



FROM RED TAPE TO RED CARPET

Aliyah on a Red Carpet sounds like a strange idea, but when you're privileged to be an olah chadasha (new immigrant) participating in this program, it is the most comforting and desirable way to immigrate to a new country / Darryl Egnal

When I arrived in Israel in July 2009, I had no idea how hard it would be to make Aliyah, leaving family and friends behind and starting a completely new life. I've come to realize that there is no avoiding the feelings, experiences or stresses that come with changing countries, no matter who you are or at what stage of life you may be. However, I was one of the lucky ones who opted for the Jewish Agency for Israel's "Aliyah on a Red Carpet" program.

If anyone understands the stress and anxiety that most people feel under the circumstances, it is the *shaliach* (emissary/representative) who is involved in the Aliyah process from the start. Not only have the shlichim been deal-

ing with olim for many years, but they are also living in a country other than their own and are aware of the bureaucracy and red tape that goes with organizing your life.

Ofer Dahan, now marketing director of the Aliyah and Absorption Department, was the shaliach in South Africa for three years. During this time, he was constantly looking for ways to improve the Aliyah process and make things easier for olim. In 2007, he conceived the Aliyah on a Red Carpet idea.

"I wanted to help olim settle easily into Israel and I tried to find out what services they would need in order to do this," says Dahan. "It came to me during my interviews with the olim. They were worried about the difficul-



Young immigrants from Russia at a "Aliyah on a Red Carpet" welcome ceremony



Darryl Egnal after receiving her new Israeli ID card

The most moving and symbolic part of the process is the special welcome ceremony during which olim receive their Israeli ID cards less than 48 hours after arriving in Israel

Cape Town in November 2007. Experts in all areas were brought to South Africa from Israel to explain the Aliyah process and help olim in any way they could - from tax and insurance consultants and real estate agents to the kupot cholim (health funds), banks and employment companies, among others. Various Aliyah and Absorption programs were highlighted through lectures and discussions, and the South African olim organization, Telfed, gave a presentation on the support it offers in Israel.

The first dedicated Aliyah flight came next, along with early check-in the day before the flight, in July 2008. Once the olim landed at Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, the Jewish Agency arranged for the olim to collect their *teudot oleh* (Immigrant Cards) without the hassle of having their baggage with them. Thereafter, buses collected them with their overnight bags for a one-night stay in a hotel in Jerusalem, while their 60 kilos (or more) of baggage was transported separately.

Once at the hotel, a dinner was held in hon-

or of the new arrivals and everyone was given a gift by the Jewish Agency. Then came the true advantage of Aliyah on a Red Carpet - the Aliyah Express - an exhibition of companies at the hotel where olim could sign up for the Kupat Cholim of their choice, open a bank account, take out a cell phone contract, sign up with the relevant olim organization, talk to a tax or insurance consultant, and more.

"Since the first Aliyah on a Red Carpet experience, the Aliyah Expos and the Aliyah Express events have improved dramatically and increased significantly," says Dahan. "We have had up to 30 companies and organizations supporting these events. After 18 months, we had to move from the Shalom Hotel to the Ramada Renaissance Hotel because we needed a much bigger venue for the exhibitions." And finally, the most moving and symbolic part of the process - a special welcome ceremony at which olim receive their *teudot zehut* (Israeli ID cards) less than 48 hours after arriving in Israel.

The ceremony for my Aliyah on a Red Carpet experience took place at the Kotel (Western Wall). It was very emotional, especially because I had been asked to make a brief speech at the event. With the backdrop of the Kotel and a huge "Welcome Home" banner in front of me, I couldn't have wished for a more significant Aliyah experience.

With all the above in mind, the overriding feeling - and one I mentioned in my speech - of this entire experience was that the Jewish Agency had eliminated the red tape and put out the red carpet, enabling us to land softly - and on our feet.

By organizing everything for us, they enabled us to avoid the bureaucracy and hassles that go with immigrating to a new country. Things that could've taken up to three months to arrange were done in two days, and we didn't have to move from our hotel (except to collect our *teudot zehut* at the ceremony).

Like coming home

Tatiana and Yugeni Galinsky are jazz musicians from Moscow. They were part of the first Aliyah on a Red Carpet experience from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). "We are so happy and pleased to be here," Tatiana said after she, her husband and daughter received their *teudot zehut* at a special ceremony which took place at the amphitheater of Hebrew University's Mount Scopus campus in September last year. "It was a really precious day for us. The Jewish Agency helped us so much and made our trip so good. It was a big celebration for us; a big present. We hope that more and more people come from Russia to Israel because it is so good to be here. It is like coming home." →

Photos by Darryl Egnal

ties that came with setting up a new life in a new country, especially when you don't speak the language. The questions were always the same. 'How do we open a bank account? How do we find out about health services and which health fund is the best one for us? What about national insurance?' And the list goes on. So I decided to do it for them. I realized that this was how I could improve the Jewish Agency's 'service' to the olim and help ease them into their Aliyah," he says.

The general feeling within the Jewish Agency when the program was launched in 2008 was negative. "Most people didn't like the idea and opposed it. They felt it wasn't our job or our responsibility. Today, everyone praises it and everyone wants to be involved, from the staff within the Aliyah and Absorption department to the department's executive director, Eli Cohen, and the Jewish Agency's chairman, Natan Sharansky," claims Dahan.

Avoiding bureaucracy

The first part of the program to be launched was the Aliyah Expo in Johannesburg and



New olim at an Aliyah Expo open bank accounts, sign up for health funds and more

By organizing everything for us, the Jewish Agency enabled us to avoid the bureaucracy and hassles that go with immigrating to a new country

← Daphne and Charles Silverstone made Aliyah from South Africa in October 2009. They are in their seventies and had planned to come on their own at the end of the month, but when they found out about the special Aliyah flight leaving mid-October, they decided to take advantage of the opportunity. “Everything became a big hurry and a rush, but we are so grateful we came when we did and that everything has worked out the way it has,” said Charles from the Shalom Hotel in Jerusalem, where the new immigrants were staying for the duration.

“It has really been worth it to have everything done in one go. The way we’ve been received, and the speed and efficiency with which it was done, is an eye-opener for us. It has been a pleasure. We were so justified in coming on this flight. If we’d come at the end of the month as originally planned, our daughter would have had to shlep us around or we would have had to run around ourselves to get everything done. And we’re not in our 20s anymore. The Jewish Agency has made it so much easier for us,” Charles attests. “It’s like falling into cushioned arms!” adds Daphne. “We really appreciate what they’ve done for us. They have given us the confidence to start off. I don’t know how we can thank them for

helping us; for everything they’ve done!”

Increase in popularity

More than 16,000 people make aliyah in an average year - approximately 10,000 family units (including singles). This represents only a third of those opening files with the Jewish Agency with the hope of making Aliyah sometime in the near future, and the numbers increase each year.

This means that more and more Aliyah on a Red Carpet events will take place - all as a result of the seed planted in South Africa. “The concept has grown by itself,” says Dahan. “Thousands of people making aliyah want to join the program. When we started to do it in other countries, it spread like wildfire. Last year, we had about 1,700 olim coming to Israel in this way. This year, we will probably have more than 3,300 people from around 10 countries around the world. Many of these countries will only do Aliyah flights now. Britain has about four flights planned for this year, South Africa has added a few flights to its planned events, France has one flight a month, and many other countries are following suit.”

Most people plan their aliyah at least a year or two before making the big move, and some

even start thinking about it over a period of many years. And then there are those, like me, who decide in a period of two or three months. Whatever the time-frame, the preparation is essential when deciding to immigrate to any country, but especially one in which the language is different from your own.

Once again, the Jewish Agency is ahead of the game when it comes to assisting potential olim. The organization is sponsoring the Virtual Aliyah Expo, which will be launched by S-Cube ICT around mid-year and will provide olim with a similar service to the physical expos. “The Virtual Aliyah Expo is a great addition to what we have to offer olim before they make aliyah,” Dahan says. “It won’t take the place of what we’re already doing, but I have no doubt that the online version will be equally successful and a great service for olim.”

Dahan believes that people who decide to live in Israel and fulfil the Zionist dream are entitled to get the best service in the world. “And this is exactly what we’re going to give them,” he says. “The idea was just waiting for us to implement it. Aliyah on a Red Carpet is the Rolls Royce of aliyah.”

Asked what his most memorable experience of all the Aliyah on a Red Carpet events has been since inception, Dahan says emotionally: “Standing at the Kotel with the olim just after they’ve received their *teudot zehut*, singing Hatikva and shedding tears of joy.” ■



For more information about Aliyah on a Red Carpet, go to www.jewishagency.org.