

## **Moving My Home**

In the past 15 years, my move to Atlanta stands out as the biggest single event. Before that, I lived and grew up in southern Connecticut, along the coast of Long Island Sound. I lived in a small town called Shelton, a few miles northeast of Bridgeport. In my 11th year, Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, GA offered my dad a job. He visited often in the years before, and finally decided to move there. We picked a house, packed up the old one, and drove south. We settled in quickly, but the move sent ripples through my life. My whole life stopped, moved 800 miles south, and restarted. A new town, new people, new school, and new responsibilities awaited me there. Even today, our location effects my life in ways I never expected.

Shelton, Connecticut lies on the shores of the Housatonic River. My parents built our house on the edge of a valley overlooking the river, with another town on the other side. My front yard offered a perfect view all the way down due to the slope of the subdivision. Each house, especially mine, sat upon about on a half-acre lot with lots of backyard space. Behind these homes grew small forests where deer, squirrels, and bats lived. I lived at the top of the street, so my yard matched my house in size. I played in my yard often; we owned a big playground set with swings, monkey bars, a slide, and a tarp roof. I also played with a bow and arrows that my parents bought in New Mexico. Sometimes I crossed the street to my neighbor's house where my friend lived. Now we visit them every time we go up north.

Years ago my dad also grew up in southern Connecticut, so his family lived there as well. My grandmother and cousins all lived 20 minutes away, and we occasionally visited them. I often stayed with my grandmother for weekends, or ate dinner with other family. Every Thanksgiving, all my family came to my grandmother's house for dinner. My mom's family lived in Concord, NH, where she grew up, and owned a summer home in York Beach, Maine. It took four hours to drive to New Hampshire, and about five to York Beach. We visited them on holidays and birthdays. My mother and her father shared the same birthday, July 28, and we visited the beach for the week. We visited New Hampshire in the winter when they celebrated Christmas. Over all, we visited them two or three times a year.

I got my education at a small Jewish school called Ezra Academy, a Solomon Schechter school. It consisted of Kindergarten through 8th Grade, and I started there in Kindergarten. I learned with the same group of kids from Kindergarten through 5th Grade, and knew all of them very well and made better friends with some.

Every Monday through Thursday, I took a bus to the JCC and stayed at their after-school care program. There I alternated between swimming and karate lessons after finishing my homework. I loved doing both, and they provided regular exercise. Every Friday, I went home with my best friend and stayed until my mom got off from work.

In the year or two before the move, my dad often visited Atlanta for work. He worked with Morehouse School of Medicine, and they finally got the grant they wanted. Eventually, they offered him a permanent job and asked him to move there. After some thought, he agreed, and started looking for houses. My family visited in August of 2006, and we looked at the area in

person. We toured the city with a realtor, and looked at a variety of houses. We also looked at schools and synagogues, and the houses around them. I visited Epstein and GHA, and decided to pick one based on houses around them. My parents settled on a house right between GHA and Congregation Beth Teffilah, a Chabad synagogue. We belonged to a Chabad synagogue in Connecticut, so we preferred a similar place.

The house we picked looked very nice, with a master bedroom on the main floor, and three more bedrooms upstairs. My dad planned to make it more wheelchair accessible, and then it would fit perfectly. But half way through the process of buying it, some complications arose and we became unable to close. But my dad's job required him to move down, so he found an apartment. He attended Beth Teffilah, and began to get to know the people. To his surprise, the house right next to the one we picked became available to buy. The couple that lived there attended the synagogue and recently got a divorce, and she offered to sell the house to us. My dad liked the house, and he decided to buy it before it even went up for sale.

Back home, my mom and I started packing up the house. I went through the bins full of old toys in the basement, and decided which to keep and which to give away. My mom sorted through the garage, and gave away things that we would not need or did not want to bother moving. For example, we gave our big wooden sukkah to one of our family friends, who recently moved to Shelton from France. We gave our snow blower and sled to our neighbors. We slowly spread the word to people that we finally found a house, making the move official. Everyone seemed sad to see us go.

My classmates threw me a goodbye party at school, which took me by surprise. They all made me personalized cards expressing their sorrows. The whole grade enjoyed cake and cookies in a back room of the school. The class all pitched in to buy me a customized t-shirt, which I loved. They even handed out pencils with our class year engraved on them. They really showed me how much they would miss me.

When the time came, my mom and I packed for the drive. We already packed all our things in boxes, from appliances to clothes. The house seemed so big after the moving truck came. Seeing the house without furniture interested me because the house seemed so empty. Our beds lay locked in the back of a truck, so my mom and I stayed with my grandmother the night before we left.

The next day, we did a final check on the house before leaving on the three day drive. I borrowed a DVD player from my friend (the one we gave the sukkah to) for entertainment during the drive. On the way down, we visited Hershey, PA, and Luray, VA. In Hershey, we toured Chocolate World, the part museum-part massive store all devoted to Hershey's chocolate. Under the town of Luray in northern Virginia, water eroded big underground caverns over the years. All kinds of rock figures hang from the ceiling, created by years of dripping water. The caverns displayed two main attractions: a big lake sitting undisturbed for years so the reflection created a perfect mirror, and an organ made of hollowed stalactites. When you played a key on the keyboard, a small hammer hit a hollow stalactite and echoed around the cavern. Outside the caverns, a hedge maze provided some outdoor time after the time underground. I still remember the drive down fondly.

My mom and I arrived in Atlanta on December 25, 2006. We knocked on our front door, and my dad came and showed us the new house. I went upstairs to my room, he presented me with a choice. I could sleep in one of two rooms, connected by a bathroom. One would become my room and the other a play room or storage room. I picked the room with blue paint that overlooked the street through three big windows. In the other room, two small windows faced a forest and pale orange paint covered the walls. I unpacked my bag in the other room, so they could set up my bed in the room I picked. Until then, my parents slept on a bed my dad rented, and I slept on an inflatable bed downstairs.

Soon after we arrived, the moving truck brought our belongings. They set up our bigger furniture, and left the boxes full of clothes, books, and toys in the rooms written on the side of the boxes. Whatever we couldn't sort ended up getting left in the garage. Slowly we unpacked the boxes and filled shelves over a few days, but full boxes still clogged our house. We found new furniture, like shelves and couches, in stores around our new home. The first time I drove around Atlanta, I marveled at the strange new area. I liked exploring the city, and decided I liked urban life more than rural because any store we wanted waited a few minutes away.

The community welcomed us warmly. For the first few weeks, people wanted to host us for shabbat dinner or lunch. Since we moved so close to the synagogue, we literally lived in the center of the community. We made many new friends, and even found an old one. One of the synagogue members previously lived in Connecticut, and rear-ended my dad's car in high school. He payed the damages, and they both moved on with their lives. Now, almost 35 years later, they met each other by total coincidence! We quickly became good family friends.

My new school made the biggest impact on me. I estimated GHA at about twice as big as my old school. To me it felt huge, and I felt afraid that I would get lost. I quickly got used to it, and my only issue became the other kids. My parents raised me in a totally different environment than most of these kids, and they knew each other for years. Some kids acted nice to me, and some treated me badly. The first year or so became filled with problems with the kids that didn't like me. But we worked the problems out, and I started to become part of the class.

The whole move went very smoothly, and we quickly settled into our new home. I liked Atlanta almost more than Connecticut, so I never missed home. So many new parts of my life stemmed from my move. The new city opened up opportunities for me and my family that probably did not exist up north, like the job my dad got at the VA Hospital, which led him to do more work with wounded troops. The location also brought some downsides, like living so far from family. The new school grew to become the biggest change for me, especially with all the people I met and became friends with.

Adjusting to the new environment took some time. I never lived in a city before, and only visited New York on occasion. Actually living in a city allowed me to learn to live in a more densely populated area. That included things like safety, sociability, and responsibility. If I wanted to go anywhere, it usually involved crossing busy streets. In Shelton, I couldn't go anywhere close, and I only crossed my street. When walking places, you often pass other people. I eventually got used to saying hi to people passing by, or giving them space if I happened to ride my bike. Again, those situations never arose in such a small town. All that added up to more responsibility than I ever previously dealt with. My parents trusted me to stay home alone, or to

go places by myself. I showed that I could act somewhat independently. This also increased as I got older, and became able to care for myself.

The community we joined also changed our general way of life. For the first time, we lived in a Jewish neighborhood. We lived next door to our synagogue, and many other families resided within walking distance. Therefore, we finally became able to fully observe shabbat. In Connecticut, we drove to synagogue because of our location. Now we no longer drive, and keep shabbat diligently every week. This developed into a huge influence, because it ultimately led to my full Jewish conversion. Since my mother did not convert when she married my dad, I only qualified for a conservative conversion. Before my Bar-Mitzvah both my mom and I received full orthodox conversions. For me, it will prevent future complications should I happen to marry a religious girl.

We don't see our family that often because we live so far away. We almost never get to see everyone, even when we visit family. Because of this, we know almost nothing about our cousins' current life. I don't see my five small cousins that often, and every time I do they surprise me by how much they grew. Other family members go through things that we barely know of. For example, my aunt found her son that she put up for adoption long ago, and I only met him twice. Also, my mother's dad and grandmother both died recently in new Hampshire. Both times she flew up for the funeral, which took unexpected expense, time, and planning out of our week. The distance makes driving and frequent visits impractical, where living closer would make staying in touch easier.

The biggest impact on my life came from the new school. I realized from the beginning that the teaching style varied greatly from my old school. At Ezra, we spent a long time on one subject and learned it in detail. At GHA, the classes covered more material, with shorter, broader units. I figured it out so soon because the entire first semester of 5th Grade, I studied Egypt in depth, from religion to way of life. When I arrived at GHA, we spent maybe 2-3 weeks on Egypt, and only read a book and learned about some gods. There I also attended my first real Judaics class, since Ezra did not focus much on Judaics until later grades. Now GHA expected me to know at least a basic general knowledge, which I did not. It took some time, but eventually I could hold my own in class.

Because of my newness, no one knew me academically like they did in Connecticut. In my old school, my teachers knew me and my learning habits. In this new school, I didn't carry a reputation, and I could live as who I wanted to be. I could choose to become a better student, act more social, or stay the same. Therefore, I made a point to do well and pay attention so none of the teachers would think badly of me. The kids also didn't know me, and I could label myself as whoever I wished without previous complications.

The people that live somewhere make that place unique. I met many people here and made new friends that impacted my life. My friends give me someone to talk to and hang out with, which also influences my interests, and therefore personality. I often find totally new things through my friends, and those usually become part of my life. These parts of my life change how I see the world, mostly in a better light. And some of those friends I met at Camp Stone, which I would never hear of in Connecticut. That I also hold significant, but not as much as the move.

I don't want to mention names, so I will write a little generally. My friends altered many things about me, both good and bad. Friends usually connect by sharing common interests. My friends and I talk about things, and share interests or new things we find. For example, one of my friends told me about a few people on Youtube I should follow, and now I spend a lot of time on Youtube and other sites related to them. That same friend showed me some online comics that I now follow daily. Both of these became part of my life, and expanded my creativity and knowledge. But recently my many interests cut into my productivity, in addition to chatting with those friends.

I also met Yehuda Rothner, the man who runs Camp Stone, here in Atlanta. He visits my synagogue every year to promote the camp to kids and parents. I decided to go to Stone, and he later convinced me to go to Machal. My three previous years only added to my experience in Machal, which involved a month of bonding with friends and learning in northern Pennsylvania. Many of the things we did built character, like 18 mile hikes and advocating against the capture of children to be used as soldiers in central Africa. Learning about the world, both good and bad, helped me better understand my purpose in life and how I can help others.

I also made some friends at Camp Stone. Most of my friends there did not live in Atlanta, so they lived different ways of life, but with similar interests. Two of them introduced me to new music, one of which moved what kind of music I listened to. I liked classic rock, and he introduced me to modern hard rock, which resembles metal more than older music. I listen to music all the time, and music commonly affects how kids' personalities develop. My music also helps me connect with more people that share my interests, broadening my group of friends and influences.

In hindsight, moving really impacted me in many ways. Most of the changes came from the new setting, which opened up doors that almost did not exist in Connecticut. The responsibility of staying home alone, the new opportunities in the community, and the many people I met all changed me in many ways. Some things showed clearly four years ago, but our location continues to impact me even today. From my school to my friends to the people I meet, living in Atlanta effected my life in uncountable ways that still arise today.