



Erez Baron and his twins, Daphna and Danielle, enjoy life in Israel. The twins were born in Portland to a surrogate mother. Erez is the director of the Israel Department of Oregon Reproductive Medicine, which enabled Erez and his partner to become biological parents.

PHOTO BY NIR SLAKMAN

Only love gives us the taste of eternity.

— Jewish Proverb

FROM OREGON TO ISRAEL: THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

BY DEBORAH MOON

Like many other Israelis, Erez Baron and his partner, Roy, turned to Portland when they wanted to become parents.

For Erez, the connection to Portland and the clinic that made him a dad has gone much further. For three and half years, Erez has been the director of the Israel Department of Oregon Reproductive Medicine. He helps Israelis navigate the medical, social, legal and Jewish aspects of becoming parents through surrogacy in Oregon at ORM.

ORM helped its first Israeli couple become parents in 2011. Oregon Jewish Life chronicled the emerging trend in 2012 with an article on the second and third couples, whose twins were converted to Judaism following their birth to a non-Jewish surrogate birth mother.

Now thanks to that burgeoning movement, 180 Israeli children have been born to surrogate mothers in Oregon, with 36 more babies due soon.

“Our patients from Israel have certainly increased since Erez opened our office there,” says Dr. Brandon Bankowski, a partner at ORM who focuses on surrogacy and donor egg in-vitro fertilization. “It is so important to have an authority like Erez on the ground to help us to meet the needs of our patients. Most importantly, the care we deliver is more comprehensive for our patients. We are certainly lucky to have him.”

While the majority of the Israeli couples that use ORM are gay, the clinic has also helped heterosexual couples, single men and a transgender woman (who had previously donated sperm) to become biological parents. Erez leads a two-person ORM office in Israel and travels to Portland twice a year to meet with clinic and surrogacy agency staff.

“Same-sex couples cannot do this in Israel,” says Erez. “Heterosexual couples can use a surrogate, but they must get approval of a committee with rabbis and physicians.”

Several factors have converged to make Oregon a very attractive option for Israelis who want to become biological parents and are unable to do so in Israel: Oregon has a favorable legal climate for surrogate births; ORM is rated the third best in the nation for successful surrogate births; Portland has two surrogacy agencies that work frequently with Israelis; and the conversion process here is very friendly (and even easier with the opening of Portland’s new community mikvah, see page 34).



Tomer and Ziv Fuss Sanderovich with twins, Shira and Maya, are flanked by Cantor Ida Rae Cahana and Rabbi Michael Cahana, right, following the twins conversion at Portland's new community mikvah, Rachel's Well.

Because surrogacy is expensive and many Israelis want more than one child, most chose to try for twins. ORM has a success rate of 91% for at least one child born when two embryos are implanted, with 69% producing twins. “Only 9% have no pregnancy on the first try,” says Erez.

“One of our clients told me it is the best 'buy one get one free' deal ever,” says Erez, whose own twins, Daphna and Danielle, were born Jan. 6, 2015. Even though some Asian countries offer a less expensive surrogate option, Erez says many Israelis choose the United States because of the higher success rate, the ability to know who the surrogate is and being able to have twins from two different fathers.

To illustrate the multi-dimensional journey of becoming parents via surrogacy, Erez shares his own story.

EREZ'S STORY

The desire to be a parent knows no boundaries. Jewish mothers want their sons to have children, even if they are in a same sex marriage.

“My partner and I wanted two kids, one biological for each father,” says Erez. “It is very expensive and an emotional roller coaster to do this journey, so we decided to go for twins. It is quicker and less expensive to do it all at once.”

In the fall of 2013, the couple made their first visit to Portland to leave a “genetic

sample,” as Erez euphemistically calls the sperm collection. Two weeks before the trip, the surrogacy agency they had decided to use called to say, “We have a match for you.”

Brooke is married with two kids and was willing to be a surrogate mother and carry twins.

“We flew to Portland and met Brooke,” says Erez. “We went to the zoo with her, her husband and two kids. It was a very emotional meeting. That night we went to dinner without the kids to discuss expectations.”

Erez says biological parents and surrogates go “from strangers to best friends in a few months.”

While they were in Portland, the couple also chose an egg donor and met her.

About four months later, ORM transferred two embryos, one from each father. “We were lucky and had a good clinic with high success rates,” he says, adding that after 10 weeks they learned there were two heartbeats. Erez and Roy returned to Portland 20 weeks into the pregnancy and spent more time with Brooke and her family. Then, knowing twins are often early, they returned to Portland in December 2014.

“We spent Christmas together – my first time to experience what Christmas is,” says Erez.

The girls were born on Jan. 6, which some people think is the end of the journey. “It is just the beginning of the real story,” he says.

The family stayed in Portland for three weeks – long enough to receive the official birth certificate listing Erez and Roy as the parents of both girls and for the girls to be converted to Judaism by Rabbi Michael Cahana of Portland's Congregation Beth Israel.

“I am not religious,” says Erez. “In Israel religion is intimidating for me. (Religious) people don't allow me to be a parent or drive on Shabbat. But going to Portland, (where) there's even a lesbian rabbi, was so welcoming. Beth Israel families invited us to dinner at their homes. For the first time I felt close to my religion.”

Israeli citizenship is tracked by birth, so the girls had to have a blood test. “One matched me and one matched my partner,” says Erez. “They got Israeli citizenship.”

Fortunately for the couple, Israeli law had recently changed to allow them both to be recognized as parents of both girls without having to formally adopt their partner's biological child. Previously couples had to do a full adoption, which took two to three years. Since Erez and Roy had birth certificates listing both as parents, they only had to get parental recognition, which took only a couple weeks.

The couple stay in touch with Brooke and her family and consider them all close friends.

A HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE CHOOSES PORTLAND SURROGACY

One couple, who asked to remain anonymous, says that Israel also makes it cumbersome for heterosexual couples to use a surrogate.

“We underwent fertility treatments and all that jazz for almost two years in Israel before looking at the surrogate option,” says the wife. “When it was time for the surrogate option, we were advised by our doctor that there is a committee that is in charge of approving surrogacy requests, and, from his experience, the terms of our case (time of trying to get pregnant, our age and medical history, our social economic backgrounds, etc.) doesn't put us even close to being considered. So I looked into options abroad ... and my desire for the highest level of medical care and my kids getting American citizenship led us to choose the more expensive Portland option.”

“We are both very family oriented and not having kids never really crossed our minds.

(Based on) our health histories and mental wear and tear of two years of attempts, we chose the option with the highest rate of success for healthy happy children. We used our own egg and sperm extracted and fertilized at ORM before re-introduction to the surrogate.”

Since the couple are the genetic parents of the twins and are listed as the parents on the U.S. birth certificates, they were able to take them home to Israel without the conversion and parental recognition requirements.

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~ CAREY FLAMER-
POWELL, FOUNDER
AND DIRECTOR
OF ALL FAMILIES
SURROGACY



The couple says they had limited contact with Portland’s Jewish community other than “the lovely rabbi we used for the bris,” Rabbi Tzvi Fischer.

A JOURNEY TO SAME SEX PARENTHOOD VIA SURROGACY

Tomer and Ziv Fuss Sanderovich, whose twins were born Sept. 8, 2017, chose Portland because of ORM.

“The clinic was the first thing we chose (before choosing a surrogacy agency, hospital, etcetera,” Tomer says. “We considered a number of clinics across the U.S., but in the end chose ORM from Portland.”

“The family is a major part in the Israeli culture, also in the gay community in Israel,” says Tomer, discussing the couple’s decision to have children. “We both have large families and they are playing very important roles in our life. We felt that having children is a natural step in our relationship and our lives together. ... Unfortunately adoption is not an option for gays in Israel, nor is surrogacy for gay couples. The Orthodox have way too much influence on the Israeli government and daily lives – even a Reform wedding for straight couples is not approved by the government.”

With their experiences of religion in Israel, Tomer and Ziv were pleasantly surprised by the welcome they received. “It was amazing experience,” says Tomer. “It is wonderful that the community in Portland looked at us as Jewish at the same level as everyone. We got used to the reality in Israel, where we, as liberal and especially as gays, are considered as not Jewish enough.”

Shortly before Tomer and Ziv had to fly home to Israel with their daughters, Portland’s long dry summer finally relented and enough rain fell to allow the twins to become the first immersion in Portland’s new community mikvah, Rachel’s Well (see story page 34).

Though the mikvah’s official opening was Nov. 1, on Oct. 9 Rabbi Michael Cahana was able to use Rachel’s Well to convert the twins to Judaism for the purpose of Israeli citizenship. On Oct. 15, he officiated at a second conversion for an Israeli couple.

“This great miracle happened in Portland – it rained,” he says with a smile. “I’m really grateful they have allowed these pre-opening mikvot. Many uses you can put off, but these people have to get back to Israel.”

Left: Israelis Or and Idan shared this photo of their twins born in Portland in fall 2016. Congregation Beth Israel Rabbi Michael Cahana officiated at both the twins’ conversion and the couple’s Jewish wedding in Portland.

A SINGLE MAN’S SURROGATE JOURNEY

“I chose Portland because I got excellent recommendations for ORM,” says a single man, who asked to remain anonymous.

“I wanted to have my own son ... as a gay individual I want to establish my own family,” he says. “I decided to go with the surrogate mom option, as I wanted be able to have my biological son. My son was born June 3, 2017, in Medford.

“I experienced liberal Judaism in Israel for the first time a couple months ago as I converted my son to Judaism,” he says.

Erez explains that non-Orthodox conversions are permitted in Israel, but there are advantages to having children converted in America. It can be difficult to find a rabbi in Israel who is willing to convert the child of two fathers. More importantly, he says, “If one chooses to do it in Israel, the baby/ies will be listed as ‘no religion’ when they get here and then will require further bureaucracy to change it to ‘Jewish,’ which complicates the procedure. ... Most will prefer to do it while abroad in a short ceremony.”

A SURROGATE MOM AND SURROGATE AGENCY

Carey Flamer-Powell, founder and director of All Families Surrogacy in Beaverton, is also a surrogate mother.

All Families Surrogacy has been a popular resource for Israelis since early 2015, shortly after being founded. Carey says they connected with Israel through ORM and Erez. “We work very closely with ORM, and the majority of our clients have chosen ORM as their clinic. Our first clients from Israel signed on in early 2015.”

The agency’s Intended Parent Coordinator Elana Alpert lived in Israel for nine years and speaks fluent Hebrew, which can be useful in translating for Israeli clients. About 70 Israeli couples have either completed or are in the surrogacy process through All Families Surrogacy. About 98% of them are gay male couples.

“So far we have had 35 babies born to Israeli parents and many more on the way,” says Carey.

“I am a lesbian mom married to a Jewish woman,” says Carey of her personal interest in connecting to Israeli couples. “I am also an experienced surrogate and so are five of my staff members – four of whom carried for Israeli gay male couples. We form strong bonds and friendships with our Israeli clients, and we are passionate about helping them create their families. We have traveled to Israel twice as an agency for surrogacy conferences, and each time we always make time to visit with our clients and their babies, as we consider them part of our extended family. Just today, we had celebrated one of our Israeli client’s birthdays by taking them to lunch – they were in Portland visiting their surrogate.”

PORTLAND CONNECTIONS TO ISRAEL

The strong bonds that form between the Israeli parents and the surrogate families in Oregon also provide new connections between the two communities.

“These families make a connection with Israelis and they have a relationship,” says Rabbi Cahana, who has now converted more than 100 Israeli babies born here. “I hear most often (that) they maintain the relationship. Mostly these are people who have had no reason to have a connection with Israel. For the surrogate family, Israel becomes a real place with real people living real lives.”

Through it all, Erez helps weave a fabric of indelible threads between biological and surrogate families, Oregon and Israel, and most importantly parents and children.

“ONE OF OUR
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BEST 'BUY ONE
GET ONE FREE'
DEAL EVER.”
~ EREZ BARON
ON WHY ISRAELI
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TWINs