

Diaspora effect

A new book looks at Israeli expats living in the US



UDI SOMMER.
'There is a disconnect.'



• By NATHAN BURSTEIN

Depending on your sources, as many as 750,000 Israelis live in the US, a large number of them concentrated in New York City. For decades, their experiences were viewed in Israel largely in ideological terms – as a rejection of the Jewish state, or even of the Zionist idea.

That attitude has largely broken down in recent years, a trend reflected in *Krovim Rechokim*, a Hebrew-language book published in December about the Israeli expatriate community living in the US.

In interviews with dozens of families across the US, author Udi Sommer made a counterintuitive discovery – that Israelis' ties to their homeland are often strengthened after they leave, particularly following the arrival of children.

"When there are no kids, many people just move on," says Sommer, 35, a

Jerusalem native who is now an assistant professor of political science at SUNY-Albany. "They go to school, they get a job – their professional identity or identity as a student becomes dominant."

That disconnect between past and present tends to fade, however, once children enter the picture. In deciding how to raise their kids – which language to speak, what sort of education to provide – Israeli immigrants are often forced to confront tensions that long lay dormant, or which they might not have been aware of in the first place.

"If [immigrants] arrive with kids, or when kids are born, suddenly the identity crisis becomes something that they have to deal with," says Sommer, who, along with his wife Michal, is the parent of two young children, Talia and Ori, born in the US. "The kids don't need to be very old or very sophisticated – they can use just a few words to ask, Who are you? Who am I? What kind of family are we?"

Different responses to these questions provide the focus of *Krovim Rechokim* (which in Hebrew is a play on the words for "near" and "far," and the term used for "distant relatives"). Using input from 30 in-depth conversations – as well as material from dozens of shorter encounters – Sommer has provided one of the most comprehensive portraits of Israelis living in America, detailing the decisions and compromises they make as they navigate questions of who they are and what they hope their children will be.

"Is it possible to be Israeli outside of Israel?" Sommer asks in the introduction. "And if so, for how long?"

The answer, perhaps predictably, is that it depends: on family, on environment, on the commitment of the parents involved.

For some of the families in *Krovim*, Israel serves as a major point of connection, with parents seeking out an Israeli social network or insisting on

Hebrew as the language of the household. In other families, ties with Israel are de-emphasized or placed within narrow parameters, such as by a mother who presses her children to pursue her version of the American Dream.

WITH GRADUATE TRAINING in clinical psychology (he also has a PhD in political science), Sommer sought a diverse group for his interviews, pursuing potential subjects via Web postings, word of mouth and other means. The resulting discussions included immigrants from a variety of age groups, political orientations and professional backgrounds, as well as parents with different reasons for leaving Israel. Some of the families are recent arrivals while others have been in the US for decades, watching as their own children grow and have kids of their own. Some arrived primarily to pursue economic or professional advance-



'WHAT KIND of family are we?' The Sommers on vacation.



TALIA SOMMER. 'If it weren't for her, it wouldn't have happened.'



'KROVIM RECHOKIM.' Sommer is now in the early stages of translating his book into English.

ment, while one couple, here since the '60s, originally came in search of better medical care for their daughter.

Although the families' experiences differ, certain themes recur throughout the book, which Sommer describes as popular non-fiction that incorporates elements of his academic training. For young immigrants, Israel becomes more significant with the arrival of children, who often cause parents to re-engage with their homeland and seek out family friends with a similar background.

"When kids are born [to] people who had no connection with the Israeli community, suddenly the parents' Israeli identity becomes a major component of their experience," Sommer says.

Ironically, moving away from Israel often makes parents more religious, inspiring them to embrace aspects of Judaism they may not have observed in their youth.

"When I asked people, 'What do you

do with your kids? What do you teach them?,' in many cases they would say, 'I try to teach them Israeliness,'" Sommer recalls. "When I asked them to be more specific, the majority of the examples were around religious content – things

'If immigrants arrive with kids, or when kids are born, suddenly the identity crisis becomes something they have to deal with'

related to the holidays and so on."

By way of example, with the Adloyada, the traditional Purim parade in Israel that's attended by the secular majority, "there is no religious association neces-

sarily," Sommer says. But outside Israel, "all of a sudden, there is a disconnect.... So much of what they thought of as Israeli, in the US becomes Jewish."

As with many of their Jewish-American counterparts, continuity becomes a concern for many Israeli expats. In passages that should resonate with US rabbis and other Jewish leaders, interview subjects tell Sommer about what they've successfully passed on, and what appears to have been lost. One mother speaks warmly about sharing books in Hebrew with her daughter, but expresses sadness that her son, in a relationship with a non-Hebrew speaker, now chooses to communicate in English. Inter-marriage also figures prominently in a number of the interviews.

BUOYED BY the book's success in Israel, where it sparked admiring media coverage and debate, Sommer is now in the early stages of translating it into English,

with hopes of releasing *Home but Away* for an American readership. (In the meantime, excerpts can be read in Hebrew at krovimrechokim.com, where visitors can also order the Hebrew edition.)

As much as children can spur questions about identity, they can also help parents adapt, Sommer says. Recalling unconventional Yom Kippur services he attended in the fall, the author recounts his own mild sense of alienation – and the effect his daughter Talia, then 5, had on him when she joined him.

"I found [the services] very interesting, but I found it hard to relate emotionally and spiritually," he says.

His daughter's enthusiasm changed his feelings. "I was very excited about her excitement. Seeing my daughter just made me connect," he says. "It's an example of how you change along with your children. It happened through my daughter – if it weren't for her, it wouldn't have happened." ●