

PUTTING THE 'SNAIL'

The Israel Postal Company admittedly can't keep up with the digital revolution, causing delivery delays, long waits and a disgruntled public that still believes mailboxes aren't dead. But as it undergoes reform, the IPC pledges to improve services. We'll just have to wait (a bit more) and see how it delivers



A typical Israeli post office. (Marc Israel Sellem)

• By ORIT ARFA

I began this feature on the Israel Postal Company with an experiment.

I visited the branch I used to frequent when I lived in Jerusalem years ago, on Bethlehem Road off Yehuda Street, and took a number from the automated, (pseudo) touch-screen ticketing machine: 141. The time was 12:49 pm.

The post office felt more like a storage room – or a bomb shelter? – tucked away in the back of a residential building, with metallic and red furnishings that failed to make the place look any more modern. The glum look on the faces of the tellers and the people waiting around befitted a funeral.

If my experience at my Givatayim branch was any indication, I'd have at least an hour to talk to people waiting in line to see if their experience matched that of most other people I had casually spoken to about the post offices lately.

That experience is, in one word, "hell" (or, as one friend generously put it, "the seventh circle of hell"). I had already learned to use the wait in Givatayim to go grocery shopping, stop at the bank and even get a hair blowout.

I sat next to a dark young man with a

kippa, Yoav of Baka.

"How's your experience here?" I asked.

"Very good."

I looked around – 18 people were waiting for three tellers.

On the other side of me was a mother in a hijab, Nancy from Abu Ghosh, her daughter fidgeting on a chair in front of her.

"How's your experience?"

"Excellent."

My first thought was: How often do they come to the post office? My second thought was: The Messiah has arrived! A religious Jew and religious Muslim sitting in the post office, side by side, praising Israeli customer service.

My turn came at 1:05 pm – 16 minutes. Not bad at all. This could be worth moving back to Jerusalem.

But once I had the chance to talk to other people there, it was clear that waiting for the Messiah would require the same grueling patience with which we wait for our packages (to be sent to the right place, and to receive them).

I threw out a question to a woman walking past the entrance: "How's the postal service here?"

"Terrible!" Barbara lamented. "They're nice here, but I sent a letter using the 24-hour service, and it arrived 10 days later."

IN SNAIL MAIL

"The tellers are nice, but the problem is with the higher-ups," said Aviad, leashed dog in tow, happy to get into the conversation after picking up a package – a process that, at that time of day, took him a few minutes.

Behind him was a sign advertising the branch's new extended hours, which, for some reason, appeared vandalized. He blasted the higher-ups as "arrogant" and recounted an incident in which an elusive package from the US was finally delivered to his doorstep, only to be returned to sender when he didn't collect it in time. It was lost forever.

"There was no one to talk to," Aviad remembered.

Another man, who rushed to the teller to pay his bills before I could ask him why he doesn't just pay bills online, could have ranted on about how his Homat Shmuel neighborhood – founded in 2002, home to 13,500 people – has no post office of its own.

SINCE IT'S hard to gauge the nationwide customer service of the Israel Postal Company (IPC) by visiting a few branches, I took to crowdsourcing at the Keep Olim in Israel Movement, a 10,000-member-strong Facebook group where immigrants share frustrations about living in Israel and/or seek solutions.

I opened with an admittedly leading question: "Do you ever feel screwed by the post office in Israel?"

And the replies started coming, with

English speakers more than glad to vent their horror stories; in fact, I started to feel like a therapist. The bulk of the 73 responses related to delays and damage during international delivery, inaccurate or inconvenient hours, rude and inefficient customer service, parcels and letters that simply never arrived.

The problems were the same all over the country: Netanya, Hod Hasharon, Ramle, Rehovot, on moshavim. Postal peace seemed as elusive as Mideast peace; this was a war zone with the postal services holding the mail of Israeli citizens hostage.

"Don't get me started," said Shawn Eni of Modi'in, who even posted exhibits. Exhibit A had a picture of envelopes originating from Herzliya, dated from March and April – which arrived in June.

Simone Katz of Jerusalem wrote: "I think the postal service is responding to the low demand for what they offer. I don't have any disappointments in the system, as I have found a way to almost completely avoid them."

They couldn't hold back their snarky responses.

"I never have reason to go to the post office," said Dakota Kluev of Nahariya, "since my mail from abroad never arrives anyway."

One man spoke of an incident in which he sued the IPC for a lost cellphone – and won.

"I've had multiple packages simply never arrive. Whenever there's bad weather,

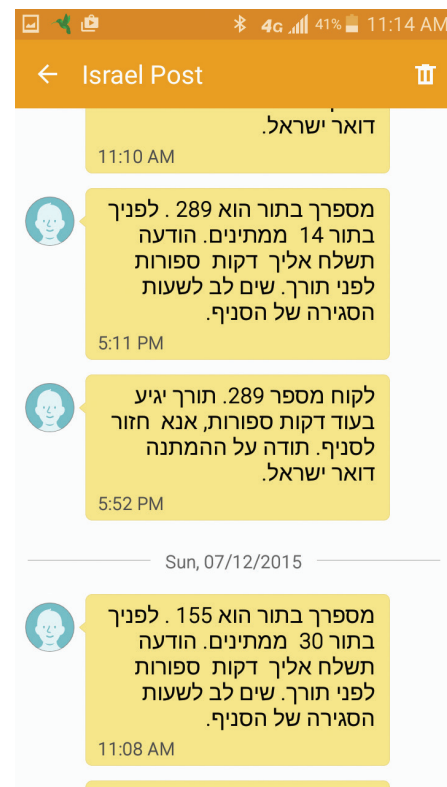
or a holiday, or maybe if it's a Tuesday, I know that my mail will either come extremely late or not at all. I strongly discourage all my family and friends from mailing me anything," vented Abra Forman of Jerusalem, concluding: "Incompetence, laziness and indifference are the name of the do'ar's [post office's] game."

"OMG [oh my God] I've been in tears so many times because of the post office here," cried Justine Rivlin.

Shoshanah Shear complained of the inefficiency of registered mail, in which the sender is (supposed to) be informed of when the item has been delivered. "What is the point of paying extra to have a number that is supposed to help us to track a parcel, when it is never accurate?"

Throughout this story, I continued to conduct mini-experiments. I learned, for example, that if you'd like to send a package via registered mail, you cannot be guaranteed a date of delivery. When I asked a few times when I could expect my package to reach its destination, the tellers would say: "We can only guarantee within 30 days."

So, desperate for a book to reach someone in Israel the next day, I was told my only option was a courier service, which costs about NIS 36 for a half-kilo package, and serves only major cities. In the process of sending more books, I learned that I had better include a phone number for the recipient; otherwise the courier might give up if the receiver is not immediately available to collect it.



Text messages received upon multiple uses of the My Visit app, telling customers their place in line and how many people are ahead of them. (Orit Arfa)

Sending a book via registered mail cost me about NIS 16 (with a text-message notification service). If I used an old-fashioned stamp for NIS 10, I'd invariably wonder, for days on end: Did my book arrive?

Over the phone, I pressed a source in the Communications Ministry: How is it possible that in a country smaller than the state of New Jersey, no one could expect affordable, guaranteed next-day or two-day service via snail mail from one major Israeli city to another?

First he said that one to two days' service via regular mail is not necessarily a given in any country. Then he informed me of the Doar 24 service (and which Barbara at the Bethlehem Road branch had apparently used), which could expedite delivery to within 24 hours. For a book, it cost only about NIS 2 more than regular mail. Why couldn't a teller, who must have sensed my frustration, tell me of this option (whose efficiency I have yet to test)?

Stuart Schnee of Jerusalem and a few others I casually interviewed have noticed that the chaos at the post office is relatively new.

"For years, the postal system seemed to be improving," Schnee remarked. "However, over the past half a year or so,



Waiting in the Givatayim branch. (Orit Arfa)

there has been a dramatic change for the worse. Going to pick up a package in Beit Shemesh can easily be a one-hour affair. To send a package, it's the same thing. Letters seem to take double and triple the amount of time to arrive at domestic locations, and packages from abroad don't always arrive."

IT WOULD make sense that the problems began at the start of the year, since that's when the IPC began a plan of rehabilitation.

"These days, the Israel Postal Company is implementing a comprehensive program with the goal of improving the services given to customers and to adapt the company to the needs of its consumers in the age of online business," said IPC spokeswoman Maya Avishai, in a statement translated from Hebrew.

The IPC, which became a government-owned corporation in 2006, recognizes customer complaints and problems. Contrary to popular opinion, the IPC is not state-funded. As a corporation, it must have a sound business plan, even if the shareholder is currently the government. (Plans are in place to privatize a portion of the corporation.)

As its regulator, the Communications Ministry serves to ensure the IPC lives up to its obligations as a state licensee, fining it for lapses. To strike the balance between maintaining profit, providing reliable service and living up to government requirements, the IPC has had to restructure services, resources and personnel in a world where snail mail is to letter correspondence what house phones are becoming to cellphones.

"When such dramatic changes take place," stated Avishai, "you sometimes have birthing pains, and it's possible that the issues you raise that have occurred throughout this time are tied to the reforms being made in the field, which we are working on fixing as soon as possible."

Given customer complaints as of late, one has to wonder if the precursor to the Israel postal system during the British Mandate served its populace more speedily – and on horseback. After the Jewish state was established, Israel's postal system was subsumed under the Transportation Ministry and, later, the Communications Ministry. It then evolved from the Israel Postal Authority to the corporation it is today.

Last year, as part of its restructuring efforts, the IPC reached an agreement with the Histadrut labor federation (thus avoiding a strike) to gradually lay off over 1,000 employees, eventually to replace them with automated systems.

Israeli post offices have traditionally been more than just a place to send and receive parcels; as such, its name is misleading. They also serve as a simple bank where people can exchange currency and keep a small account; as an in-person payment processor for utility companies and the Israel Tax Authority; and as a retailer not only for postal supplies but for cellphones and household goods. These services are meant to increase revenue for a company that, in this digital age, cannot rely on profit from traditional postal ser-

vices alone.

The red public mailboxes lining the streets have been the main casualty of the digital revolution; the IPC seems to consider them as ancient as rotary phones. According to the IPC, only 3 percent of mail is sent through the mailboxes. The public mailboxes are in the process of redistribution, with some being gutted completely,

interruption for a daily siesta. At over 150 branches, people can now go online or download the My Visit app to schedule an appointment, much like they could with the doctor, to avoid waits that can reach an hour in a waiting room that doesn't offer a water cooler or glossy magazines.

While snail mail delivery is taking a dive, e-commerce is on the rise, hence

raeli postal system, I learned a few tricks. First, the hour at which you go makes a big difference. Avoid Sunday and after-work hours. Try the My Visit service – using the app actually is pretty easy, and you may enjoy the chance to be the envy of a few people for a day when you punch in your phone number in the automated ticketing system, and you're called to a teller within a few minutes of your scheduled appointment. Fill out your paperwork at home (the post office will happily give you some packaging slips).

One day I found myself in Tiberias needing to mail a package. I thought: Let's give the Galilee a chance; maybe the waves of Lake Kinneret sent over peaceful vibes. I walked in, and the place was packed. This would be a record-long wait. In Givatayim, I had recorded nine, 14, 17 and at most, 30 people in front of me at my various visits. In Tiberias, 41 people preceded me. According to my experience, multiply the number of people in front of you by two to achieve the approximate wait time in minutes. This was 82 minutes!

I threw the Tiberias ticket away and drove back to the center of the country, figuring my turn might come by the time I got on the Ayalon freeway. I made an appointment at Givatayim using the My Visit app for later that afternoon. It went smoothly.

According to the Communications Ministry, the average wait time is 18 minutes. Intended changes will reduce the time to an average of 10 minutes.

Of course, patriots in the Facebook crowd, like Malkah Fleisher – who enjoyed personal, friendly postal service when she lived in Beit El, but who admits to having issues receiving packages in her community on Mount of Olives – didn't appreciate what essentially became a roast of this national institution. "*Chaval* [shame] that the story HAS to be about how bad everything is, doesn't that get old?"

To which Michael Weinberg of Beer-sheba happily replied: "This article could be about a solution. It's not very complex. Burn every postal office to the ground, refurbish, take tenders... minus the corruption, of course."

But true. Why end on a negative note? It seems that Yoav from Baka and Nancy from Abu Ghosh are not the only ones who have had positive experiences.

"Actually, very surprisingly, I had wonderful experiences with the post office in Tel Aviv on Yehuda Halevi and Shenkin [streets]," wrote one Dalia on the Facebook discussion. "Always pleasant if you go early enough on Friday, the wait isn't that long. The staff is courteous and they even got a kick out of me when the religious cashier went to bring me the *shadchan* to staple my document and I freaked out, thinking she was bringing the matchmaker [shadchan is Hebrew for both stapler and traditional Jewish matchmaker]!"

Now, if only the Israel Postal Company added a matchmaking service to its repertoire, then it might earn some brownie points in heaven – or, more likely, shoot straight to the first rung of hell.



Inactive mailbox on Jerusalem's Hapalmah Street. (Erica Schachne)

to maintain a ratio of one mailbox within 1,500 meters of every residence.

As if it's a consolation, given the downturn in snail mail, postal carriers are delivering mail every other day. Since 2006, a law was instituted opening up competition for mass mail distribution, and major companies who engage in mass mailings are – fortunately for them – able to bypass the IPC.

The IPC cites other (actual?) improvements. Since April, opening hours of over 90 branches have been extended to 8 p.m. (as opposed to 6 p.m.), without an

overflowing package rooms. Since 2012, package turnover in Israel has increased about 100% annually. To meet demand, the IPC is outsourcing package delivery to certain Shufersal supermarkets and Office Depot chains, and 90% of registered packages weighing up to 1 kg. will soon be delivered straight to one's doorstep. Plans are in place to install automated delivery stations within the post offices and to install electronic tracking mechanisms for each parcel.

As I began to become intimately familiar (or shall I say gently abused) by the Is-