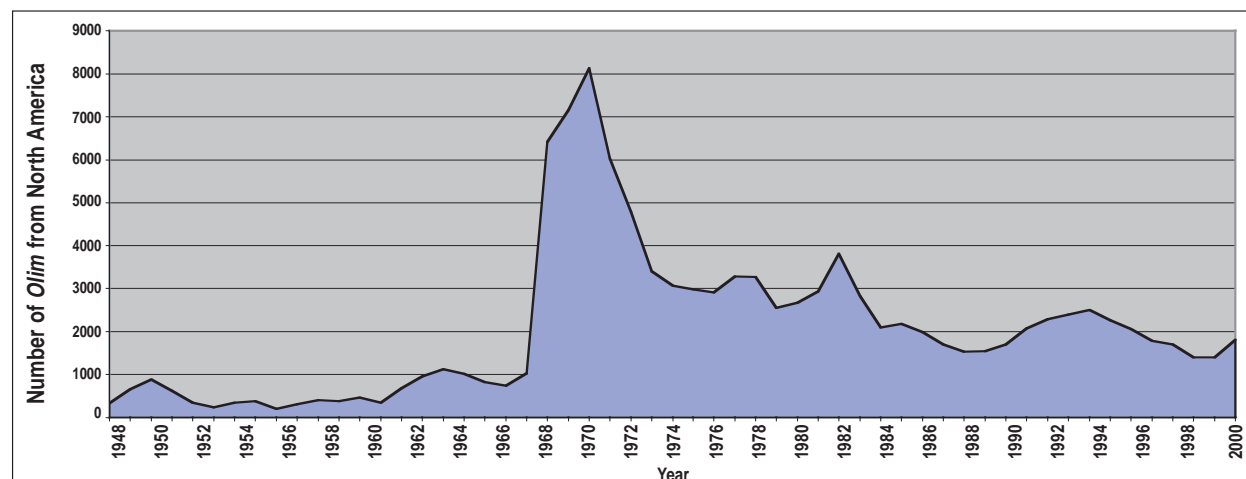
The union between Nefesh B'Nefesh and the OU is a natural outgrowth of the OU's pro-*aliyah* stance. "The OU has always encouraged *aliyah*," says Rabbi Weinreb. "The difference is that now we are helping to facilitate it."

Dassi Zeidel is the assistant editor of Jewish Action.



Photo: Assaf Shilo/Israel Sun  
New *olim* from Nefesh B'Nefesh flight arrive in Israel.

### Aliyah from North America 1948-2002



## Aliyah Resources

The Jewish Agency for Israel  
[www.jafi.org.il](http://www.jafi.org.il)  
e-mail: [elibir@jazo.org.il](mailto:elibir@jazo.org.il)

World Zionist Organization  
[www.wzo.org.il](http://www.wzo.org.il)  
e-mail: [hagshama@jazo.org.il](mailto:hagshama@jazo.org.il)  
tel: 972-2-620-2319

Tehilla  
[www.tehilla.com](http://www.tehilla.com)

Jerusalem Office  
e-mail: [tehillaj@netvision.net.il](mailto:tehillaj@netvision.net.il)  
tel: 972-2-625-8802

New York Office  
e-mail: [ny@tehilla.com](mailto:ny@tehilla.com)  
tel: 212-339-6055

Nefesh B'Nefesh  
[www.nefeshbnefesh.org](http://www.nefeshbnefesh.org)  
e-mail: [info@nefeshbnefesh.org](mailto:info@nefeshbnefesh.org)  
tel: 866-4ALiyAH  
Outside the US: 561-955-1908

Israel Aliyah Center  
[www.aliyah.org](http://www.aliyah.org)  
e-mail: [aliyahny@jazo.org.il](mailto:aliyahny@jazo.org.il)  
tel: 212-339-6063

Aloh Naaleh  
e-mail: [aloh-naaleh@aaci.org.il](mailto:aloh-naaleh@aaci.org.il)

**Pnai (Parents of North American Israelis)**  
A support group for parents, grandparents and siblings of Israelis from North America.  
[www.pnai.org](http://www.pnai.org)  
e-mail: [sandJ525@aol.com](mailto:sandJ525@aol.com)

sors *shiurim* and *Shabbatonim* with the aim of placing *aliyah* on the North American communal agenda.

Aloh Naaleh, founded some months ago by a group of North American rabbis now living in Israel, encourages yeshivah students learning in Israel to consider *aliyah*.

Some *olim*, however, make *aliyah* without any help, financial or otherwise. One such *olah* is 27-year-old

Zeeva Chana Pace who recently emigrated from the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. A convert who was raised as a Southern Baptist in New Orleans, Louisiana, Zeeva Chana—who became religious through Chabad—made *aliyah* soon after her first visit to Israel, a three-week romance that left her heart soaring.

“[In Israel] I met the most wonder-

Many of us think of *aliyah* as an ideal, but the practical questions are never far from the surface: Can I make a living in Israel? What about the current economic situation? Will I be able to cover my expenses on an Israeli salary? Don't worry—you are not the first person to wonder about these things.

There are many successful *olim* out there, but success requires knowledge of the job market and effective planning.

### Background Research

Depending upon your particular circumstances, you may need to find answers to the following: How does my profession operate in Israel? What is the demand for people in my profession? Are there too many or too few professionals in my field? Should I consider a career change? What skills do I have that will allow me to earn a respectable living? The Internet is a great resource for finding answers to some of these questions. Web sites such as [www.jr.co.il](http://www.jr.co.il), [www.jobnet.co.il](http://www.jobnet.co.il), [www.tehilla.com](http://www.tehilla.com) and [www.jafi.org.il](http://www.jafi.org.il) offer a lot of information about the Israeli job market. Additionally, joining an e-mail discussion group for professionals in your field can keep you abreast of job openings (see list at the end of this article).

### Assessing Your Skills

Your current profession may not be transferable to Israel. Therefore, it's a good idea to make an assessment of all of your skills. One recent *olah*, a school administrator, realized that she would be unable to practice her profession in Israel; she ended up opening a chocolate store. Another *olah* with a background in

*Rachel Berger has been assisting olim in finding employment opportunities in Israel for the past four years. She is also the Tehilla online career counselor. You can write to her at [Rachel@tehilla.com](mailto:Rachel@tehilla.com).*

## The Economics of Aliyah

editing taught herself how to create and manage web sites; today, she is running an Internet business. The key is changing your attitude from “I am” to “I can be.”

### Networking

It's important to plan a pilot trip to Israel three to six months before your intended *aliyah* date. This will enable you to meet with potential employers and establish other contacts. Israelis enjoy giving advice and helping prospective *olim*. As an employment adviser for Tehilla, an organization that assists religious *olim* in preparing for and adjusting to *aliyah*, I have made thousands of phone calls to set up professional contacts for *olim*, and have rarely been turned down by people unwilling to help. Networking is an indispensable tool when seeking a job in Israel.

### Be Prepared

It is important to have the qualifications for your chosen field. In Israel, if you want to work as a psychologist, you need a Ph.D. Similarly, guidance counselors must have a teaching license and social workers, a B.S.W. Find out what the requirements are in your particular field and set out to fulfill them. Proper preparation will prevent frustration when trying to break into the job market.

### Think Creatively

Israel thrives on what we call *koach hamoach* or brainpower. Given the lack of natural resources in the Land of Milk and Honey, we are blessed with “inner” resources that have helped the desert bloom

and the country flourish. Israelis think creatively, and so should *olim*. One *oleh*—a film producer—was having a hard time making a living. His wife happens to be a great baker. Together, they established a wholesale bakery business that is doing very well.

### Be Flexible

Being flexible is critical to finding employment. You may need to take

*The key is changing your attitude from “I am” to “I can be.”*

a professional step backwards in order to take a leap forward. It is difficult to make a parallel jump from a job in the US to one in Israel. Just because you were the chief cheese in Chelsea doesn't mean you are going to be the biggest *boureka* in Bet Shemesh. Recently I met someone with a background in English literature who is training to be an appliance repairman. The need for appliance repairmen is greater than that for professors of English literature, and this individual's flexibility is enabling him to have a more successful transition. (He plans to read Milton on the side.)

Similarly, a physician who made *aliyah* twenty years ago works part-time in Israel and part-time in the

US. He recommends commuting as a way to make a respectable living.

### Becoming an Entrepreneur

Israel is not the easiest place to open a business, hence the classic joke, “How do you become a millionaire in Israel?” “You come with two million.”

Nevertheless, many *olim* do become entrepreneurs. Salaries in Israel are not as high as they are in America, but for the person with ideas and some capital, there can be real opportunities. One of my clients wanted a part-time job in sales and marketing. Since it is difficult to find such a position, I introduced her to an artist seeking someone to promote her work and to a magazine publisher looking for someone to increase advertising sales. Ultimately, my client started her own sales and marketing firm and is making a much better income than she would have as a regular employee.

(Any *oleh* interested in starting a new business should contact MATI, the Jerusalem Business Development Center at [www.mati.org.il](http://www.mati.org.il). MATI offers courses in marketing, accounting and other business areas for *olim* who are entrepreneurs.)

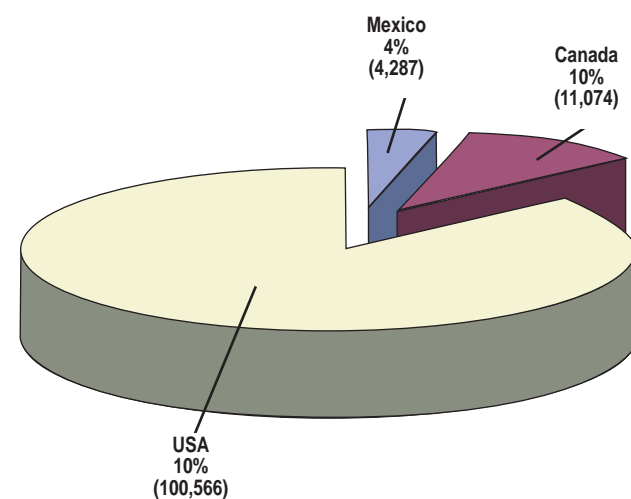
*Aliyah* is probably the most exciting adventure for the Jewish people in our time. If you do the research, plan effectively and are determined to make *aliyah* happen, you will find the right opportunities. Whether you are a scientist or a social worker, a dentist or a diamond dealer—consider joining us here.

### Job Resources:

English teachers: [www.etni.org.il](http://www.etni.org.il)  
Technical writers:  
[techshoret@yahoo.com](mailto:techshoret@yahoo.com)

All job postings:  
[tehillaasuka@yahoo.com](mailto:tehillaasuka@yahoo.com)

### Aliyah from the US, Canada and Mexico 1948-2002





ful people,” says Zeeva Chana. “I connected with Hashem at the Kotel. It was the closest I ever felt to holiness.”

During her cab ride to Yafo to catch her return flight, her love for the Land and admiration for the Jews living in it flashed before her eyes.

“I had never felt such pain; it was physical,” Zeeva Chana explained. “I just cried and cried, and when I stopped, I realized that other people in the cab were sniffing too. I promised myself that I would come back, and that’s the only thing that made the pain go away.”

It was after that trip in April 2001 that she knew she had to leave the black asphalt of Crown Heights for the white-hewn stones of Jerusalem. Some months later, she was back in Jerusalem, learning in a woman’s yeshivah, volunteering for Livnot U’Lehibanot, a program that helps young people explore their Jewish roots and pursuing her acting and writing careers.

New *olah* Mariam Berzon, who also immigrated without financial assistance, has a love story of her own. Her absorption this past July was both a culmination of her love for the Land, as well as for her Israeli-born husband, Baruch. Just days after making *aliyah*, she and Baruch were overlooking the rolling hills of Jerusalem under the *chuppah*, dedicating themselves to each other

as well as to building a home in Israel. The couple met in America while Baruch was involved in a year-long teaching program in Memphis, Tennessee. They could have easily settled in the United States. Yet despite the lure of American comforts, they are committed to staying in Israel.

“This is where I feel most comfortable,” says Baruch. “[Our motivation] is not even Zionist, it’s emotional; this is the county of the Jews.”

“The average salary here is probably a half or a third less [than in the United States], cars cost twice as much and rent is the same if not more,” says Mariam. “Plus there’s a war going on, busses get blown up and there’s a *pigua* (terrorist attack) almost every day.

“I think about going back every day; but I feel that this is where we’re supposed to be,” Mariam says. “[Living in Israel is] like being actors in a play rather than members of the audience. You’re living and experiencing life, not just watching it happen.”

Few new *olim* have their heads in the sand about the current security situation; the Accarzidis admit that they are conscious of the dangers and concerned for their children. Yet despite the persistent acts of terrorism and their proximity to Ramallah, the

Accarzidis feel secure.

Ironically, in so many ways Kochav Yaakov is so much safer [than New York],” says Steve. “In day-to-day life, the kids are freer; there are no strangers around and they walk to their friends’ homes by themselves all the time. In New York you can’t let your kids go anywhere alone.”

Zeeva Chana admits that terrorism plagues her, and she suffers from visions of suicide bombers when she steps aboard a bus. But her faith in God, instilled in her from a young age by her father, keeps her going. “My father loves that I moved to Israel; he knew that I didn’t feel safe in New York. He always says, ‘Don’t worry, God protects Israel.’ An old Baptist guy is telling me ‘God protects the Jewish people, and those who fight against the Jewish people will be punished.’ That’s what I grew up hearing.”

Indeed, beneath their bravery and idealism, new *olim* must struggle with fears about terrorism, concerns about the darkening clouds of war over the region as well as the pain of leaving family, friends and a whole life behind. Yet, for most, the simple pleasure of waking up every morning in Eretz Yisrael—the fulfillment of the Jewish people’s 2,000-year-old dream—far outweighs any alternative. **JA**