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Plain Dealer (Cleveland)

June 29, 2006 Thursday
Final Edition; All Editions

Jewish family makes the big move to Israel; Heights couple, kids part of growing trend

BYLINE: Robert L. Smith, Plain Dealer Reporter

SECTION: METRO; Pg. B1

LENGTH: 915 words

The Pomerantz family's possessions spilled out of the front door and onto the lawn, where a harried Riva Pomerantz paused to coax a neighbor to look past the shoes, the sled and the electronic drum set.

"I have two twin beds inside," she lightly pitched. "Both for 50."

The kids could sleep on the floor for a few nights, she had reasoned.

Parting with furniture was the easy part of a life-changing move. But what to do with her college notebooks, the children's artwork?

"The things you would shlep from house to house, you don't take on a move like this," said Pomerantz, a 28-year-old mother of three. "You don't move that kind of stuff to Israel."

The all-day house sale last Thursday confirmed for neighbors on Bendemeer Road, in the largely Jewish Taylor Road neighborhood in Cleveland Heights, that Joel and Riva Pomerantz were indeed going through with it. They would make **aliyah**, literally, a spiritual ascension, and move permanently to Israel.

Friends and family had learned of the plan months before. Reaction ranged from curiosity to astonishment.

Riva Pomerantz understood.

"There's nothing remarkable about us," she said, as she scanned the caller ID on an ever-ringing kitchen phone. "We don't fly an Israeli flag out our door. We're normal people."

Yet she recently piled personal belongings into a shipping crate. It was hoisted aboard an ocean freighter, which set sail the morning of the house sale. Joel and Riva - with Bracha, 7, Dovid, 5 and Akiva, 2 - will follow shortly on a plane.

American Jews have followed their hearts to Israel since the nation's founding in 1948, though never in numbers large enough to fulfill the ideal of Zionists like Theodor Herzl, who called upon world Jewry to return to the homeland lost in biblical times.

Only about 100,000 Americans have made **aliyah**, and nearly half of those eventually returned.

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But the pace of American immigration is rising, thanks to people like Joel and Riva, a deeply spiritual couple with a taste for adventure and a willingness to trade suburbia for the Holy Land.

Israel expects to welcome about 3,500 immigrants from the U.S. and Canada this year - including about 40 people from Greater Cleveland - the most in nearly 25 years.

The pilgrims cause a sensation on both sides of the ocean.

Israel, a nation of 6.3 million people, is a land of refuge. Most of its immigrants came in distress, fleeing persecution in Europe, the former Soviet Union and in nations of North Africa and the Middle East.

Americans, in contrast, come by choice. They immigrate willingly to a small, Hebrew-speaking country surrounded by enemies, often accepting a lower standard of living and years of adjustment.

"Most Israelis have genuine admiration for Americans who choose to do that," said Dina Roemer, whose family moved from Cleveland Heights to a suburb of Jerusalem nine years ago. "It's certainly a conversation starter."

The Pomerantzses, who are jetting off from New York City July 5 on a charter flight filled with other olim - Jews making **aliyah** - expect to be greeted in Tel Aviv by dignitaries and a brass band.

The reaction on and around Taylor Road is more nuanced.

Beyond Taylor's kosher groceries and orthodox temples, shady side streets are alive with young girls in long dark dresses and boys in skull caps called yarmulkes.

Even non-Jews in the neighborhood know the Passover toast, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Still, Goldie Friedlander was shocked to learn that her best friend, Riva, planned to make the dream real.

"I hear that all the time, 'I'm going to Israel.' No one does," she said.

It's more than a bloody conflict with Palestinians keeping Americans away.

"Israel is our homeland, and that's where we're all supposed to be," Friedlander said. "But it's not an easy life there. Unless you have money, it's a big struggle."

Those concerns weighed upon Joel and Riva Pomerantz, too.

They lived in Jerusalem for three years after their marriage in 1998, and they planned to return after Joel finished a master's program at Cleveland State University. But the years fell by.

"America grows on you," Riva said. "This is a really great community. We got comfortable."

Last year, Joel reminded her of their fading dream. He said a nonprofit group that aids **aliyah**, Nefesh B'Nefesh, would pay their airfare and help them find jobs and Hebrew study.

She resisted.

Then he said something that got her thinking. "Riva, we have only one life to live. How do we want to live it?"

They are orthodox Jews with a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Joel, 31, is a school psychologist for an online charter school. Riva, a free-lance writer, teaches piano and designs Web pages.

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They are also, as Jews, entitled to Israeli citizenship and to a lifestyle maybe only Israel can offer.

"Everybody understands that the land of Israel is different," Joel said, marveling at the concept of a nation lost and reborn. "There's a chance there for an elevated experience."

Riva likens Israel to a radio tower tuned to a special, heavenly frequency.

"My soul is bound up in that land, and I have the best shot at a spiritual life if I go there," she said. "It's cool. We're starting a new life together. How many couples get to do that?"

They leave today for New York City in a rented mini van, planning to visit friends along the way, their last American car trip.

For Goldie Friedlander, the parting is bittersweet. She feels sadness and pride and a sensation she did not expect: Envy.

Her best friend is moving to Israel. Deep down, she feels that she should be going, too.

LOAD-DATE: June 30, 2006

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: LONNIE TIMMONS III THE PLAIN DEALER Riva Pomerantz's home in Cleveland Heights was in disarray during a garage sale last week when the family tried to sell off all belongings they couldn't take to Israel. They are part of a growing trend of American Jews who are immigrating to the Holy Land. Daughter Bracha, 7, is expected to learn Hebrew quickly when she attends a new school in Israel in the fall, while son Dovid, 5, is mostly excited about flying in an airplane.

LONNIE TIMMONS III THE PLAIN DEALER Joel Pomerantz replaces a tool box last week after showing it at a garage sale he and his family had. The family leaves today for Israel. The Pomerantzes are one of four families from Greater Cleveland who are moving to Israel this summer.

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PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper