

*Religious Zionism
Post Disengagement:
Future Directions*

EDITED BY
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Are the Right People Making Aliya? [Who Will Be the Teachers of Our Children?]

Binyamin Blau

Introductory note: At the outset, I must acknowledge that since there has not been an exhaustive sociological study examining this issue, many of the premises presented are based on anecdotal evidence. On the other hand, when there is a preponderance of evidence even of this nature, and it is combined with a situation of potential gravity, then it is our task to honestly wrestle with this topic.

At first glance the title of this paper seems, at best, provocative, and at worst, inappropriate. How can one criticize those who have

made *aliya*? Minimally, moving to Israel is at least a fulfillment of a religious deed, a *kiyum mitzvah*, while there are views that it is the central mitzvah that dominates our spiritual existence.¹ Moreover, as individuals dedicated to the approach, *hashkafah*, of the Rav, can one ever fault someone who has “heard the knocking” and has answered the call?

While those are valid points, they do not do justice to the complexity of the issue. It is not the sincerity of *olim*, immigrants to Israel, that is being challenged, but rather it is the consequence of their actions that must be reckoned with. What is the impact of the recent wave of *aliya*, and how should North American Jewry respond to this phenomenon?

FACTS ON THE GROUND

There is clearly a resurgence of *aliya* fervor. Nefesh B’Nefesh, an organization founded a mere five years ago, has been a resounding success. Last summer alone they arranged for seven flights to arrive in Israel, bringing close to three thousand new residents to our homeland.² Seminars are now held around the country and the prospect of making *aliya* has become a real option rather than a wistful dream. In a similar vein while many summer camps battle decreasing enrollment and struggle to find suitable counselors, many of the Moshava camps have to turn applicants away. For those who believe in Religious Zionism, this is a welcomed development.³

On the other hand, there is a real paucity of qualified educators and/or rabbis who openly subscribe to either a Religious Zionist or Torah U’Madda philosophy. The number of synagogues, self-described as Modern Orthodox, that are searching for suitable leaders to guide them, is startlingly high.⁴ A listing of Young Israel rabbis reveals a striking number of *musmakhim*, rabbis, whose hashkafic views seem at dissonance with those of their congregants.

Along the same lines, if one enters the typical yeshiva high school, it is rare to find a cadre of teachers who fully support the institution’s ideology. One of two possible scenarios exists, with both being problematic. Either the Judaic faculty members themselves are not Orthodox and feel that the school’s stated mission does not

match their personal beliefs, or, as is more common, they feel that the school does not sufficiently promote true religious observance. While the problem is less acute in the New York/ New Jersey area, and there can be a healthy educational component to having a staff with heterogeneous views, in most instances it is not a matter of choice but rather a concession to the limited available options.

We are therefore left with an ironic reality; at the very instant that adherence to the philosophy of Religious Zionism is rising, there is a crisis in finding proponents of that same ideology in the institutions that naturally promote it, namely in our schools and synagogues.

ARE THESE TWO ISSUES INHERENTLY LINKED?

Is there a correlation between the rising aliya rate and the lack of *klei kodesh*, communal professionals in the religious community, who believe in that same objective? There are cogent arguments that support both possible responses to this question.

On the one hand numerous factors that are totally unrelated to aliya contribute to the shortage of philosophically aligned educators/rabbis in the United States. Unfortunately, there is a lack of respect accorded to these positions by our community which leads to a smaller number of individuals actually selecting these career paths.

The Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, (RIETS) the leading source for our community's *klei kodesh*, has revamped aspects of the *semikhah* program in response to the disturbingly low rate of graduates who actually enter into either the rabbinate or the teaching profession.

Additionally, the jobs themselves have become quite taxing, leading to decreased longevity. While years ago one grew accustomed to associating a synagogue with its rabbi due to the almost symbiotic relationship between them, now it is rare to find a synagogue that has not formed a search committee within the last five years. The matter is particularly acute in terms of administrative positions where it has become increasingly difficult for institutions to retain administrators for extended periods of time. The latter

concern is not limited to the field of Jewish education, but the fact that it permeates the general educational landscape serves as little consolation.

While those points are not in dispute, there is another equally powerful perspective to consider. If one talks with *klei kodesh* who are in the field there is a growing uneasy sense that indeed our community's best and brightest, a clichéd but apt term, are making aliya, and it is unclear who will fill the widening void created by their departures. Let us examine anecdotal evidence that bears out this contention. (I must note that these examples are based on personal experiences, but I suspect that they will resonate with most readers.)

One of the fringe benefits of the semikhah program at RIETS is the option of spending a year or two in Israel studying at the Gruss Center. Eighteen years ago I availed myself of that opportunity along with over twenty of my fellow students. In a striking development almost all of my colleagues did indeed become educators and rabbis. A recent calculation of their whereabouts, however, reveals that over 50 percent of them now reside in Israel. While one can not dismiss their collective numerous, and ongoing, contributions to Israeli society, clearly they are no longer directly impacting the North American community.

Moving to examples of more recent vintage, two years ago I was contacted by a dynamic young educator who was in the process of making aliya. A conscientious individual, he was concerned about who would replace him as he was part of a unique learning program still in its infancy. We chatted and both lamented that we could think of five suitable replacements who lived on the same block in Israel, but could not name five comparable educators in all of New York. Once again, without making a judgment as to the effectiveness of those Israeli educators, or the wisdom of their choices, the power of the observation remains striking.

Finally, I presently have the privilege of serving as the principal of the Upper School at the Fuchs Mizrachi School in Greater Cleveland. We are blessed with incredible staff members who proudly defy the normal pattern and all exemplify the Religious Zionist ideals

that define the school's mission. A huge concern of mine, however, is that within five years the staff will have a total makeover as my *mehankhim*, educators, fulfill their dreams and depart on aliya. (Having just been informed of another rebbe's imminent move to Israel, it appears that my worries are coming to fruition.) As a friend I can celebrate, and even champion, their decisions; as a principal, I greet those same choices with trepidation and a degree of wistfulness.

In many respects it is the sentiments behind those mixed emotions that capture the essence of our dilemma. From God's first encounter with Avraham, and then proceeding throughout the words of the neviim, the prophets, the message is unequivocal: Israel is the place where all of the Jewish people belong. *Hazal*, the Talmudic sages, powerfully reinforce this belief in numerous statements, even declaring that living outside of Israel is comparable to living without God.⁵ (While that poignant comment requires further analysis, it is revealing nonetheless.) The longing to return to our homeland has been a constant theme, as well as a beacon of hope, during our prolonged exile. Against this powerful backdrop, can an individual who elects to move to Israel in fulfillment of our destiny be considered anything less than noble?

Moreover, leaving aside the theological implications, the decision to make aliya often requires significant personal sacrifices. Rabbinic opportunities in Israel are scarce, and many educators need to teach in numerous institutions simply to get by. Even with the increased numbers of olim, and the frequency of travel and new forms of communication in the modern age, young couples who emigrate still face the prospect of separating from friends and family. Despite all the preparation, moving to another country, even our own, entails a serious psychological transition. This is particularly true for children, most notably teenagers, which is another factor compelling couples to accelerate their aliya plans in the hope of easing their family's adjustment. In light of these factors, can the decision to make aliya be considered anything less than heroic?

From the perspective of those individuals moving to Israel, the answer to that question is clear. Indeed they are deserving of our praise by virtue of their actions. If the same question is viewed

through the communal prism, however, the answer becomes less clear. Assuming that our present trend continues, and many of our gifted *klei kodesh* immigrate to Israel without an accompanying mass movement, what will become of the schools and synagogues that they leave behind? Who will fill those critical positions in cities across the country? Inevitably communities will be forced to make one of two choices. Either they will select individuals who firmly believe in our *hashkafah*, but may not be fully qualified. Or, they will turn to the myriad of dynamic graduates of the *haredi* educational system who will powerfully impact the communities in which they settle, but will not espouse our philosophy. The ramification of these selections will be profound in numerous ways, but even if we limit ourselves to the issue of *aliya*, the impact is significant.

The message of moving to Israel that we expect to reverberate in our schools and synagogues will either be muffled (assuming the former scenario in the options listed previously) or it will be eerily silent (in the case of the latter scenario). From the communal vantage point, is it not then incumbent on those making *aliya* to worry that their departure will perhaps weaken the very cause they are championing?⁶ While there is no single solution to our dilemma, four possible responses may be suggested.

1. Adopt a “Scorched Earth” Tactic

Rather than attempting to change the present pattern, the very phenomenon of increased *aliya* by our *klei kodesh* (and the resulting void it creates) can be used as a powerful argument to encourage the larger public to follow suit. By portraying the bleak future for those who remain behind devoid of leadership, perhaps amorphous *aliya* plans will crystallize and there will be an ingathering of immigrants to Israel of staggering proportions. Taking this approach to its fullest point of application, even more educators/*rabbis* would be persuaded to move to Israel further heightening the crisis, and eventually coercing the *tzibur*, the larger community, to emulate their example.

While ideological purists may find this tactic quite appealing, it does not seem consistent with the Rav’s more pragmatic view of

both Zionism and religion. If even our present ownership of the state cannot be taken for granted, if we are not yet in a messianic age, then taking a gamble of this magnitude reeks of recklessness. The risk of a lost generation looms heavily on the horizon.

2. Replicate the Rabbi Riskin Model

Perhaps the solution then is to encourage more educators/rabbis to create new communities in Israel, and then have their communities move together with them. The positive impact of this model is enormous, as it strengthens Israel's economy and national psyche, and it greatly eases the transition of North Americans making aliya. Just as Efrat has grown exponentially over the last few years, other cities will hopefully follow suit, which in turn will generate further aliya as there will be even more locations readily accessible to English speaking olim.⁷

While this is a noble thought worth contemplating, it is wonderfully naïve to assume that a unique model can be duplicated many times over. The dynamism and charisma required to build a new town and then persuade a sizable portion of an existing congregation to relocate, are not found in abundance. We may marvel at those who can accomplish this daunting feat, but we can not depend on this becoming a common occurrence.

3. Alter Aliya Plans

While it is ultimately a personal decision, it is critical that the effects on one's community be an important factor when weighing the timing of making aliya. No one is as successful at affecting our Modern Orthodox/ Religious Zionist community as those who emerge from within. While this consideration does not exactly meet the Rambam's criteria for allowing someone to live outside Eretz Israel,⁸ we must note that the Rambam himself was dwelling in Egypt when he penned these words. Clearly he, and the numerous *gedolim*, sages, who lived outside of Israel, believed that the needs of the *klal* can outweigh personal obligations.

While it would be presumptuous for any individual educator or rav to compare oneself to figures of stature such as the Rav or

Rav Moshe Feinstein and thereby rationalize remaining abroad, our dilemma concerns the collective departure of *klei kodesh*, which greatly changes the equation. Moreover, if we are suggesting delaying *aliya*, as opposed to abandoning the dream altogether, the justification for serving Klal Israel, the Jewish people, in the Diaspora grows even stronger.

Perhaps the wisest permutation of this concept would be for the educator/rabbi to not depart until a suitable replacement had been found. In this manner, continuity would be insured, and the problems envisioned earlier, overcome.

There may be much merit to this approach; however, it can not be the sole solution. There is no way for the community to legislate or dictate when individuals make *aliya*, nor should there be. Moreover, due to the personal nature of these choices it would be impossible for a real system to be created. Our dilemma would be lessened, but not solved.

4. Develop a Better Model of *Shelihut*

The present system of hiring emissaries from Israel has added a unique and valuable dimension to schools and communities across North America. The authentic Israeli spirit that these young men and women possess can not be replicated. Emotionally, their impact lasts far beyond their limited stay. Unfortunately, the overall success of this arrangement is far more erratic.

While clearly well intentioned, many of our Israeli guests arrive extremely unprepared for their mission. Their lack of familiarity with both the language and the culture can be difficult for all parties involved. The expectation that any Israeli, even those who have not been trained as educators, can be successful in the classroom is deeply flawed.

The remedy then is to create a better training mechanism so our communities can reap the benefits of having dynamic Israelis in our midst, without sacrificing the quality of instruction. The creation of a new institution in Israel that would use gifted educators/rabbis who themselves had recently made *aliya* to train these emissaries,

and would certify their readiness to go abroad, would be a welcome development.

I believe that Yeshiva University (YU) is uniquely positioned to form such a program, in light of its large number of talented graduates who have already emigrated and the facilities the school already possesses, which minimizes the start-up costs. Additionally, the fact that the YU placement office in New York is already in contact with schools and synagogues looking to fill positions makes YU the perfect conduit between these newly certified *shelihim*, emissaries, and their prospective hosts. The matchmaking process would be streamlined and the recipient communities would have greater confidence that their guests are qualified and appropriate.

Enacting this program under the auspices of Yeshiva University could potentially have an additional corollary benefit as well. Presently, the majority of individuals embarking on shelihut are native born Israelis who feel a moral obligation to spread the message of Zionism and encourage aliya. The involvement of YU not only raises the profile of this mission, but it also engages many North American olim in the process. Perhaps this will spark some of those same educators/rabbis or their contemporaries to consider a tour of service abroad of their own.

While the latter point may be a bit ambitious, a successful implementation of the larger concept, even in a limited fashion, would create a steady flow of competent replacements for *klei kodesh* immigrating to Israel. In addition, there would be no doubt that these new teachers and rabbis will promote the future aliya of our children.

Theoretically, the idea sounds wonderful; whether this vision will become a reality is another question entirely. There is no guarantee that such a program will be created, or that it will run smoothly if established. Even if the first two criteria are met, there is still the concern that the numbers will not be sufficient to accommodate the growing need. Ultimately, a complete solution remains elusive.

What then is our next step? In many respects, we remain with our initial quandary. Aliya must be promoted and celebrated; our

hashkafah demands no less. At the same time our community must discuss and debate possible solutions, be they the ones outlined or any other creative offerings, until we merit the only clear resolution, the advent of Moshiah, may he come speedily in our days.

NOTES

1. The former position is quoted by Rav Moshe Feinstein in *Igrot Moshe Even HaEzer*, 1-102, while the latter position is advanced by Ramban on Bamidbar 33:53.
2. While it is hard to determine the exact impact of Nefesh B'Nefesh's activities, they have clearly streamlined the process and aroused community awareness.
3. Regrettably, it must be noted that even with all these developments, the actual number of olim is relatively small. According to the Jewish Agency, there were 3,200 emigrants from North America in 2006. The tide is far from a thunderous wave.
4. This assertion is based on recent listings by the RCA/OU/YU Joint Placement Committee.
5. Ketubot 110b.
6. In truth the issue is far deeper than merely the message of aliya being lost. The same educators/rabbis who espouse making aliya tend to promote a myriad of values (the inherent worth of secular education, the broader role of women in Judaism etc.) that are critical to our hashkafah. I have chosen a narrow focus to simplify the argument. Additionally, we have not even touched upon the related issue of whether those educators/rabbis have a requirement to serve their communities as an expression of *hakarat hatov*, appreciation, for all that they received in their formative years, particularly in light of their unique ability to influence those same kehillot from which they came.
7. Unfortunately, Efrat's growth has not come without its own set of challenges. Nonetheless it remains an important conceptual model for purposes of our discussion.
8. Hilkhhot Melakhim 5:9.