

# Two Prominent Members of Riverdale's Orthodox Community to Leave for Israel

By Written by Robert Lebowitz, Riverdale Review

While news of unrest in the Middle East persistently dominates the media, two prominent Orthodox Jewish families in Riverdale will be leaving the community they helped create in order to build lives in Israel.

Howard and Debbie Jonas and Joshua and Sharona Margolin Halickman and their respective children will embark early next week for Jerusalem. Both families have been instrumental in building the community at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and in advancing the vision of its leader, Rabbi Avi Weiss.

While leaving the safe confines of Riverdale to live in a tension-filled young country surrounded by hostile neighbors might strike an objective observer as strange, for the Orthodox Jew such a journey represents one of the highest levels of religious commitment. Many observant Jews view the move to Israel--known in Hebrew as "aliyah", which literally means "going upward"--as mandated by the Torah.

Although the Jonas and Halickman families are the only families from the Hebrew Institute who are making the move to Israel this year, 150 families have made aliyah from the synagogue since its inception.

While the Halickmans will be settling in Israel permanently, the Jonases are planning to live there for one year. Howard Jonas is the founder and CEO of IDT, a multi-billion dollar telecommunications corporation based in Newark, New Jersey. He is also known throughout the Jewish world as one of its greatest philanthropists, regularly donating to such causes as Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital and Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem.

A long-time member of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Jonas has served as its president, and is currently the chairman of the board of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a modern Orthodox rabbinical school founded by Rabbi Weiss in 1999.

Earlier this year, Jonas was the center of local controversy when he and his son Shmuel announced plans to build a 19-story building adjacent to St. Gabriel's Church. After many in the community protested against the structure on the grounds that it would adversely impact Riverdale's character, the building's proposed height was reduced to 13 stories. Construction of the building is currently underway.

For Jonas and his wife, the idea of living in Israel has been brewing for about a decade.

"I have been waiting for the right time to go for a long time," she said. "But I saw it wasn't happening, so I decided to finally make it happen. We wanted to make a big change in our lives, to try something new and exciting."

Despite the threat of terror attacks, Debbie stated that she did not fear for her safety there.

"I have more of fear living in New York City," she stated. "The fears I have are of not being able to speak the language, and of the difficulties my children will face in their new schools."

Although she feels drawn to the land, Debbie said that for her and her husband, building a new life in Israel was not practical at this stage in their lives.

"It's too late for us to start over again," she said, "but it's not too late for my kids. I want them to feel that if they choose to live there, they have the chance."

The Halickmans similarly dismiss any fears of any potential danger they might face.

"We have been thinking about this for 13 years, and we wanted to go there now, before our two children start school," said Sharona.

Sharona broke new historic ground in the Orthodox Jewish world when she accepted a position as congregational intern at the Hebrew Institute in 1997. In this capacity, Sharona gave sermons from the podium during some sabbath services, officiated at weddings, and helped prepare young children and their families for bar and bat mitzvah. Traditionally, women have not been accorded such leadership roles within the Orthodox community.

Sharona said that she will not be leaving her teaching behind. She has already accepted a full-time position teaching students on the year-long Young Judea trip, sponsored by Hadassah.

A life-long Riverdalian, Sharona said that she will miss the many people with she has grown close over the years, as well as the high holiday learning service, which she led with her husband. Still, she does not seem to experience the separation-anxiety that might plague one who is leaving all that is familiar and comfortable.

"We feel like we are going home," she said.