



S. Greenspan

t's said that "Israel is the new Florida." The way people used to jump on a plane to Florida for under a week or just an extended Shabbos, they'll now make that quick trip to Eretz Yisrael, flying at the drop of a hat. Where young *bachurim* and girls used to spend their summer vacations working in camps or otherwise utilizing their time to unwind and make a few dollars, now a vacation is not a vacation unless you've been somewhere.

How has this affected our post high school girls?

Binah turned to Mrs. Gitel Kaluszyner and Mrs. Shani Leibowitz of Lakewood's Travel Plaza, a travel agency with over thirty years of experience in frum travel, and to WandeRVingJews.com's Mrs. Shaunna Kestenbaum, the well-known travel advisor, educator and all-round guru of frum family travel, asking for their professional expertise in the area of girls traveling.

Rumor has it that there is a trend toward more exotic travel for single girls in recent years. Do you find that travel has changed for post high school girls over the past decade, and what would you attribute that to?

Mrs. Leibowitz: Traveling to what you're calling "exotic" locations — like Cancun, Dubai or the Caribbean — is certainly not the norm. We see it, it exists, but it's definitely a minority and not very common for Bais Yaakov girls, especially girls just out of seminary or a year or two past that. That said, travel in general has become much more common, which can be due to a number of the following factors.

Many girls are making more money than they did years ago, and while back in the day girls were encouraged to save the money they were making and didn't spend as freely, the ease of good jobs and earning larger salaries at a young age makes spending on travel a bit "laissez faire."

Another reason can be the access of kosher food and *frum* communities in places that were much less accessible years ago. While single girls don't have to take into account searching for a *minyan* in their travel plans, knowing that kosher food and *frum* people exist in the city they want to visit definitely makes traveling more comfortable and attractive.

In addition, our world has become so much more connected, and the large number of frequent flights to many cities and countries make distant places no longer feel so distant. Eretz Yisrael used to be seen as a huge trip, far and costly, and now girls right out of seminary are rushing to go back, sometimes with a quick visit in

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Europe on the way. Friendships formed from camp or seminary with girls living across the country or even the globe are a pull for girls to fly off to visit each other, to attend *simchos* and spend time together in person, resulting in it sort of becoming "the norm."

So yes, traveling has become more normalized, flying has become more popular, but we don't see a lot of traveling to exotic places; the most popular place for single girls is still Eretz Yisrael, even with a stopover somewhere in Europe, but to cities where there are *frum* people and *frum kehillos*.

## Do you give opinions on locations that you feel girls should not travel to? Or only if you're asked?

*Mrs. L:* We don't give opinions on actual locations, unless they specifically ask for our opinion, but when it comes to flight reservations, certainly. We'll discourage

certain itineraries or tickets, either because the times don't make sense, the connections aren't reliable or the airline is not recommended. People want the cheapest flights available, but we know from experience that either the hidden fees will hike up the price, the connections are terrible or the airline itself has had so many problems that they are just not worth booking. Take, for example, Turkish Airlines. Although they have a reputation for being very cheap, have good service and decent connections to Israel ("everybody flies them!!"), a simple delay in a flight, which is not uncommon in travel, could land a young girl in a Muslim country, scrambling for a place to spend the night, often without a

cell phone, and amongst people most of us would not like to associate with. We learn from our customers' mistakes. We get a lot of feedback on certain flights and know which connections aren't good. Customers rely on and trust our recommendations, so it's usually up to us to offer options that will ensure their travel will go smoothly. Often, when parents are making the arrangements for their daughters' travel, they go with what seems safest rather than cheapest, but we find that mature young girls will listen to what we recommend and appreciate the advice.

Mrs. Kestenbaum: I'd advise against any place where there can be unnecessary drama, whether that's safety concerns (riots, anyone?), concerns about extreme cultural differences or anywhere you or your parents would feel in any way uncomfortable.

## How could girls go about planning a trip for a short vacation?

*Mrs. K:* I'll start by saying that obviously, the subject of single girls — or *bachurim* for that matter — traveling alone is not as simple as we'd like to make it, and I strongly advise each family to figure out their guidelines before reaching out to plan a trip.

In addition, there is a difference between 20-year-old single girls traveling and 29-year-old single women who are traveling. Presumably, their life experience and view of the world are very different, and what's appropriate for one is not necessarily right for another. (Sometimes parents are more overprotective of their 27-year-old single daughter than their 21-year-old married daughter because the 21-year-old is traveling with her 23-year-old, just-asinexperienced husband... This all needs serious thought!)

Planning a trip depends a lot on the level of experience of the people traveling. I'd first ask if they have a definite

need to go far, or would they want to stay closer? Do they want a location with frum resources (kosher food, etc.) or are they bringing everything themselves? The younger or more inexperienced the girls are (and even if they are a little older), the more you want to keep things as simple as possible. You would want to make sure there is a fully frum infrastructure so they will have food readily available, a Walmart or other store, where things are available to them should they need it. Sometimes they can find a fully-frum travel package, which obviously makes the trip easier.

It's popular to look online for cheap tickets, which can be very attractive to working girls who are looking to save money. What are some of the pitfalls of going this route, and how can using a travel agent help avoid problems later on?

Mrs. L: Domestic travel can easily be booked on your own; there's not that much gamble, and unless you're not computer savvy, you don't need the service of a travel agent. If you know what you want and it's an easy itinerary, by all means take the risk. When booking online, though, people can be a little lax, not necessarily paying attention to the rules and restrictions. If all goes well it doesn't matter, but making changes later often makes one wish they had someone guiding them in the booking process. Additionally, if the times are very specific, or it's a more complicated itinerary (a few cities, connections, etc.), then, yes, a travel agent can be a more convenient route for such a trip.

When it comes to international travel, there can be many more restrictions and there is more room for errors and unexpected things to come up. In addition, when you run into a problem with a ticket you booked online, it's very hard to get hold of someone to help you — no



one is responsible. Often the site uses third-party sellers, and each one pushes the responsibility onto the other. We have certainly had our share of people calling to see if we can get them out of messes and mix ups from tickets they booked online. Sometimes we can help, many times there's really nothing we can do. People often end up having to pay the service fee that they were trying to avoid by booking online, only with a lot more headache and complications that could have been avoided had they booked with an agent in the first place. If it's a ticket we booked, we

generally know exactly where to take a complaint and who we can turn to for help.

What are the pros and cons of girls staying in hotels vs. house rentals such as Airbnbs?

Mrs. K: For families, we lean toward Airbnb rentals because they lend themselves to larger groups with their varying ages and stages — you can avoid booking several hotel rooms. For groups of girls, it depends on how many there are and how long they're staying. If they can pile into one room for a short stay, they can save money. If they need a bunch of rooms, a house rental might make more sense. Airbnb rentals certainly offer convenience in

terms of privacy (noise emanating from hotel rooms late at night is not appreciated!) and in the fact that you have a full kitchen at your disposal. On the flip side, you also have plenty of *she'eilos* that come up (and many that you may not even know to be aware of!) like stovetops, coffeemakers, a pool that you thought was closed in but in fact is not fully secluded... This all has to be taken into account.

On the flip side, Airbnb rentals can often be located

in less-than-desirable places. Just because a house looks nice on the inside, it doesn't make it okay to rent. Two blocks over this way or that can bring you to a very different neighborhood with different neighbors and safety concerns. Descriptions that mention that they're close to nightlife, action, celebrating diversity, are all good clues of places to stay away from.

As far as hotels go, the number-one consideration has to be safety: What does the greater neighborhood look like, and what environment is the hotel itself in? Who does it



attract? This all needs to be researched ahead of time, and reading the reviews will answer many questions. Is there outdoor access to the rooms with the rooms being off an outdoor balcony, where there are no security cameras? Is it right near the local bus station? Or are the rooms off hallways with shared lobbies and spaces? You can find out all of this information fairly easily ahead of time.

In both situations, reading reviews gives you loads of information. Read them! And then read more.





Up until fairly recently, girls from the East Coast enjoyed going to places like Lake George, Boston or Newport, RI. Now, there seems to be a feeling that if you didn't fly, you didn't really go on vacation. What are some pros of staying more "local" rather than flying off into the sunset?

Mrs. K: The long answer is that what you're referring to might really just be a reflection of the "more and more" in society in general: the inability for many to be satisfied with simplicity. It seems that everyone, regardless of financial bracket, wants to vacation like the wealthy, but that's beyond our discussion here, so let's just address the short answer.

For starters, budget is a good one! You can often get more bang for your buck if you put the money you saved on a flight toward the vacation itself. I acknowledge that sometimes tickets are cheap and flying is the cheaper route, but remember that even cheap tickets have plenty of added hidden fees.

But really, first think about what the purpose of the vacation is. If it's to see a specific sight, obviously, you can't do that anywhere else, and you need that particular destination. But if you need a break and want a change of scenery, there are so many beautiful places to go to accomplish that. You want to see mountains? You don't need Montana (or the Alps!). You want water? You don't need Cancun or the Caribbean. There are so many beautiful places to go and see, and places with incredible scenery, that are closer to home. Flying is an experience, but it can also be stressful - you knock out several hours just between getting to and from the airport, security, possible canceled flights, lost luggage... You start your vacation hours after you leave your house, and you're already exhausted. On the other hand, when you drive somewhere, your vacation begins the moment you get in the car!

If you are looking for a vacation to unwind and relax, you can certainly have that feeling of getting away from it all without flying somewhere. Within a three-hour radius of your home there are alternate realities.

When should girls rent phones and not rely on their own? (If traveling internationally, i.e., to Eretz Yisrael, with a stopover in another country, what is the recommended way of having service in each location?)

Mrs. L: We recommend renting phones rather than paying through your phone service simply because the feedback has been that the phones just don't work as well in foreign countries. It's more convenient to have your own phone, with its contacts, etc., but just know that the service is often not as reliable. Some people will pay to have international service on their existing phones just for the day of travel so they have service at all times, which is invaluable for single girls traveling alone. We have definitely had instances of girls who missed connecting flights or got separated from their friends with no service, and it becomes very tense.

Do your homework, speak to people who have your type of phone and learn what your options are because not every service is available everywhere, and these days it's certainly important for girls to have a phone wherever they are

Mrs. K: If you're with other girls and you'll be somewhere where cell phone service can be spotty, we recommend bringing along good, long-range walkie talkies! Yes, really! It's a great way to stay safe if one person loses her group.

How important is travel insurance? People might feel like it's an extra expense that will most likely not be needed, so they're hesitant to spend on it. What happens when people don't buy insurance but need it in the end?

Mrs. L: My brachah always is that your traveler's insurance should end up being a waste of money and you should never need it, but we could write a book about people who used



their insurance, or didn't buy it and ended up needing it. We always, always encourage it. We had a girl who got appendicitis abroad, we've had emergencies where one person had to fly home immediately on a different flight than the others, we had a girl who flew to her friend's chasunah in England and broke her foot. People get back money on canceled flights, they have medical bills taken care of without the huge hassles and headaches. Travel insurance for domestic flights is not as important because the risk is not as big: Often people have private insurance that will cover them across the country. If someone has state insurance (e.g, NY Medicaid, NJ Family Care), it's up to you to decide. No one is invincible, and no one can say that they know nothing will happen to them. So it's a good idea when traveling domestically, but it is imperative when traveling internationally.

What are some details that are commonly overlooked that can ruin a trip?

I'd advise against any place where there can be unnecessary drama...

Mrs. L: As mentioned earlier, insurance. Aside from that, luggage issues are a big one! Either pay for a carryon in advance, or take nothing at all, but it's almost impossible for girls to take only a personal bag that complies with airline regulations on vacation. Girls think they can get away with a bigger personal bag, and end up having to pay \$100 at the counter for the bag, which the airline calls a carry-on. Had they bought the right to a cabin bag in advance, it would have been cheaper and they wouldn't have had the hassle. You really have to measure the bags after they're packed and learn what the regulations are for your particular airline...and stick

to it! Don't rely on "everyone does it" or "everyone brings this" unless you're really ready to pay up when that one associate makes you fit your bag into the sizing bin. You might have gotten away with it on the way there, but anything can happen in any airport, and it can really put a damper on the experience, not to mention the potential for *chillul Hashem*, when girls begin arguing with the representatives about not paying for the carry-on. You're at the mercy of whoever is on-staff right then, so the fact that your sister used that bag last week and got away with it won't mean much and you'll have to pay an extra \$100 for it. Follow the rules to the T.

The same thing goes for allowing enough time in the airport. Yes, we all know people who it worked out well for — they got to the airport by the skin of their teeth, but we have people calling all the time that they missed their flight because they didn't think they really had to leave all that time at the airport... You do!

Mrs. K: Kosher food! Find out and do research,

and do not assume there's kosher food everywhere. And even if you hear "there's kosher food," do your own research. (Suddenly, we're on vacation, and everything anyone else eats is kosher...!) Reach out to people who live in that place, or even call a Ray there, and ask them about the hechsheirim in town. Know and understand what your standards are and how to maintain them when you're away from home; find out where the supermarkets are and make sure they carry what you need. Educating ourselves before traveling helps us plan; nothing is impossible if you know what you need to know. (As an aside, in addition to educating ourselves, with some halachic knowledge about kashrus, there are lots of foods you can buy almost anywhere by way of fresh produce or even fish — but again, research, research, and ask, ask, ask.)

In America, Canada and Eretz Yisrael, products are labeled on the outside as kosher, but in many other places around the world they are not, and it's important to familiarize yourself with this in advance — even for drinks in airports. Just because there are Hebrew letters on a store or a package, don't assume it's kosher at all! In Europe, there are places that use all Hebrew lettering because they attract many Israelis, and while some of these places are kosher and some are questionably kosher, some don't even pretend to be remotely kosher — they just have everything written in Hebrew.

As mentioned above, reading reviews can help you avoid a lot of disappointment. Getting a house with a pool? Look at the pictures; make sure it's fully fenced in. Planning on eating out? What are the hours of the restaurants? In plenty of places, eateries close early, leaving you without food.

When staying for Shabbos: Electronic keys and light sensors are just a couple of the things that need to be planned for, or it can really ruin a trip. If you are going for Shabbos, leave yourself lots of time to get there before *licht bentchen* so you can see the situation and set up properly. Call a Rav before your trip and ask, what do I *not* know? What might I *not* be prepared for?

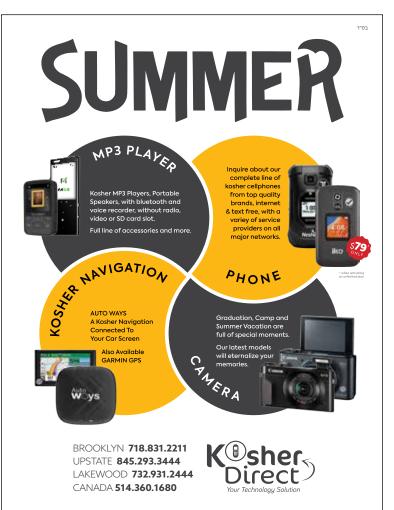
Do you find that frum travelers in general have a false sense of confidence or security when traveling? What are some tips you can recommend for young adults traveling — whether locally, domestically or internationally?

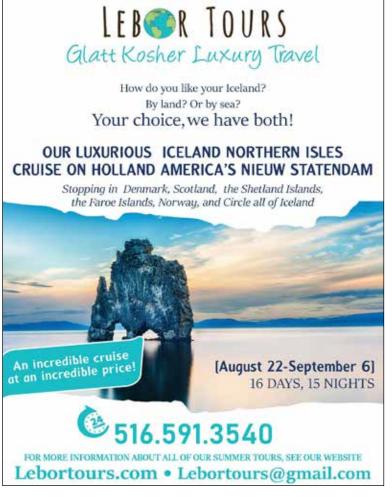
*Mrs. K:* Someone must always know where you are. Period. The Jewish world is small. Inevitably, you'll know someone, who'll know someone, and all of a sudden you'll have a local contact! Even full-fledged adults need their family to know where they are. In remote places, you can alert the Chabad house that

you're in town. Here's a very unknown but important fact: In an emergency, a citizen of any country can *always* call their nation's embassy or consulate, no matter what country they're in. Going on a hike? Make sure people know where you're going and when you're expected back, so that if you're not back at that time, they can get help. Your parents back home should know your itinerary. No, it's not a lack of trust or maturity — it's basic safety, and even adults and seasoned travelers need to do this. Traveling or hiking in a pack of four is always best (imagine the scenario: One gets hurt, one stays with the injured party, two others go get help).

You can call it a sense of security, others might call it a certain entitlement, but sometimes *frum* travelers might have certain expectations for things when they're away: kosher food readily available, everyone being able to speak their language, expectations of others.... But there always needs to be situational awareness, both on a safety level and on a level of simply being appropriate in the place you're in. You're not in the bubble of *Frum*-Town USA when you're traveling. A 7-11 in a remote town in Middle America is not Route 9, and no, the safety is not the same, nor are the social norms.

You're *frum* girls (this applies to families as well, but we're talking to girls here...), and you have to know your







place. You might be on vacation, but there is propriety: You are in a *reshus harabim*. Societal norms have to be taken into account while you're taking selfies, snapping pictures and taking videos, playing music on your speaker or simply being conspicuous.

It's imperative that when traveling, we learn the nuances and societal norms of the place where we're going. The same way you research things to do there, research the behaviors. Important details like tipping, interacting, saying thank you, opening doors for others, these really do vary by locale! When in Rome do as the Romans, when in Brooklyn do as the Brooklynites, but when anywhere else, do *not* do what you're accustomed to doing at home. Laughing out loud, hugging, a shriek in a park — girls (and all *frum* travelers!) have to be very cognizant of their surroundings and act accordingly. Even in America, the cultures in different states can be diverse; people carry themselves differently in different places. Even *frum* social norms vary in different *frum* cities, and it's prudent to familiarize yourself with what's situationally appropriate.

## Any last thoughts on girls traveling?

*Mrs. L:* Follow rules when you're traveling. Comply with airport guidelines, leave yourself time to get through security or having a gate mix up and follow rules regarding what is and what's not allowed on the flight, what that particular airline allows as a carry-on or personal item. People get upset when the airline gives them a hard time about rules, but sometimes we might have a notion that "everyone" gets away with things so we will also, and we're shocked when we don't — and take it out on the authority who is just keeping to the rules. Abiding by the rules when you travel can really save you a lot of distressing moments.

Mrs. K: Don't overpack!

We, as a society, tend to overdo it when we go away, packing outfits for every single weather possibility and extras *just in case*. Leave the kitchen sink (and the extra-cute booties) home. "Just in case" items get left out of the suitcase. Have you ever seen non-Jews travel? Carry on and personal bag! We've done it, too, and so can you. We like to use the twenty-twenty rule: Anything that can be bought in under twenty minutes, for less than \$20 stays home. (Exceptions would be over the counter meds, like Motrin — no need to be miserable because it's in the middle of the night and you can't get to a pharmacy.)

Next, although I'm a travel advisor and not your *hashkafah* advisor, my capacity is really one of educating people with travel. In light of that, I'll mention something that is important for all *frum* travelers, and certainly for *frum* girls.

Know your standards, and keep to them, even on vacation. Stay true to yourself and your values, and don't lose sight of what is important to you just because you're not on your home turf.

Finally, back in the day, girls going on vacation was often used as a way to have a break, get a change of scenery and also to do for others. Girls used to go to Russia and work in summer camps, for example. Today, vacations seem to be more about what's in it for us than about looking out for the Yidden in the place where we're going. But there are so many opportunities! Here's just one example: If you're going somewhere out of the way and there is a local Chabad house, call in advance and ask what you can bring them! They appreciate it so much. We've been asked if we could bring a few challos ("So my wife can have a break just one Shabbos!"), bishul Yisrael tuna, some "in-town" nosh for a Shabbos party, grape juice. You can leave donations, especially if you utilize their services. Sure, you're going on vacation, but Klal Yisrael is built on chessed, so take the time to look for opportunities! You can really enrich your vacation by doing so.





