

# FROM TO

by Shlomo Ben-Yissachar

## The Turning Point

"I had lived in Miami since I was a child. And even though I'd been a rabbi of a major Young Israel branch for years, believe it or not, I'd never been to Eretz Yisrael. Not even once," Rav Leff recalls. "Ironically, the opportunity to come visit happened just when the shul was passing through a turbulent period, when some of the congregants had openly hinted that I should become more 'Zionistic.'"

Though his congregants knew that Rav Leff wasn't about to exchange his black hat and coat (*kapote*) for a crocheted *kip-pah*, they were only too happy to offer to accommodate him to finally visit Eretz Yisrael. They even found someone with an apartment in Jerusalem's Old City who was willing to trade homes with the *rav*'s family.

The trip proved to be a turning point in Rav Leff's life.

"When we returned to JFK Airport in New York, my wife and I looked at each other and said, 'What are we doing here? We should be in Eretz Yisrael!' Mind you, I had a lifetime contract awaiting me at the Young Israel of North Miami Beach, if I wanted it."

Rav Leff slowly settled back into his routine of tending to the needs of his shul's community. The idea of uprooting his family and moving to Eretz Yisrael started to fade. Until one day, someone in the shul called Rebbetzin Leff and said, "Let's move together to Eretz Yisrael. To a place called Matityahu. Maybe your husband can be the rabbi there, since at the moment, the moshav doesn't have one."

"My wife was convinced that we should give it a try. But I wasn't, though I was willing to listen. The moshav was under the aegis of Poalei Agudas Yisrael. It ►►

# NORTH MIAMI MATITYAHU

From North Miami to Matityahu:  
Rabbi Zev Leff Spearheads a Drive to Attract *Frum*  
Families to His Picturesque Moshav

*What would motivate a respected pulpit rabbi in chic North Miami Beach, Florida, to uproot himself and his family from a lucrative position, and risk his entire career on a seemingly impossible spiritual quest, atop a windswept and all-but-desolate moshav in the Modiin region of Eretz Yisrael?*

*When Rav Zev Leff reminisces about his fateful decision of over twenty years ago, to leave the Young Israel of North Miami Beach for "no-man's-land," he still shakes his head and laughs. Without the prodding of various rabbanim, Rav Leff might still be enjoying a Shabbos kiddush with his congregants in the Florida sunshine.*



Photos: Joel Rosenstein



consisted of eleven families, living in the middle of nowhere. And here I was in North Miami Beach, tending to a beautiful shul with 300 families, with a lifetime contract in my grasp. But we decided to take a pilot trip to Matityahu, for ten days, to see if there was something interesting to look forward to and build on."

The Leffs' return to the Holy Land did not begin auspiciously. "We were taken from the airport in a pickup truck to a place that was literally a no-man's-land. They put us in this freezing house. It was so cold that I turned to my wife and said, 'First thing in the morning, we're getting out of here!'"

"But our destiny is written Above. The next morning, we overslept. By the time we woke up, the sun was shining and it was a bit warmer. We left the house, were enthralled with the surrounding landscape, and thoroughly enjoyed meeting the lovely people on the moshav. It was then that we started to see something special here. However, I was still far from convinced that this was the right move for us to make."



## Leaving the Comforts of Home

"After returning home, I spoke with Rav Gifter, who had originally sent me to the Young Israel of North Miami. I painted Matityahu as a bleak and dismal place, and Miami as nice and easy. (You have to know how to ask a *sheilah*.) But Rav Gifter told me that if I could make a *par-nassah* in Eretz Yisrael, then that's where the future is... take the opportunity."

Still feeling the need for more spiritual reinforcement, Rav Leff consulted with the Bostoner Rebbe. "He also told me that Matityahu presented a unique opportunity for me." Any lingering doubts were put to rest once and for all when Rav Leff then went to meet with Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. "He was very positive about making the move, but urged me not to leave the Miami *kehillah* high and dry, without finding a suitable replacement."

After these consultations, Rav Leff summoned the shul's Board of Directors and told them, "Well, you asked me to be more 'Zionistic.' So, I've decided to leave the shul, in order to move to Matityahu."

Rav Leff's stunning announcement caught the shul off-guard. "However, the shul wasn't convinced that I was leaving forever, and gave me six months to make a final decision. They weren't going to hire another rabbi until they were absolutely one hundred percent certain that I wouldn't return. Mind you, a shul such as the Young Israel of North Miami Beach is a much sought-after posting for many congregational rabbis. I also didn't want to make it easy for myself to go back, so even though I didn't put my house up for sale for awhile, I shipped all 13,000 sefarim that I had in my library to Matityahu."

In 1983, when Rav Leff and his family arrived in Matityahu for good, there were



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halachos of living in Eretz Yisrael, such as *shmittah* (Matityahu owns two beautiful vineyards that produce a magnificent bounty of grapes for the Carmel Mizrahi Winery), which was new to me. In an American *kehillah*, the rabbi's basic functions are dealing with *brissos*, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals. Matityahu was a whole new ballgame for me."

## Momentum

Slowly but surely, word spread that although Matityahu might be off the beaten path, it had a *rav* who loved and nurtured his *frum* pioneers. As the moshav began to grow, Rav Leff was also able to start teaching and speaking throughout the country. "There's something about building things on your own that's exciting. The people of the moshav were getting what they needed. Almost everyone

had a job. A person can be a fine Torah Jew while working, and still make Torah the *ikkar* of his life. My children were going to good yeshivos, and not only were they happy being in Eretz Yisrael, my wife and I were even happier that they were being sheltered from outside influences."

Today, Matityahu is a true anomaly within the moshav movement. Though a sizeable majority of families on the moshav are originally from the United States and other English-speaking countries, there's not a single TV antenna or satellite dish. Sixty families, and not one TV set. And that's the way Rav Leff intends to keep things.

"Matityahu doesn't have the same luxuries and it certainly isn't a satellite of America in Eretz Yisrael. But here people have the opportunity to come to a place and adjust to Eretz Israel, along with

people of the same mindset (American/Anglo). It's never easy to acclimate right away when one makes the jump from America, but if one has to acclimate, then Matityahu is a truly unique place."

Matityahu is no longer the windswept, desolate no-man's-land that Rav Leff discovered, over twenty years ago. With massive construction projects abounding throughout the region (Kiryat Sefer, Modiin, Hashmonaim), Matityahu has also become an attractive real estate property. But even with construction cranes looming a few hundred yards from the moshav, Matityahu remains an island of tranquility. Young couples push baby strollers along beautiful tree-lined paths, and the sounds of passionate Torah learning waft from the windows of the kollel.

Rav Leff — who is not only Matityahu's spiritual leader but also its *rosh yeshivah* (for American post-high school yeshivah students) and *rosh kollel* (for men from Matityahu and Kiryat Sefer) — couldn't be happier. However, he isn't resting on his laurels. With real-estate prices soaring in the region, Matityahu must grow or be "absorbed" by outside interests. Rav Leff and Matityahu's management are looking to take the moshav to the next level by offering property and creating an independent school system modeled after the Agudah-oriented Torah Umesorah system in the United States.

"We now have so much to offer, because our moshav is a beautiful, *heimishe* place to live. It's important for us to grow, while at the same time maintaining our uniqueness and identity."

Rav Leff's dynamism has also helped him expand his influence beyond the borders of Matityahu. ArtScroll is soon to publish his two newest sefarim, on the Shemoneh Esrei and on the *moadim*. It's not unusual for him to give an inspiring *shiur* to a chareidi audience in Bnei Brak by night, and an insightful *drashah* at the OU-Israel Center in Jerusalem the next morning.

Indeed, Rav Leff has met with success far beyond anything he could have dreamed of in North Miami Beach. ■