



Noam during his service in Givati

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Diamonds in **Camouflage**

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

Though most of what happens in the army can understandably not be shared with the public, the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) is one of the most unique sectors of Israel's society. Because most of Israel's civilians pass through and give years of their lives in service there, many types of people are

placed together in units who would otherwise never cross paths. From lone soldiers, to handicapped, to religious Jews looking for a way out of their restrictive community, the IDF is a unique hub of opportunity and destiny. Below is a bit of what we were allowed to share of their stories.

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DIAMONDS IN CAMOUFLAGE

Going at it Alone - Noam*

IDF soldiers in urban training



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Among this unique mix of humanity are tens of thousands of Israel's lone soldiers. Lone soldiers aren't orphans necessarily. A soldier qualifies as "lone" when he has no family in Israel and thus no support system outside of the military. These soldiers are allotted special benefits from the IDF to try to alleviate some of the difficulty of having to serve their country full time and still handle their "civilian" life completely on their own when they are off duty.

It was when I heard that my history teacher had been among the seven murdered in a kibbutz by a terrorist that the first seeds were sown in my heart—when I was drafted into the IDF, it would be into a combat unit. I was in high school at the time. In a boarding school, to be exact. I had moved to Israel alone at the age of 15. It was my second year living in a new country with no

family and there was no dampening the growing attachment I was developing to my ancient homeland.

When I turned 18, I graduated and made my Aliyah (immigration to Israel) official. Israel usually likes to give new immigrants a few years to get settled before they draft you into the army. But I wasn't interested in waiting. So, I got a friend to help me write a letter to the IDF to tell them I was ready to join immediately. They put me in Givati—Israel's equivalent to the U.S. Marines. And, because I had no family in the country, I was categorized as a lone soldier.

While attending Israeli boarding school, I had studied alongside many Jews from other parts of the world. But nothing could've prepared me for the diversity I would experience when I arrived at bootcamp. There were Israelis from Morocco, Ethiopia, and Yemen. There were also Druze and even a Lebanese guy whose family was allied with Israel. I knew we were all on the same team, but still it felt like culturally we were worlds apart. I was from the Ukraine with just a couple of years of Israeli experience. They, on the other hand, had been here most, if not all, of their lives and yet still carried the remnants of the cultures they had left behind.

Early on I thought the exercises were pretty easy—running, climbing, crawling, pushups—and getting up early to do it all again. Then they threw us out in the desert and left us to survive. It was extremely difficult and I questioned what I had gotten myself into more than once. But it was surviving those difficulties together that turned us into a tight knit unit like brothers.

Still, I was different from them. I was a lone soldier. On the weekends they went home to families, a closet full of clean clothes and warm meals. I, on the other hand, went home to an empty studio I rented, cooked myself a meal, cleaned, did laundry and packed for the next two to three weeks I would be gone. Despite the stark

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difference in lifestyle, at the time I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything because I didn't know anything else.

Ironically, I only experienced life differently when I was punished for going AWOL. I had left the base without permission to pay for a cellphone bill in cash. I simply had no one on the outside who could deposit the money in my account and I was concerned the bank would lock up my account. If that happened, I would have had no way to buy food when I went home.

This event caused my friends to take more notice of how "on my own" I was. They took my laundry home with them and brought me back all sorts of goodies from home. They knew I hadn't run away to cause problems, so everyone felt bad that I had been confined to the base for 40 days. I felt grateful for the help and often offered to stay on the base over weekends so my friends could attend weddings or funerals. After all, they had something to go home to that mattered.



IDF soldier in field training

With God on Our Side

Being a lone soldier often means handling the daily grind alone, but it doesn't mean I am on my own. For Israelis, the need for God to be our refuge is not figurative. We are under constant threat and really need Him to protect us. Even

more so when we are on the battlefield, needing Him to go before us and fight our battles is a very real prayer.

We were stationed near Gaza during our advanced training when a conflict broke out. Because we were newbies—only eight months into our training—our commanders sent us in to clear out the wounded. It wasn't a dangerous job, but it brought us face-to-face with the reality of war. By the time Operation Cast Lead broke out, we were among the first to be sent in.

Fighting against Hamas and the Islamic Jihad is tricky because they deliberately operate in residential areas knowing Israel will go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. During one ground operation we went into a deserted residential area and stayed overnight in a school building. (It was deserted because days before we had warned the civilian population through phone calls and pamphlets to evacuate the Hamas stronghold.)

In the morning, a couple of our soldiers came across a wire that ran under the school. They followed the wire to a nearby zoo and found it attached to a detonator. Next to the detonator was a mattress, some blankets, clothes and snacks. Clearly someone had recently been there with the intention of setting off the explosives in the school while the soldiers were sleeping. We heard later, after an investigation, that the entire school had been booby trapped—when it was built. This meant Gazan children would've been regularly attending a school with explosives embedded in the foundation while Hamas fighters awaited the opportunity to one day drop the multi-level building on a platoon of unsuspecting Israeli soldiers. What no one was able to figure out was why—with Israel literally announcing they were coming to that area—the guy who was supposed to press the button did not. But, I have no problem believing that God had a hand in making the terrorist unavailable for this task which would've easily wiped out hundreds of us. ●

*All names were changed for security reasons

DIAMONDS IN CAMOUFLAGE

Hidden Treasures - Yaniv

The IDF's ability to recognize the hidden treasures inside its special needs population has given it an edge over other larger and wealthier countries. A great example is Israel's 9900 unit which consists entirely of high functioning soldiers with autism has also proven to be an invaluable tool in out-of-the-box thinking in cyberwarfare and noticing things in surveillance that other people—and machines would miss.

Yaniv has cerebral palsy and is hearing impaired. To find a quality job with such physical limitations in Israel would be difficult, to say the least. And yet, in the Air Force he has not only found acceptance, he has found a place to excel and contribute to his country with his administrative giftings.

It began when the military issued a standard “due to severe physical handicap” release to Yaniv from the mandatory duty every Israeli is expected to fulfill. Yaniv did not accept it. He wanted to serve. After sending in a letter volunteering to serve anyway, the IDF took him in for testing where he scored extremely high in administration, among other things.

Even while his condition would've allotted him specific privileges, he insisted on living as much like every other soldier —working long hours and sleeping on

the base. “The Air Force not only trained me to be in charge of analyzing post-flight and operations data, but they trusted me to make decisions about my findings,” Yaniv explained. Having mastered this task, Yaniv believed he could do more, and his superiors agreed. Together they worked to get Yaniv into an officer training course for soldiers with special needs. Today he is an academic officer and trains other soldiers.

Yaniv is not the only one to excel despite his limitations. When the heart is there to serve, the framework to develop each soldier in their skillset is well designed. Yaniv's gratitude for the squadron that changed the course of his life continues today. And when the most recent *Operation Watchman on the Walls* broke out, Yaniv completed his day time duty at the military academy and volunteered his nights at the Air Force base with his squadron. ●



Yissachar Rues - Courtesy Israeli Air Force

DIAMONDS IN CAMOUFLAGE

Free to Serve - Benjamin

For many in the ultra-Orthodox world, the military is a forbidden place. Religious political parties have gone to great lengths to “protect” their community from the mandatory service that would expose their people to the secular world. And yet, those who have made the choice to serve anyway have often found their time in the army to be a welcoming place to develop in a way that is not necessarily hostile to their religious practices as they had been taught.

I grew up in an ultra-religious family. I studied Torah from a young age but by junior high

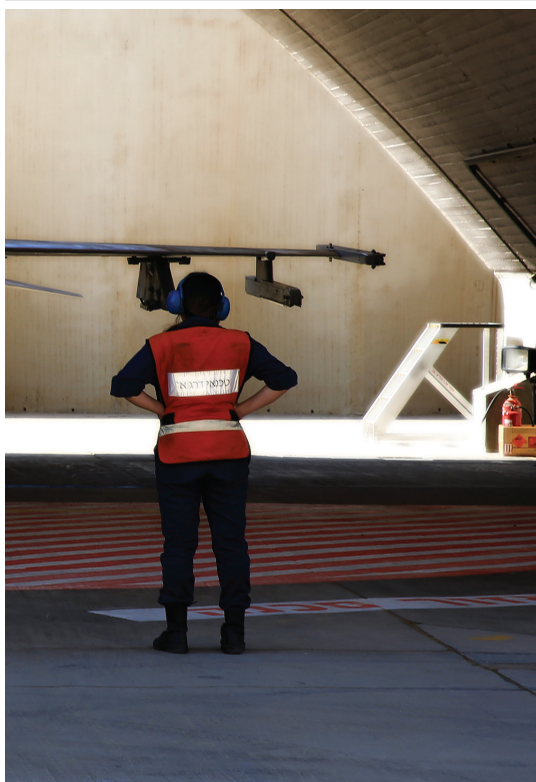
school I decided I didn't like the pressure to believe what they were teaching. I wanted to personally decide what I believed. My mother was very unhappy with my decision to leave Torah studies and we fought almost every day about it. My father made my studies less of an issue because his businesses were struggling and he needed my help.

Things were so bad at home that I often slept at work.

The more my father's businesses struggled, the more abusive he was to all of us. Eventually he went bankrupt and we lost our home. Soon afterward my parents divorced. My dad left the country, found a girlfriend and abandoned my mother to raise my younger siblings alone.

Even though ultra-religious families like mine don't usually have anything to do with military service, I felt I wanted to serve my country. I found a pre-military course that would help me get into the track I wanted in the IDF. At first, I was unsure that I could pull it off because I was my own source of support. I would have to study during the day and then work late hours at night.

In the end, I did it to escape everything I knew of life in Jerusalem. But I wanted to escape into something that mattered. Since I had left home before I ever finished high school and my family would have nothing to do with my being in the military, once I enlisted I was recognized as a lone soldier. I eventually completed my training as an Air Force technician. When I see our planes taking off on missions to protect our homeland, I know we, the technicians on the ground, are a crucial part of everything that is happening up there. It gives me a deep sense of satisfaction that after living my whole life in this land, I have found a corner in Israel where I belong. ●



Diary of an ISRAELI SOLDIER

HOW IT ALL BEGAN - **PART 7**

By Ari Sorko-Ram

As we rummaged through old *Maoz Israel Reports* and documents for the “*How it All Began*” series about the early days of Maoz and Israel as a whole, we came across some journal entries Ari kept when he was fighting in the first Lebanon war in the early 1980’s. This account covers his call-up in March-April, 1983. His entries are a rare inside view of a unique time in Israel. If you read last month’s article in the *Maoz Israel Report*, “The Major and the Millionaire” these journal entries will give you a more intimate look at what was happening during this exact time in the life of Ari as an IDF soldier.

-Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

Monday - 1st Day

I’ve been called up for reserve duty in the army.

Every year they call us up for a month or so of shoring up our skills in the reserves. But when there’s war, our service time is uncertain. When I arrive, I see hundreds of soldiers milling about waiting for buses. I am told my destination is Lebanon.

We are transferred to an army base to receive weapons and uniforms and a bed for the night.

Tuesday - 2nd Day

Our bus heads north and crosses into Lebanon through the famous “Good Fence.”

Though it is chilly, we ride with our windows down and weapons pointing out the window. Yesterday, there was an ambush by the PLO (Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization) and nine Israeli soldiers were seriously wounded.

We arrive safely at our base which is in a Lebanese town. There we receive our local assignments. I go on water patrol, which

means our armed vehicle escorts the truck which brings water to our bases. We mainly watch for ambushes or mines laid in the potholes of the Lebanese roads.

Friday - 5th Day

Unlike the American army in which I also served, Israel tries to send home as many soldiers as possible for the Sabbath. But I have weekend duty, so I do not go home. The army strictly observes the holidays and the Sabbath. When it comes time for the Sabbath meal on the base, everyone sits down at the table and the doors are locked. No one comes or goes and no one eats until the prayers and the blessings are finished.

I sense that though most of the soldiers are not religious, they still have a reverence towards God and honor the Sabbath. Everyone participated in the Sabbath blessings before the meal, and afterwards the dining hall was filled with songs from the Psalms and the Bible.

Saturday - 6th Day

I go on guard duty at 6 a.m. Suddenly an Arab begins to walk towards me, intoxicated. I ask him what he wants. He yells something in Arabic. I speak to him in Hebrew, English and French (many Lebanese speak French). He continues towards me, yelling all the time in Arabic. He could easily be armed or possess a grenade.



I shout more aggressively for him to stop. He continues towards me. I release the safety latch from my weapon which makes a loud click. He continues his approach, jabbering all the way. I motion more, speaking in three languages. Arabs around us begin to look on as he walks towards me. I load a round into the chamber—which gets everyone’s attention. A local citizen jumps out of a car, grabs him and takes him away. I inhale deeply and silently thank God He saved me from having to hurt anyone.



Ari, Shira, Ayal and Shani photographed outside their home when Ari returned from Lebanon for a weekend of rest.

Wednesday - 10th Day

I am allowed to go home for a few days. On the way out of Lebanon, I have a chance to get a good look at the countryside. I compare it to news footage I had seen from the summer before when Yasser Arafat conquered and then controlled the area. It has been less than a year since the IDF, together with its ally, the South Lebanon Army, liberated the area. Where, under Arafat the fields had been run down, abandoned, and unkempt, the farmers are now back farming. Orchards in all the valleys are being tended. Children are playing everywhere. Soccer fields are full of young people. Stores are full of merchandise and produce. The busy sounds of buying and selling which had waned under the rule of the PLO are now back with a vengeance.

I am very glad to get home to Shira and the children. I appreciate a bed where my feet do not hang over and the blankets cover me.

Sunday - 14th Day

It takes most of the day to get back to the base in Lebanon from Tel Aviv. When I arrive, I receive news that two of our officers were killed when their vehicle ran over a land mine that had been planted the night before. I quickly snap back to reality that though a cease-fire has been signed, there is still a war going on and people are still losing their lives. We run our routine patrol with the water truck.

Monday - 15th Day

I have guard duty. Major Haddad (leader of the South Lebanon Army) arrives at the base with several of his military aids and a PLO infiltrator who had been captured. Since I had interviewed Major Haddad on several occasions, including the film we did for George Otis’s radio and TV stations, we exchange a friendly nod.

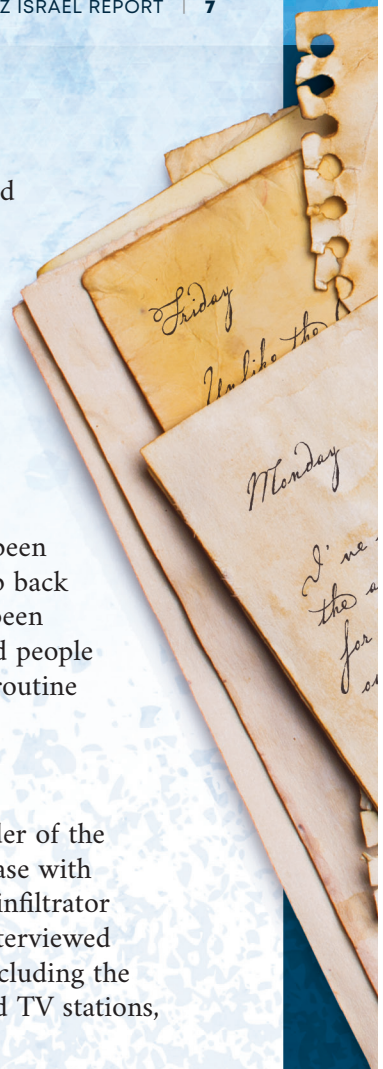
I wonder if he is as comforted as I am—both of us knowing that he, a Lebanese army leader, and I, an Israeli soldier, are born-again believers.

Tuesday - 16th Day

I’m up at 4:45 a.m. for devotions, thinking about the officers who were killed. Still, I sense God near me.

It’s time for my guard duty. Today a command comes down for us not to let anyone leave the base without at least one escort vehicle with a minimum of three people in each vehicle, and all must wear bullet-proof vests at all times off the base. And I am the one who must deliver the news.

Pandemonium breaks out. A line of vehicles with everyone from generals to privates is backed up as far as the eye can see. Each has his own story as to why he doesn’t have to conform to the rules. For one and a half hours people yell at me for not letting them out of the base. With God’s help, I keep my cool. After it is all over, I learn that a high officer in military education was watching the whole affair and wants to transfer me to his division.



The Day before Passover

Tonight is Passover. Most of the soldiers will be home for the traditional Seder. Even though our family is disappointed I won't be home for Passover, I realize God may have a reason for me to stay at the base. Shira also felt that the Lord has some special reason for my staying on the base during this time. It was not long after I had finished morning duty that I began to see God's hand working.

Then something interesting happened. When a new person would come in and offer a different opinion, those who had been there in past days would argue against him, using the Scriptures I had given them in discussions. I saw a genuine change in their hearts, and I could see they were all very hungry for God and His Word.

I had gone back to my room and was sitting on my bed practicing chords on my guitar while people were rushing around, preparing for the Seder. Since there is not much entertainment for the soldiers, it was not long before a dozen or more soldiers gathered in my room and asked me to sing for them. I sang several songs including some praise songs like "Ronu Shamayim," from the Psalms, which translated means, "May the Heavens Rejoice." Naturally the question was asked, "Are you dahti (religious)?" I answered, "Well, in a way, according to the Scriptures."

When asked to clarify whether that meant I was Orthodox, Conservative or Reformed, I said it meant I am a Messianic Jew. For several hours we discussed everything from God's plan for restoration and salvation of the Jewish people

to a deep conversation about the "prophet" whom Moses had said would rise up after him.

Afterwards, one man with an Orthodox background told me he wanted to read the Scriptures to confirm what I was saying. I assured him that God would honor his searching and that I would help him find the verses.

Evening of Passover

The Seder was well planned even though the Rabbi who led it lacked charisma. Most soldiers knew

all the traditional songs and I could tell they had a strong desire to celebrate something. So the Haggadah was read quickly as a matter of form, and the meal was eaten. After the meal, the soldiers just took over and began to sing their own songs. It was a cultural feast to hear Jews from all over the world each bringing their Biblical songs from Yemen, South America, North America, Europe and Africa.

Passover Day

Guard duty at 6 a.m. First hour and a half very quiet since it is a holiday. Had great prayer time. About 7:30 a.m. one of the soldiers came to the gate to talk to me about my conversation the day before.

That evening I was praying in my room when a fellow I'll call Shaul who was sharing the room with me spoke up. He was a Sephardic Jew, about 6 ft. tall, with strong features, perhaps 35 years old and had been raised in an Orthodox home. He asked me why I was not praying in the synagogue with a Siddur (prayer book). I told him that these were personal prayers to God and that sometimes I did pray from the Siddur, but most of the time I pray straight from my heart. When he asked me what I prayed about, I told him that at that moment I was praying for him and several other soldiers.

Taken back, he said I couldn't do that. His religious orientation had taught him to accept traditional oral law which says you must pray prayers from the Prayer Book, and many of them must be prayed in the synagogue. A brusque and outspoken Sabra (native-born Israeli), he was insistent that I could not pray for him and that I had no right to do so.

I told him that not only did I have a right to, but that I must, and that God would answer my prayers. By this time several men had gathered again, and I began to explain to them that God has a covenant relationship with the Jewish people, and we must do things according to His Covenants, of which talking to God is an essential part.

I felt the Lord prompting me to tell Shaul that I would pray for him and that God would change his attitude about the New Covenant, about who the Messiah is and when He will come. I would pray that God would put a desire in his heart to find the truth so that he, too, might fellowship with the God of Israel through the Messiah. I told him he could accept it or reject it, but he would not be able to

deny that God was revealing Himself. I said God would answer my prayer before my reserve duty was ended—and by this he would know that God answers prayer according to His Word.

Over the next couple of days, I had several discussions with various groups of soldiers who were continually asking questions until it was time to go home on leave.

Friday - 26th Day

Shira and the children were in Jerusalem for the Passover week, so I joined them and we fellowshipped with believers. A preacher from the East Coast began to prophesy to me, stating among other things that God would give me more boldness and authority when I spoke the Word. As I was going back to the base, I was eager to see what would unfold.

Sunday - 28th Day

Arrived back. Several soldiers came to my room immediately when I got off duty. Again, they asked many questions. So, I began discussing the Bible with half a dozen of them.

Then something interesting happened. When a new person would come in and offer a different opinion, those who had been there in past days would argue against him, using the Scriptures I had given them in discussions. I saw a genuine change in their hearts, and I could see they were all very hungry for God and His Word.

Knowing I'd be asked for some, I had brought several of our new books which we had translated into Hebrew and passed them out. They were gone in about three minutes. (Oh, why didn't I bring 50 with me?)

When we ended this evening, they asked if I would sing one of the praise songs they had previously heard me sing.

I thanked the Lord that He has answered my prayer of last week and is changing the hearts of the soldiers.

Last Day of Passover

Holiday guard duty, so not much base activity. By this time the news was pretty much out concerning my faith in the Messiah. Many soldiers came



IDF advances near Beirut in bid to defeat PLO stranglehold in Lebanon

and visited me while I was on duty. Some would awkwardly strike up a conversation, not knowing exactly how to lead into the subject.

One young fellow, a regular soldier with a timid face, walked up to me and blurted out, "I don't believe in God, do you?"

Another fellow—more mature, over 40, from South America, according to his accent—looked me straight in the eye and in excellent Hebrew said, "Do you think Yeshua is the Messiah?" I said, "Not only do I believe it, but this is why." And for the next hour the Lord opened his understanding. When we finished he said for the first time he saw how he could possibly have a relationship with God and how it made sense to him. This was not just religion, it was real. I continued my guard duty, but I was rejoicing inside.

Tuesday - 30th Day

Water patrol and guard.

That evening as I returned to my room, there were several guys already there. As soon as I sat down, the conversation shifted to the Bible. A new fellow came in. He said it wasn't worth believing in anything these days because the religious people were all hypocrites. I told him how when God was really involved with people, He could change people's hearts. As I related these things to



him, God quickened to me that He had already changed the attitude of this other fellow I had been praying for.

I turned around and said, "I'm not a famous rabbi or teacher. I don't have all the great words of wisdom. But God's Word is powerful. It affects the lives of those who hear. For example, when we began to speak here together about God and His Messiah some days ago, I said I would pray that God would change the hearts of those I was speaking to. I'll ask everybody here—isn't your attitude different from a week ago?" And everyone responded, "Yes!"

Then I looked straight at Shaul whom I had told I would pray for and I said, "Hasn't your heart changed, and don't you have a new desire to search the Word of God, to find out who is Messiah and what is His New Covenant and how it affects you?" And he said, "Yes." I continued, "Hasn't God shown you that you need to look to His Word first before you listen to men or rabbis, no matter how smart they are?" He said, "Yes, I've changed."

Thursday - 32nd Day

Packing—going home. Soldiers coming from everywhere—asking for my address and asking for books.

One soldier named Abraham, a family man, came and said, "I believe what you are saying is true, but what can I do, one man against many? I'm not learned and don't have a lot of authority." I told him to pray to God with all his heart that God would give him the strength and courage and the learning he needed.

When we were discharged from the Israeli base, I felt the warmth of all the handshakes and goodbyes. I reflected that in these 32 days, I had absolutely no conflict with anyone over my faith. Only an open door to give witness of the King of Israel!

I am left with many phone numbers and addresses and invitations for visits all over the country. Seeds were planted, but there is much follow-up work.

Surely books which clearly explain God's truths will play a great part in the solution for Israel's lost. They need Bibles and books that will help them understand the scriptures. We will print books as fast as we are able.

After Word

Ari never experienced any opposition to sharing his faith, and he only discussed it when someone initiated the conversation, as that was military policy. However, a year or so later, Yad L'Achim, the anti-freedom of religion organization, read the above article we published in the *Maoz Israel Report* and complained to Yitzhak Rabin who was Minister of Defense at the time, that Ari was proselytizing. Rabin signed an order for Ari to be removed from his position in his unit.

Ari only heard about the accusation when a friend called and said he had watched the Knesset debating his case on TV. Meretz (a far-left political party) had objected to the order after finding that neither Rabin nor his staff had inquired of Ari before signing the papers. A member of Meretz called Ari and asked if he would like them to represent him in court. But Ari felt he shouldn't have a political party represent him at that time.

The case did go to court, but Yad L'Achim could not produce any witnesses, so the court dismissed the case. Ari heard nothing else, but was never again called up for reserve duty. Upon reaching the age of retirement from the army, he received the standard honorable discharge.

Israel's culture has come a long way in the last 40 years. Today the military and other government offices recognize the loyal, high-integrity and hard-working nature of Israeli Messianic Jews. Many are now commanders and officers, holding important positions.

Interestingly enough, as we were preparing this article about Ari's time in Lebanon, Israel announced a renewed interest in that war (which until today does not have an official name) and made two fascinating decisions. First, it was decided that IDF soldiers (including Ari) who fought in the Lebanon War (1982-2000) would receive a special medal honoring their service. Second, just a few weeks ago, Israel dedicated a monument in honor of the fallen soldiers of the South Lebanon Army, Israel's allies, and committed to investing in the Lebanese soldiers and their families who fled Lebanon decades ago and settled in northern Israel. ●

To be continued next month...



August 2021

Shalom Defender of Israel!

If you got to read both Ari's journal entries from his time in the Lebanon war and the personal stories of soldiers serving today, you will find a common thread – **love for our land and the determination to work hard to protect it** – whether on the front lines or behind the scenes.

Still, while the IDF spends billions on training their soldiers and defensive weaponry, when **all is said and done our soldiers are just people. People with their own personal struggles.** That is where Maoz Israel comes in.

Maoz has a long history of **helping IDF soldiers and civilian victims** who suffer from the constant attacks against Israel.

Over the years, Maoz partners – **Defenders of Israel** – have helped promote the welfare of Israel's soldiers. We've funded everything from **team building activities to counseling for PTSD sufferers.** We've helped lone soldiers **find and move into appropriate housing** during their service and **outfitted a home entirely dedicated to housing lone soldiers.** We've also financially supported retreats for believing soldiers **before, during and after their service** as they spend much needed time fellowshiping with other believing soldiers.

Maoz is dedicated to making believers strong in Israel, because we believe a strong Body is the best witness we have to the people of Israel that **God is good and that His covenants are good.**

When it comes to helping these soldiers, every story is different and each need is unique. And because the Maoz team is here on the ground in Israel – **being able to help each unique need is where we shine.**

When Israel comes under attack, IDF soldiers are the wall of protection standing between Israeli families and harm. Your gift, **to bless an IDF soldier,** allows us to be there for them when they get back from the battlefield.

Your boots on the ground,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kobi and Shani Ferguson".

Kobi and Shani Ferguson



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