



Jamie and David Money
and their family at son
Noah's Bar Mitzvah

HELPING TEENS ADJUST TO ISRAEL

When families make aliyah from English-speaking countries, older children – and especially teenagers – often have a particularly difficult time adjusting to their new environment. However, it is possible to help teens better acclimatize and make the most of the situation / Liza Rosenberg

According to Zahava Bogner, the best advice she and her husband David received prior to making aliyah in 2003 with their two older children was to talk to others who had been through the process. “We spoke with other parents, and they told us to talk to EVERYONE – people who considered their aliyah to be a success as well as those who considered it to be a failure – and to use that information constructively in conjunction with what we knew about our own children,” notes Bogner.

Today, Bogner is pleased by the degree to which her two teenagers have successfully integrated into Israeli society. She is convinced that the family’s successful absorption involved several factors. “We believed it was very important to speak to the kids in advance. We wanted them to feel like they were part of the decision-making process,” she says. “We brought them along on the pilot trip and even sent them to *kaytana* (day camp) while we were here,” she adds.

The Bogners were very honest with their children about how difficult things might be. “David and I explained to them that they would probably feel like a fish out of water for the first year, and that for a while, ►

Evan and Noah Munev enjoy a hike in the Galilee



Ariella and Gilad Bogner at Ariella's recent high school graduation

“they would understand nothing,” she says. “We also let them know that the first six months would likely involve lots of sobbing at the end of every day.” The couple told their children that for the first three years, they wanted them to focus on finding friends and having a social life. “We didn’t set any big academic goals for them. We wanted them to enjoy every school outing and every youth activity.”

surprised to discover that their family isn’t as democratic as they previously thought.

Ups and downs

The Munevs, who met and lived in Israel prior to getting married, started raising their children in the US. Jamie was always a big Israel supporter, but never planned to settle here. Evan grew up in the Zionist youth movement Young Judaea and making aliyah was his dream. When their son graduated from elementary school, they felt the window of opportunity was closing and decided to take the plunge. They arrived on a pilot trip in February 2009 before returning to make aliyah in August.

Traeger-Munev likens their absorption to being on a roller coaster. While they made friends fairly quickly and found a sense of community that had been lacking, other aspects were harder to overcome. Professionally, Jamie had been working in a niche job that was blossoming, and she knew that moving to Israel meant giving up those opportunities. Her work as a psychologist was also language-dependent, and while Evan’s Hebrew was fluent, Jamie struggled to learn.

It was especially difficult for the kids, who were placed in Hebrew-speaking schools without knowing the language. “One of the most important decisions that Evan and I made was to let the kids struggle. It was one of our spoken goals and something we knew would happen,” says Traeger-Munev. “It was something we embraced as a huge life lesson for the future; an opportunity for our kids to know that they could depend on themselves – that they could be tried and tested and come out successful,” she adds.

When Traeger-Munev reflects on her aliyah experiences, she mentions that while there are a number of great organizations that talk to olim about “the how”

Communication is key

Jamie Traeger-Munev agrees with Bogner. Traeger-Munev, who made aliyah to Modi’in with her husband Evan and two children aged 8 and 11, is a psychologist by profession and one of the founders of olim4olim (<http://olim4olim.com/>), an organization that assists new immigrants with the emotional transition that accompanies the aliyah process. She believes it’s critical to start the conversation about aliyah as early as possible. “It’s important to make it clear to your children that you know they have input; that you’re interested in hearing about their opinions and concerns,” says Traeger-Munev. “Let them know you can handle those concerns, and be sure to maintain an open conversation,” she emphasized.

With teenagers, the process is trickier. It’s one thing to pick up an eight-year-old and tell them that the family is moving to Israel, but as Traeger-Munev points out, it’s very different with teens, who already have lives of their own and are making choices about future plans. She says that parents have to decide where to draw the line in terms of involving teenagers in the decision-making process. “The idea is to not give them too much power, yet give them enough so that they don’t feel as though they’re being dragged along,” she notes. Even though it’s important to involve children in the process, ultimately the decision is not a family decision, and kids may be

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◀ and what," she felt that there weren't enough opportunities to discuss the emotional impact of the process, especially for people who were moving to Israel by choice and not because they felt forced to flee their countries of origin. Says Traeger-Muney, "Something that would have been very helpful for me would have been the chance to talk really openly about the process, and what it feels like to have to translate skill sets into a new language and culture and learn new rules."

Drawing both on her background as a psychologist and her experiences as a new immigrant, Traeger-Muney co-founded Olim4Olim with Bev Ehrlich, a veteran immigrant who made aliyah from South Africa in 1987. According to Traeger-Muney, people can deal with anything as long as they're given opportunities to address it. "It's important for people to be able to articulate their goals and then take active steps towards reaching them. Having a coach or someone who can support them through the process can help," she points out.

Working with teenagers

The organization provides individual coaching sessions as well as group coaching services, and it is beginning to work with teens as well. Traeger-Muney mentions the importance of helping teenagers come to terms with their situation, emphasizing that while adults can choose whether or not to come to Israel, teenagers are often brought. They don't necessarily have the opportunity to make the decision themselves, and this only compounds the "regular" challenges that teenagers face. In many cases, this leads to anger about being brought here, and results in a power struggle where the teens may try to "punish" parents through acts like not trying to acclimate or purposely not doing well in school. In the end, the teens are the ones who lose out.

Traeger-Muney's organization identified a need to run programs for teenagers in order to help them come to terms with their anger. "There's a lot for teenagers to overcome just to be able to say, 'Okay, I'm here. Given that I'm here, how do I want to move forward,'"

says Traeger-Muney. These programs teach teens how to express anger and discuss it with their parents, focusing on issues such as how to make the most of their time in Israel, given that they will most likely have to remain for at least a certain number of years. Teens are also given support and tools to minimize their chances of becoming overwhelmed by the situation. Traeger-Muney notes the importance of ensuring that kids can articulate their needs and concerns to their parents in order to receive their cooperation. "It's crucial that parents understand how challenging the situation is for their children, even when they don't want to hear it," she emphasized. "Sometimes kids are just so happy to be able to have opportunities to speak openly about their feelings," she adds.

Tipping the odds

Bogner and Traeger-Muney agree that it's crucial to build realistic expectations for kids during the absorption process. "A lot of people say things like, 'your kids will be fluent in X amount of time, and it's really not true,'" says Traeger-Muney. She and her colleagues have found that most teens don't reach a level of fluency that's comfortable and not so exhausting for almost two years. It's important to remember that there are no set timeframes, and that all kids do things in their own time.

Both women believe that creating a social framework is a key element. Traeger-Muney suggests having kids think about how they can use their assets as the new kid on the block with something new to offer. "To find friends you want, research your areas of interest and look in the kinds of places that you enjoy," Traeger-Muney tells families. "Empower your children to find their own solutions," she adds.

As people go through the absorption process, it's easy to forget how far they've come and get frustrated about how much farther they have to go. Declares Traeger-Muney, "Having kids be able to recognize and feel grateful for what they've accomplished gives us the energy to move forward." ■