

Why I Have Returned to Israel

After 22 years in the United States, I recently returned to Israel to begin my military service and settle here permanently.

I was born in Israel but grew up in the United States. When I was six, my parents and I moved to America in pursuit of my father's academic career. When we arrived in California I had no sense of my Israeli identity, at least not one that I can recall. What I did feel was that I was different from my classmates and hence an easy object of ridicule. At the beginning of our lives in the States, Israel was not foremost in my mind. I was like any other little boy in Ann Arbor. In 1965 there was talk about returning to Israel and my immediate concern was how could I live without Michigan football. In 1971, when I was 14, my father again

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contemplated a return, and this time I was quite adamant that I would not leave Ann Arbor. I had just changed schools, made wonderful friends, was on the basketball team, and the Michigan football team had national championship potential.

However, I was always aware and proud of my Jewish identity. Not that I considered myself a religious Jew. We didn't even belong to a synagogue. Rather, I felt that being Jewish held certain responsibilities, however ill-defined and dimly understood, that identified me, yet did not set me apart from my peers. During this time I experienced my first "Israel pangs", maybe something akin to the first kicks an expectant mother feels in her womb. However, these pangs were nothing more than that, just little kicks.

I was sixteen in October 1973 when I suffered at the thought of the heavy losses taken by the Israel Defense Forces, and of so many young lives lost. Did I do anything concrete? No, I just lis-

tened intently to the radio and watched television, continuing my normal existence.

We were in Israel in December of that year and I was overwhelmed by the depression that had settled on the country. I spent an evening at an army base and recall feeling a sense of awe. These soldiers, no more than three to four years older than I, had just been through something I could not even imagine. They had defended the Jewish state but, and this is critical, I felt no affinity with them; we were not the same. Yet two years later, in my last year of high school, I decided to return to Israel after graduation, do my military service, then come back to the US "to get on with my life."

It is important to mention that I cannot remember any of the specific reasons for this decision, just as I am unable to recall the family discussions that must have gone on about this issue. All I can remember is that my mother urged me first to get my college degree in the States, and then, if I still felt so strongly, to return to Israel. Obviously I heeded her advice as I did not go back to do my military service. There must have been a strong pull existing at the time but apparently not strong enough. The prospect of return went as quickly as it had come. A quick, sharp kick, but no more. And off I went to college.

Two years later, my best friend and I spent a month in Israel visiting my parents who were spending their sabbatical in Haifa. We had a great time but I did not feel any urge to return. While the pangs of old may have returned for a brief moment during that visit, the kicks, once again, remained mere kicks.

At the end of my junior year in college

I was asked to participate in the senior honors program in history. Working with a faculty member, who was to become my most significant intellectual mentor, I chose as my thesis topic "The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising." With the aid of this professor I began the process of discovering my Jewishness and, I left Kenyon College much more comfortable with, and confident in, my Jewish identity.

After graduating in 1979, I began the slow process of making my life-long dream, attaining an elected office, a reality. I went to Washington, D.C. as the first of many steps leading to the fulfillment of my ultimate goal. I was very fortunate to obtain a staff position with a young and dynamic Congressman. In the course of my two years with him I was given the Middle East and Jewish Affairs portfolios. While performing the various tasks associated with the position — meeting with lobbyists and diplomats, attending functions, briefing the Congressman, responding to constituents — I began to take note of a most revealing and professionally disturbing truth: I could not view this issue objectively. I reacted to anti-Israel opinions defensively and personally rather than objectively and professionally. On one occasion a senior Israeli diplomat visited our office to meet with the Congressman. I experienced powerful emotions both during and after that meeting. I was embarrassed by his behavior, became defensive about him and Israel, and felt that I could do a much better job of presenting Israel's case than this man had done. The kicks were getting stronger.

Not long afterwards, I left my job in the US Congress and took a position

with a communications consulting firm. I was 24 years old and still very much involved with the dream of my life. While working with a variety of Jewish organizations, I began to consider myself in a more Jewish fashion. I was very frustrated by the frighteningly enervating and maddening political infighting that appeared to characterize these groups. Now I could afford to give up fighting to maintain my objectivity, the losing battle I had fought in my previous position. After a year I went to law school. This had been part of my master plan since the age of 11, and it was time for the next step: a law degree and hence "acceptability to the club". After all, approximately 90 percent of US Senators and Congressmen are lawyers.

During my first year of law school, a woman friend and I decided to visit Israel. We planned to work on a kibbutz and to travel. I had not returned in seven years and I so looked forward to the prospect of this trip. It would be a wonderful way to unwind after the grueling rigor of my first year of law school, the two of us would be together, it would be my first time in Israel without my parents and I could meet my relatives on my own. There were two additional and powerful reasons for our trip: could my friend convert and was Israel a place where I could make my life?

As our El Al 747 touched down at Ben Gurion Airport and an Israeli folk song came over the loudspeaker, I felt on the verge of tears. It hit me in a flash: I had come home. Within three days of our arrival I decided that after graduation from law school I would return to Israel. Sometime later, sitting in a cafe in Nahariya with my uncle I made the first official announcement about my future. I

was very comfortable with what I heard myself saying. The five weeks on Kibbutz Elon reinforced this decision. For the first time I felt like a native-born "sabara", my Hebrew was coming back and I was even picking up contemporary slang. Most importantly, in contrast to my experience at the army base ten years earlier, now I felt like "one of them". A difficult and emotional visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum left me with two powerful feelings: I must move to Israel and if I ever doubted my childhood decision to become politically involved, all such doubts were permanently erased. Action would be the game and Israel the playing field.

Upon returning to the US at the end of the summer, my friend and I separated for a variety of reasons, the most relevant one being her decision that conversion was out of the question for her. For me, after this trip, it would be impossible to marry outside of the Jewish faith.

However, within a matter of days I fell back into the routine of school, applied for legal jobs for the following summer, and once again, became absorbed in planning my political future. In the fall of that year I came home to Ann Arbor on a number of occasions... yes, to watch Michigan play football. I felt that I couldn't give up that way of life. One of the primary motivations for public service had been my belief that it was the only way I could repay America for the opportunities it had afforded me. I had been privileged to attend a private high school, an outstanding liberal arts college and was now receiving a solid legal education at a top law school. I had become, on the surface, as Christian as my Christian friends, and benefitted from this development. As a result of my

middle class upbringing, my prospects in America looked bright. However, finally I decided to return to the land of my birth.

The process of reaching the final resolution was agonizing. In May, 1984, I spent ten days in Israel meeting with lawyers, judges, government officials and army officers in order to determine whether, as an American trained lawyer, I could be successful professionally in Israel. The answer was a unanimous and resounding yes. Then the question became whether I could live in Israel, make it my home, marry and raise a family. I had already made an emotional decision in 1983. Now, I had to weigh carefully the pros and cons. I realized that while my heart was saying "Israel", my head was saying "USA". I could find no rational argument for leaving the USA and moving to Israel. Finally, the decision occurred

effortlessly.

The night before I was to hear about a much-desired job, I decided against accepting the possible offer. I suddenly realized that there were no "pros and cons". It was all very simple: I am a Zionist. I want to live in and to contribute to the fabric of daily life in Israel. My identity and sense of belonging are directly tied to the past, present and future of Israel.

I am unable to explain now why it is that this was such a difficult decision to reach. It was the only decision possible. I have been in Israel now for some time and I know that this was the right decision. In the end it was my need to affirm my identity in deeds and live out my convictions that inevitably tipped the balance.

I have come full circle and given birth to my sense of Jewish identity and ideals. I have come home.