

Baltimore

WWW.BALTIMOREMAGAZINE.NET

MAY 2003



KEEPING THE

PROMISE

Despite the violence,
Baltimore transplants are
choosing to make Israel
their home

BY HILLEL KUTTLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBBIE ZIMELMAN

Yocheved Golani's English garden bursts with smell and color. Pomelos strain their branches. Pink rose bushes arch nearby. Purple bougainvilleas dazzle. Vines of white grapes hug a trellis.

"In the morning the jasmine gives off its perfume," she says, pointing to a plant growing from a bowl just outside her bedroom window, "so I wake up to this wonderful aroma. It's so romantic."

Just like her move to Israel last July from Baltimore, she says. It was a life change the 47-year-old writer undertook despite the almost daily terrorist bombings, the difficulty of making a living here, and all the unknowns of moving to a foreign land.

Her commitment to the country seems impervious to all those challenges—unshaken even by having her furniture stolen or damaged during the move. In fact, things began marvelously for Golani, from the free airplane ticket over, to this ground-level apartment in Beit Shemesh (a town off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway) that she was lucky enough to find on the Internet.

Golani's neighborhood is home to many English speakers, and she makes friends seemingly every day, even welcoming her mail carrier with cold drinks. People on the street stop to say hi, and at synagogue services they extend meal invitations.

Some come from the States, even from Baltimore. One woman startled her by recalling their children had played together in the U.S. While Golani's son is now going to college in Baltimore (she didn't want the name of the college published), the two women have resumed their long-ago friendship.

An author (her latest novel is a terrorist thriller called *Legacy*) and freelance writer specializing in medical reporting, Golani

makes ends meet through sales of her espionage novel and occasional journalism assignments. She is floating her resume all over the country, while also taking Hebrew language classes and coping with the bureaucratic drudgery of putting down roots.

Like most Western newcomers here, Golani complains incessantly of running about to register for needed documents, applying for the benefits granted to new arrivals, and performing what in America is the simple act of paying one's expenses. In Israel, that often must be done in person. It's harder yet with no car.

Golani is a religious woman who last lived in an apartment complex on Greenspring Avenue, in the heart of the Jewish community. Ideologically, she falls somewhere between what Jews in America call "modern Orthodox" and "ultra Orthodox." Even on this warm October afternoon, she wears an ankle-length denim dress, a long-sleeved shirt, a sheitel (wig) and a summer hat, all projecting modesty. She peppers her talk with allusions to God, as in "Barukh Ha-shem" (thank God) or "Hakadosh baruch hu" (the holy one, blessed be He). In e-mails and conversations, she cites the Torah and prayers. Golani whips off Beit Shemesh's Biblical connections: Nearby is where Samson is buried and where David gathered the stone to kill Goliath.

Golani's religious convictions underlie her decision to make the Jewish state home. Living in Israel is mandatory, like any other commandment that Jews accepted at Mount Sinai, "and the holiness it represents was part of that acceptance package," she states. A spiritual journey that began at age 12 led to her adopting Orthodoxy. She visited Israel, but only now, with her son grown, could Golani

Clockwise from top left: Yocheved shopping at the outdoor market in Bet Shemesh; on her way to the market; in her apartment.





Clockwise from top left: Robin and Eric in Ashkelon; unpacking in their new apartment; getting their new pool pass.

fulfill her yearning “to reside among the hills where the forefathers and mothers, prophets, kings and ordinary folk embraced the soul-sustaining love of a compassionate and just One God.”

“Being here as Palestinians bully their way into the headlines is not the issue for me that it is for others,” she asserts. “I am living in my rightful home. I could have been killed in any major U.S. city, and it would have been in vain. Living here is how I demonstrate my regard for the value of God, Israel, Judaism, and my soul.”

Belief provides relief in coping with the country’s stresses. When taking buses in Jerusalem, Golani sits behind the driver so she can get information about bus stops, but also because it seems somehow safer should a terrorist attempt to incinerate everyone. On buses, she withdraws from her handbag a small volume of Psalms and silently mouths the words. Psalm 58 is her favorite. “The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance” of God on the wicked, it reads.

Golani already has experienced two terrorism scares: first in the post office (a false alarm), when an abandoned bag brought the bomb squad—“that’s when I felt like I was in Israel,” she says—and then as a bus passenger, when she stared across Jerusalem’s Jaffa Street as police evacuated the area around a carton of vegetables that contained a bomb.

Such incidents, she says, only strengthen her resolve to enjoy her new life. She came because, she says, “Jews only belong in Israel” and because the bitter experiences of diaspora

history show that “we apparently need the reminder about where we belong.”

Golani—the former Aviva Yocheved Chait selected the name in solidarity with the Golan Heights—concedes in only one way to terrorism: wearing a bracelet that notes her allergy to penicillin.

“I came to Israel, not Iowa. I’m not going to stop riding buses. I go to concerts, cultural fairs, art shows,” says Golani.

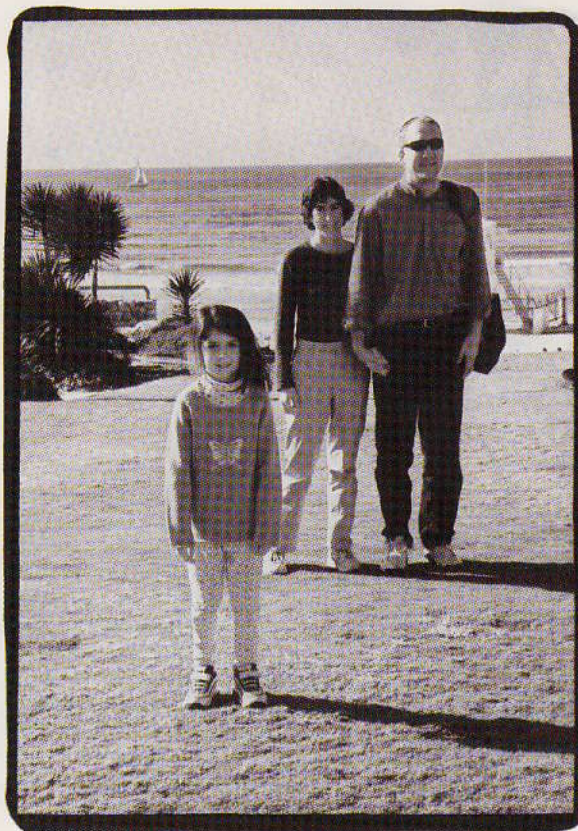
“You do what moves your spirit. It’s fun to get out and do things that are recreational. You have to take care of your emotional equilibrium. You have to nurture it—especially when the news is so bad.”

COME OVER FOR DINNER AT ERIC AND ROBIN KORNBLIT’S apartment—not far from Golani’s—and step into the American southwest. On their living room wall are large prints of children and musicians by Texas painter Mauricio Mora and New Mexican Ramon Martinez. A coffee table rests on an area rug in subdued yellows, blues and reds. Though Eric grew up in Baltimore, the décor makes sense, since Robin comes from El Paso and Eric spent 2000 and 2001 working in Albuquerque, and they first met in New Mexico.

The staunch Zionists are trying to make it all feel like home, but the newlyweds pine for their families back in America.

Eric agonizes over making ends meet—after two years of recession aggravated by the Palestinian uprising, unemployment is over 10 percent and 20 percent of Israelis live below the poverty level—while Robin tries to adjust to a new standard for creature comforts: In Israel, most apartments come without closets, air conditioners, ovens, dishwashers and refrigerators.

Hillel Kuttler, a freelance writer in Baltimore, worked for seven years as The Jerusalem Post’s Washington correspondent. This is his first story for Baltimore.



Clockwise from top left: Odia and Dan at the supermarket in Ranana; with daughter, Ellie at the beach in Herzilya; Ellie in her kindergarten classroom.

Consider her upheaval just in the past two years: meeting Eric, carrying on a long-distance romance, becoming engaged and married, leaving her job as assistant district attorney, living in Ireland for three months while Eric, a procurement manager at Intel, concluded a project there, and moving to Israel, a country she'd never even visited before settling here in September. There was one more thing: She wasn't born Jewish, but converted to Judaism just eight years before they met.

For now, the goals are clear, the blonde-haired Robin says: "There are no screens on the windows! Bugs come in. Dust. And the floors aren't carpeted! If we buy an apartment, we're getting carpeting and screens—the things that are important to women. And cabinets."

Not that she's complaining. "It's a good experience," she offers as a progress report. "You realize that a lot of things you think are important are not so important. You can live without them. The things I have to deal with are nothing compared to knowing that your son is going off for [Israel Defense Forces] reserve duty."

Eric is the one who brought them to Israel. It's been his home since graduating from Baltimore's Beth Tfiloh Community School and the University of Maryland. He completed compulsory army training in an infantry unit and didn't enjoy it. But contributing to Jewish nationhood tugged at his gut and kept him here. It's the great motivator for his annual, required stint in the reserves. Last April, while on duty in Jenin, in the West Bank, his sister unit lost 13 men in a Palestinian ambush. Eric, shaken, called his parents, in the dead of night, Pikesville time, to assure them that he was unscathed.

Terrorism, indeed, motivated him to move to Israel. A bottle that a Palestinian threw on a bus near Jerusalem's Old City crashed against Eric's face, requiring 42 stitches. While Eric's first instinct was "to remove myself far away from the danger," he says, "I realized for the first time that doing the right thing was doing what your gut tells you, showing solidarity with the Jewish people."

Arriving here as bride and groom—Eric is 29, Robin is 31—expanded their spirituality. But Robin admits to experiencing "a big culture shock" in Israel. Like when she ran low on gas and the American in her figured, "No sweat, there must be a service station nearby." Wrong. She prayed to God that her car would make it home. It did. To her, that counts as spiritual, too.

Because Robin is still learning Hebrew, she also is experiencing a loss of independence. She isn't sure what products in a supermarket are or what they cost. Still, what American friends and family considered a bizarre life change represented, really, her evolution.

"For me, it was: I fell in love, and he was in Israel, and I wanted to experience that, too," Robin explains, passing the chicken cutlets and mashed potatoes at dinner. "I was on a spiritual journey. I wanted to come and see what would be the effect of living in Israel and being where Jewish history occurred.

"I take it one day at a time. I didn't come with any preconceived notions about Israel. It's been a lot of changes. Some days are harder than others," she says. "Not working is really hard for me. I'm in a traditional role now, and that's hard."

Eric sometimes works deep into the night and wishes he were making a better salary. It's a big issue, one that gnaws at his oth-



erwise fierce commitment to Israel and its security. He'd easier abide the struggles were his Intel stock options still worth what they once were, he jokes.

"But I feel a certain sense of obligation," he says. "In Israel, you really have to watch every shekel. But in some ways it's good, because you appreciate what you have a lot more. In the States, you'd go out to movies or dinners more. Here we do it less, but we appreciate it. In Baltimore, you go to the Inner Harbor because it's a nice day. Here, you're fighting for your right to enjoy your life. It's a spiritual experience because a lesser people might be crushed by [terrorism]. It's easier for me to stay in Israel when times are hard because you can't desert."

By building their lives in Israel, Eric says that he and Robin "are sending a message to the Israeli people that the American Jews who are coming to Israel are not religious fanatics, but among the best that the communities have to offer."

"We did not leave the U.S. seeking an apocalyptic resurrection of a Messiah or the end of the world as we know it," says Eric. "We came to Israel as patriots of the Jewish people and American representatives of democracy attempting to transform the Middle East into a better place."

Eric feels bolstered by his father Chaim, an accountant and "frustrated Zionist" who was born in Poland and spent part of his

part-time job counseling new mothers at a clinic. She says she feels "great" being in a Jewish country, seeing the Israeli flag flying, listening to the man who recites a prayer on the radio news each morning.

Because of its history and divinity, says Odia, Israel "feels like it's my place" and represents her homeland, just as other ethnic groups have theirs. Even after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Wroblewskis continued planning their move. Indeed, she's read of other Americans who were spurred by the attacks to take the leap.

"The whole country is not a war zone by any stretch of the imagination," she asserts. "I have a five-year-old kid. I wouldn't bring her to a place where I thought there was a good chance that she wouldn't make it to 10."

Dan, impassive, stoic, won't come out and say he's happy yet in Israel, but he admits that fitting in is hard wherever he is. He'd love for their good friends from Pikesville, the Landaws, to come to Israel, too, and buy a home nearby.

His pleasure is volunteering to chant the Torah portion at their synagogue on Saturday afternoons—"my way of fitting in." Weekly basketball games with other immigrants and Israelis at a local gym are, for the 6-foot, 5-inch guy who coached the Maimonides Academy of Baltimore's girls high school team, "very, very stabilizing . . . the one thing I really, really look forward to," he says.

"We came to Israel as patriots of the Jewish people and American representatives of democracy attempting to transform the Middle East into a better place."

youth in a displaced person's camp. Eric's mother, brother, and sister "think I'm off my rocker" by living in Israel, he says. Eric is candid about missing them all, especially his young niece and nephew.

"There's no doubt that if we weren't living here, we'd be in Baltimore. That's where my family is," Eric says. "But that's why I moved to Israel: That's where my greater family, my tribe, is. And that's my greatest conflict, that by living in Israel and starting my own family, I'm branching off."

LIKE NEW IMMIGRANTS EVERYWHERE, THE WROBLEWSKIS—Dan, 40; Odia, 35; and Ellie, 5—have been fitting in, little by little, since reaching Israel last May. And the transition still offers some surprises in their fresh eyes.

Dan recalls the client at the technical writing company for which Dan worked, who interrupted a difficult business conversation to remark on Wroblewski's being a new immigrant and to wish him "B'Hatzlacha" (good luck). To Dan, a film buff who comes up with a cinematic association for virtually every experience, that conjured up a Civil War movie, when soldiers paused to observe a young farmer retrieve his straying cow from no man's land, then resumed battling.

In Israel, the family has the basics in place: a nice, four-bedroom apartment, both parents working, kindergarten, synagogue membership, acquaintances, friends, shopping trips to the mega-supermarket.

Odia is a gregarious people-person who worked as an intensive care nurse at Towson's St. Joseph Medical Center and now holds a

"I'm a traveler. We're on an adventure. It's a psychological thing. We're living here for a bit. I lived in Baltimore and stayed for 12 years. Then it was time to move on. We'll see."

And what about Ellie? Her long brown hair envelops the dolls that surround her in bed. It's 8 p.m. and she's fast asleep.

Her parents marvel at Ellie's swift transition. She missed the last month of the Jewish Community Center of Park Heights's nursery school last spring, and missed her classmates even more. She is making new friends in the Tel Aviv suburb of Raanana—some newcomers like her, some natives. She amuses Dan and Odia by rolling her Rs occasionally, Israeli-style. She's not yet comfortable enough to speak Hebrew in school, though.

But Ellie finds comfort in familiar sights, like seeing Barbie, Bob the Builder, and Blue's Clues in stores. Local brands of fish sticks, macaroni and cheese, and chicken cutlets are close enough to Baltimore's products to make her happy. She's also got her grandmother a bus ride away, in Jerusalem.

Odia is one of the few immigrants from Baltimore who already has close relatives in country. Her mother, Rivkah Frank, immigrated from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to Jerusalem six years ago. Odia's brother, David Gilad, lives in Beersheva. They all get together every month or two.

"Some people say, 'You have family here, so that'll make it so much easier,'" says Odia. "It's not so. It makes tasks easier. If you have questions, if there are crises, it helps. But I don't think it makes adjusting easier. You have to do your own adjusting. No one can do it for you." ■