

**Arrivals: From Brisbane to Tivon: Uri and Geraldine Themal**

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**Birthplaces:** Berlin and New Zealand

**Aliya date:** Yom Ha'atzma'ut, 2007

**Occupation:** Rabbi and Teacher

**Family status:** Married

Uri Themal was born in Berlin in 1940 and survived the war by hiding with his mother in a village on the Polish-German border in the home of a fanatic Nazi sympathizer who had no idea she was sheltering a Jewish woman and child. Uri's father was hidden in a pet shop in Berlin which the Nazis had closed down because it wasn't considered useful to the war effort.

"We were given papers with false names by the resistance which showed my mother was the widow of a German officer who was missing on the Eastern front. My mother figured if she could bluff this woman she could bluff anybody, and no one would be looking for Jews in this place."

The boy's circumcision was explained by the fact that he had supposedly suffered from a skin disease and the doctors had recommended it.

Although he was very young, Uri still has one vivid memory of those hazardous days: the Nazi landlady had a picture of Hitler on the radio which stood on a high shelf, and whenever he spoke she would stand rigid and make the Nazi salute.

Geraldine was born in New Zealand to an English mother and New Zealander father. She had already converted to Judaism when she married her first husband, a Hungarian-born Jew.

Both previously divorced with two children each, the couple met sixteen years ago and have been married for four years.

**BEFORE ARRIVAL**

Uri came to Israel with his parents from 1949-56. With his mother not well after her wartime experiences and his lawyer father unable to work in his profession and obliged to sell sweets and cigarettes in a kiosk instead, the family could not survive and eventually went back to Berlin.

Uri studied political science and qualified as a Reform rabbi. Geraldine, a world away, studied geography and anthropology and worked as a teacher. When she moved to Australia her qualifications were not recognized so she worked as a book-keeper and real estate agent.

In 1973 Uri got a call to become the rabbi of a congregation in Perth in Western Australia. After accepting the offer and practicing as a rabbi for about four years, he resigned and took a job in the federal government where he was involved in the development of Australia's multiculturalism policy, eventually becoming executive director of the Queensland office within the department responsible for multiculturalism in that state. At that time he lived in Brisbane and volunteered to help smaller communities as a rabbi.

In one of these communities he met Geraldine, who was teaching Sunday school. Uri was by then a well-known radio and TV personality as well. But, after retiring from the government, and doing more rabbinical work on the Gold Coast, Israel beckoned.

"We were always both dedicated Zionists," he says. "We asked ourselves 'are we going to sit here for 20 years or get up and do something a bit different?'"

As president of the Jewish National Fund in Queensland, he had special interest in a Keren Kayemet LeYisrael project in the northern Negev which focused on creating water infrastructure for a planned population center near Beit Kama.

"This increased our motivation to come, but two years later when we visited again little had developed, and the option we were offered was a caravan on the building site," they say. Deciding they wanted to be pioneers, but not at that price, they chose to return to Tivon where they were renting a house, and stayed on there.

#### UPON ARRIVAL

They all traveled separately, Geraldine first, Uri on another flight and the two dogs, Kandi and Lucy on yet another. Geraldine arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport at 2:30 a.m, completed her processing as a new immigrant within half an hour and was put in a taxi to be taken to a friend in Yokne'am. Uri, a returning resident went straight there and the dogs turned up the next day.

They heard about the house for rent in Tivon, took it sight unseen on the assumption they would be living in the Negev, and when their plans changed, they ended up buying the house, which they still live in today.

#### ROUTINE

After settling in they both began working as English teachers for Berlitz. Geraldine also teaches children including Beduin from a nearby town. They have many interests and participate in many activities.

Uri is involved in the Committee for Foreign Relations of the Tivon local authority and a member of Maram, the Rabbinic Council of the Progressive Movement in Israel. Geraldine volunteers at Haifa SPCA, clipping the dogs' coats. Both do voluntary work for the Reform synagogues in Haifa and Tivon.

#### CIRCLE

"We have a wide circle of friends, mainly from the Reform shul in Tivon, and they are a lovely group of people," they say. They are mostly Israeli - "We don't go hunting for English speakers to talk to" - and although they understand the need of people to often seek out their own, they are happy with the local crowd.