

Heading back home TO ISRAEL



Shimon, his wife Renana
and their four boys



So that's it... After four and a half amazing shlichut years in South Africa, my family and I are heading back home - to Israel, to the Negev | BY SHIMON SHAMILA

SERVING AS HEAD OF THE ISRAEL CENTRE ON BEHALF OF THE Jewish Agency was much more than a job for me – it was an experience I will cherish for the rest of my life. Aliya, Partnership2Gether, Israel Expos, Tikkun Olam Programme's, Masa, Israel Encounter, Maoz Educational Program, Zionist Caravans, Israel Quiz and all the many other programmes the Israel Centre runs are meant to do one thing – to Zionize the community.

I tried to bring Israel a little bit closer to every South African Jew. I hoped to enable each individual to connect to our homeland in whichever way spoke most closely to his or her heart.

In addition, I was a strong promoter of Aliyah. I tried my best to ensure that each family and every individual had a clear and precise plan and direction to allow them to face the many challenges awaiting them in Israel.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of working with amazing, dedicated and passionate people. Firstly, my staff and shlichim at the Israel Centre – men and women who come to work with smiles on their faces, knowing that every single day they are actively taking part in bringing the Holy Land closer to the hearts of the Jewish people. Working together and uniting our efforts is the strongest asset of the Israel Centre. This allows our organization to achieve an incredible amount of activism with very limited resources.

Secondly, the leadership of the South African Jewish community comprises individuals who work every day to ensure that South African Jewry remains proudly Jewish and Zionist. Unfortunately, they have to deal with a turbulent Anti-Israel environment which stems in large from hypocritical, anti-Semitic, self-hating NGO's and sadly, the government. Fortunately, I do not believe the majority of South Africans share these sentiments.

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I can say with much satisfaction that I enjoyed full cooperation from all major organizations in the community. Every initiative or idea I had, no matter how crazy or controversial, was welcomed.

And last but not least – the South African Jewish community itself. From the moment my family and I stepped on the plane to come to South Africa (yes, even on the plane), community members made us feel

as though South Africa was our home away from home. People, who we had only just met, opened their homes and their hearts to us in a way which we had never experienced before. Living in the heart of Glenhazel, shopping at KoshersWorld, buying pitot at Friends, eating shwarma at Mi-Va-Mi and sending our children to Yeshiva College allowed us to experience South African Jewish hospitality (yes it is a bubble but a nice one). We really enjoyed our stay!

Travelling all around South Africa, reaching out to and working with the Jews of Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, taught me that although each community is unique, they all share that "thing" that makes South African Jews so special. I believe it is their dedication, love and commitment for Yiddishkeit and for the State of Israel.

My JAFI colleagues in other countries throughout the world know, as well as I do, that there are few communities in the world which are infused with as much passion as this one, which makes the position here the envy of every shaliach.

When I return to Israel I'll be working with two very special communities as part of JAFI's Partnership2Gether project, the Jewish Communities of Montreal and San Diego, who partner with my home town of Beer Sheva, the regional municipality of Bnei Shimon and Sha'ar Haneguv. I hope to bring much of the incredible experience gained here in South Africa to the Montreal partnership.

I would like to wish Behatzlacha to the incoming shaliach – Aviad Sela – who brings valuable experience to the position. I have no doubt he will serve the community well. I hope to see you all in Israel as visitors and even more so, as fellow citizens of the incredible State of Israel.

Thank you, Shimon Shamila