

The Story of one Israeli American

Have you ever felt like an alien? Have you ever been somewhere where the culture, the language, the climate, and the people are completely different from anything you have seen growing up?

There is a student at Sunset High named Itay Mevorach. Itay was born in Zikhron Ya'akov, Israel in 2003. Itay and his family moved from Israel to the United States in 2011.

Moving from one city or state to another is a life changing experience for most people. Moving from one *continent* to another is an adjustment that changes the world around you in ways most can barely imagine.

For Itay, it seemed like the sun was always shining in Israel and clouds were scarcely seen in the bright blue sky. The rain was rare but refreshing when it fell on the streets. It created a steam that was warm and fresh to walk on.

This is the picture Itay paints of what Israel was like, and it sounds like a beautiful sight to see. Year-round, kids played soccer on fields of grass, and swimming pools were filled with people trying to escape from the heat.

As I listened to Itay describe his life in Israel, I could picture the sun and imagine those hot days and the relief of a swim in a cool pool.

But Itay also described other sights and sounds, such as bomb sirens warning the cities of the dangerous reality that they lived in.

When I asked Itay why his family moved to the U.S., it was very apparent that it was not all sunshine and rainbows in Israel.

“At the age of 5, almost every kid in Israel has heard a bomb siren and knew what to do,” Itay says. “We would know where the shelters were and remained calm because of how common it was.”

Itay’s family moved to the U.S. in part due to the political tension and danger. The other factor was a job offer for his father. Itay’s father has worked at Intel for years and got an opportunity to work for the company in America and was provided a work visa.

According to Itay the growing danger and political challenges were a big factor in the decision to move. Even though these issues were a big presence in moving, Itay was too young to fully understand why they were moving.

People are extraordinary, considering that they can adapt to just about any environment, especially if they are young and know only one way of life. Most children know nothing of what it would be like to live somewhere where there is a fear of bombs or military assaults on your country. Itay has lived in this circumstance and now lives in a very different world in Oregon. I asked him where he preferred to live, and he shared with me the pros and cons in his opinion.

It is a hard question to answer because Zikhron Ya'akov and Oregon are vastly different and have their own unique charms.

The summers in Israel were blistering hot, hot enough to overpower the air conditioning. People would always play outside, seeking to escape the humidity of their homes.

To Itay, Israel was his first home, a place where he could feel safe and loved by his community.

“It’s not just the similarities that everyone bonded over,” Itay says. “It’s also the fact that everyone was always outside. Regardless of who the person was, you would probably end up playing with them.”

Itay has always been good at making friends. Of course, it’s easier when you can communicate through the same language.

“When me and my family first moved here,” Itay says, “I knew no English whatsoever to use for a conversation. I went into my first day of American school, at Jacob Wismer Elementary School, and knew two words in English: banana and giraffe, because they are the same in Hebrew. I knew one phrase which was, ‘Can I go to the bathroom?’”

Not having any prior English knowledge was a minor setback, as Itay adapted so fast from hearing others around him speak it. Today, he is an exceptional English speaker and was bilingual by the age of 10.

Oregon's summers are warm, but year round, Oregon rarely gets so warm that it encourages the masses to go out and interact with each other. Itay expressed that he felt American Culture was much less social and more centered around technology and staying inside.

“I used to be outside in my freetime a lot more,” he says, “but now I often spend my free time playing video games with friends.”

The usual social hobbies from outside of school vary from culture to culture, but I wanted to know more about how moving to Oregon affected Itay’s connection to Jewish culture.

“The move slowly weakened my Hebrew,” Itay says. “I now speak like I am in second or third grade in Hebrew, even though I’m a sophomore, because I don’t get to practice very often. But the move did not weaken my Jewish roots. I still feel very connected to my Jewish culture. Moving definitely changed me, I used to always play soccer outside and be a decent swimmer, but now I don’t go swimming that often and I quit soccer here in sixth grade.”

Israel is his homeland, and it will always have a special place in his story.

“My favorite Jewish holiday is Yom Kippur,” he says. “Everyone from age 13 or older fasts. Yom Kippur was the last day historically of the Seven Day War, where Israel conquered back a lot of territory. On Yom Kippur you reflect on the last year, and if you have sinned you ask for forgiveness from God. I am not the most religious person, but I feel like I become more connected to the culture and friends when the technology and food is out of your mind, and you have time to really reflect.”

To me Yom Kippur is one of the most beautiful parts of Itay’s story, because it gives him, his friends, and those who celebrate the chance to reflect on themselves and their year.

I wonder how Americans would feel about immigrants if we could hear from and be inspired by their stories? I wonder how other Americans would react when they hear stories like Itay’s of growing up with the real threat of bombs or in a country at war? We often hear the expression that we are a nation of immigrants, yet it seems that we may have lost touch with our direct line to our collective countries of origin.

Itay has a powerful story, an Israeli story that became an American story, too. Thank you Itay for sharing some of your memories of your childhood in Israel. Thank you for enriching my life by sharing more of yours.