



ISRAEL MATTERS!

1809 Whitney Avenue, Hamden, CT 06517-1401

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ELAL Israel Airlines A Behind-the-Wings Look at Israel's National Airline

If you've been to Israel recently, you might have flown on ELAL, Israel's flagship airline. My first trip to Israel was in 1976, sponsored and accompanied by my mom. At that time, there were only three airlines flying from the US to Israel: TWA, Pan Am, and ELAL. My mother decided that if we were going to Israel, we should get the full experience and support ELAL (and Israel), so that's how we flew.

Founded in 1948 as Israel's national airline, ELAL's first scheduled commercial flight was on July 31, 1949 from Tel Aviv to Rome and then continuing to Paris. In those first years, all ELAL aircraft were *used* planes, purchased from other airlines. Regularly scheduled flights between Tel Aviv and New York did not begin until 1951, with the voyage spanning 1½ days, including many stops, some for refueling.



Aircraft used for ELAL's first commercial flight in 1949

Although some people used to joke that ELAL stood for "Every Landing, Always Late", the name actually comes from the Bible, in the book of Hosea. The words "el al" literally mean "to the above" (or more poetically, "to the skies").

On that first trip of mine nearly 50 years ago, I was shocked by the thoroughness of ELAL's security screening, especially for the pre-9/11 era. We were asked numerous questions by security, questions like: "What is the purpose of your trip? Have you ever been before? Do you belong to a synagogue? Which one? Who is the rabbi there? Who packed your bags? Have they been with you from when they were packed? Did anyone give you something to bring on your trip?" After our security "interviews," each of our suitcases was searched in detail by hand, and we were sent to private areas where we were physically searched by same-sex guards. From the moment I stepped onto the plane felt it like I was already in Israel, seeing and hearing Hebrew all around me during the flight. Our non-stop flight from New York took a little over 10 hours - MUCH faster than the 1½ days it took to fly that same route 25 years earlier! A few minutes before landing, I remember being awestruck by the beautiful Tel Aviv coastline, something that still amazes me to this day each time I fly to Israel. Once we landed, the passengers broke out in applause, and soon after, we descended to the tarmac via stairs that had been wheeled to the plane's doors. Some of the passengers fell to their knees and kissed the ground, a few crying at the emotions they felt with arriving in Israel.

Of course, today's experience flying on ELAL to and from Israel is different in many ways. Besides being much faster, metal detectors and luggage x-ray conveyer belts have replaced many of the old-time security inconveniences; jet-bridges that lead passengers from the plane directly to the terminal have replaced portable stairways to the tarmac; and electronic-chipped passports and sophisticated databases inform the security personnel on almost

everything they need to know about us even before we arrive at the airport. Yet some things don't change: To me, it still feels magical when you hear Hebrew all around you and when the Tel Aviv coastline appears before landing. And believe it or not, some passengers still applaud upon touchdown in Israel.

ELAL's Unmatched Security

Although most airlines enhance security for flights destined for Israel, no other airline implements security to the extent that ELAL does. Security involves examining passenger lists days before departure, then implementing elaborate measures for screening and securing passengers, their luggage, and the aircraft while at the airport, during the flight and after landing.

ELAL security personnel are almost all formerly in the Israeli military, and each undergoes rigorous preparation, including understanding Israeli security protocols, extensive firearms training, passenger profiling, threat assessment and identification and more. Those who are security interviewers are changed out frequently, so that each remains fresh and sharp. When the plane is at the terminal, a ring of security personnel surrounds the plane. In the background, baggage handling, food service and aircraft maintenance are done by carefully screened ELAL staff or ELAL subdivision companies. A friend who used to work for ELAL



told me that on every flight, there are dozens of plain-clothed undercover security personnel (who look like "regular" passengers) sprinkled throughout the cabins, keeping an eye on passengers and inflight activity, and ready to react to any security situation that might emerge. As far as who is staffing the plane, almost all flight attendants are former IDF soldiers and have all the abilities associated with army training. ELAL pilots were (with few exceptions) previously pilots in the

Israeli air force, skilled beyond the training of most commercial pilots.

Finally, ELAL is the only commercial airline to equip its planes with missile defense systems to protect against possible surface-to-air attacks. ELAL clearly prioritizes passenger safety, and the airline's security approach has influenced global aviation standards. Most experts agree that ELAL is the world's most secure airline, and many choose to fly ELAL just for that reason.

Flight Experience

What's it like to fly ELAL? Ask two different passengers and you'll get three different answers. ☺ From this writer's point of view, the ground crew and flight attendants are courteous and as pleasant as anyone could be on a long-haul flight with hundreds of passengers with varying needs and demands. Food offerings on ELAL flights have been expanded and improved significantly in recent years, and although they aren't bad, we all know that food at 35,000 feet will never taste like Grandma's (it's at least as good other airlines). One big-plus that ELAL has made to its transatlantic flights is the addition of the Boeing 787 aircraft – a plane that is more fuel efficient, feels less bumpy during turbulence, and has improved air humidity/quality and lighting that helps significantly with jet lag and flight comfort.

ELAL - Helping Others

Besides it's normal operations, ELAL has done some remarkable things to help Jews and non-Jews throughout the world. Over the years, the airline was involved in several covert and non-covert operations. You may have heard of some of these initiatives:

Operation Magic Carpet. (nicknamed Operation On Wings of Eagles)

In 1949 and 1950, ELAL airlifted over 49,000 Yemenite Jewish immigrants to Israel

Operation Ezra and Nehemiah

Between 1951 and 1952, ELAL transported nearly 130,000 Jews to Israel from Iraq, Iran, and Cyprus.

Operation Exodus

In 1990, EL AL flew hundreds-of-thousands of Jews

to Israel from the former Soviet Union and other parts of Eastern Europe.

Operation Solomon

In 1991, an ELAL Boeing 747 cargo plane rescued a



record-breaking 1088 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Israel. The plane carried twice as many

passengers as it was designed for – and two babies were born during the flight! In less than 36 hours, over 14,500 Ethiopian Jew were flown to Israel by ELAL.

Support of IDF Soldiers

ELAL has always committed to ongoing support for IDF reservists and soldiers. Since the start of the current war, ELAL has distributed over 20,000 free flight tickets, provided complimentary baggage and preferred seating, and allowed full refund options to active and reserve soldiers. And as of late December 2024, all reservists who have served at least 100 days since October 7, 2023, are eligible to receive 100 frequent flyer points for each day of their reserve duty, creating opportunities for flights to visit loved ones abroad and for much needed R&R.

What Else?

Although originally owned by the State of Israel, ELAL is now a publicly owned company, with 43% (controlling shares) owned by a Jerusalem Yeshiva student in his 30's, originally from New York! (His dad owns a huge health-care business.) The State of Israel currently owns about 15% of the company, and if you own mutual funds, it's possible you have a part share of ELAL too! Though once in significant debt, in 2023 ELAL's revenues were \$2.503 billion, with profits of \$263.7 million. ELAL employs over 4500 staff members in the air and around the world in 46 countries.

ELAL observes Jewish religious traditions by observing Kosher laws for all food offerings, and also by refraining from flight operations during Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Exceptions to this practice are extremely rare, having only occurred twice in the airline's history: Once during the 1982 Lebanon War and again during the 2023 Israel-Hamas War, when flights operated on Shabbat due to exceptional circumstances.

Did you know that all ELAL planes are named after towns or cities in Israel? Next time you fly, look for the name near the nose of your plane as you board!



The Oct 7th attack by Hamas on Israel and the resultant Israel-Hamas War has led to the vast majority of airlines canceling service to Israel. ELAL, however, has continued flying to and from Israel and altered schedules to match the differences in demand, reducing or eliminating flights to certain destinations, while increasing the number of flights to other places such as the United States. But, even after US airlines like United and Delta return to their non-stop NYC-TLV routes, many of us will still fly ELAL. The safety provided by ELAL, as well as the knowledge that you are supporting Israel and its national airline, make ELAL a great choice when flying to Israel.

Find out more about ELAL at the Online ELAL Museum page: <https://www.israelairlinemuseum.org/>