



TELLING our STORY

Finding a Bayit (house) for All Seasons

Yael and Alon in JCC front lobby

Yael Wapinski, a Cornell graduate on the path to becoming a pediatrician, decided to take a year off to see the world before starting medical school – a decision that changed the course of her life. The child of passionate Zionists who met on her maternal grandparents' kibbutz on the Sea of Galilee in the 1970s, Yael chose Israel as her destination, looking to make a deeper connection with her family's homeland and history.

When she arrived, she fell in love with the country, and not long later, with one of its young men – Modi Feibish. No surprise, Yael decided to stay on and attended medical school at Sackler University in Tel Aviv. During her third year, she and Modi married, and when she completed her medical degree, they discussed making a brief move to NYC

so she could attend a pediatric residency program at Mount Sinai. Modi agreed, thinking it would be a fun adventure for a couple of years. But three years has turned into 14. Why? Because they found the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades.

“Once my residency was over, we were at a crossroads when it came to deciding where to settle down,” Yael explains. “We had three sons by then and were eager to find the right community to raise our family. We could have moved closer to my mom in Florida, or my brother, who lives in Boston. Or we could have returned to Israel. We had a lot of options, but now that we had a growing family of our own, there were two paramount considerations that would ultimately define our choice: a place that could provide an excellent public education for our boys and a thriving Israeli community that would allow us to feel at home.”

We did a lot of research and wound up moving to Cresskill, which has great schools and the Israeli population we were looking for.

“What really made this community right for us was the JCC, which has become our family’s adopted home away from home. Israeli populaces keep emerging all across the country, but none come remotely close to what this community and this JCC have to offer. In fact, the widespread buzz in Israel these days is that if you are going to move to the US for any length of time, you should move near the JCC in Tenafly, NJ, which is the known new magnet for young Israeli families.”

With no family nearby and no personal connections in the local community, choosing to put down roots in such unfamiliar territory might seem a bit chancy, but for Yael and Modi it was the perfect choice – providing a life-changing experience that has completely shaped their lives.

When they moved to Cresskill, their eldest son, Alon, was about to start kindergarten in their hometown, while the younger two boys were heading to nursery school.

“We immediately enrolled Eyal and Oren, who were 3 and 1 at the time, in the JCC Leonard & Syril Rubin Nursery School, which surpassed our every expectation. The teachers and other parents were so warm and welcoming; the classrooms and programs were just amazing, and it opened the door to all their early childhood experiences and friends.

Modi and I found a whole new life at the JCC as well. We got really involved with the JCC’s Israeli Center, which brings the entire Israeli community together for incredible lectures, movies, and all sorts of concerts and cultural events. The energy this Center creates is electric, and it gave Modi and me an immediate social life and the chance to make meaningful and enduring friendships. We also began attending weekly Hebrew seminars with Rabbi Kimelman, the JCC’s rabbi-in-residence. We loved his program and the people we met in it so much, we continued going for the next two years. It’s where we made some our closest friends.”

As time went on, the entire family continued to forge deeper connections with the JCC community. The boys attended the *Neil Klatskin Day Camp*, and as sports lovers, they took up soccer and Tae Kwan Do. They participated



Modi, Alon, Oren, Eyal and Yael gathered around their new little princess, Neomi.



Oren, at JCC Kids Club afterschool program



Eyal baking with a classmate in Emek, the JCC Hebrew and Israeli culture program.

in the sports camp as part of their summer experiences and they all learned to swim at the J as well. They went on to join music programs at the *Thurnauer School of Music* and afterschool classes in the *JCC Kids Club*, which provides them with seamless afterschool coverage as well as homework help in both English and Hebrew.

Now that the boys are getting older, they are also connecting with all kinds of unique Israeli programs the JCC offers for school-aged kids. Alon, who is now 11, is extremely active in the *Tzofim* (Israeli Scouts), who meet every Sunday at the JCC to share experiences and learn the kind of leadership skills that will help them develop into responsible and inspiring role models for others. The program is just amazing and Alon has made so many special friends in this group.”

The boys also participate in *Emek*, the JCC Israeli afterschool program that teaches Hebrew and Israeli culture in a fun, hands-on way; *Start Up Nation*, a camp that offers Hebrew and Israeli cultural activities with native Hebrew-speaking counselors and specialists; and *Big Idea*, an innovative technology camp that features cutting edge workshops in robotics, 3D modeling, film production and other exciting hi tech topics, all taught in hands-on workshops by professional instructors from Israel and the US.

And Yael and Modi? Yael, who has a private pediatric practice on the Upper East Side, and Modi, who is a real estate developer based in NYC, are more involved than ever at the JCC. They are avid users of the JCC gym. Modi plays in the men’s basketball league and the whole family participates in the *JCC Rubin Run* each year. Committed to healthy lifestyles and living, they also participate in the JCC’s Community Supported Agricultural program and keep a family garden together at home.

“I think my husband initially hoped we’d all move back to Israel,” Yael concludes. “But we wound up finding a life here we’d be hard-pressed to trade.

“ Our experience in this amazing community has given an extra dimension to our lives that neither of us ever expected to find. When Modi watches our boys singing in Hebrew as part of a JCC Shabbat celebration or chatting away in Hebrew with all their friends from summer camp, I see his eyes light up and know he is happy and confident that even though we chose to remain in the States, our children will have every opportunity to stay connected with the Israeli life and culture he wants for them as part of their childhood and part of their identity.

Growing up in the States, I didn’t have the exposure to the Israeli life my parents had and if I hadn’t repeated their experience by falling in love ‘in’ and ‘with’ Israel, I might never have known the diverse and rich life I now have. It’s a great gift. And on January 6, our gifts were multiplied exponentially, when our baby daughter, Neomi was born. We now have a little princess to add to our troupe of sons. I can’t wait to start bringing her to the JCC where she will begin the same remarkable journey the rest of our family has made. We are giving our kids the best of both worlds and I thank the JCC for making this possible. You enter its doors and you know you’re home.”