



NOTES OF A JOURNEY

EFRAT KEDEM

FOUR WEEKS AMONG ALEPPO JEWS IN BROOKLYN

Efrat Kedem - is working on a Ph.D. in behavioral sciences at Ben Gurion University. She was Born in Haifa, served in the Army - in the Paratroopers Brigade. B.A. and M.A. degrees from Haifa University. Completed part of her studies in Boston, U.S.A. Efrat specialized and developed special models in psychotherapy and art therapy. She works as a therapist with youth, Kibbutz members and Holocaust survivors. She is currently researching the socio-psychological aspects of new immigrants - female in particular - among Syrian Jews.

A year has elapsed since I left Brooklyn, where I had spent a month among veteran immigrants from Halab. While the purpose of my visit was purely academic and concerned gathering data and information on Aleppo Jewry, the phenomenon of 1900 Jews who had emigrated from Syria in the years 1992-97 to settle in New York, with a similar number making Aliya to Israel, was extremely interesting.

The preparations I had made prior to my trip and my meetings with relatives in Israel had familiarized me with the history of Halab Jews, but I did not dream that in one month I would discover such a distinct difference between emigres from Damascus and Kamishli.

Fortunately, I spent the entire four weeks of my stay with families from Halab. I shared their daily life, ate their food, studied their customs, heard their stories, spoke a bit of their language and went out with them.

I arrived on the morning of August 1st, 1998 and within a matter of hours I found myself with the Antebbi family at the Shaarei Zion Synagogue square, mixing with the new Halab emigres who had arrived in America 6 years ago. I soon realized that I was in the center of a religious, cultural and spiritual life of the Halab community in America. Although veteran community members spent their time in the city of Deal, the square was filled with people from the old generation along with second and third generations Halabis. Both the English and Arabic languages could be heard.

My hosts introduced me to their friends, explaining that I had come there for research purposes and that I was a

student at Ben Gurion University. However, I was a stranger and the titles with which I was introduced appeared to make no impression on any of the Halabis. I could hear such comments as, "You too are a journalist who has come to interview and provide material for the paper?" or "Perhaps she is an agent who was planted by the Mossad?", "What exactly do you wish to research and why is it of any interest to you?", and "For whom is the research intended".

These questions also came up the following week, and only ceased two weeks later, when I became involved in the community and was often seen in social events, visiting people or just going for walks. I frequently heard explanations from former Damascus emigres about the fact that some 250 people had emigrated to the U.S. from Halab between 1992-97, and were welcomed in Brooklyn by their wealthy relatives who had come to the U.S. some 30-50 years ago where they make a comfortable living. They guided them on what to do and how, and offered good advice.

During a talk I had with Albert Eyal, one of the founders of the "Bikkur Holim" institution established in 1992, to provide new Syrian immigrants with clothing and furniture, he pointed out that the Halab emigres were fortunate enough to have wealthy relatives who took an interest in them. Apart from a few exceptional cases, few Halabis came to "Bikkur Holim" - and those who did, were former citizens of Damascus and Kamishli.

The first Sabbath I spent in Brooklyn proved to be an

