

Psychological Screening of Applicants for Long Term Programs in Israel*

JAMES S. ELKIND

Director, Geographic District Offices, Jewish Family & Children's Service,
Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts

... (in) helping people realistically approach, and plan for, a sponsored long-term stay in Israel . . . the objectives and goals of the screening interview . . . call for an integrated use of developmental and ego psychology . . .

History of the Psychological Screening Procedure

The program to be described began in 1976 when one of the agency's senior caseworkers was invited to conduct the psychological screening interviews of, and submit written reports on, applicants in the Boston area for one of the many long-term programs in Israel.

As the number of applicants increased, the agency's director encouraged other interested staff to learn about the programs and conduct these interviews. Later that year, the shaliach of the Aliyah Center,† troubled by some of the individuals who were interested in immigrating to Israel, asked for agency help in screening people for the Aliyah Center. In the period from Spring, 1976 to June, 1982, approximately four hundred individuals have been interviewed.

Background

Historically the Israel Aliyah Center and Jewish Family and Children's Service have been committed to maintaining and deepening the continuity of Jewish life. Continually working to strengthen the bonds between Ameri-

can Jewry and Israel, the Aliyah Center encourages interested and capable people to pursue long-term residence in Israel. The Center not only helps those planning to make aliyah, but also recruits and places appropriate people in a variety of six-month or year-long programs. Three of the programs for which people frequently apply are:

A. The Kibbutz-Ulpan program offers adults between the ages of 18 and 35 the opportunity to live on a kibbutz and work and study Hebrew intensively for six months.

B. The aliyah office, in conjunction with universities and the Jewish Agency in Israel, helps college students locate six-month jobs related to their course of study. The students usually receive college credit, a token salary, and participate in a limited but concentrated study of basic conversational Hebrew.

C. The World Union of Jewish Students Institute in Arad immerses participants in a five-month curriculum of Hebrew, Jewish history, literature, philosophy, and Zionism. Then, for seven months the students work in development towns.

In the process of counselling, the meaning to oneself of one's Jewishness is usually revealed, and counselling can enable people to shed some of the misperceptions which may have distorted their relationship to Judaism and capacity to live by, enjoy, and advance its heritage.

* This paper is based on a presentation made at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Minneapolis, June 16, 1982.

† Kal Liebeskind.

Currently, many more clients seem dissatisfied with an assimilated position, are seeking to strengthen their religious identity and search for new ways to express it. Judith Weinstein-Klein describes a search for religious cohesion that is less in response to external crises and is increasingly based on internal yearnings.

In light of the past decade's consciousness of ethnicity, new questions about Jewish identity are being raised. Without overt anti-Semitism or ghetto walls to insure solidarity; without poverty and the immigrant experience to fuel a collective fervor, Jewish identity has to be redefined. . . . Jewishness has become in America, less a phenomenon defined by others through anti-Semitism and more a subjective personal phenomenon.¹

In clinical practice we treat people who have achieved considerable academic and professional success but who suffer internally from a lack of self esteem and a satisfying sense of who they are. Their disappointments in work, personal relationships, and religion often leave them feeling lonely, unfulfilled, and constantly searching. In a number of instances, people look to a life in Israel as a solution to their stress. This idealization of Israel may represent an attempt to find an identity, a sense of purpose, calm, and belonging that they feel is missing. For them, Israel is "the land of milk and honey" and going there provides the opportunity to start their lives again, as if problems and maladaptation will magically disappear. For example:

A man in his late twenties sought to make aliyah. His marriage and business were failing and he told the shaliach "I might as well go to Israel" conveying the expectation that Israel will care for him and all will then be o.k.

In a second instance, a college student ac-

cepted the fact that his unstabilized epilepsy would make it impossible for him to be accepted into the program he chose. However, his mother phoned the shaliach, denied the severity of her son's problems saying that "Israel will take care of him . . . everything will be fine."

In our work we all have seen that if such overdetermined, unrealistic, and highly idealized perceptions are allowed to go unchecked, they can be as disastrous as allowing equally extreme devaluations to remain unquestioned.

On the other hand, a plan for an extended stay in Israel or aliyah can be quite appropriate for one whose Jewishness has been an integral part of one's life. Then, planning to live in Israel can represent the realization of years of education, religious observance and a well ingrained belief in Israel and the various ideals its continued existence represents. Or the extended stay can serve well the individual whose identification is incomplete but who seeks soundly and in a reality-based way, experience that will aid in strengthening Jewish identity.

Current Screening Program

Whenever someone goes to an Aliyah Center to learn the possibilities and ramifications of living in Israel for an extended time, this act itself—regardless of the amorphous, unconscious, and uncrystallized motivations—signifies that Judaism and Israel hold special meanings for that person. The question is, will the person be able to adapt to life in Israel. The aliyah shaliach provides general information, assesses skill marketability, notes frank disturbances in overall demeanor, and tries to get a pulse on the motivations and their roots. In addition, he will begin to evaluate the applicant's potential to withstand the slow, exhausting and sometimes isolating integration process. While he does

¹ Judith Weinstein-Klein, *Jewish Identity and Self Esteem; Healing Wounds Through Ethnotherapy*. New York: Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity, The American Jewish Committee, 1980, pp. 6 and 7.

not formally evaluate psychological and social stability, he refers individuals to Jewish Family and Children's Service for one of two reasons: first, when a given program (such as World Union of Jewish Students and the Co-op) requires an evaluation of every applicant; or when he has questions about the individual's personal and social adjustment as well as vocational capabilities and achievements.

Objectives of the Screening Interviews

In the interviews, the objective of the JF & CS worker is to review the individual's past and present adjustment so that a formulation can be made about his adaptive capacities, strengths and weaknesses. The foci of the appraisal are:

1. *Motivation:* What is prompting the person to seek a long-term stay in Israel now? Is this a crystallization of a long-standing association with Judaism, active support of Israel, a well-integrated Jewish identity? What has been this person's active affiliations with temple youth groups, Hillels, Zionist organizations? If there has not been previous involvement, is the individual being moved by impulse, discontent or inability to sustain personal relationships and/or career development?

2. *Planning:* Does the individual's planning reflect a good understanding of the program, a realistic assessment of what he is relinquishing and which of his educational plans or vocational goals can be realized? Are his current vocational and social experiences consonant with what is being planned; and if not, are the reasons and expectations sound? How has the person planned for major undertakings before such as college; and does his current approach reflect any major differences? Has the person seriously considered the impact of a long-term stay in Israel on his per-

sonal and family relationships? Are the plans being made within a financial, social, family, and vocational context that is realistic and reflective of a thoughtfulness that speaks to the future as well as the present. For example:

A college senior, planning to immigrate to Israel was sent by the shaliach for an evaluation and counselling. Michael grew up in a religious family and had been seriously involved with his religious education, youth groups and a life in Israel. He had spent his junior year there, was upset when he returned to the States, and was ready to leave college and move to Israel without a well thought-out plan. Such impulsiveness was unlike him, and contrasted sharply with his former accomplishments and approach. Treatment revealed that his departure from Israel, return to the U.S. and impending graduation precipitated a delayed grief reaction and separation anxieties from which he was trying to escape. Counselling allowed him the time to grieve and he competently planned for his immigration to Israel.

3. *Achievements:* What academic and vocational achievements and failures has the individual had and how has he coped with each? Does the individual have a realistic awareness of his role in his successes or failures? Does he demonstrate a capacity to sustain efforts in light of frustrations, disappointments, disagreements with colleagues as well as superiors?

4. *Initiative and Flexibility:* Has the person been able to take initiative appropriately, be flexible, and adapt creatively to taking situations? Or has he tended to be passive, excessively aggressive and antagonistic in his approach to friends, colleagues, or superiors? For example, has the person attended overnight camp, travelled, lived away from home? What was the nature of these experiences? How did he get along with peers, people in authority? Did he view them as positive events in his life? Did he hold any leadership positions?

In one case, a 25 year-old man and his German-born wife applied for help in immi-

grating to Israel. In the late sixties, as a teenager, he had been regarded as brilliant, but very provocative and hostile. She was raised in Germany and had led a conventional life. They were conversant with several foreign languages, had travelled extensively, spending time in Israel and three years in Morocco where he had been employed as a teacher. Both were extremely bright, adapted well to a Middle Eastern life, and utilized their resourcefulness in locating jobs and maintaining a comfortable life style. It was their resourcefulness, intelligence, and his having matured and developed a solid religious and political ideology that enabled us to support their wish to immigrate.

5. Family and Social Relationships: What has been the nature and depth of the applicants' personal relationships? Has there been the capacity to sustain old ties and develop new ones? Or has the person been isolated, estranged from and devaluing of others, prone to superficial contacts? Has the person developed the ability to be with people? Has he the interests and skills that allow him to relax or discharge tension? Particularly for those considering aliyah, how is such a plan consonant or dissonant with the individual's and family's long-term expression of their Judaism? And if aliyah has produced conflicts within the family, how are they being approached? We can cite instances where a particular family consciously or unconsciously encouraged and supported, if not mandated, a given child's pursuit of and dedication to a religious and cultural education and lifestyle. Family conflicts may erupt when the person decides to act on what seems to be the logical outcome of his years of religious and cultural training—a life in Israel.

6. Personal Adjustment and Medical History: In order to assess over-all strength, growth and potential, the nature and extent of any personal psychotherapy, psychiatric hospitalizations and use of medications are carefully reviewed. A psychiatric history

however, is not an indicator for automatic disqualification.

While actual medical reports are acquired by the Aliyah Center, we explore medical history with an eye to identifying the nature and scope of any illness/condition that may reflect significant emotional vulnerabilities that may be exacerbated with the stress of such a major separation. Asthma, migraine headaches, colitis, accident proneness and chronic, indifferentiated illness would call for careful and detailed review.

7. Habitual Drug Use or Criminal Activity: These areas are explored when indicated. A chronically unstable employment record, overt and unabashed revelation of impulsive or unpredictable behavior have often led to questions about drug use and police involvement.

This is shown in the case of Stephen, a 17 year-old who had applied for a twelve month Kibbutz Ulpan program and had been interviewed carefully by three shlichim, accepted, and then referred to me. Stephen had been charged with and convicted of breaking and entering and drug possession and was facing a prison sentence. Parents were divorced, Stephen had suffered from physical and emotional abuse, had done poorly during high school and had had several unsuccessful experiences in therapy. His identification as a Jew was minimal and ambivalent, with his motivation to go to Israel being primarily based on his wish to avoid prison. Every adult involved, including the judge, supported a well structured program in Israel.

Stephen was seen for two 90 minute interviews to assess the criminal tendencies, how chronically impulsive he was, how corruptible his conscience, and his potential for responding to clearly defined limits. In the six months since his arrest, he had moved in with a divorced friend of his father who was interviewed alone and with Steve. Steve worked steadily as an apprentice and was described as being conscientious, anxious to learn, and responsible. He had skills as a carpenter, learned quickly, and performed competently. While he was living with the threat of a prison sentence over his head, he relinquished his criminal activities and associations, and developed appropriate interests and a reputable circle of

friends. Stephen was accepted to a kibbutz and had a gratifying year. He returned with a very positive identity as a Jew, has moved on to complete high school and hopes to return to Israel.

Goals of the Screening Interviews

The information we gather during the screening process helps us to assess the individual's capacity. . . .

- a. To maintain self esteem within the boundaries of normal, expectable and sometimes extreme frustration, disappointment and failure.
- b. To differentiate inner and outer reality.
- c. To rely on oneself and others for support, encouragement, guidance.
- d. To relate to and value others as being as important as the self.
- e. To verbalize as well as physically discharge tension.
- f. To recognize danger and reduce fear to manageable proportions.
- g. To realize mature ambitions and ideals within the context of what is achievable.

Collaboration with Shlichim

Whenever possible our recommendations are shared with the person at the end of the interview and a full report is sent to the shaliach. The degree of flexibility and amount of creativity we might exercise in our recommendations has been a function of the following: a) our own ever expanding experiences with the different programs and schlichim, b) our credibility within the network of schlichim and agencies here and in Israel and c) the nature of the relationship with each shaliach, which has been based on the two previous criteria as well as our mutual biases, experiences and areas of special interest and expertise.

With each shaliach there has been an initial period of mutual uncertainty, assessment of competence, style, and an attempt to discern what type of person alarms him and what criteria alert him to the fact that there might be difficulty. Stephen, the 17 year old, never would have been considered had there not been the mutual trust, openness and respect between Jewish Family and Children's Service and the shaliach that had developed over the eighteen months during which there had been extensive contact between the two agencies.

Follow Up

Until now there has been no effective and routine way to follow up those who go to Israel. However, in situations where a program participant has been given a qualified recommendation, or may have required special arrangements, a concerted effort has been made to follow his progress by letter. A regular follow-up procedure would enable us to compare our efforts and impressions with the individual's adjustment. Also, this would help to refine our screening procedures and criteria and better help prepare individuals.

Presently a questionnaire is being constructed to provide a more objective measure of the capacity to take initiative, to postpone gratification, to tolerate frustration, and to act in a thoughtful, non-impulsive manner. Such a questionnaire will be administered during the screening process and at some point during or after their stay in Israel.

Conclusion

The Boston Israel Aliyah Center and Jewish Family and Children's Service are dedicated to helping people realistically approach, and plan for, a sponsored long-term stay in Israel. This

paper has detailed the objectives and goals of the screening interview which call for an integrated use of developmental and ego psychology to assess the person's adaptive capacities. Through reviewing an applicant's past

and present emotional, social, and academic/vocational growth we have been able to develop a profile which helps us assess his level of maturity and appropriateness for the different programs.

***Eighty-fifth
Annual Meeting
Conference of Jewish Communal
Service***



**June 5-8, 1983
Concord Hotel
Kiamesha Lake, N.Y.**