

THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR ISRAEL
BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Aliyah Zoom Committee Meeting - February 17, 2025

Members Present: Bruce Leboff, Chair; Rabbi Steven Wernick, Deputy Chair

David Barish, Karma Feinstein Cohen, Michael Frankel, Robert Hertzberg, Candace Kwinter, Danny Lamm, , Sergio Oberlander, Karen Pack, Marina Rosenberg Kortiny, Stephen Rosedale, Kimball Taylor,

Invitees: Mark Wilf

Victor Asser, Laura Cutler, Shmulik Fried, Joseph Glyn, Dorron Kline, Lori Klinghoffer, Mario Lev, Almog Moskovich, Inbar Ruimy, Zev Schwartz, Eliahu Shaul, Alon Weiss

Professional Staff: , Yehuda Setton, Shay Felber

Moshe Adiri, Riki August Cohen, Sharon Handler, Yehuda Feinberg, Limor Kay-Brinna, , Ornit Reshef, Natan Schachter, Shimon Shamila, Natalie Shaiderman, Hagit Weiss, Avtamo Yosef, Rina Zaslavsky, Orly Zuckerman

Agenda

Opening and Greetings

Bruce Leboff, Chairman, Aliyah Committee

3 years of the Russia-Ukraine War

Natalie Shnaiderman, Director of Strategic Development and Partnerships
Dimitry Sobol, Oleh from Odessa, Ukraine

Summary of 2024 in Aliyah & Absorption

Shay Felber, Deputy Director General, Aliyah & Absorption Unit

2025 Aliyah Forecast

Shay Felber, Deputy Director General, Aliyah & Absorption Unit
Shimon Shamila, Director, Programs & Operations, Aliyah & Absorption Unit

Open Discussion and Questions

Closing Remarks

Rabbi Steven Wernick, Deputy Chair, Aliyah Committee

Opening and Greetings

Bruce Leboff opened the meeting, saying that after 500 days of war, the longest in Israeli history. Watching the return of some of the hostages and the issues of bringing them back and the reality of the many who have been killed, it is an extremely difficult time.

He congratulated **Yehuda Setton** as new Director General and CEO of JAFI, following in Amira's footsteps

He then congratulated **Chagit Weiss** as the new COO

Mark Wilf said that today, 500 days of the war, is foremost in our minds and we are all praying for better days. He thanked everyone for their time and leadership and said that the Aliyah work continues. We are talking about the future and building of Israel and Aliyah is first and foremost in this. Yehuda and staff are working very well.

Yehuda Setton says Aliyah is not just about the number of Olim. He thanked **Bruce** and **Steve** for leading the committee as well as **Shay** and the entire professional team. We must connect people to Israel and their Jewish identity and need new ideas for them to find their place in Israel.

3 years of the Russia-Ukraine War

Shay Felber said that as seen in the PowerPoint, we have been very busy with our work with Ukraine. It is fascinating to see numbers like this, which we have not been seen since 2000. There have been many problems and we made sure that no matter what the situation, everyone who wanted to come would be able to. The numbers are now less, as most of those who wanted to come have already arrived. We must continue to work in Russia not just for Aliyah but with summer camps and other Jewish activities.

It is also good to see that most of those coming are not just escaping the situation but that 60% of those who came were considering Aliyah before the war.

The number of those eligible is approximately 600,000, according to **Sergio Della Pergola** 500,000. Chabad sees this figure to be as much as 800,000.

These years have been very difficult. The PowerPoint shows how we worked during this period. If there is a ceasefire in the war, then hopefully the husbands and children of those already in Israel will join their families here. Our main goal is to work with those left behind.

Unfortunately, El Al is not flying there due to security issues and it does not seem that it will be flying soon. We have opened the system enabling Olim to fly from other areas. We will continue this until El Al is cleared to resume flights.

The call system in Russia is comprised of 24 staff members who must follow the exact rules of Russian law.

Since last March we have not been called to court, but we know that this can change at any time and we are ready if we need to resume this process.

Natalie Shnaiderman told the committee she had not yet returned to Israel and is close to the border, saying that it has been a very educating experience being with all the staff in Ukraine. Currently activities have resumed in safe areas. There is still 18% of the land occupied by Russians. We are offering aid where needed. We have resumed our in-person activities throughout Ukraine. This can be seen in the PowerPoint. There are youth programs and there was the largest ever Aliyah fair. We expand our programs whenever and wherever we can. Infrastructure will be needed when the borders open and the war ends. Big cities in Russia and near the border are also sometimes under attack and people are feeling insecure.

Dimitry Sobol was introduced. He is 24, made Aliyah in 2023 from Odessa, where he spent his whole life and graduated from medical school. He was on a young doctors MASA program in Haifa and later participated in Ulpan Etzion. He has passed his exams and will shortly begin working in the medical field. He told the committee that his desire to come on Aliyah was from way before the war. He explained that his father was ill and he received citizenship to get treatment here, and Dimitry had permission to be his guardians here. He was therefore allowed to leave. Otherwise, he would have had to pay bribes of 6000 to 8000 dollars.

Dimitry said that Ulpan Etzion was a good experience. While he was there, he was also preparing for his exams, while studying Hebrew in the top class. He said it was hard doing both simultaneously. He is happy to have made Aliyah. His first time in Israel he admitted he was a bit disappointed as his dream and reality were not the same. But now, even if he thought he might leave he is too emotionally connected to the people and life here.

Natalie thanked him and **Bruce** wished his father a speedy recovery.

Summary of 2024 in Aliyah & Absorption

Shay said the numbers can be seen in the PowerPoint, both of the Aliyah files, and those arriving. An Aliyah Fair together with MASA had 1,000 young adults come to explore their options.

The ages of the Olim are around the same as last year- a young group, and a lot of children. This is very helpful to Israeli society. We continue to see the numbers of Aliyah files increasing.

During the war over 32,000 Olim arrived. This number is equivalent to a small town in Israel. He gives those who have come a lot of credit. Many of them moved to the North. Exact numbers are on the PowerPoint. A lot are coming to show their solidarity and see their futures here, not just because they are worried about antisemitism.

The Olim who came from Ethiopia were brought under Law of Return. Another group are waiting to come shortly.

The lone soldiers are our responsibility and we work hard to take care of them. Two weeks ago, there was a ceremony in memory of the 24 Olim Lone Soldiers who were murdered in the war.

At this time, 6,500 Olim are residing in our Absorption Centres, many who had to be evacuated during the war.

2025 Aliyah Forecast

Shimon Shamila said the table in the PowerPoint shows how well we are doing. We were in range of our target, albeit the low range.

As for the 2025 forecast we know that in times of distress people open Aliyah files and many of them won't actually won't be coming shortly. In order to estimate the number, we have taken them out of the equation. We are seeing an Increase from the west and a decrease from FSU, unless something unanticipated happens

Shay said that if the government works with us, offering additional aid for the Olim, we will be able to increase even more.

Bruce told the committee that the most significant factor influencing Aliyah numbers is Russia

Steven Wernick asked about the number of people staying in Israel, the retention rate from Ukraine. **Shay** said that the percentage of those leaving is less than 10%. Most of them are settled happily in Israel and their husbands will hopefully be joining them. They have found jobs, learned the language, and their children are settled in the education system.

Natalie said that most people going back to Ukraine are from Europe. Once their temporary status is over, a decision about those who remain or return will be made. When their visa to Europe will end, we will reach out.

David Barish asked if we have the number of potential Olim. **Yehuda Setton** explained that this is our target now, talking to the people in Israel and our estimate is 10,000 to 14,000 people. In the main areas of refugees, we have a lot of activity to connect them to Israel and **Shay** said that in 2025 their visas will end.

Yehuda Setton said that we want them to come to Israel and they will be helpful in rebuilding Israeli society, group Aliyah, etc. We are working to create an atmosphere that more people will want to join those here.

Bruce said that due to the war, people have quickly become part of Israeli society and we should make sure that they want to stay, not leave it all to chance. Dynamics are changing.

Open Discussion and Questions

Dorron Kline of the Olim Associations related to the Aliyah figures. The Associations connect to those already here and work to make them part of Israeli society, The Associations work closely with Olim from all over the world. He emphasized that they are partners with the Jewish Agency and want to work together.

Shay spoke about the latest resolution, that was passed the day before the zoom. It relates to different professions enabling Olim to get their license to work in Israel. Two major changes – the Olim can

apply to get their licence prior to their Aliyah and get approval. This can save significant time. If the Oleh has enough experience before their Aliyah it can also affect their internship. This will make the process much faster and easier. If for example the Oleh is a social worker they only have to do a test ensuring that their level in Hebrew is sufficient and can begin to work. This is another step to ease the process and reduce bureaucracy. The next step will be for those in the medical professionals with, working with the Ministry of Health. These steps are significant and Israel really need these professionals now.

Bruce said this will definitely be a hot topic at all the Aliyah fairs. We will no longer see professionals working in cleaning or driving taxis.

Kimball Taylor said he thinks the Aliyah number will be surpassed when the war ends in Ukraine. He thanked everyone for their work and said that during this time of turmoil and stress the Jewish Agency did amazing work.

Bruce said he hopes to see as many as possible in March.

Closing Remarks

Rabbi Werner told the committee something that he had just heard.

The question is what is the Bracha we say when the hostages come home?

The reply he heard was both Shechinou and Baruch Dayan HaEmet.

The first is for our relief and joy in their return.

The second one is normally what we say when we hear bad news. Here it is said without the name of Hashem. The reason is that the cost to our society is very high and the war and conflict around the country is the Emet of the reality of what are we living through. We can't escape reality.

On the 500th day we have a lot to be thankful for— Aliyah, hostages returned and our resilience through the many challenges and things that have to be addressed. We are a people of faith and resilience and our values have brought us here. We are realists.

May the day come soon that we only have to say Shechinou.