

Making it to the other side

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

If aliyah had been a piece of cake for Elizabeth Kay, she might not have found her niche combining art therapy and garden therapy to help people overcome difficulties in life, including those that come with moving to a new country.

“When I look back, I realize it took a long time to find my way,” she reflects, 34 years after arriving with her parents, Arthur and Shirley Cahn, from Monsey, New York.

At the time, she had just returned from a gap year in Jerusalem and was quite happy to be home. But her parents had announced, while visiting her that year, “Elizabeth, we’re making aliyah.”

It wasn’t a very surprising decision; the Cahns had sent their four daughters to Zionist schools and had taken them to live in the Old City of Jerusalem the summer Elizabeth was 15. They had organized meetings of Tehilla: The Voluntary Union for Religious Aliyah.

Nevertheless, “I never imagined we would move here,” says Elizabeth. “We made aliyah in September and I thought, I have to give it a chance.”

She did a year of National Service in the dialysis unit of Shaare Zedek Medical Center, and then began her BA degree in Land of Israel studies at Bar-Ilan University, planning to be a tour guide because of her love of the outdoors and Israel’s history and archaeology.

“I found these years very challenging, trying to fit in to Israeli culture, building a whole new social circle and creating a life for myself here in Israel,” she recalls.

But she did enjoy working as a guide at the Tower of David Museum, and she later completed a two-year tour guides’ course in Jerusalem. In 1989, she met Barrie Kay, a medical student from England, at a mutual friend’s wedding in Israel.

“We wrote letters back and forth until he made aliyah in September 1990, and we got married in October,” she says. “We lived in Jerusalem for a few years and then he got drafted into the army as a doctor in Tel Nof air force base near Rehovot. So we lived there for over a year.”

By that point, the family included a three-year-old daughter and one-year-old son.

Elizabeth recalls that time as a positive turning point in her absorption process. “It was an incredible experience because we met a whole different population – pilots and air force personnel, whom we got to know as part of our daily lives. Our love for Israel grew through an appreciation of the people behind the scenes, and this deepened our connection.”

Their next stop was Modi’in, where they have lived ever since. With young children, tour guiding was no longer a good fit for Elizabeth. She began working as an environmental educator at the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel.

Two years later, she was asked by the Yachad school in Modi’in – where the population encompasses both secular and religious children – to develop a class combining nature study and relevant Jewish traditions and holidays.

Elizabeth accepted the job enthusiastically.

She loved being outdoors with the children, planting a garden and going for nature walks. She noted with interest that some children who had a hard time in the regular school setting blossomed in her program.

WHEN A colleague suggested she take a course at Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts in garden therapy, Elizabeth jumped at the chance, even though by now her family included another daughter and son.

The course taught her “a whole different way of connecting to children’s emotions” and also taught her something about herself: In trying so hard to be Israeli all these years, she had unnecessarily blocked the American part of herself.

“It can be beautiful to retain the culture you grew up with and combine it with the culture you are in now. I realized I had to let that part of me back in,” she explains.

At Yachad, she started working with small groups of children with emotional difficulties in the greenhouse and garden, supervised by a psychotherapist. She found this work rewarding and wanted to learn more. As there is no master’s degree course in horticultural therapy in Israel, in 2014 she enrolled in an art therapy master’s program at the University of Haifa.

“For my internship, I did art therapy with teenagers at risk at Ben-Shemen Youth Village. I was there for four years and it was incredible. The kids come from such hard families and they had such will to push on.”

For a couple of years, Elizabeth worked for an organization that builds gardens in youth villages, and then she started thinking about a way to mesh art and garden therapy. The problem was finding the right venue for such a venture.

The solution fell from heaven when she and her younger daughter went to buy a plant at Wende Garden Center in Shilat, near Modi’in. On the grounds was an empty building that had housed a café with its own garden. The agronomist at Wende was someone she knew from Yachad and – to make a long story short – Hachamama Shel Elizabeth (Elizabeth’s Greenhouse) opened there in November 2017.

Clients thus far include children and teens; she also offers team-building workshops for corporations and is creating workshops for seniors. Many of the families she serves are *olim* whose kids are struggling to adapt.

Each child chooses a plot of land to cultivate in an individual way. In the art room they work with clay and paint, again in any way they choose, even if sometimes they want to throw these materials to vent anger.

“I really relate to them and their hardships, but since I’ve come to the other side I can see the light at the end of the tunnel,” says Elizabeth. “I can instill that hope in them, because I’ve been there. And I can help them find the beauty here in Israel through the art and the gardening. It gives them a lot of comfort.”

With three out of four of her children in the army now, Elizabeth feels that she has truly integrated into the country and Israeli life. “When I look at my children, I can honestly see the measure of my successful aliyah. I feel very blessed.” ■



ELIZABETH CAHN KAY, 52
FROM MONSEY, NY, TO MODI’IN, 1985

(Ingrid Muller)