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### Aliya gets a step up

By RUTH EGLASH

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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."



The Hessler family sailed through Israeli bureaucracy with their aliya coordinator in Ma'aleh Adumim. Photo: Jacob Richman / www.jr.co.il

"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."

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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."

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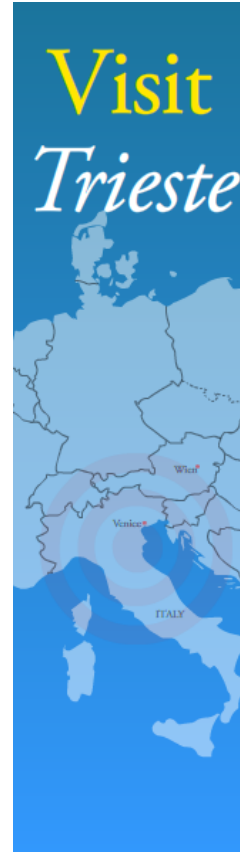
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According to Vesely, who lives at the Young Judaea-run Mercaz Hamagshimim in Jerusalem, "I was given a contact in the ministry who said I could call her if I had any questions or problems during my aliya process. So far I have not needed to get in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

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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



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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."

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