

Loving it here

• DR BATYA L. LUDMAN

We recently marked the 18th anniversary of our aliya. I still need to pinch myself at times, as I can't believe that we're really here.

Making aliya is often considered a difficult and even irrational decision. Moving halfway across the world, giving up financial and professional security and leaving behind friends and family are not insignificant obstacles. Yet, in spite of this, we are not alone in having chosen to rebuild our lives and raise our families here, and most of us feel very happy with our decision. As a clinical psychologist, I can't help but ask why, despite the many difficulties of living here, we're so happy.

The answer lies in how we choose to perceive our own happiness. Our outlook on life impacts our sense of well-being. The more grateful we are for all that we have, the more content we are with our lot.

Here are just 18 reasons that explain why I feel blessed to live here. Make your own list of things in your life for which you are grateful, should you ever need a reminder as to why you are so fortunate.

1. **Meaning:** Life here has incredible meaning in everything we do every day. Look at the many miracles we experience daily, but rarely notice. The depth of Jewish life is incredible. Holidays here are amazing, with the lead-up palpable on the streets, in the air and in every grocery store. I'm still moved when the bus driver, gym instructor and cashier at the supermarket, none of whom may be religious, or even Jewish, wish me Shabbat Shalom.
2. **Appreciation:** People live life to the fullest and embrace it with passion. No one takes life, or living here, for granted. They live for the moment because they never know what tomorrow may bring, appreciating even the smallest things.
3. **Sensory stimulation:** Israel offers a multitude of "feel-good" sensory experiences – trees replete with sweet-smelling citrus, dates and pomegranates, pink, red, yellow and orange flowers growing on the same bush; topography that changes dramatically within a 15-minute drive, the scent of spices and the sound of music coming out of hidden ancient alleyways.
4. **Uniqueness:** Life here constantly provides moments where the Bible, history, geography and culture all come alive. Jerusalem is like no other city in the world and hiking up north beneath the snowcapped peaks of the Hermon is as magical as the underwater marine life in Eilat. Holidays are celebrated at the "right time."
5. **Relevance:** You are part of the course of Jewish history. The weekly Torah portion actually has relevance for current events happening here. The prayer for rain precedes the first rain. Where else does the discovery of some ancient artifact make front-page news on a regular basis?
6. **Optimism and excellence:** We may be a small country, but big things happen here. Mighty in brain power, we are the start-up nation in every sense of the word. Not afraid to make mistakes and learn from them, and excited by challenges, with



PEOPLE ENJOY a bike ride along Tel Aviv's promenade last year. (Marc Israel Sellem)

- our creativity and determination, our contributions to medicine and technology have made us a real light unto the nations.
7. **Pride:** Aside from the Nobel laureates of whom we are justly proud, we also have the kindest and most humane army in the world. We generously send our experts to help in other countries and provide medical care to those from beyond our borders.
 8. **Relationships:** Friendships here are cherished, deep, intense and sincere. If need be, I could call upon any number of people for assistance in the middle of the night and they know without hesitation that they can count on me. Our friends have become our family, and people willingly drop everything to help you out.
 9. **Kindness:** The prevalence of *hessed*, acts of pure kindness, is truly amazing. Almost everything imaginable is collected for the less fortunate. Strangers offer help, with talented people of all ages giving tremendous amounts of time (that they may not have) for many wonderful purposes. Youth from an early age participate in school programs that help others and many take time off to do voluntary community service. Where else do youth give so freely of themselves?
 10. **Values:** Children in this country are treasured and welcomed everywhere. Young and old spend time learning new things, often together. People care deeply about each other's welfare.
 11. **Safety:** Despite being perceived elsewhere as a country at war, women and children feel safe walking alone at night.
 12. **Diversity:** What a wonderful melting pot the ingathering of the exiles is. Our children's Sabra spouses and our grandchildren reflect this, provid-

ing so many diverse cultural experiences and opportunities.

13. **Feeling of belonging:** Complete strangers are called "my brother" because in spite of our differences, at times we really are one big family, with someone always close by to lend a helping hand or offer an opinion – whether solicited or not.
14. **Well-being:** Life here is exciting, action-packed. No one seems to sleep, cafés are open at all hours and the news is constantly changing. We appreciate our beautiful beaches, museums, parks and hiking in nature. People have so many ways to enjoy themselves.
15. **Freedom:** In such a diverse environment, you are able to be yourself and speak freely. People don't hesitate to say whatever is on their mind and everyone has something to say.
16. **Empowerment:** Everything is negotiable – There is no such thing as "no." Anything and everything can be bargained for and will be.
17. **Happiness:** From the minute I first stepped foot here as a teenager, this country has felt like home – my home. Israel has become our home, what we know and cherish and are willing to sacrifice for, day in and day out.
18. **Gratitude:** My family loves it here and for that I am eternally grateful. It really doesn't get any better than this. ■

The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist (PsyD) in private practice in Ra'anana, and author of the book Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts.

*ludman@netvision.net.il;
www.drbatyaludman.com*