



votefromisrael.org



ONLINE EDITION  
**JERUSALEM POST**

 [Click to Print](#)

## Aliya gets a step up

Oct. 27, 2008

Ruth Eglash , THE JERUSALEM POST

Tehillah Hessler can count on the fingers of one hand the disasters she experienced since moving here three months ago.

"It took us about two months to get our son, Yisrael, finally settled in a suitable school," she recounts. "And we've been traipsing across town to try to sort out our driving licenses, which was quite a challenge, but apart from that it's been pretty smooth."

Originally from Cleveland, Hessler, who now resides in Ma'aleh Adumim, has encountered only in small doses the classic Israeli bureaucracy that so infuriated previous immigrants.

"We have an aliya coordinator in Ma'aleh Adumim," says Hessler, who came with her husband Michael and Yisrael, but left five grown children behind. "Between her and Nefesh B'Nefesh [which facilitated the family's aliya] the bureaucracy has been cut to a minimum."

With the exception of the Education Ministry, which the aliya coordinator tackled on their behalf, the family's interaction with the other government offices has been fairly straightforward.

"We went to the Immigrant Absorption Ministry to fill out our paperwork so that we could receive our aliya benefits. The people there spoke to us in English, they were very helpful and we were out of there in 15 minutes," she recalls.

"I was very impressed with the Immigrant Absorption Ministry's service," says former Australian Paul Vesely, who is currently studying at Ulpan Etzion. "The first time I went there, I had to lie my way in, because apparently you need an appointment, but once I was inside the people were very helpful and explained everything I needed to do in English."

According to Vesely, who lives at the Young Judaea-run Mercaz Hamagshimim in Jerusalem, "I was given a contact in the ministry who said I could call her if I had any questions or problems during my aliya process. So far I have not needed to get in touch with her."

Both Hessler's and Vesely's hassle-free immigration procedures are a far cry from anyone who arrived in the country up until about five years ago. Of course, Nefesh B'Nefesh has certainly streamlined the process, and the dwindling numbers of olim from communities in distress, such as the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, has also served to ease the pressure on the Immigrant Absorption Ministry, the Jewish Agency for Israel and other immigrant services.

However, according to aliya experts and the official line from the ministry, this ease of starting up a new life here is part of a concerted effort by the government to iron out the kinks in the process and make those first few months memorable for reasons outside of the impossible bureaucracy.

"THERE has been a change in our office over the past two years," says ministry Director-General Erez Halfon, who took over in September 2006. "We obviously want to do our best for all new immigrants, but we also know that certain groups already receive a lot of support and enrichment programs from the government.

"English-speaking olim are a little bit different, in most cases they are not as needy, and we want to try to tailor our services to suit each group."

Among the changes that have benefited Anglo olim is the ministry's recent success in repealing a 2003 regulation that had forced new immigrants to declare all their earnings and assets abroad to the Income Tax Authority, a move that all aliya experts claim will entice more Western immigrants.

In addition, the ministry is in the process of increasing the number of native English-speakers in its offices, especially in cities where there are large numbers of Anglos, such as Jerusalem, Beit Shemesh, Modi'in and Ra'anana. There has also been an easing of the process for professional retraining or licensing.

The ministry has also been happy to outsource its work to organizations such as Nefesh B'Nefesh, which since last November has received one-third of its funding from it.

Halfon also talks about a push for community-based aliya. "Over the past few years more than 1,600 new English-speaking olim have arrived in Jerusalem and we see that as a core aliya," he says. "Because of that we have increased the services here for new olim, providing a special ulpan for both children and the adults and offering cultural programs and even a kindergarten in their native language."

These changes notwithstanding, Halfon talks about the ministry's outlook for the future. Refusing to go into too much detail, he hints at a new program currently being developed to encourage aliya from South Africa, where there are more than 60,000 people eligible to immigrate under the Law of Return, and a flexible aliya program in which young families and students can spend a year investigating their prospects here.

Halfon insists that all these plans and programs mark a sharp change in policy, which in the past urged all new immigrants to join the "melting pot" and just get on with life the Israeli way. "Today we see that every community has its own specific needs, and we want to be able to give them the tools to succeed here," he states.

ACCORDING to aliya experts, Halfon's assertions are not just the talk of a smooth politician. The changeover in the government's taxation policy for new immigrants was two years and much haranguing in the making, say various English-speaking aliya facilitators who helped the ministry to draft the change.

"It is a huge benefit for new immigrants," says one expert. "The whole process today is hugely different to how it was in the past. Even the basket of aliya benefits was just a dream when I made aliya in 1975. It only existed for those who came from countries of distress."

Part of the changes, he claims, come from improved technology enabling those about to make aliya to be processed in their native country and have much of the fine details of their immigration worked out

beforehand.

"Anyone who arrives today can go straight to the Immigrant Absorption Ministry's office in the airport and receive their ID card and immigration ID before they even pick up their luggage," he says. "All that's left for the immigrant to do is to go to the ministry's offices to give them their new bank account details and to receive a voucher for ulpan."

BUT FOR Shira Friedman, who arrived from Melbourne in February, the sabras' initially prickly approach was not the problem.

"It was just disorganized," she complains, as she begins to describe how it took her several months and numerous visits to the Immigrant Absorption Ministry before she was even assigned to a suitable ulpan program. "I just would have appreciated some kind of aliya counselor to help me coordinate the visits to each office and to guide me on what to do next."

She finally managed to secure a place at a pre-university ulpan through the Student Authority. "I was living in Beit Canada, which was an excellent place to live and I was supposed to participate in the ulpan there," she recalls. "However, every time I went to ask the head of the ulpan if I could take the entrance test, she told me that it was not available yet. I believe they just did not have a suitable level for me."

Giving up on the classes at Beit Canada, Friedman tried to get some answers from the Immigrant Absorption Ministry about alternative Hebrew classes. She made the required appointment to meet with an aliya counselor, but when she arrived she was told that she only had 10 minutes.

"It was very frustrating and certainly not enough time to have all my questions answered," she says, adding that she pretty much had to navigate her own way through the Interior Ministry and track down details for driver's license registration. "I found out most of what I needed to know from other new immigrants. The ironic thing was that I was the most informed of all my friends because I my sister made aliya a few years ago."

For Max and Chantal Castiel, who arrived from Los Angeles with the help of Nefesh B'Nefesh a year ago, the bumpy transition to their new life was somewhat different, but no less unsettling.

"Nefesh representatives were certainly there to help us with certain information and advice," admits Max, whose four children range in age from two to 15. "However, they were not hands-on in a practical way." He says that "in terms of getting all our rights in order, that was fairly smooth"; however, both he and Chantal are still struggling to find employment.

"I'm not exactly sure what the role of the Immigrant Absorption Ministry is, but I think it needs to be much more active in the lives of new immigrants during their first year in Israel," he says, adding that he participated in a recent private seminar to aid job seekers which was extremely helpful.

"Among the thousands of new immigrants that we help every year, there are always going to be those who end up falling through the cracks," says Halfon, pointing out that aliya counselors are usually assigned to new olim.

He believes that in the future contact between the counselors, who are meant to be in touch with the immigrants for up to a year and a half, will be via e-mail and other programs on the Internet.

"We have to change our procedures to tailor them to preferences of the English-speaking community who like to use Facebook and other social networking tools."

WHILE day-to-day contact certainly seems to be on Halfon's agenda, Danny Oberman, executive vice president of Israel operations for Nefesh B'Nefesh, says the ministry's role in the lives of English-speaking immigrants is also significant on a macro level.

"We work very closely with the ministry advising it on issues concerning Anglo olim," he says. "I believe the fact that it decided to outsource work to us shows that it recognizes that Western olim need slightly different handling than other groups."

In addition, Oberman sees the ministry's role as one that will lobby for immigrant rights in government circles and points again to the changes in the taxation laws, which now allow new immigrants the right not to declare holdings or assets abroad for their first 10 years in the country.

"Halfon is in a tough position; he is constantly faced with changing ministers," Oberman says, referring to the recent changeover from Ya'acov Edri to Eli Aflafo.

Another authoritative source on aliya also points to recent changes in the procedure for returning minors and returning Israelis, both reforms that have happened in the last year or so.

"Returning minors account for roughly 25 percent of new immigrants from North America," he says. "These are usually children of former immigrants or Israelis, who did not grow up here but want to make aliya. In the past, the Jewish Agency for Israel could not guarantee these people their aliya basket benefits. That could only be done when they arrived here and presented themselves at the Immigrant Absorption Ministry. We managed to convince the government that these people also needed to feel a degree of certainty that they would get the help they needed and not leave it all to chance when they arrived."

The ministry agreed to make the change.

Over the past year, the ministry has decided to take on the task of helping former citizens who live abroad to return. It has managed to find a way around the huge health tax imposed on returning Israelis and offer a basket of benefits competitive to the basic aliya package.

Of course, the source adds, even with all the efforts made over the past few years to improve the aliya service, "there is still always room for improvement. There has to be much more follow-up with individual immigrants and the ministry's customer services needs somewhat of an overall to make staffers friendlier and more helpful."

---

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1225036822669&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>  
[ [Back to the Article](#) ]

---

Copyright 1995- 2008 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>