E	very morning, Ricki Lieberman wakes up to the sound of the Mediterranean lapping against the seawall outside her apartment in the old port city of Jaffa. Then she pops down to a boardwalk café to meet English- and Hebrew-speaking friends for coffee.

“I knew the bustling, trendy Tel Aviv-Jaffa area would be right for me when I made the decision eight years ago to retire here,” says Lieberman, 70, a former consultant to New York City nonprofits who says her move fulfilled a long-held Zionist dream to make aliyah.

Lieberman says she is “extremely pleased” with her life in Israel, except for being 6,000 miles away from her film-editor son in New York. “I love the weather but I miss my kid.”

Lieberman is one of an increasing number of retirees and other mature adults making aliyah in recent years from North America. “Many of these individuals make aliyah to be closer to family, for the incredible Israeli health care system, the warm spirit of the country and, of course, the awesome weather,” says Marc Rosenberg, director of pre-aliyah at Nefesh B’Nefesh, the nonprofit organization that promotes, encourages and facilitates Jewish immigration to Israel from North America and the United Kingdom.

According to Tani Kramer, Nefesh B’Nefesh’s senior public relations and marketing manager, 563 olim ages 60 to 90 moved to Israel in 2017 from these countries, an increase of nearly 15 percent from 2014. The average age among this group was 69. (The total number of new immigrants from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom in 2017 was 3,460.)

Retiring to Israel, however, has its share of challenges.

“Retirees go through two changes, both of which require adjustment and involve lots of gains and losses,” says Batya Ludman, a psychologist who counsels many older olim in her practice in Ra’anana, northeast of Tel Aviv. “They must adjust to a new stage in life, and also reinvent themselves in a new language and a new culture.” This includes adapting to Israelis’ assertiveness, she notes. Indeed, when it comes to dealing with aggressive Israeli driving habits, many American-born retirees stick to public transportation; only the brave drive cars.

“You’ve got to keep a sense of humor about things,” says Anne Rothenberg, 69, a former day school teacher and president of Hadassah’s English-speaking Tamar-Nechama chapter in Jerusalem. (There are 2,000 Hadassah members throughout the country in 20 chapters that are under Hadassah-Israel’s umbrella.) She and her husband, Jeff, a patent attorney, made aliyah from Albany, N.Y., last year.

While most people spend years, even decades, planning their retirement to Israel, Lieberman spontaneously decided to move to Jaffa while on a 2009 visit to the city, where she had lived for three years in the mid-1970s. “I had the good fortune of coming across a 500-year-old building in the early stages of restoration and decided then and there to buy one of the apartments, with its impressive Arab-style vaulted ceilings and arched windows,” she explains. Gentrified Jaffa has recently attracted many retired Israelis as well.

Despite her relatively quick decision, Lieberman had to do careful financial planning before her move. Israel has a high cost of living, which can pose a challenge for retirees on a fixed income that is vulnerable to fluctuating currency exchange rates. Housing is expensive, too. The price of a two-bedroom apartment in a metropolitan Tel Aviv or Jerusalem can begin at around $1 million; a rental is about $2,500 a month—and food and gasoline prices are high.

“Whereas years ago it was possible to come to Israel with relatively few resources,” Lieberman says,
**ANY NEW IMMIGRANTS**

find the socialized, universal medical system to be excellent and affordable, but it has fewer bells and whistles than Americans are used to. Patients need to get their own referrals and pre-authorizations from their Kupat Holim (health plan) for procedures and visits to specialists. Family doctors, who have heavy workloads and often must see several patients a day, can be less proactive in managing a patient’s care. When it comes to emergency care, surgery and treatment for major illnesses, the retirees interviewed for this article gave Israel’s health care system glowing reviews.

Weiss, who wears a scarf covering her balding head, is currently undergoing chemotherapy for metastatic breast cancer at Hadassah Hospital in Ein Kerem. “The medical care is better and more caring in Israel than in the U.S.,” she says. “The nurses and doctors are amazing. They’ve given me their cellphone numbers, and I can call them at any time.”

Greg Pemberton, 70, lived in Spanish Fork, Utah, spent 20 years there before he and his wife, Carol, moved to Tel Aviv four years ago because he was caring for her frail father and her husband’s mother, both of whom the Weisses brought with them to Israel. Since then, she has had to deal with her own breast cancer. Today, her Hebrew is limited, so Weiss asks her son for help with bureaucratic paperwork and strangers in the supermarket to read food labels for her. “I’m a member of the health club at Ramat Rachel”—a kibbutz just south of Jerusalem—“and I have to admit that I do miss being able to understand the gossip in the hot tub,” Weiss jokes.

In contrast, Rose Faber, 75, continues to improve her Hebrew nine years after making aliyah to Jerusalem from London with her husband, Sydney, who is now 76. She takes Hebrew lessons and listens to Hebrew-language radio and television programs. “You miss out on so much if you can’t speak to people,” says Faber, a retired nurse who volunteers two evenings a week with newborns at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem.

**FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE**

between remaining in the Anglo “bubble” and pushing oneself to learn Hebrew can be tough for those coming without fluency in the language. Almost all retirees take advantage of ulpan, the Hebrew lessons initially provided free for new immigrants by the government. Some stick with the intensive classes for the long term; others give up more quickly.

Weiss was unable to study in ulpan when she settled in Israel four years ago because she was caring for her frail father and her husband’s mother, both of whom the Weisses brought with them to Israel. Since

“English speakers are a force in volunteerism in Isarat,” says Josie Arbel, director of absorption services for the Association for Americans and Canadians in Israel. AACHI (aachi.org.il) enlisted volunteers to greet new olim at the airport, staff English-language libraries, chair committees, and more. Other organizations seeking volunteers include:

**Skilled Volunteers for Israel** (skillvolunteerisrael.org) facilitates volunteer opportunities with nonprofits for mature adults and retirees.

**ESRA** (esra.org.il) puts new English-speaking immigrants to work in community projects in disadvantaged sectors.

**First Hug** (timotuk.org) seeks volunteers to help care for abandoned babies.

**Israel Museum** (im.org.il/content/volunteers) and **Yad Vashem** (yadvashem.org) seek docents.

**Lone Soldier Center** (lonesoldiercenter.com) prepares care packages for soldiers, serves Shabbat and holiday meals and more.

OneFamily (onefamilytogether.org) mentors children and teens affected by terror.

**Yad Sarah** (yadysarah.org) helps provide health and home care services to people of all ages, with special programs that support older adults and children and adults with disabilities.
where they both worked as special education teachers in public schools. They also founded and led Camp Ramah’s Tikvah program for children with disabilities. In 1999, they retired early to fulfill a lifelong dream of making aliyah, settling in Ra’anana, where their married son and daughter live with 11 grandchildren, nine of them born in Israel.

“Israel was always in my soul,” says Herb Greenberg, who together with his wife started a pre-aliyah preparation group years before the establishment of Nefesh B’Nefesh. However, he warns, “you will have trouble adjusting if Israel is not central to your identity.”

For her part, Rothenberg, the Hadassah chapter president whose two children and six grandchildren live in Israel, finds it inspiring to regularly see the medical center in action and raise funds for specific research projects. “In the U.S., Hadassah was about being social with other Jewish women, Zionism and raising money,” she says. “Here in Jerusalem, Hadassah is literally our local hospital.”

When it comes to housing, Ludman, the psychologist, often encourages older olim to think about senior residences and assisted-living options, of which there are many good choices for those who can no longer live independently. Every city has one or more upscale, full-service, private senior living buildings or villages, on a par with such residences in the United States. For retirees who have family on a kibbutz that has a communal dining room and laundry, they may be able to live there as long as they are still mobile. Seniors in need of assistance or nursing care can get limited home care from the government or pay privately for supplemental care.

After housing and health care, one might imagine that these new Israelis would be concerned about safety issues, yet many say those fears are not front and center. They say they appreciate the security checks in public places and don’t feel personally threatened on a day-to-day basis. They are especially pleased about how safe they feel walking outside after dark.

“We can walk around at night here. That’s not something we could do in London,” says Sydney Faber. But his wife, Rose, acknowledges that she has moments of anxiety during tense periods, such as the wave of stabbings that followed the 2014 Gaza War. Rothenberg also worries about the threats from Iran. “Sure, the Iran situation is a little nerve-racking, but if anything bad were to happen, I’d rather be here close to our kids and grandkids,” she says as she gazes out the window of her art-filled penthouse apartment in Jerusalem’s Armona neighborhood.

Indeed, many retirees’ days are filled not with worry but with volunteer work and other enriching activities. Lieberman supports Rana, a Jaffa choir of Jewish and Arab women who sing together. She is active in left-wing Israeli politics and with the Democrats Abroad chapter in Israel. Recently, she started volunteering with the children of African asylum seekers and refugees in south Tel Aviv. She often hosts meetings and social gatherings in her beautifully furnished apartment.

“I consider myself a traditional Zionist,” Lieberman says, “therefore I am committed to working for social justice, pluralism and progressive politics in service of a democratic and Jewish Israel.”

For their part, the Sommers and Mischels volunteer with Sar-El, the National Project for Volunteers for Israel, that regularly suit up in olive-green Israel Defense Forces uniforms and help out on army bases. Howie Mischel, who loves hiking as well as uncovering layers of history, also volunteers with the Israel Antiquities Authority at digs around Modi’in. His wife, Terry, is part of a group of local women who make quilts for wounded IDF soldiers.

Barbara and Herb Greenberg volunteer as English tutors at a local high school. Barbara has taken up acrylic and watercolor painting, hanging her creations among family photos on their apartment walls. Sydney Faber has begun taking art lessons for the first time in his life. In addition, he volunteers once a week at the information desk at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, plays tennis and sings in the choir at Jerusalem’s Great Synagogue.

According to Rose Faber, getting out of the house, meeting people and giving back to Israeli society is what makes retirement to Israel so meaningful. “There’s so much to do, you could be busy all day every day,” she says. “The key is to get out and not sit at home.”

Moure Schmidt, who has a caregiver, is the perfect example that it’s never too late to make aliyah.

“I’m just sorry” she says, “that we didn’t do it earlier.”

Renee Ghert-Zand is a freelance journalist covering Israel and the Jewish world from Jerusalem, where she lives.