U.S. JEWS EMIGRATING TO ISRAEL AT HIGHER RATE

MANY SEE OPPORTUNITY TO RENEW THEIR FAITH

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Body

CHICAGO -- Myron and Marilyn Weintraub had all kinds of reasons not to board that plane to Tel Aviv in late December. They were looking forward to a comfortable retirement in Rogers Park, Ill. And some friends raised eyebrows that they would move to ***Israel*** after having visited the country just once.

But the Weintraubs took the leap of ***faith***, joining an uptick in immigrants from North America who are embracing aliyah, a Hebrew word meaning "ascension" that refers to ***Jews*** who move to ***Israel***.

About 2,800 ***U.S.*** and Canadian citizens migrated to ***Israel*** in 2004, the ***highest*** total in 20 years and 75 percent ***higher*** than the number five years ago, according to the Israeli government.

While ***Israel*** has long been a refuge for ***Jews*** fleeing persecution, ***U.S.*** immigrants have been drawn by a variety of factors, including the search for new economic ***opportunities*** and a unique chance to ***renew*** their ***faith***.

And the immigrants make the move with the knowledge that they are entering one of the world'***s*** hot spots, where the threat of suicide bombers has become part of daily life.

Israeli officials consider immigrants, known as olim, to be vital to their nation'***s*** economic and cultural health. Studies show that most ***U.S.*** immigrants to ***Israel*** come with college degrees and quickly find work.

As migrant flows dwindle from other parts of the world, Israeli officials said they are placing greater importance on newcomers like the Weintraubs.

Myron Weintraub, 58, said ***Israel***'***s*** mild climate and ***high***-quality medical care would appeal to anyone approaching retirement.

But Weintraub said their decision was about more than practicality. He said they felt a profound connection to their spiritual heritage in 2003 when they visited ***Israel*** for the first time.

"***Israel*** really is a home for the Jewish people that needs to exist and needs to thrive," he said. "Yes, we've donated money and participated in different events. But going there and becoming a part of the society, we think that'***s*** a way to really make a contribution, by putting ourselves right there."

Israel claims immigration as a core value, spelled out in the 1950 Law of Return that gave every ***Jew*** the right to claim Israeli citizenship. The law was expanded in 1970 to include non-Jewish spouses and some relatives.

Israel, which became a state in 1948, instantly served as a refuge for ***Jews*** displaced during World War II. Likewise, more than 300,000 ***Jews*** ***emigrated*** from the former Soviet Union in 1990 and 1991 as that nation collapsed.

But in recent years, the migration flow dried up. Only 23,226 ***Jews*** migrated to ***Israel*** in 2003, the lowest total since 1988.

Michael Landsberg, an official with the Jewish Agency for ***Israel***, a nonprofit group, said the Israeli government and other agencies responded to the crisis by expanding their outreach to prospective immigrants.

The Israeli government and nonprofit groups offer job training, Hebrew classes, and are considering special mortgage ***rates*** for immigrants, Landsberg said.

Nonprofit groups like the Florida-based Nefesh B'Nefesh, which helped the Weintraubs relocate, supplement the aid by offering help with everything from shipping refrigerators to filing tax returns.

Landsberg, executive director of the Jewish Agency'***s*** immigration department, said he thinks ***many*** Americans began considering ***Israel*** after the ***U.S.*** economic downturn left them looking for a fresh start.

Likewise, the 2001 terrorist attacks left ***many*** ***Jews*** in Americans shaken and more open to life-changing decisions, Landsberg said.

While other immigrants might be "pushed" to move to ***Israel***, Americans need job ***opportunities*** or other factors that "pull" them there, said Andy David, ***Israel***'***s*** deputy consul general in Chicago.

David said ***Israel*** is trying to promote its burgeoning ***high***-tech industry, for example, to Jewish professionals seeking work.

But as more American ***Jews*** move to ***Israel***, some politicians there have expressed concern that American culture will overwhelm traditional Jewish values.

David said it is often tough for newcomers to coexist with longtime residents.

"It'***s*** always a challenge," David said. "You always ask, are you going to be a melting pot or a salad bowl?"

Chaim Waxman, a professor of sociology and Jewish studies at Rutgers University, said American ***Jews*** in ***Israel*** typically form "Little Americas" and often have ***higher*** education and income levels that set them apart from typical Israelis.

But Waxman, author of American Aliya, said any resentment takes a back seat to the admiration ***many*** Israelis feel about Americans who make the move.

"I know there are Israelis who say to the Americans, 'You're nuts. Why did you come? You have so much going for you,' " Waxman said. "But those questions show that (Americans) are appreciated much more for their contributions."

Waxman said he thinks migration from the ***United States*** has reached its peak, but Jewish Agency officials say proper marketing could double the numbers.

Although ***Israel*** remains under threat from terrorism, experts say immigration numbers generally are not affected by increased violence.

In fact, immigrants like 23-year-old Esther Enright said they feel reasonably safe, thanks to the visible and sophisticated Israeli security network.

"To my friends, it's all kind of scary because they turn on CNN as well. But you turn on the radio in Chicago and you hear about drive-by shootings," said Enright, who recently moved to ***Israel*** from Mequon, Wis. "I can walk out at night in any part of Tel Aviv, by myself, and not give it a second thought."

Despite support from fellow immigrants, Americans who move to ***Israel*** find themselves facing the ups and downs of adapting to a new society.

Shoshana Krakowski, a 20-year-old former Chicago resident, said she occasionally questioned her decision to move there in 2002.

In a telephone interview from a Tel Aviv suburb, Krakowski said it was difficult living far from her family, being able to sputter out only a few Hebrew words and navigating endless security checkpoints.

Krakowski, now a student at Bar-Ilan University, said she still mainly hangs around other Americans. But slowly, she stopped feeling like an outsider.

The defining moment, Krakowski said, was acquiring Israeli citizenship last year and receiving a passport with her name on it.

Now she looks forward to pursuing a career in social work and spending the rest of her life in ***Israel***.

"It's weird. You feel like you've transformed into something else all of a sudden, like I had reached some sort of dream," Krakowski said.

"Yes, you always feel a little different because you are an immigrant. But I finally felt like I'm not a tourist anymore. I really belong here."

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