

Why I'm Not Making Aliyah

These and Those – Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies Posted on November 8, 2012 by Derek Kwait

“Oh, so you’ve been here [almost a year/two years]! So are you planning on making aliyah?,” they say, bearing their teeth and gently lifting their eyebrows in anticipation of the upcoming hearty “Mazel tov!” they’re sure to owe me.

“No.”

“Oh,” this is less an expression than the sound a face makes as it falls. “Why?”

Since coming to Israel, I’ve had this conversation with more people than I can keep track of. I’m here to articulate my answer to this disappointed “Why?” in the best way I can. I know my answer probably won’t be good enough for you olim out there reading this, but hopefully I can at least get you to understand and maybe, *maybe* even to respect my decision *not* to make aliyah as much as I respect your decision to make aliyah.

Let me begin by saying this: I love, love, **LOVE** Israel and consider myself a Zionist. Over the past thirteen months, I have come love this country, and to love Jerusalem especially, more than I thought I could ever possibly love a place that doesn’t begin with “Pittsburgh.” I shouldn’t even have to say this, but I want to anyway because it’s so true. But there’s different ways of loving something:

You came here on Birthright and you just *felt it*. Good for you, I didn’t. Or maybe it’s that ever since you first heard there was a place for Jews, you knew you just had to live here/this is the only place in the world where the Jews have a future/you want to share in the historic fate of your People and your Land/you couldn’t find a job in your home city/you come from Europe/you came for a visit and just couldn’t bring yourself

to leave...and you can't understand how I, as a fellow passionate, committed Jew did not want to move to this country as soon as I stepped off the plane. I get it.

What's more, I know how much you've sacrificed in order to live here. You've left your beloved families, friends, communities, jobs, to come live in a tiny, upstart nation in what still is—in spite of its and your Jewishness—a foreign culture where things are overpriced, jobs are hard to come by, people are rude, you don't speak the language, you live under constant threat of annihilation, and you know that possibly you, but certainly your children, will have to sacrifice, at minimum, only the best years of their lives in its defense.

I can't tell you how much I respect all that, olim. I also can't tell you how hard it is for me to look you in the eye and tell you I have no plans of making aliyah when I know that for you, it must seem like I'm telling you that I think it's right for you to have to struggle to begin your life over again half-way across the world and for your children to fight terrorists for the sake of the Jewish people, while I visit my parents on weekends and my children go to ice cream socials at their universities' Hillels. I totally understand.

But here's what you don't understand: Messianic dreams notwithstanding, I can think of almost nothing worse for the State of Israel or for the Jewish People than what would happen if every Jew (or even every Jew who cared) picked up and moved to Israel. Jobs would be harder to come by, our border issues would increase at least hundredfold, and no one would ever have enough water. The Kinneret would cease to be.

But these are minor, solvable problems. The bigger, much more lasting problem would be what would happen in a world where all the Jews lived in one tiny rift in the Middle-East? Who would support Israel? Who would fight anti-Semitism, or just be around to live around non-Jews and show them that they shouldn't believe the lies, most of us are actually pretty cool people? I know that in my life, growing up around almost entirely non-Jews, many people thought they didn't like Jews or that Jews

were this way or that, until they discovered I was, not only a Jew, but an actual human being just like them, too! If I go to Israel, who will be left to prove them wrong? Why should the world respect a people or a religion that can only work in one place far away from them?

If every Zionist Jew like myself makes aliyah, there will be no Jews, Jewish influence, or Jewish ethics left in the sciences and the arts anywhere else in the world, and medicine, technology, economics, science, government, and culture all over the world will suffer enormously.

Further, it's not easy being a Jew in America. No, we don't have to worry about terrorism or overt anti-Semitism, thank God, but we have our own set of challenges. Yes, no Jewish community in history has ever been more accepted or more affluent, but no Jewish community in history has ever been as Jewishly illiterate, indifferent, or intermarried. We face the unprecedented challenge of trying to make Judaism matter in a free market place of ideas, and I believe as much as I believe anything that Judaism is more than up to that challenge, that its wisdom, beauty, depth, and divinity are more relevant and more needed now than ever. To this end, helping to capitalize on the equally unprecedented opportunity modern diaspora Jews have to create open, robust, committed, learned, diverse communities that will be a blessing for their residents, for the wider communities surrounding them, for the Jewish people (including those in the State of Israel), and maybe—in some small way—even for the entire world, genuinely excites me far more than the prospect of making aliyah. Yes, this is somewhat of a dream, but no less so than the idea that my moving to Israel will have some huge impact on making it the kind of Jewish State it needs to be.

One last point, and this comes from a friend who recently made aliyah: Israel doesn't *need* me. It could use me, sure, but it doesn't *need* me. Thank God, unlike in the early days of the State, it now has enough native population and new immigrants to support a viable, diverse economy and culture. If this weren't so, if lots of talented, educated Jews *weren't* making aliyah, and if America's Jewish community was

thriving, then I would strongly consider making aliyah. But since I don't believe Israel is sorely lacking for a thoroughly unathletic Jew whose most valuable skill is his ability to write in English, I think I'll stay in America and do my best to serve the Jewish community there.

So in the end, disappointed olim, I believe the world needs both your kind of Jew and mine, I only ask that you respect my choice as much as I respect yours. What matters most is that we're in this together.