

Frustrating--But the Best of Times

[View PDF](#)



Chaim I. Waxman is Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Jewish Studies, Rutgers University, and lives in Jerusalem. He specializes in the sociological study of Jews and Judaism, including America's Jews, Orthodox Jewry, Jewish identity and identification, Israeli society and culture, and Zionism. He is the author of numerous books and articles. This article appears in issue 10 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I must say at the outset that although my wife, Chaya, and I had some different motivations and experiences in our *aliya* process, we are both happy with our *aliya*. For me—and I am speaking about my own personal reflections and feelings—our *aliya* is the fulfillment of a dream I had since learning in Yeshivat Kerem beYavne in 1958–1959. It took more than 40 years—but it also took Bnei Yisrael 40 years to make it through the wilderness to the land of Israel. Personally, I am very happy with my *aliya*. But I understand why many Jews, Orthodox or not, do not want to make *aliya*. Economics aside, living in Israel can often be a very frustrating experience, and in many respects it is “easier” to be a Jew in the United States. Let me tick off a number of what, in my opinion, are the most frustrating aspects of Israeli society.

1. Lack of civility—Common American norms of civility and courtesy are alien to much of Israel. On the contrary, here the rule is, “don’t be a *freier*,” a patsy, someone who allows someone else to get ahead of them, be it standing in a line for a bus or in a store, or driving on the road. I drove for decades in the United States, but it wasn’t until I drove in Israel that I was a victim of nasty name-calling by the driver in back of me, for allowing someone to precede me in merging lanes. I violated the rule of not giving an inch, which applies to the road as much as it does to foreign policy.

2. Ethnic hostility—Perhaps I was sheltered where I lived in the United States, but I never encountered the kind of blatant discrimination and hostilities that I see here between some Jews and Arabs, some Ashkenazim and Sephardim, some secular and religious. The degree of intergroup tension that pervades Israeli culture is something alien and distressing to me.

3. Lack of basic democracy—I was aghast when I learned that some of the basic civil rights, including protection from arbitrary searches and seizures, that (most) Americans enjoy were not part of the Israeli system, such as being held by the police for more than 24 hours without being charged with a crime. I subsequently learned that Israel, too, has such protections but that security cases are differences. And, following the September 11, 2001, much more restrictive security measures have been undertaken by the authorities in the United States as well.

However, I still cannot get used to a common Israeli practice that clashes with the notion of rights with which I was raised, namely, blatant housing segregation, on the basis of both religion and ethnicity. Housing projects openly advertise “for the *dati-leumi* [religious-Zionist] community,” “for the Hareidi community,” and don’t even think of buying an apartment anywhere but very special places if you are not Jewish. Around 1998, Chaya and I were looking to buy an apartment and we heard that there was going to be a new community called Ramat Bet Shemesh, so we drove out to see where it was and get an idea of what it was to be like. We arrived at a hilltop that had various trailers, *caravanim*, out of which the contractors, *kablanim*, worked. Each of the contractors greeted us with the identical question: “What are you?” When I replied that I’m looking to buy an apartment, they thought I didn’t understand their question, so they repeated it, and I replied that I’m a Jew who wants to buy an apartment. Now they started to get upset. “*What are you?*” “*Are you dati, dati-leumi, hardali, hareidi Litai, haredi hassidi?*” The reason for asking was that there was to be different housing for each of the different kinds of Jews, even if all of them were religious. If they weren’t, they were relegated to an entirely different section of contractors. As soon as we saw what was happening, Chaya and I realized that this wasn’t for us, and we left. But the very fact that it exists—and legally—leaves me with a bitter taste.

4. Kashruth—For years I was told that kashruth is so much more natural and less complicated in Israel. But, in fact, just the opposite is the case. In the United States, the OU is overwhelming, if not almost universally accepted among Orthodox Jews. There is nothing even close to that in Israel, where there are so many more groups, each having its own kashruth certifiers. A bag of raw lettuce

can have five or more supervisions, all of which contribute to higher prices. I find it incredible when I hear of the barriers all of this presents in terms of family harmony.

5. Segregation—Much worse are the “super-kosher” *mehadrin* buses that are segregated by gender, with women forced to sit in the rear. It reminds me of the pre-Civil Rights days in the United States South—and gets me very upset.

6. The Hareidi-*dati* divide—I will just mention a series of issues that rile me, such as the Rabbinate, which controls matters of marriage, divorce, and conversion; the fact that the majority of Hareidim do not serve in the army or in any other kind of national service; government-supported voluntary unemployment; government-supported schools that do not teach a basic curriculum of general studies; and so forth.

7. Political corruption and incompetence—During the past five years, we have witnessed a President and several ministers and Knesset members found guilty of serious crimes, and we have seen a now-former Prime Minister under investigation for numerous accounts of corruption. As for incompetence, even the glaring examples are too numerous to list here. Also, the country does not seem have any conception of planning. Just take a look at the water crisis, the loss of life and damage in the Carmel Forest fire, the extended disruption from the Jerusalem light rail fiasco, and so forth. *Avira deAr'a mahkim?* (The air of the land of Israel makes one wise?) Israel today is all-too-often proof that Chelm lives. Sometimes I get so upset so upset that I am almost ready to agree with Yaakov Kirschen, the famous “Dry Bones” cartoonist, who said, “If there was another Jewish State I would move there.”

But seriously, there is no other Jewish state, and even if there was, I am not at all sure I would move there. This is not just a Jewish state, it is also *Erets Yisrael*, the land promised to Avraham Avinu and his children and the birthplace (after Egypt and the wilderness) of the Jewish people. To live here is to live Jewish history and tradition. Judaism is intrinsic to the national culture here and it is built in to the calendar. In the Diaspora, one knows what the Gregorian calendar date is, and one has to stop and check for the corresponding Jewish calendar date; in Israel, though, it would be more likely for you to know what the Jewish calendar date is—and you may have to stop and check for the corresponding Gregorian calendar date. Even in Tel Aviv, you breathe Judaism here much more so than in the Diaspora.

One hard lesson that I have learned since my *aliya* is that the French socio-political thinker, Alexis de Tocqueville, was correct not only in his analysis of France and the United States, but of Israel as well, when he said that an alliance of religion and state is bad for religion and bad for state, and separation of religion and state is good for religion and good for state. I used to fear that separation of religion and state in Israel would create a major rift in the society; that already exists even with, perhaps thanks to, the Rabbanut.

Yet, the breadth and depth of Jewish learning here is incomparable. The range of almost daily lectures and symposia is such that I sometimes am overwhelmed and have to remind myself that I neither can nor have to participate in everything. It's wonderful to know that opportunities are there and that I can choose those of which I wish to partake. When I think back and remind myself how meager were the opportunities for such enrichment in the very Jewish neighborhoods in which I lived, I feel blessed to be here.

The society has problems—but it's my society; there's no invisible cultural wall between me as an Israeli and me as a Jew. My life is not schizophrenic; I do not live an "inside/outside" existence, as do many Jews and most Orthodox Jews, even in the open and welcoming United States. Indeed, for many of those who do not experience an invisible wall or even a difference between their Jewish self and their American self, there are increasingly pronounced issues relating to Jewish identity and identification, but that is a somewhat different subject.

Despite all of the frustrations I mentioned and more, I frequently sit on my *mirpeset*, porch, and think how incredibly fortunate I am. I cannot believe that I am actually living in Israel, in Jerusalem no less, and how wonderful it is to be here. Despite the harshness and intolerance we too often see, there is also simultaneously a beautiful sense of oneness here, of giving, of sacrifice for others and the society. There is also a sense of informality rooted in the understanding that we are all family, and, therefore, we can do away with artificial facades.

For Chaya and me, *aliya* was a "no-brainer." All of our children and grandchildren are here. I am fortunate to have a career from which I never actually have to retire. I am no longer salaried, but do not have any problems of not having anything to do. Quite the contrary, if I have a problem it is not having enough time to accomplish everything that I want.

As far as the material aspects of daily life, I find living in Israel easier in many respects. The image of impossible bureaucracy is no longer applicable; Israel is in many ways much more technologically advanced than the United States, and

many things can be done online or in other ways with relatively little hassle.

The range and quality of medical care available to all, not only to the very wealthy, is very satisfying and reassuring. Whenever I have needed medicals exams and procedures, I have found the entire process to be much more efficient, quantitatively and qualitatively, than my medical experiences in the United States

Even if I were looking for an “easier” life, I am not sure that I would not have come on *aliya*. Perhaps in some ways it is “easier” to live in the United States; but, in much the same way, it is “easier” not to have children than to have them. I chose to live here in part because I want to be a participant in what I view as the most significant development in the past 2,000 years of Jewish history. I love *Erets Yisrael* and I love *Am Yisrael*, and I want to live among my people in the land of my people, even though they sometimes frustrate me and even though I have many interests beyond both the land and the people.

All of the ideas presented here are my personal thoughts and feelings, relating to me alone, and are in no way meant to preach to others. I don't tell others that they should make *aliya* because it's just not part of my personality to tell others what they should or shouldn't be doing. That is probably one of the major reasons I never considered entering the rabbinate. Nor do I think that *aliya* is for everyone. Quite the contrary, there are some people whom I think should definitely not make *aliya*. I think that successful *aliya* requires not only resources but flexibility, tolerance, and a sense of humor. If someone is inflexible and intolerant, they probably won't last too long in Israel; and besides, Israel has enough intolerance and inflexibility.