

**BUSINESS**

# Culturally challenged

Living and working abroad may sound like a fun adventure, but for many expatriates there's just no place like home

**Dvarim Shero'im Misham lo Ro'im Mikan**

(The Relocation Journey: Functioning in a Foreign Culture), by Hana Ornoy. Rimonim Publishing (Hebrew), 439 pages, NIS 88

**By Yishai Fraenkel**

The preparatory course I took before setting out for the United States on assignment for my work focused on cultural differences between Israel and America. Both Israelis and Americans took part in the course, the former preparing to head to the United States and the latter on their way to Israel.

Constant exposure to American cultural themes in Israel may lead to the illusion that there are barely any inter-cultural differences, but the opposite is the case. The instructor, who was trying to explain the essence of Israeli culture to the Americans in the room, was compelled at one point to cite an example from the world of physics. "In Israel," he explained straightforwardly, "the speed of sound is faster than the speed of light." He elaborated for his puzzled listeners: "If you are stopped at a traffic light in the middle of August in Tel Aviv, and the red light is about to turn green, you will actually hear the horn of the car behind you well before you see the color of the traffic light change."

With a single concise sentence, the Americans in the room understood exactly where they'd arrived. As for me, even after two full years in the United States, I would often find myself bewildered, struggling in vain to understand American thinking and logic.

In the past few years, with the spread of globalization, increasingly more Israelis have been living abroad for long periods of time for the purpose of work or study. This phenomenon, once rather limited, has greatly expanded, and now includes thousands of individuals and families annually. "The Relocation Journey," by Dr. Hana Ornoy, a lecturer, researcher and organizational consultant, is the most encompassing and up-to-date work on the topic available today. The fact that it is aimed at an audience of Israeli expatriates makes it most valuable.

## Not a pleasure trip

Spending an extended stay abroad for work might at first impression sound like a nice long excursion. The journey to a distant land and a different culture is usually accompanied by good living and salary conditions. But Ornoy's book tells the real story. A story that every expatriate, including the writer of these lines, has experienced for himself. Relocating to a foreign country is not a pleasure trip; in fact, it is anything but a picnic. The complex nature of the experience, which affects one on both the personal and professional levels, and the difficulty many organizations have in overseeing the process, can often lead to failure.

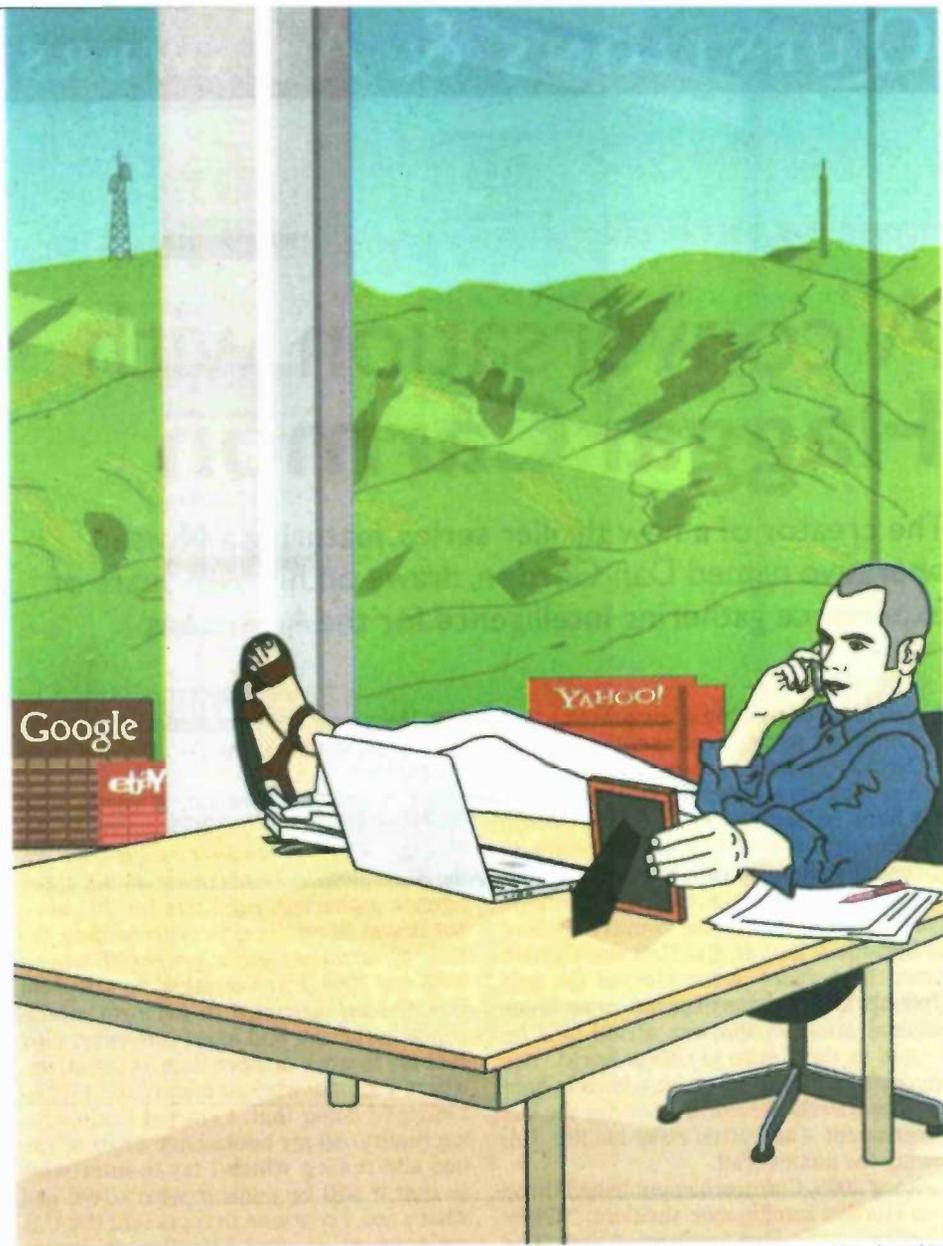
According to studies cited in the book, close to 50 percent of these stays abroad may be termed failures. In most instances, expatriates return to their home countries before the end of their full term, which is typically one to three years, and in other instances, even when they stay the entire duration, if one judges by yardsticks of professional success, the service abroad may still be termed a failure.

Several key insights arise from Ornoy's book. First and foremost, it's important to manage and supervise the expatriation process along every stage of the way. Ornoy outlines those stages, beginning with the selection of the candidate, the preparations and guidance prior to departure for the target country, the period of work or study abroad, and ultimately, the stage of return to the home country. Each stage demands thought, preparation, management and supervision. The stage prior to departure, for example, should include training the candidate for relocation, with a strong emphasis placed on learning about the target country and its culture.

The second significant insight concerns the centrality of the family factor. One survey of Israeli expatriates who had relocated to various locations around the world found that one of the key predictors of their success was the ability of the spouse and children to adjust to the alien society. In a large percentage of cases, the family's failure to adjust was the main reason for the expatriate to return to Israel before completion of the full term. It is therefore highly important that the family factor be taken into account when the decision to relocate is made. It is vital that the candidate consider in advance potential challenges that his or her family may come up against, such as children with special needs, older parents who remain behind, employment of the spouse in the target country, etc. As much as possible, one should avoid leaving these issues unresolved before departure. And perhaps most important, very often, any marital or family issues that may have seemed insignificant in the home country are only magnified in the target country.

## It's in 'the little things'

A third issue discussed in Ornoy's book is somewhat surprising. Numerous expatriates report that their reabsorption at home, upon conclusion of their stay abroad, was in fact harder and more traumatic than adjustment in the target country at the start of their period overseas. This process, "reverse culture shock," is characterized by difficulties in acclimatization upon returning home. The expatriate oftentimes finds that the country has changed, if only slightly, in "the little things." The workplace has also changed, and now he may at times struggle to reestablish his position in the organization, or vie for recognition by his or her boss. The expatriate, who has been living in a foreign culture and undergoing diverse life experiences, feels like a third-party observer, and can become critical and embittered.



Liron Bar-Akiva

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His family's readjustment difficulties may also add to the troubles. The outcome of all this is reflected in a sad statistic: The numbers indicate that between 25 and 40 percent of expatriates returning home after spending time on extended assignment in a foreign country leave their workplace within two years. Another study demonstrates that about two-thirds of returning expatriates feel that the time spent abroad had a negative impact on their career, particularly in the short term. The managements of organizations sending these emissaries should be aware of the price they will pay when the expatriate's return home is deemed a failure, not to mention the personal cost paid by the expatriates themselves. The process of returning to the home country, Ornoy emphasizes, should be conducted like every other mission with defined objectives, including adjustment of expectations, complete with constant assistance and support to the expatriate and his family.

Ornoy's book is rich and well-constructed. It relates to practically every imaginable issue pertaining to expatriates and their foreign missions, and includes references to a wealth of additional information in research literature. In addition, the author provides tools to assist expatriates along every stage of the process. These tools are useful to managers, in particular to human resources departments. The many firsthand accounts appearing in the book not only add color; they are crucial for sketching a representative and balanced picture of the expatriate experience.

Nevertheless, the book has its shortcomings. It is not an easy read. While the volume is a treasure for those engaged in the field, its academic perspective and dry wording make it difficult to read fluidly. Future expatriates are liable to drown in a sea of information as they seek the specific information of interest to them. The academic style also stifles the author's voice. Given the plethora of research study findings cited, it is hard to discern one clear voice or decisive opinion, or a limited selection of central themes that might have provided a backbone to the entire book. It would have been better if the chapters appearing at the end of the book, which provide concrete data on matters of taxation, insurance and the like (data that changes from time to time), appeared on a Web site, rather than in the book.

Throughout my own stay in the United States, I always tried hard to bridge between the distant geographic parts of my organization, an attempt that was sometimes successful and sometimes not. One day, during a meeting that took place just before my return to Israel, my American secretary entered the conference room excitedly and informed us that one of our colleagues had given birth to a daughter. And then, beaming at me, the local advocate of the metric system, she announced, "The baby weighs three and a half kilometers." I smiled back at her with my good American manners, knowing that the time had come for me to go back to Israel.