



THE BLOGS

Yoni Leviatan

The Secret to Successful Aliyah (A True Story)

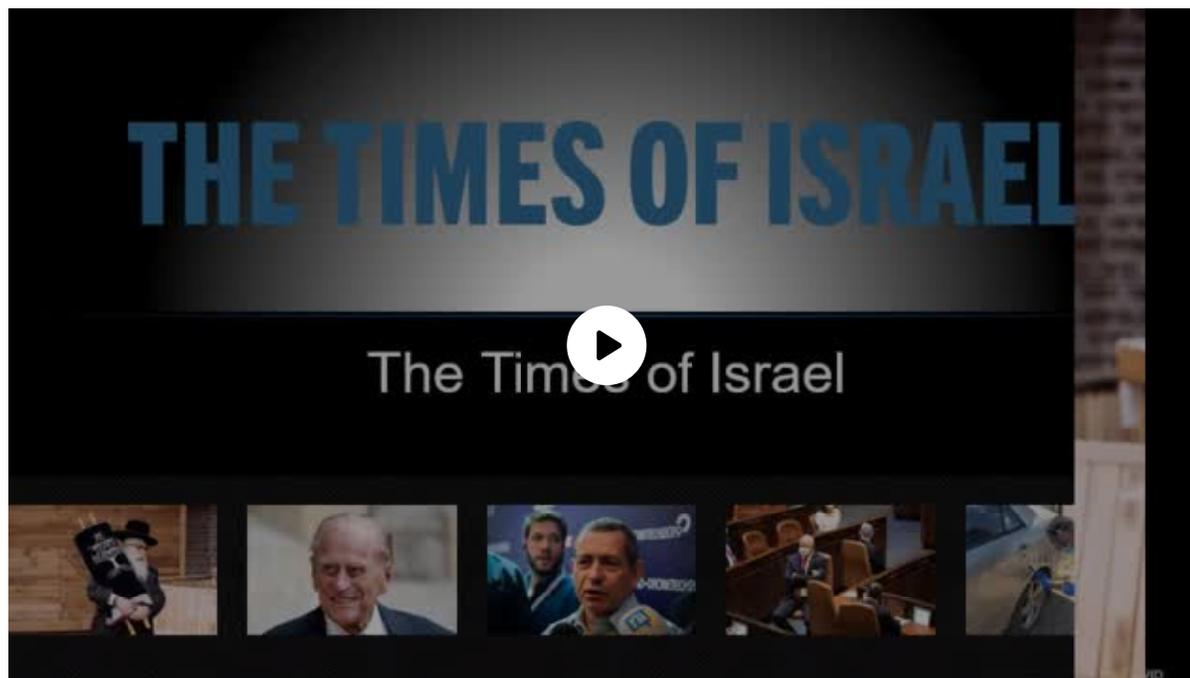
May 26, 2019 was my 10-year “Aliyahversary.” I was sure when the time came to mark double digits I’d celebrate with fireworks, or at least write a blog post.

When the day finally came, it felt like one big meh, so I let it come and go – as big a sign as ever that I’m now a real Israeli.

But in light of the Ministry of Absorption’s [scandalous](#) disregard for truth in advertising, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to let everyone know that miracles do happen if you’re open to receiving them.

The one constant from the moment I told people I was moving up to Israel was the deeply embedded cynicism of well-intentioned Jews on both sides of the Atlantic warning me how hard it was, and that I’m more than a little bit crazy (guilty as charged).

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In the US, I was told by multiple people who had already tried it that I'd never find even a half-decent job, having the language skills of a toddler and being too old to serve in the army – two anachronistic requirements from the days before high-tech – which proved royally false the first time I sent my resume.

I got the job of my dreams.

And I stayed there for most of the next decade.

IN THE BEGINNING

When I first arrived in Israel, the giddy excitement oozed out of me as it does with every new immigrant. It was promptly met with a signature smugness telling me to wait a few months, maybe even a year, but soon enough I'll understand what it really means to live in Israel and my dorky Zionism will quickly subside.

Not every Israeli projected their cynicism in this way. Every now and then I'd come across the exception who reciprocated my excitement by telling me about

their children living in America, or were simply astonished that I would leave there in the first place to come struggle in Israel.

But it was the good kind of astonishment. The kind that came with respect.

In one of many crazy twists along this crazy ride, six weeks into my Aliyah journey I found myself at the family dinner table with another man named Yoni – the eldest son of Israel’s President, Shimon Peres. He had married a cousin of close family friends I was staying with.

Quiet and mild-mannered with the statesman-like presence of a president’s son (not a prime minister’s), we only exchanged a few polite words. I spoke far more with his wife who was excited to learn I was a pro at teaching music since their daughter was excited by learning the piano.

It never panned out. I was soon living in Tel Aviv, crashing with a cousin from my own family (there’s always a cousin of some kind). I couldn’t even host them had they wanted to make the drive. They didn’t, understandably.

But I’ll never forget his puzzled look of curiosity as the night wore on and the wine brought my Aliyah exuberance to eleven. Like many others of his generation who probably figured Zionism was a thing of the past, he seemed genuinely pleased to see the dream was still alive, wishing me a heartfelt *be’hatzlacha* (best of luck) at the end of the night.

Little did I know, it was only the beginning.

WHY I MOVED

I was 31 years young when I made Aliyah. There’s much I could say about the events leading up to my move. A lot of stuff happened, and most of it was awesome. But to live a full life sometimes you have to make tough choices

(politicians), so I've decided to put most of the focus on life here in Israel as that's the most relevant to anyone considering the same path.

It's important to understand your motivations in making the tough choice to leave America for Israel. There's no question it's easier to stay in your comfort zone, and America is nothing if not the world's biggest comfort zone. Leaving life-long friends behind who knew you in your youth is not something even Israel can replace, not to mention your family.

I've seen many people move up to Israel in my life. Almost everyone I knew from an English-speaking country has moved back, from those who moved before me, to friends I made during my early years in Israel. For the most part I stopped making those kinds of friends.

I simply got tired of losing them.

I figured out early on who stays, who doesn't, and when they go back. The easiest is anyone who comes for religious reasons. They usually stay, and if they come with a family they almost never go back.

When you believe Israel is your destiny – and you really believe it – there's almost no hardship you can't overcome.

What about the Zionists?

They usually go back.

It goes without saying that most religious Jews are Zionist, too. What's important to understand is the difference between them.

Religion is faith. Zionism is love. Faith rarely leaves. The passion of love usually fades.

When the love isn't reciprocated, it usually fades quickly.

I've always been an out, loud and proud Zionist (spoiler alert: I didn't go back). For this reason I was [interviewed](#) by the Forward during my first year living in Israel for an article they were doing about the new trend of young singles making Aliyah right after the 2008 recession.

I can't remember how they found me, but I didn't grow up in the NY Jewish world and had never even heard of the Forward at the time. (I certainly have now, thanks to their fearless opinion editor who takes no prisoners when it comes to anti-Semitism.)

Economics did indeed play a big part in the timing of my move. Even though I grew up in the glorious United States of America – and no matter how many people are doing their best to ruin it, America will always be glorious in my eyes – I also knew at some point I'd make Aliyah.

My mom always hated hearing how I framed it, but as I always said, "I'll be buried in Israel." My original plan was to make it in America and then retire in Israel later in life. Though someone with a higher pay grade took a look at my plans before taking a big, giant laugh.

I was a working musician with a little bit of success, having worked for Warner Bros. Publications during the first half of my twenties producing sheet music and videos for major label artists.

I spent the second half of that decade promoting my own [music](#), signing licensing deals with reality shows and webisodes on networks like MTV, CNN, ESPN and others, getting nationwide airplay on (mostly) college and terrestrial radio, playing shows all around with some nice press to boot.



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Yoni Leviatan on Deco Drive



I even played guitar in a side gig with famed folk singer Ellen Bukstel, once serving as the opening act for a young Democratic senator trying to become president.



I don't say this to brag (ok, just a little), but the truth is for a musician, I was doing ok. But for a Jew in his thirties? Not so much.

At the end of the day I was still a struggling musician, burned out from the hustle, and not in a good way. I figured it's time to put down the guitar, grow up and finally get a real job.

Ha, just kidding. That's when I decided it was time to move to Israel.

But before I get further into my past decade in Israel, I first need to wrap up a very loose end: the ones who move back, why and when.

WHY THE ANGLOS GO BACK

There are three basic requirements for living in Israel as an Anglo immigrant who is downsizing in many ways, unlike those from Eastern Europe and Ethiopia making a huge upgrade. You need at least two of these to not just survive, but to thrive and be happy enough to stay here:

1. A decent job doing something you like. If you've grown up living comfortably in America, there is no amount of Zionism that makes up for being poor. You can get away with hating your job, but most people don't, especially if it ends up becoming their career.
2. A family. It can be family you already have here, or a family that you start here, but no amount of Zionism makes up for being lonely on Hanukah. (Actually, in Israel, that's not such a big deal. You'll be lonely on Rosh Hashanah and Pesach – sorry, Passover.)
3. A love for Israelis. If you're all about politeness, civility and political correctness, no amount of Zionism will wipe away your tears after you get trampled on by the herd waiting for the bus/train/checkout line/you name it. (And may the odds be ever in your favor if you enter a government office without knowing Hebrew.)

The timeline is similar to a long-term relationship. The first 2-3 years are the honeymoon phase. If you love living in Israel, because you still don't speak fluent Hebrew and everyone thinks you're a tourist who tips well, you'll feel like a college freshman reborn. None of the above will really phase you, yet.

Once you hit the 3-year mark – now it's getting serious – and all of the above will now begin to phase you. This is the biggest drop-off where I've seen anyone who goes back have to reckon with the fact that it's time to now pack.

The next phase is all about laying down roots. Your Hebrew should be good enough to know when you're getting ripped off, and even be able to argue about it. You probably won't win, but you'll feel great that you stood your ground, and you probably won't even know that you still didn't win.

You'll have a steady job, which you may not love, but you also don't hate, so you're able to bear it because you know how to tell the taxi driver to stop talking, start driving and put on the *monay* (meter – very important).

Many Diaspora Jews have family in Israel, but most are distant relatives they still feel too polite with. If that's the case, then you really start to think about your future happiness. You're still happy in Israel, so today is not the problem, but with every passing day you realize dating an Israeli may not be for you, as many have told me (I'm more than ok with it).

If you want to have kids, this is now the problem.

If there's one piece of advice you must take to heart – and I can't stress this enough for all you crazy Zionists (don't forget I'm one of you, I know how you think) – it's that politics means nothing when you're playing games with your heart and looking for love in all the wrong places.

If you still haven't found it by the 7-year mark – you'll be heartbroken – but only about Israel. You'll go back to your hometown and feel a wash of relief as you slip back into the world you never really left.

If you do find your soulmate, or Israel is your soulmate, there's more than a good chance that you're staying here for good. If for whatever reason you're still not 100% sure, you can always bail before the 10-year mark, but by then your Hebrew is so good you're yelling at the news, and when you go back to your other country, your friends start to ask you, “why do you have an accent when you're talking in English?”

Out of the three basic requirements, the last one is a deal-breaker. It doesn't matter how great a job you have, or even how great a love you find (passion fades), you have to truly love living in Israel.

Correction – you have to love living with Israelis.

You have to love it so much that the things others find annoying are exactly the things which amuse you to no end.

It really is some kind of wacky relationship. You have to love the faults, or all of it will drive you crazy.

What are the faults? Up to you to decide. But if you can't deal with faults, Israel isn't for you.

You'll eventually stop seeing Israel as some kind of fictitious story, or a military adventure (though you'll have some of that, too), and sooner than later you'll be living a normal life, though you'll be living it as an Israeli.

You'll interrupt, argue and defend your place in line – defend it with a vengeance or someone will definitely steal it.

Wherever you work, the incompetence will drive you crazy. The laziness will drive you crazy. It definitely won't be everyone – but everyone will drive you crazy.

Though it's really not their fault. You're the one who chose this, now you need to deal with it. If you let it drive you crazy, you will indeed go crazy.

WHY I STAYED

If you try to recreate wherever you came from, insulating yourself within a community of expats and only expats, unless you're religious, you almost certainly will go back. You'll always feel like an outsider who's frustrated at the lack of whatever you're lacking. Your Hebrew will suffer, and worst of all, you'll never fully get the humor – and that's the best part.

I'm still living in Israel because right from the start I made friends with Israelis, and dated nothing but Israelis (it's great for your Hebrew). I also made friends with other Anglo immigrants, but that was just a bonus.

And almost all of them went back.

You can never rely on other immigrants who haven't at least hit phase two, but the ones who do stay will be your best friends to this day.

You'll still keep in touch with the ones who went back. They love to come and visit – but it's only a visit.

I'll be the first to admit this all came very easily to me. Having an Israeli parent is a leg up like no other.

Having two is an ace in the hole.

But I know many other immigrants who grew up with no Israelis and they love them no less than I do (probably more).

So right there, the culture felt natural and I had lots of family to help me when it didn't. The beginning is the hardest, but it's also the best part.

Just make sure you have the right attitude.

It all comes down to attitude, and JFK said it best: Ask not what your maddingly chaotic country can do for you – ask your doctor what you can do for your blood pressure. (The younger ones will tell you to smoke weed.)

Israel isn't easy on anyone's best day. It'll even ruin a few of your best days.

Now imagine you've got the flu – and so does everyone else – so you're sitting in the waiting room watching them all scream at the doctor because they're running an hour behind and everyone has somewhere most important to be.

These are the moments that try Jew's souls. Plus, don't forget the guy who is trying to cut the line (pro tip: it never really existed). You and your polite, second grade Hebrew is never going to be the one they call next.

None of this stuff bothered me when I first moved to Israel. Most of it still doesn't bother me to this day. Someone cutting in line should always be my biggest problem (it's not, I defend it with a vengeance).

Now here's the good news. Something weird happens when you have the right attitude – a plethora of patience with zero expectations – luck seems to find you in all the right places.

When I made Aliyah, I was resigned to the fact that I'd never be rich, or have much of a career. All I wanted was Israel (Tel Aviv, to be specific), and that was

more than enough for this struggling musician.

I'm still not rich, but that's not what I expected. I expected nothing other than teaching guitar for the rest of my life, because wherever I am, someone will always be trying to learn guitar.

That's my fallback. You gotta have a fallback. Finding work is not a problem. There are plenty of jobs. Finding well-paying ones in exactly the field you wanted to conquer is not realistic if you want to live in Israel.

But that doesn't mean it can't happen. It happened to me.

FINDING A JOB

That resume I mentioned at the top of the post? It was to a legendary audio company I had no idea was Israeli until one day I saw the address on the back of the software box I'd had all these years: Azrieli, Tel Aviv.

Turns out my cousin (same cousin) played guitar in a band with an American who'd been working there for years (everyone plays guitar – but not like him). They were dying to find another English speaker to grow their social media.

Every high-tech company in Israel is dying to find more English speakers to grow their social media, or some other marketing position they need filled by somebody other than Israelis.

This is the secret to finding a great job in Israel working in English – WORK. IN. MARKETING.

But in high-tech where they pay.

I never in my life thought I would work in marketing. I didn't know much about it, but I knew how to write a Facebook post, and my resume said Warner Bros.

Turns out that's all I needed.

I had a 10-minute interview where I was asked "can you do this?"

This is where Israeli disregard for Western norms will work to your favor. Worst-case scenario they would fire me the next day.

They never fired me. I built their social media. Then a couple years later they wanted to make videos showing how to use their products to make music sound better. Turns out I had some experience in that field.

I even did some voiceovers. That English was now coming in pretty handy.

Introducing Nx – Virtual Mix Room for Headphone Mixing



Then they wanted to make videos interviewing famous producers, engineers and guys named Mike Shinoda from Linkin' Park. But they didn't want anyone on camera who spoke English with an accent.

Now that English was flying me to LA. (This was before my English got ruined from all the arguing in Hebrew.)

Waves at NAMM 2013: Linkin Park's Mike Shinoda



On and on it went. The luck kept coming – because I never once expected it – and the music I thought I'd never be able to make seriously again was now being used in a video with Abbey Road Studios.

Yes, that Abbey Road Studios.

Introducing the Waves / Abbey Road EMI TG12345 Plugin



Actually, they used a bunch of songs in a bunch of different videos.

Explore the Waves Abbey Road Plugin Collection



I can't explain it. I'm really not that talented. But I am that lucky for two simple reasons:

1. I moved to Israel.
2. I had the right attitude.

CODA

I'm louder than ever in my defense of the Zionist dream, but I no longer feel disloyal speaking out against the government. They usually deserve it, no matter who's in charge (it's always the same guy).

This is what the Zionist dream looks like in action – arguing with whoever about whatever you want – but arguing in Hebrew otherwise nobody will pay attention.

Ha, just kidding. They still won't pay attention.

But one day they will – when more of you come join me. Just make sure you come with the right attitude.

It's a lot more fun when you stay.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yoni Leviatan is a British-born, American-raised, Israeli-blooded musician, content producer, marketer, presenter and part-time political commentator who loves to think out loud. Especially about Israel. Originally from Coral Springs, Florida, Yoni has been living in Tel Aviv since 2009, returning to the land of his parents and grandparents and ancestors before them. [Click to watch his videos.](#) [Click to hear his music.](#)