

### ***What Aliyah Means to Me***

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Tomorrow evening, after the Hazzan and I officiate the wedding of Laurie Berson, daughter of Har Shalom members Wayne and Sandra Lynn and her fiancé I Lewish Weitzman at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel downtown, I am going to rush from the chuppah to the nearest men's room...and I am going to change out of my suit, and into something more casual and comfortable. From the hotel I am going directly to Dulles International Airport to hop on a flight to Israel for the next two weeks. I am going to study Torah at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem with a number of North American rabbinic colleagues. I'm not bringing a group, I'm not taking any tours...I'm pretty much staying in Jerusalem the whole time, and learning in chevruta and with the incredible scholars at the Hartman Institute. I'm so excited to be reinvigorated, to have my rabbi batteries recharged, to be a student for a change, instead of a teacher. I am so thirsty to learn Torah, and by this time of year after a whole calendar of holidays and programs and classes, quite frankly I'm pretty parched. I know I am going to come back to you refilled, refueled, and reenergized for the new year ahead!

Israel tends to do have that effect on the Jewish soul. *Ki mitzion teitzei Torah u'dvar Hashem mi'Yerushalayim*...we just sang those words...Torah emanates from Jerusalem...it is the source, the epicenter, the hub of Torah in the world. But even if you're not sitting and learning all day...even if you're jumping on and off of a tour bus, eating felafel, floating in the Dead Sea or sticking crumpled up notes between the cracks of the Western Wall...just being in Israel enlivens us as Jews. That's why the American Jewish community has spent over a half a billion dollars sending hundreds of thousands of young Jews to Israel on Birthright. This is a massive investment, funded in large part by some very smart, successful businesspeople. They are betting on the mystique, the indelible power of spending 10 days in Israel to make a lifelong impact on these people's Jewish lives. That's a tremendous wager! And in many cases, it really does pay off!

And that very special, incomparable je ne se qua of Israel that accounts for why we refer to the act of emigrating from any other country in the world to Israel as Aliyah. As most of you know Aliyah comes from the Hebrew root *ayin lamed hey*, meaning to ascend, to go up. When we make Aliyah, we are not talking about a physical ascent...surely you could make Aliyah from say Denver, or Katmandu, or Bogota...all of which sit thousands of feet above any city in Israel and still be making Aliyah! This term means to ascend spiritually, to be in a place of enhanced religious potency.

This word Aliyah comes up repeatedly in the Torah portion this morning, but in a rather unexpected way. Moses instructs the spies: *alu zeh banegav*, Go Up there into the Negev...*ve'alitem et ha'har*...and ascend into the hill country and see what kind of land it is. The question is was Moses simply instructing them to go from a lower elevation to a higher one? Furthermore, did the Israelites even comprehend making Aliyah the way we understand it today? Did they have a sense of going from a place of lower spirituality outside the land to higher spirituality by entering into Eretz Yisrael? Certainly their overwhelmingly negative reports don't suggest that they held the Promised Land in any particular

esteem! Not only that but when the spies reported back to Moses about their mission, they do not use the word Aliyah to describe what they did. Instead they say *Banu el ha'aretz...we came to the land, ha'aretz asher avarnu bah*, the land that we crossed through....Not only do they go out of their way not to use the word Aliyah to describe their mission, they in fact exclaim: *LO NUCHAL LA'ALOT*...the one thing that we cannot do in this land is make Aliyah. So the question is...what in the world do they think Aliyah means...and what did Moses mean when he instructed them to do it?

Thankfully Aliyah is used in many places throughout the Tanakh. While it may in some cases refer to some kind of ascent in topography, more often the word Aliyah is used to describe an attack, a siege, or a confrontation of some sort. In numerous cases in Joshua, Judges, and Samuel Aliyah describes an attack on a city, as in the case of Jericho where the people did something called *va'ya-al*, to describe the siege that ended with the walls of Jericho falling down. But it's not only used in a military context...it's also in situations of interpersonal challenge. In I Kings 1 the Israelite King Ahaziah falls from his upper chamber and is badly injured. He dispatches his messengers to go ask a pagan idol when he will recover. That's obviously a major no-no. Elijah the prophet is told *kum alei*, get up and meet, but more likely, get up and confront and talk some sense into those misguided messengers, and tell them not to go and consult with idols! There are a number of other examples where Aliyah implies not just going up, and not ascending spiritually, but a purposeful, deliberate, resolute action. Moses was asking the spies not just to shmai around Israel for a few days and write in their field journals about what they saw...he was asking them to put their shoulders back, their heads up, and believe in their mission when they entered the land. And when they returned, their heads hung low, they hunched over, and said we can't do what you are asking us to do Moses. We lack that self-confidence, we lack that determination, that certitude about this mission. Aliyah is really about a psychological grit and fortitude, more than anything physical at all.

When you think about it, making Aliyah to Israel today in the sense of emigrating really does require this kind of mental readiness and determination. Even in the 21st century, living in Israel is not like living in America. There are challenges, not the least of which being security, that are very real and very daunting. As the old joke went: How do you become a millionaire in Israel? You go there with two million! Most Israelis, even rather successful ones, don't live nearly as comfortably as their American counterparts. So to willingly decide to make that commitment; to knowingly forgo a degree of wealth, or certain luxuries or the earning potential to live in Israel takes real devotion to the cause.

What I want to suggest to you today, is that Aliyah is not just about Eretz Yisrael. Aliyah is about standing up to our obstacles and overcoming them; Aliyah is about having purpose, about standing strong for something we believe. That's in every part of our lives friends! It's very unlikely that a life lived in cruise control will yield much in the way of growth or advancement. The spies were just passing through, they came and they went...but Moses said *Alu!* Moses said, press on with strength and

determination. We are not a passive or unassertive people. We are Aliyah people. Put your chin up and your shoulders back in this life. Walk with confidence. Stand tall with purpose and resolve. Make Aliyah every day, and no mountains or giants or walls will ever be too tall for you to overcome!

Shabbat Shalom