Aliya and activism

Jeremy Dery is involved in a number of projects designed to either help Israel’s image in some way or to assist new immigrants.

Jeremy Dery

BY LAURA BEN-David

In this monthly column, Nefesh B’Nefesh is proud to introduce you to some of the remarkable immigrants from North America and the UK who have made aliyah over the past 10 years and are making an impact on the State of Israel.

Jeremy Dery is no stranger to activism. At just 25 years of age, he has already made a name for himself waging largely successful battles in Israel’s hashivun (public diplomacy) war. Since his college days when he took on the establishment at Drew University for refusing to allow him to study Israel, he has continued to prove himself a resourceful and relentless champion in the fight for Israel’s image. After living in Israel for three years, Dery formalized his commitment to the Jewish state by making aliyah in September 2012, through Nefesh B’Nefesh’s Guided Aliyah program (enabling North American citizens to make aliyah from within Israel). Since making it official, Dery is showing no sign of slowing down.

Though born in New York, Dery was raised in New Jersey and France. His 10 years in Paris made him fluent in French, which allowed him to take on a rather noteworthy cause. Dery helped French media activist Philippe Karsenty expose the false story of Muhammad al-Dura – a Palestinian child allegedly killed by Israeli fire during the second intifada. This opportunity to support and defend Israel through trust, honesty and integrity greatly appealed to Dery and inspired him to pursue other rewarding projects.

Since arriving in Israel, Dery jumped right into action and helped create a joint China/Israel event at The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (IDC) to foster closer ties by bringing politicians and business leaders together to discuss topics relevant to both countries. More recently, he aided the public diplomacy and Diaspora affairs minster during Operation Pillar of Defense by helping to distribute government-issued updates on the Gaza offensive to Jews living in the US and France. As elections drew close this year, Dery became very involved helping the Likud party promote its agenda. Now that the coalition has been formed, he is hoping to get a position within the government or Foreign Ministry to continue his activism more formally.

Dery doesn’t do things halfway, and he won’t compromise on his principles.

“When I first came to Israel to study for a semester at Tel Aviv University,” he recalls, “my university back in the United States would not approve it. I launched a three-month campaign using various pro-Israel groups and the Israeli Consulate in order for them to change their study-abroad policy.”

His success was astounding; they not only allowed him the credit, but also changed their entire study-abroad policy.

Yet Dery did not stop there. After this success he initiated an event for students that he dubbed “Operation Magic Carpet” that promoted study, travel and internships in Israel. Representatives from 20 Jewish organizations attended and offered information about their study and travel programs, including the Jewish Agency, Birthright and many Hillel chapters. Pretty impressive for a college kid.

Despite now living in Israel without any family, Dery finds that he truly feels “at home.”

“I always loved the Jewish traditions and customs,” he explains, “I always maintained my Jewish identity by keeping the basic Jewish rules such as eating kosher, celebrating the Shabbat and going to the synagogue. While I was living in France, I witnessed various anti-Semitic incidents such as spray-painted swastikas and rock-throwing at Jews going to synagogue. My non-Jewish friends would make fun of me for being Jewish, which was very uncomfortable. That experience made me realize how different I am, and that led me to be very curious about what it means to be a Jew. That passion drew me to the Solomon Schechter Jewish day school, which further enhanced my exposure to other Jews while learning more about our religion and modern-day Israel.”

In fact, Dery credits his Jewish day-school education with leading to his life-changing decision to study at Tel Aviv University for that semester.

While studying in Israel, Dery became more aware of the constant media bias against Israel. He witnessed the atrocities caused by suicide bombings and rocket attacks on the civilian population first-hand.

I decided to try to help Israel’s image while constantly remaining up to date with the conflict. I created a pro-Israel Facebook group, that accumulated 2,500 members, called ‘Peace for Israel; stand against terror’ which I constantly update with news from the Israeli consulate and other pro-Israel sources.

The indefatigable Dery also volunteered in the Knesset and became involved in a number of projects all designed to either help Israel’s image in some way or to help new immigrants. One such project is World Maghalim Herel, an aliyah support organization founded in 1999. Another is Hadar Israel, a grassroots non-profit organization that encourages international dialogue and a third is the Global Research in International Affairs Center (GLORIA), based at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center.

Dery is currently dating a young new immigrant from South Africa. In addition to regular visits to Jerusalem to see his girlfriend, he leads a pretty busy life including going to concerts, listening to Mirabi music, going to the beach in Tel Aviv and enjoying Tel Aviv’s cafés and shukas (markets). All this while attending numerous political and hasbara-related events all around Israel, including the President’s Conference and Herzliya Conference from the IDC.

Dery sums up his feelings as follows: “Being in Israel, it’s like I’ve finally come home. I found my passion in life which is to assist Israel in bringing a positive public image to the world.”

The writer is social media director of Nefesh B’Nefesh.