

What's your galus exit plan?

by Chananya Weissman -- whole article

Ed. note: Last issue of Torah Tidbits contained the first part of this long article. We had intended to break it up into several parts, but we found that we have the room for the rest of the article in this issue. So here is the whole thing...

There is very little that we know with certainty, but one thing we do know is that at some point in the future - most likely in the relatively near future - the Jewish nation will return to Israel in its entirety. That is our destiny, a divine guarantee that has kept our people going in the darkest of times, and it is rapidly unfolding.

It's time for both individuals and entire communities to plan their exit from the exile. Like a company that is being disbanded, the time has come to wind down the galus, close up shop, and enter a new era. It's going to happen regardless, so best to be proactive.

Which of the following is your exit plan?

I only want to be buried in Israel

It might not sound like much, but this still means something. For one thing, there are cemeteries all over the world, and choosing one in Israel demonstrates an attachment to the land in the most literal sense. There is often an ulterior motive involved here. Tradition teaches that in time of T'CHIYAT HAMEITIM, when the dead come back to life, those buried outside of Israel will

have to roll here through underground tunnels. This will surely be an unpleasant experience, especially if Israel blows them up, mistakenly thinking these tunnels were made by Hamas. To avoid this problem, many Jews choose to be buried in Israel. They want to reside here only as dead people, but it's something.

I am waiting for Mashiach to come

This is the exit plan of the vast majority of religious Jews who live in the Diaspora. It is similar to the plan of the dead, who are also waiting for Mashiach to come in order to live here. The latter group would likely be more exuberant upon his arrival; the former, for all their prayers, would largely find it a terribly inconvenient upheaval of their utopian religious life in exile, free of the responsibility to do more than merely survive.

Some fringe elements of the religious population have even come to believe that it is forbidden to live in Israel, or to support it in any way, until Mashiach comes. We hope Mashiach himself doesn't share this belief, since that would create quite a conundrum; if he decides to come today, must he disassociate himself from the Medina, seek to tear it down, and then build it up again from scratch? Hopefully he will simply become the leader of the current medina and bring what currently exists into the Messianic period. That would certainly be more convenient for all concerned.

Those who have adopted this exit plan must ask themselves if perhaps Mashiach is actually waiting for them to come, and not the other way around.

Considering the way history has unfolded, it seems rather likely that this is the case.

I am waiting for retirement

This exit plan is superior to the previous ones, since it includes residing in Israel during part of one's actual life. This group chooses to spend its prime years, its working years, its youth on foreign soil. That is lamentable. But at least Israel is more than a cemetery to this group; it is a retirement community. It is an even more Jewish version of Florida. There is what to come for that is above the ground, not only below it. This includes the health-care system, tours throughout the country, lectures, and more.

Unfortunately, for the most part it does not include building and creating for the next generation, actually being part of the process. Most of the contributions of these people will be enjoyed by foreign countries. They work their whole lives for other countries and come to Israel in the twilight of their days. It's something. But that's all it is.

I am waiting until I earn enough money to support my descendants

This exit plan will surely take a long time to come to fruition, because it is hard to decide exactly how many descendants one will have, and it is appropriate to be both optimistic and err on the side of caution. In addition, once we consider expected increases in the cost of living, yeshiva tuitions, college tuitions, inflation, and putting enough money away for rainy days, that's a hefty load of cash we're talking

about. Considering how hard it will be to earn quite enough even in the Golden Diaspora, moving to Israel means completely kissing that little dream goodbye.

However, once working becomes physically impossible, you can try the retirement option mentioned above, and if moving overseas at that point is also physically impossible, you can go for the burial option. At the very least, your lifetime of toil will make it possible for all your descendants to move to Israel in your stead, which surely they will do... unless you fall short of your financial goals, and they must continue your mission to earn enough money to last for all eternity.

I am waiting until I must go with only the shirt on my back

This is generally the Plan B of those with the previous exit plan, though they prefer not to phrase it in these terms. Israel is the safe haven option if all else fails. It exists primarily so Jews will have a place to run if and when they have to run. Hopefully they will never have to run for their lives, because they don't really want to live in Israel, ever, and people shouldn't be forced to live where they don't want to be.

Historically these Jews are the ones who recognize that they are no longer especially welcome in their foreign country of choice, but wish to liquidate their assets and leave like a mensch. Unfortunately they tend to miscalculate the window for being able to leave like a mensch, and at some point will be fortunate to leave at all.

There are millions of Jews around the world today who are uncomfortable being Jewish in their foreign country of choice, much as they enjoy living there. This discomfort may involve subtle expressions of hatred for the Jew or clear and present physical dangers that they have become used to. (The ability of the Jew to become used to this is second to none.) Even Jews who do not perceive overt threats to their existence generally sense a latent threat that can become activated at any time. We've always been everyone's favorite whipping boy, nothing has changed, and we know it whether we like to admit it or not.

These millions of Jews are all waiting to book the last seat on the last El-Al flight out of the country before all hell breaks loose, and do not wish to leave one minute sooner. We can only hope they are not incorrect in their prediction of when all hell will break loose, and that this last flight will not be overbooked. Jews do not have a good track record of timing these things right.

I am waiting until I get married

This is the exit plan of choice for young Jews. If they get married young, their exit plan will change to "waiting until we save up some money". Once they have kids the exit plan will change to "waiting until we save up even more money". Once they save up even more money, the exit plan will change to "waiting until it's an ideal time for us to move with our kids". This will never happen, since the burden of acclimating will always be a strong enough excuse to delay it. The exit plan will

therefore change to "waiting until the children are grown and independent". Once that happens, the exit plan will change to "waiting for retirement or burial, because how can we leave our children?"

And so the cycle continues, and the exile drags on indefinitely.

I am waiting until it is safe to live in Israel

The definition of "safe" for those with this exit plan is that there is absolutely no possibility of a terrorist attack, a missile being fired, a war, or any of Israel's nearby countries ever so much as threatening Israel in a speech. It is simply unreasonable to ask a Jew to move to Israel under such circumstances. Of course, we would be horrified if all the Jews already in Israel decided to pack up and leave for exactly the same reason (though surely we would understand). Essentially, whoever is already living in Israel should show some mettle and remain to support this crazy Jewish experiment that we want to be proud of from a distance, but those who don't live there would be crazy to join it and jeopardize their lives. It is unfair to expect everyone to be a daredevil.

What's interesting about this calculus is that it's always a reasonable deal-breaker when it comes to Israel, but it never seems to be a deal-breaker when Jews move anywhere else. Jews move from communities with lower levels of crime to higher levels of crime all the time without batting an eyelash. Jews move to cities with large anti-Semitic populations, countries in Europe that

are becoming increasingly Muslim-friendly and anti-Israel, places where everything that grows from the ground has Jewish blood mixed inside, and even places where it is unsafe to be recognizably Jewish. No problem. Jews will even move to Germany without a second thought. After all, they said they're sorry.

But Israel? No way. Too dangerous.

I don't know if, statistically speaking, Israel is the absolute safest place in the world for a Jew to live. It would be a great service to the Jewish people if someone can figure this out and provide ongoing updates, so Jews can choose where to live accordingly. It's all a numbers game, and giving yourself the best chance to make it to tomorrow is all that matters in life.

I am waiting until Israel is a more religious country

This is the exit plan of choice for religious Jews who don't want to admit that they are waiting for Mashiach to forcibly drag them to Israel. It always sounds nicer to contend that you would live here voluntarily, at least under some circumstances, however remote they may be.

How religious does Israel have to become for this exit plan to be activated? What does this mean exactly, and how is it to be measured? The more nebulous and unlikely the definition, the better. This is because the exit plan is never meant to be activated.

The fact is that, for all its flaws and shortcomings, Israel is right now the

most religiously Jewish country in the entire world. So what, retorts the Jew in exile. The community in which I live is a utopia of religious Jewry, and I simply cannot leave it to live in a country with so much secularism (even though I live in one). I can only live in Israel if it is perfectly Torah-observant, otherwise I must live in a country that is even less Torah-observant. It doesn't even matter if I can find a community in Israel that is even more Torah-observant than the one in which I currently live (an absolute certainty). I must live in exile until Israel is perfectly Torah-observant.

Of course, this conundrum would be made even greater if every Torah-observant Jew felt this way. This would mean that all Torah-observant Jews must steer clear of Israel until all the secular Jews - the only ones who would populate the land - become Torah-observant entirely on their own. Once this happens, the more advanced Torah-observant Jews would be invited to come and take over.

Only a brilliant Jewish mind can come up with this exit plan, but we all know that Jews are smart.

I am waiting for my community to die

This is the exit plan of most Rabbis, as well as other community leaders. Every so often the Chief Rabbi of some country in Europe, or a prominent Rabbi in America, will urge Jews to consider moving to Israel. Presumably, after this brave leader has successfully convinced his entire flock to move, and his vital services are no longer required, he will then turn off the lights, close the

door, and follow his flock. His sacrifice in volunteering to be the absolute last Jew to leave his community is most admirable. How could he possibly leave any sooner? He is doing great work and the community needs him.

Of course, everyone else hearing the Rabbi's message will understand that it does not apply to them for the very same reason. They are also important members of the community, their contributions are vital, and everything would fall apart without them. So the only people who should heed the call to go to Israel are those who contribute nothing to the community and whose presence would be missed by no one.

Maybe, just maybe, the Rabbis are really worried less about the future of their community than their own future. After all, in exile they serve as the great spiritual leaders who keep their community going, keeping alive the dream of one day returning triumphantly to Israel. But the day that triumphant return happens is precisely when these services become obsolete, and they may not find a comparable flock to lead in Israel. These Rabbis who are seen as indispensable community leaders in exile might be just another guy in Israel.

Hence it is much better to remain in exile as long as possible, which, for these people, will hopefully be forever. After all, leaders are supposed to follow.

I am waiting until Israel solves its problems (you name it)

These problems may include the

government, the bureaucracy, the cost of living, the culture, its resemblance or lack thereof to a what a Jewish state should look like, and so much more. This exit plan declares that you would love to live in Israel, and you're moving there the very minute Israel changes to accommodate you. Kol HaKavod!

The problem is that Mashiach will come before that happens. Normally that is a figure of speech to mean that it's not going to happen anytime soon, but in this case it's literally true. Mashiach will come before Israel solves all its problems, let alone accommodating all your earthly and spiritual desires.

What this boils down to is the following straightforward question:

How much do you value living in Israel irrespective of your anticipated quality of life - however you define that? Ideally the answer should be "more than anything in the world if only I can get by", and historically that has been the case for our greatest role models. If we are not on their level and cannot make the most extreme sacrifices that they were willing to make, we should at least acknowledge that this is the ideal, and we should be willing to make at least some significant sacrifices.

I would go so far as to suggest that this is part of the reason why acclimating to Israel can be very difficult, at least in the beginning. If Israel were the easiest, safest, and most prosperous place to live in the entire world, it would not mean anything for a Jew to pick himself up and move here. Indeed, today Israel is a far better place to live on a purely physical level than numerous other

countries, and for that reason many gentiles wish to convert and move here strictly to improve their quality of life.

Ultimately, we will all wind up living here one way or another. If the only way that can happen is for life in exile to once again become hellish to the point of despair, so that the quality of life calculation becomes a no-brainer, that can surely be arranged, but it would be a tragic disgrace for it to happen that way.

The truth is that we do not choose where to live strictly based on quality of life considerations. It is generally due more to inertia than anything else. Even moving to a different home in the same city is a hassle, an expense, and fraught with uncertainty. We usually don't move unless we have to (we are forced out, a family crisis, medical reasons) or we have an overwhelming incentive to do so (a great job opportunity, marriage). Barring either a negative reason that compels us to move or a positive reason to inspire us to move, most people will simply stay put.

It really has nothing to do with the government; you probably don't like your local government any more than you like the government in Israel, but you're not going to move because of it. You're also not going to move somewhere else where you admire the government just for that, nor would you turn down your dream job opportunity in a different country because you don't like the government there. Unless we're dealing with a tyrannical government that threatens your safety - and we're not - this simply isn't a factor. So this is really just an

excuse.

The fact that Israel is not yet a country without any flaws and shortcomings is actually just the way it is supposed to be right now. It means that YOU have a role to play in making it more like it is supposed to be. For example, if you want Israel to be more religious, coming here as a religious person will make Israel more religious. If you want Israel to become safer, more prosperous, and more successful in whatever areas are most important to you, choosing to live here and build your family here is the best way to help make that happen.

Of course, along the way you might be frustrated many times and might even suffer from the "system". The same might happen if you stay wherever you are. Being that Israel is not a tyrannical country (though injustice is certainly rampant), there is plenty of room for good people with dreams of a better future to help create it.

Even if you are not an influential person, just being here makes the country stronger. Every time you buy something, you are helping a fellow Jew make a living in Israel. Your presence here makes everyone else's presence a little more secure, and strengthens the next Jew in exile that he can make it happen, also.

When Mashiach finally does come, you will be able to say with pride that you were here first and helped pave the way. You came to Israel before it was perfect and made it a little better. You didn't move into a finished product that other people created; you helped

create it. Those who come only after Mashiach arrives will hang their heads in shame for being spectators instead of active participants in the building of our land, for choosing to live elsewhere until elsewhere was no longer an option at all.

Israel might not be the absolute cheapest / safest / easiest / most convenient place in the world for you to live today. It might not be a "better deal" than where you currently are. I understand that this matters. I'm also willing to bet that when you add it all up, it's a far better deal than you think. Chances are that, wherever you are, you are struggling to get by, the bank owns your house and your car, the cost of living as a Jew is crushing, and a few rainy days would drown you. Yet somehow you insist that it's great over there, and in Israel you would starve in the street.

Get real.

The exile is winding down whether you realize it or not, and whether you like it or not. Your days there are numbered, and it's not a huge number. It's time to leave on your terms, for entire communities to plan together how to best wind down the business and relocate to your only true home, and for leaders to truly lead their flock back to Israel, even if it is their final act of leadership.

Israel is still a small enough country that even a few thousand newcomers can make a serious demographic and political change. This is your time to come in groups and make a difference. If you sacrifice some luxuries and comforts along the way, it will mean

that much more.

It's not too late to come like a mensch and be part of the ultimate chapter of Jewish history. Soon it will be. Stop making excuses, internalize that even a hard life in Israel is better than an easy life in exile (which you don't have anyway), and make a real exit plan.

The land, your people, and Mashiach are all waiting.

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