

ISRAEL



The Levitzes of Israel gathering last Passover when Norman and Dvorah (pictured on the couch) were visiting Israel—the couple would soon become residents of the country.

By HILLEL KUTTLER

WHEN NORMAN AND DORIS LEVITZ landed in Israel in late March, they planned for their annual Passover visit to last longer than usual so they could attend their granddaughter's bat mitzvah on June 7.

It's lasting longer, alright. On June 6—a week before the date stamped on their return ticket—the Lakeview couple officially became Israeli citizens. They have no plans to return to Chicago—not even to sell their house and prepare its contents for shipment. The Levitzes' nieces are handling those tasks.

While approximately 3,700 Americans and Canadians moved to Israel last year, the couple stands out: Norman turned 94 on July 4, and Doris is 91. According to an official with the immigration-assistance organization Nefesh B'Nefesh, the Levitzes are the second oldest North American immigrant couple in recent memory, after 95- and 93-year-olds in 2012.

Doris celebrated their *aliyah* (immigration) by changing her name to Dvorah, in memory of her paternal grandmother from Latvia.

During some of the couple's 40 visits to Israel to see their family—son Ephraim, 58, a rabbi and a teacher in Beit Shemesh; daughter-in-law Nurit; seven grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren—Dvorah raised with Norman the idea of settling in the Jewish state. Ephraim

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weighed in, too. But Norman hesitated. This time was different.

Norman's arthritis was worsening, and their three-story home became harder to navigate. The Chicago winters were, well, Chicago winters, and California, Arizona, and Florida held little appeal.

"It was a quick decision not to go home. We loved our house in Chicago, our synagogue—but when it came time to move, we did it," Norman explained while sitting beside his wife of 71 years at the kitchen table of their rental apartment in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Arnona, a few blocks from the new American embassy.

While they lived in Chicago, Norman and Dvorah, Golden Givers to JUF's Annual Campaign, actively volunteered through TOV and the JUF Uptown Cafe.

"We were in the house 48 years. We made a decision and we're not looking back. Israel's a fantastic country," said Norman, who worked as a chemical engineer for 40 years at the University of Chicago's Argonne National Laboratory.

Norman and Doris Levitz move 'home' to **Israel**



In their Jerusalem apartment, Norman Levitz holds a family tree as his wife, Dvorah, displays a newspaper photograph taken after they decided to live in Israel.

"As long as you have each other, it's like you have a million dollars. I wouldn't be happy without him," said Dvorah, who worked for 22 years as allergy researcher at Northwestern University.

They're settling in, with plenty of help. Their Israeli kin helped them open a bank account and select a healthcare plan, and escort them to medical appointments. Norman and Dvorah visited a retirement community in the mountains west of Jerusalem—they're number two on the waiting list. Grandson Amichai, a contractor, works in the city and stops by daily. Granddaughter Naama Levitz Applbaum, a rabbi, lives a few neighborhoods away. The teenage son

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Midwestern leaders see Israel through a women's lens



Chicago delegation Sara Feigenholtz, Kia Coleman, Suzanne Strassberger, Sol Flores, and Robyn Gabel in front of Kibbutz Lavi in the Galilee, in northern Israel.

By SUZANNE STRASSBERGER

FEMALE LEADERS from around the Midwest gathered in Israel in June for a Women Partners for Peace mission to explore Israeli society and

discuss prospects for peace all through the eyes of women.

“What gave us hope for peace,” said Illinois State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (12th) and

Assistant Majority Leader of the Illinois House of Representatives, “was hearing from some amazing speakers who described growing grassroots movements which challenge the status quo.”

Nineteen political and community women leaders coming from different faith, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and from four Midwestern cities—Chicago, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee—participated in the visit. Representing Chicago—with funding from the Shafston Israel Institute—along with myself, were Kia Coleman, director of Juvenile Justice Programs for the City of Chicago’s Department of Family & Support Services; Feigenholtz; Sol Flores, executive director of La Casa Norte and a recent Illinois congressional candidate; and Robyn Gabel, Ill. State Rep (18th District) and Illinois House of Representatives Chair of Human Services.

“This was an awesome first

trip to Israel,” Coleman said. “Listening to narratives, visiting communities, and sharing meals throughout the region left with me with lots of questions and with a deep appreciation for the wonder of this country and the importance of peace.” The eight-day agen-

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da was built with the goal of learning about the complexities of Israel through the different narratives of Israelis, Palestinians, and Israeli Arab women. Our meetings with predominately female leaders and activists resulted in a fuller, more sophisticated understanding of Israel’s achievements and challenges.

“I feel grateful to JUF for

giving me the opportunity to experience Israel for the first time in such a meaningful way, said Sol Flores, executive director of La Casa Norte and a recent Illinois congressional candidate. “[We] saw the Holy Sites for [many] religions, talking with women like me who work in non-profits and are political and community leaders, and learned from wonderful educators. What an amazing country.” ■

JUF’s trips to Israel for non-Jewish influentials are made possible by the generosity of the Shafston Israel Institute, an endowment of the Federation’s Centennial Campaign. This trip was also supported by the Israel Action Network, an initiative of the Jewish Federations of North America in partnership with the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

Suzanne Strassberger is the associate vice president for Government and Community Partnerships for the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

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of one of Amichai’s employees takes Norman for walks in the park. Most weekends, the Levitzes spend Shabbat at Ephraim’s home. Dvorah plans to enroll in an *ulpan*, an intensive Hebrew-language course for new immigrants.

Not all the clan is in Israel. Another of the Levitzes’ three children, Sidney, 60, is the executive chef at North Central College, in Naperville, Ill. Bruce, 64, is a lawyer in northern California.

When the couple phoned Sidney and Bruce to convey the news, they “almost fell off the chair, but they said, ‘Go for it!’” Dvorah said. Her friends in Chicago? “They nearly fainted.”

Along with them, Norman and Dvorah miss the operas and ballets they attended each season, along with an occasional Cubs game. Norman fondly remembers attending services at Anshe Sholom B’nai Israel Congregation three mornings a week, strolling with his walker or bicycling on his three-wheeler.

Ephraim is thrilled with his

parents’ move.

“It’s a privilege to take care of your parents in their later years. They’re very independent people, but they’re at the stage that they need help, and we’re able to give it. That’s the most satisfying thing. The whole structure of *kibud av va’em*—the commandment to honor one’s parents—to be able to love them, care for them, help them—I think it’s beautiful.”

Ephraim made *aliyah* himself upon graduating from Ida Crown Jewish Academy in 1978, after a class trip to Israel. In 1979, the Levitzes visited Ephraim in Israel, and the rabbi of his yeshiva hosted them for Shabbat dinner. The meal made an impact.

“Everyone was so hospitable and happy to see us,” Dvorah recalled. “It was a wonderful experience.”

Over the years, the Levitzes stopped in to see the rabbi. Just after their *aliyah*, he called.

His message was direct: “Welcome home.” ■

Hillel Kuttler is a freelance writer living in Israel.

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