

SINCE 1976



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Two Choices that Mattered Most

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson, as told by Evan Levine

Being Jewish was a big part of my identity growing up. It's not that we had a strong faith in God, but we carried a generations-old sense that our lineage and traditions were an important treasure to be cherished and passed on.

As for me, I can't remember a moment in my life when I questioned the existence of God. In my earliest memories, I remember having a strong desire to connect with Him. We attended our local synagogue, but neither my parents nor our local rabbi could help me with that, and so I did the best I could. I would stand next to my bed and say the Shma (Hear O Israel) and quote some of the prayers I learned in the synagogue while facing east towards Jerusalem. Then I would ask God if He was listening, and wait day after day to hear an answer back.

Pondering if God was listening was one thing. Defining who He was, was a much more complex issue. Two notable things happened early on in my life to initiate my questions about Yeshua's connection to whom I understood God to be.

My parents made the interesting decision to send my sisters and me to a private Catholic school known for its excellent education. I spent four years there. We were clearly told to



By Mail:
Maoz Ministries
P.O. Box 535788
Grand Prairie, TX 75053-5788

By Phone:
U.S. 214.677.0560
CAN. 866.712.0188
U.K. 01732 886441

By Email:
usa@maozisrael.org
canada@maozisrael.org
UK@maozisrael.org

Online:
www.maozisrael.org
www.istandwithisrael.com

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f maozrael1
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focus during our classes on our basic subjects—like math, science and history. But as for anything to do with God or Yeshua, I was instructed to ignore it all. I wasn't satisfied with that, and though the talk of Yeshua was done in a Catholic context, the instructions to ignore the topic only made me curious with more questions. In my fifth-grade year my parents moved me to a school with a large Jewish population, but the questions remained.

During that time, unbeknownst to me, I wasn't the only one in my family asking questions. My mother, who wasn't satisfied with our Reform Jewish life, had begun exploring eastern religions. Then, one day she got a call from a relative who shared a vivid and jarring dream about her. The dream quite literally changed her perspective on life

With my Bar Mitzvah coming up, I found myself in a dilemma. I had studied for this day my whole life. How did this event fit into my new beliefs?

and she immediately recognized Yeshua to be the Son of God from that day forward. I was 12 when she shared her experience with me. It took me some time to process, since being Jewish was an incredibly important part of my identity as a person. But I couldn't deny that I knew in my heart what she was saying was true.

With my Bar Mitzvah coming up, I found myself in a dilemma. I had studied for this day my whole life. How did this event fit into my new beliefs? My mother and I agreed that this coming-

of-age ceremony was important for our Jewish heritage, and so we only shared our newly-found belief in Yeshua with my father after my Bar Mitzvah. Once that was over, I shared liberally with all my Jewish friends at school and synagogue—and really, with anyone who would listen.

Later that year the school held a speech contest (on any topic we chose). I signed up and chose my topic to be proof of Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah, using only Old

to my Jewish friends—and even had a sense deep down that this would involve Israel.

But the Christian world was still a bit of an anomaly to us—we didn't know any other Jews who believed like us. So, I was 14 before my mother and I finally decided to attend a church.

Soon after, however, we were introduced to the Messianic Jewish community and much of our identity conflict was



Evan holding the Torah with his family before his Bar Mitzvah

Testament scriptures. The school went into an uproar following my speech. Though the following weeks included intense debates with the teachers, the faculty and students, I remember that time being incredibly God-kissed as the taboo subject was being openly discussed and challenged.

I knew the moment I gave my life to the Lord that I had a calling to bring the knowledge of Yeshua

resolved. We began attending Or Ha'Olam Messianic Congregation and were relieved to discover that our Jewish heritage could *and should* be very much a part of our walk with Yeshua. It was at that congregation I became involved in leading worship at the youth group and from then on I knew this was part of what I was supposed to do.

After high school I went to college in Kansas. Though I still walked with the Lord, I had so many open doors that I began to lose focus on worship and soon saw the music industry as my destiny. I began writing love-songs music and formed several

in the sand was drawn when the label's partner wanted to sign a band whose lyrics blatantly mocked God. I refused to have anything to do with them and was subsequently fired.

Though painful, this turn of events simply brought me back

Knowing Israel was in my future, I knew I needed to scout out the land of Israel to get a better idea of what I would do when I eventually moved there. So about three years into my time in Denver, I took a "get to know your homeland" type tour geared towards young Jews. I took the tour and then stayed a bit longer to meet local Israeli believers. My steps couldn't have been more ordained.

In 2007, Elisa and I were married and she moved to Denver with me. We spent the next two years crafting the vision of what would become our ministry—HaTikva Project.



Evan and Elisa at their wedding

to my original call to ministry. I went home and stepped back into leadership at Or Ha'Olam with the youth. I led worship and poured into the young people around me.

The next summer, I attended Messiah conference and met Raleigh and Paulette Washington. We clicked, and they invited me to move to Denver to be a part of birthing the *Road to Jerusalem* which focused on building a bridge of unity between Messianic Jews and the Christian world. As things progressed, I also got involved with *Promise Keepers* as well.

I met Elisa (my future wife) on my first day of exploring the land on my own. We met because of mutual friends who accidentally booked both of us to stay at their home on the same day. That evening, Elisa and I and another friend decided to grab a bite before we headed over to the apartment. Of all the places we could've eaten, our first meal together would be at a restaurant right across the street from where our future ministry center would reside.

I flew home and kept in touch with Elisa, who lived in Dallas at the time. In 2007 we were married and she moved to Denver with me. We spent the next two years crafting the vision of what would become our ministry—HaTikva Project—and in 2009, after five years in Denver, we both knew it was time for us to make the final step across the ocean.



Evan during his college days

different bands during my time at school. Eventually I landed an internship at a record label that was supposed to be Christian. For a time, I thought this was where I was going in life, but the line

The Clinic

HaTikva Project was already set up in the U.S. so when we moved to Israel, we hit the ground running. Between language school and a variety of other “getting settled” activities, we sought out needy families to

deeply-subsidized, full-scale dental care for the needy. From the very beginning, we were determined to offer this service openly as Messianic believers. Anyone who came through our doors would have both their physical and spiritual needs attended to. Since we were

The Adoption

When I was about 15, and my mother (who had been adopted as a baby) and I were going through all our spiritual changes, my mother decided to finally look into her adoption file. She found out her birth parents, who had given her up for adoption while they were in high school, had gone on to get married and have four more children. When we met them, they cried tears of joy and said they always prayed their daughter, whom they had given up for adoption, would come back to them. But the adoption files required contact to be initiated by the child, and so they were never able to initiate a search for my mother.



HaTikva Dental Clinic

help. We quickly found, however, that a good portion of the help people needed was dental help. The cost was very high for each of these treatments, so a large part of our budget was being swallowed up by dentistry needs. The question was, could we get them the treatment they needed at a significantly lesser cost if we provided the treatment ourselves? Interestingly, enough, Elisa had a four-year degree in dental hygiene (the average Israeli hygienist has only two years) which allowed us to set up a clinic that would function at the highest level.

In 2015 we opened our first dental clinic, which offered

offering a service even the government couldn't offer, social services agreed to refer their patients to us.

It's not uncommon for Jews to feel threatened when the name of Yeshua is introduced in any given setting, and we didn't want to put patients in a position where they might feel suddenly uncomfortable. So we asked social services to “warn” anyone who came that they were coming to a Messianic clinic where Yeshua is a part of everything we do as Jewish and Arab believers. It's not uncommon for new patients to walk into our clinic with all their medical papers and a “be advised” bulletin about us.

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I had grown up loving my mother's adoptive parents. As far as I was concerned, they were my grandparents. But when we were reunited with this whole new part of our family, I was struck by the incredible gift my adopted grandparents had given me. My biological grandmother's choice not to abort my mother together with my adoptive grandparents' willingness to raise my mother in a good home are the two most important decisions ever made as far as I'm concerned. I exist today because of both of those

choices. My children now exist, and generations will come after them because of these two choices, as well.

This reality had a profound impact on my life, so you can see why I couldn't be more passionate about abortion, adoption and, of course, foster care. In 2016, we started exploring the dynamics and policies of at-risk or parentless kids in Israel. While there were several believing organizations supporting young mothers in their decision to keep their child, there were no initiatives in the local Body for foster care and adoption.

Anyone who's ever tried to adopt or foster knows the process is stressful and complicated. However, Israel, having mastered the art of we-can-make-anything-more-complicated, includes a religious mandate criterion. Israel's religious mandate requires a child who is rabbinically Jewish (with a Jewish mother) to be matched with a rabbinically Jewish family. An Arab child must be matched with an Arab family, and so forth. The dilemma arises when children come from a mixed Arab and Jewish family, or are Jewish only on their father's side and are thus considered an anomaly. This works in our favor, because as Jewish believers in Yeshua—we are an anomaly to the government as well, and are, thus, perfectly positioned to provide a home for this category of “unplaceable” children.

Once again, social services agreed with us, and we've seen two significant breakthroughs just this past year. As an openly Messianic family, we succeeded in adopting a child! And another openly Messianic family was

granted foster care rights. These accomplishments are not just great for the kids who will now enjoy a warm home, but this has made great headway for the Messianic community to be recognized as a valuable asset to the Israeli fabric of society.

The Songs

For a decade, living in Israel, I had led worship at times in our local congregation and even wrote some songs in Hebrew. Some of my songs are sung in congregations in Israel, but my dream was to put out a whole album of the music I had written. It was just a dream, since we had so much going on and the logistics of a music project were beyond anything I could imagine handling.

About two years ago, I attended an invite-only gathering at the *Fellowship of Artists* studio with a few dozen other musicians and worship leaders from around the country. In the meeting they talked about their vision to see local congregations supplied with original Hebrew worship songs and ultimately see Israel become a source for worship music worldwide. Even beyond that, they wanted to see believing Israeli musicians have a place to come and create and fellowship with other creative artists just like them.

It seemed like a great vision, so when they said they'd be happy to work with us to produce our



Evan recording his first single at the Fellowship of Artists studio

own music, I jumped at the opportunity and joined the *FoA*. We spent time sifting through my songs looking for the best ones and we've just released my first single *Boreh Kdoshim* (He who makes us holy). I can't wait for the rest of the album to come out later this year.

Despite such a difficult year last year, I am keenly aware that the work we do is close to God's heart. So it's interesting to me how God can give you a passion for something, and then put you in a position where you must set aside that passion. Then, while you're busy fulfilling His dreams, He comes in and fulfills yours. No wonder we worship Him. ●

When Ari

How it A

PART

Ari was born in the U.S. to a Jewish immigrant family. As the story has been passed down, Ari's mother, Tatyana, fled the pogroms in Russia (a massacre of Jews that took place at the beginning of the 20th century). She boarded a ship with a few members of her surviving family and attempted to move to the British-controlled Holy Land. Everyone on her boat was turned away, and she found herself headed to the United States, where she was granted citizenship. Somewhere on that fateful trip, she met Ari's father, Hokano Sorko-Ram, a physician from India. Settling into Michigan, they married and had seven children. Ari was number six.

That's about all we know, because when Ari turned two, his father left the family—never to be seen again. His mother, who was the

only remaining thread holding things together, sustained a head injury and the family shattered.

Ari was too young to know why the decision was made, but while his six siblings were sent together to a place called Children's Village, Ari was separated and sent elsewhere. So, from the tender age of two he was raised without a father, mother or siblings. Having no long-term relationships with any of the people from those early years, he has no idea who took care of him or where he was until at some point during grade school, he was moved to a boys' boarding school.

Every summer all of the kids from his boys' school would go home to their families, then return in the fall. However, Ari remained at school with the staff because he had no family to return to. He was treated well and was a model student, but summers were a lonely time. So, in the summer of his fifth grade year, he ran away. When the faculty tracked him down—not far from the school, they asked him why he ran away. He explained that he had simply never been off the property by himself, and was curious what was out there.



Ari & Shira
and their children,
Ayal & Shani



Ari at 11. This is the only known photo from his childhood.

To address this issue, the following summer the staff found a summer camp for Ari to attend. While there, a young couple took a personal interest in him. He was

Met Shira

All Began

RT 2

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson



people, and would be praying for him. This piqued a curiosity in Ari for the Bible, and during the following year, he spent time reading it.

It made sense to start in Genesis, but by the time he made it through several of the following books he was too discouraged to go on. He wanted to know God like this couple did, but the text was too difficult to understand. The following summer, when he saw the couple again at camp, he expressed his frustration at not being able to understand the Bible. The couple was happy to share the whole story with him and at the ripe age of 13, he began his journey with the Lord.

Life After School

During his senior year, his older brother who had recently married looked him up and invited him to move in and finish his final school year with them. In 1959, upon graduating, Ari enlisted in the army and served in NATO on special assignment. During his military service he ran track and field, won a light-heavy weight boxing championship and played in the French National Rugby League.

Upon leaving the military, he signed with an NFL football

very impacted by this as it was the first time anyone had taken an interest in him as an individual.

As they were saying their goodbyes at the end of the camp, the young couple told him how much they loved the Jewish



After high school, Ari enlisted in the US military

team, but within a year decided instead that he wanted to pursue a college education. He attended the University of Southern California studying psychology and behavioral research.

During graduate school, he was recruited by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department as he continued his studies in



Ari competed in international track and field during his time in the military and in college

behavioral research. While serving in the Sheriff's department he received an invitation to play the role of a detective in a Hollywood movie with Dean Martin.

At the time, Ari had no acting experience, but the director wanted someone with real-life experience. It being a detective role, Ari felt comfortable and played the role naturally. They loved it! And so, by sheer chance, Ari began his acting carrier with no audition.

While he acted in about 100 films and TV shows, like C.H.I.P.S.,

Hawaii Five-0, and the original Wonder Woman series, his role was always a clean one. He often took opportunities to share his testimony everywhere from public rallies to prisons.

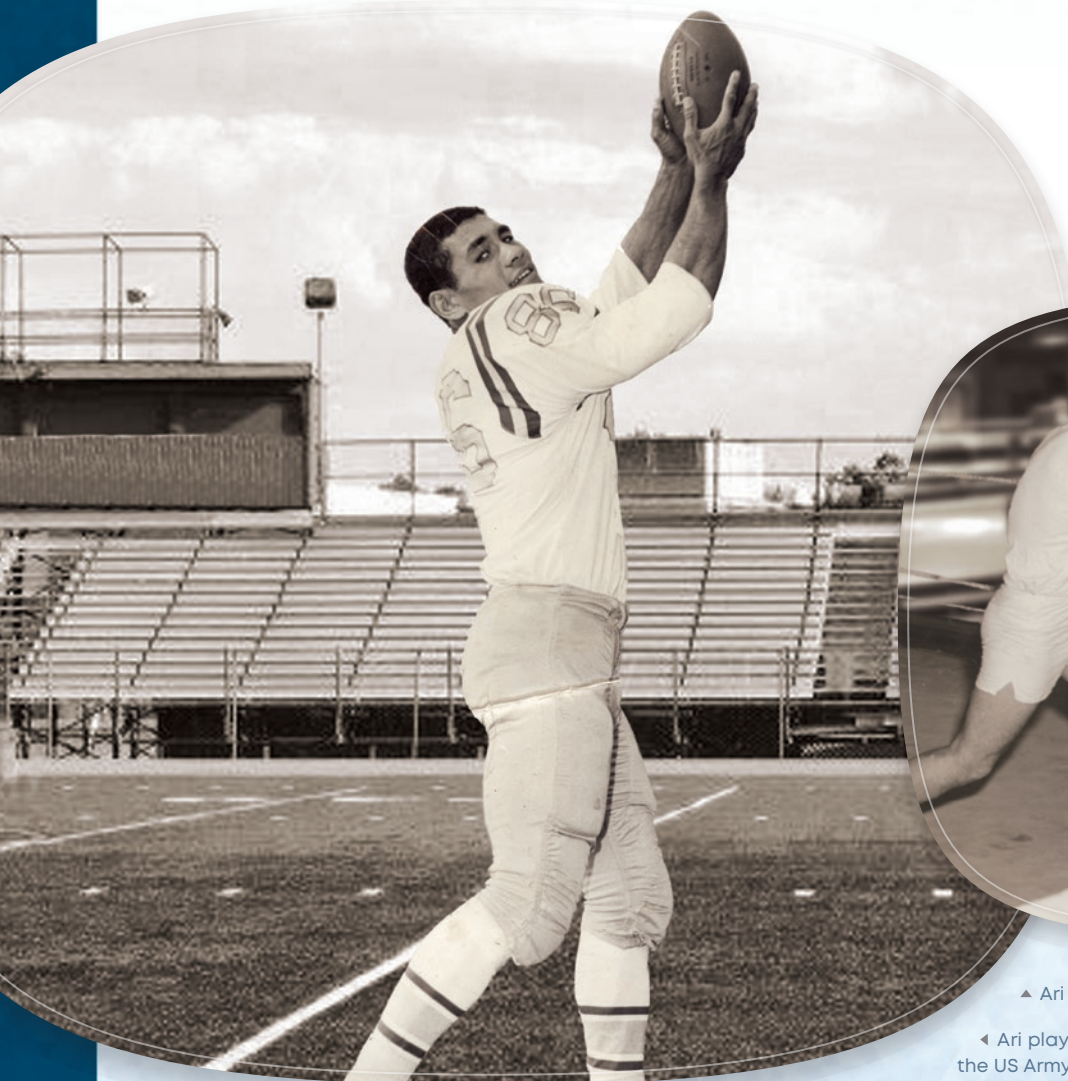
Ari & Shira Meet

In 1976, through mutual friends and Pastor Jack Hayford, Ari met a young Israeli-American film director named Shira Lindsay who was a Messianic Jew like himself. She had come to the States looking for Jewish believers who would be willing to move to Israel to help pioneer a Messianic beachhead in the land.

Ari had just signed a contract for a new TV series and had several commitments he couldn't walk away from. But as he sought the Lord on whether to accept the challenge of moving to Israel for a year, He told God, "If you can take care of all these loose ends like getting me out of my film contracts, I'll go check out the Holy Land."

Within weeks, he was released from all his contracts; every loose end was tied up and he was on his way to Israel for a one-year visit. Before six months were up, Ari was so convinced he was staying that he took the cutest local girl he could find to a café in Jaffa overlooking the Mediterranean and proposed to her. They would build a Messianic community together.

Even before Ari and Shira were married, word got out to the local film industry that he was in the



▲ Ari (right) was a champion light heavyweight boxer

◀ Ari played in the French National Rugby League and the US Army European Football League before he signed with the National Football League

One of those weekends, some from the group had planned to catch the evening bus, but the service lasted longer than usual. For that reason, they were not there when the terrorists arrived.

country and he was sent many offers for film roles. Even though he turned a number of them down, the films he did do turned out to be very helpful in funding their early years in the country. Over the next couple of decades, Ari appeared in several action movies as well as educational TV series designed to help Israelis learn English. As there were so few Israeli films during that time and basically one Israeli channel, Ari still occasionally has people walk up to him on the street who recognize him from their childhood.

Build A Community

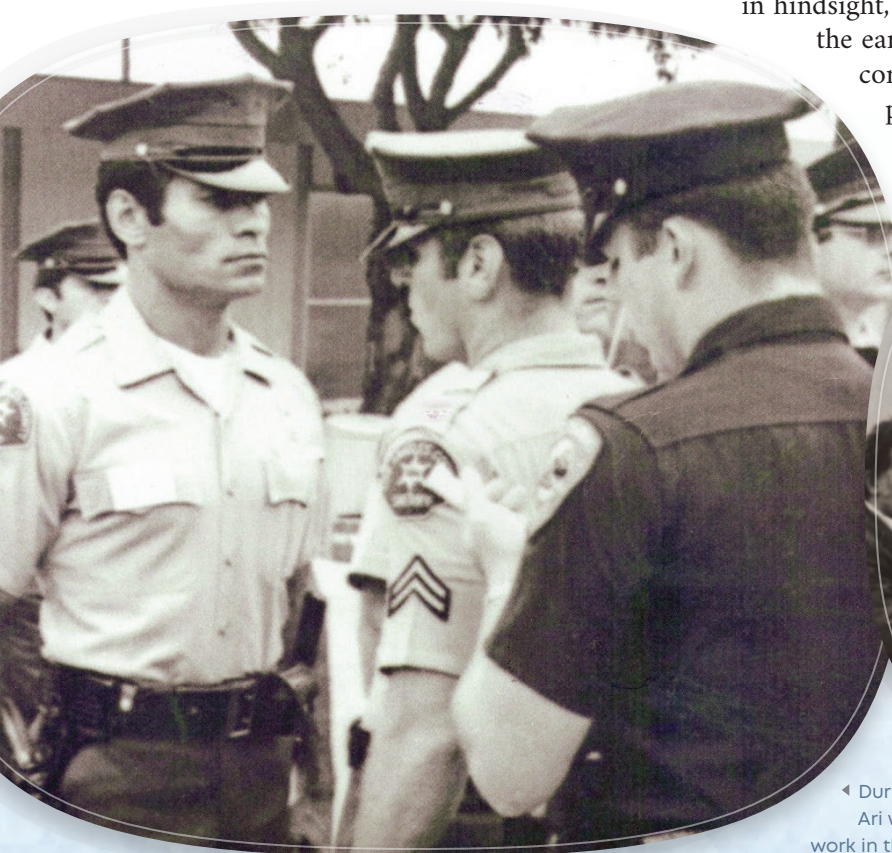
For Ari and Shira, the first step towards building a Messianic community was to find a safe place where they could have meetings with music and singing without disturbing the neighbors. They rented a house in Herzliya, a suburb of Tel Aviv, and began their pioneering congregational plant. It would become the first Spirit-filled Hebrew-speaking Messianic congregation established in Israel in almost 2000 years.

Pioneering often sounds legendary in hindsight, but most of the early days of the congregation plant revolved around the

logistics of getting people to the meeting place and back.

Few people had a car in those days, and buses didn't run on the Sabbath. So, Ari made several trips to nearby towns before and after each service. A few times the congregants got around the no-buses issue by taking the bus on Friday and camping out in the yard with tents. Then they would wait to catch the first bus that began running after sunset Saturday night. It being the 70's, the neighbors expressed concern that a "hippie" colony was moving into the area, and so the practice stopped.

One of those weekends, some from the group had planned to catch the evening bus, but the service lasted longer than usual. They missed that bus, and for that reason were not on the highway at the time and place where terrorists were driving up and down the highway in a hijacked bus spraying bullets. Thirty eight Israelis died and 71 were wounded from that attack.



◀ During college, Ari was recruited to work in the Los Angeles Sheriffs Department



▲ Ari began his acting career in his late twenties, and played in both TV and film



David and Lisa Loden were instrumental in introducing original Hebrew worship into the vision of an all-Hebrew-language congregation

Going Hebrew

At the beginning, the messages were given in English and translated into Hebrew. However, there were no Hebrew worship songs and so worship was done in English. Moving towards the goal of an all-Hebrew service, Ari and Shira pushed for the worship time to be only in Hebrew. They brought in their friends David and Lisa Loden who were quite happy to teach their newly-written Hebrew worship songs on the group (read their beautiful story in the June 2020 *Maoz Israel Report*).

If the move to restore Hebrew worship wasn't so significant on a spiritual level, one could imagine the angels would have had good reason to chuckle at those early meetings. Israelis in the Tel Aviv area who knew Hebrew but knew nothing of worship outside of the traditional reciting from prayer books, were trying to sing together with westerners who had a lot of passion but knew little Hebrew!

Change and familiarity are funny things. Interestingly enough, some of the Israelis had a hard time with the Hebrew worship. They

explained they felt a much deeper anointing by singing and praying in English than in Hebrew! So you can imagine those early services were quite a sight—and quite a sound!

Moving towards the goal of an all-Hebrew service, Ari and Shira pushed for the worship time to be only in Hebrew.

Despite the logistical challenges, Ari and Shira's small gatherings quickly grew to about 70 people.

But the majority of the attendants were volunteers from abroad who would instinctively speak in their mother tongue during times of fellowship, making it difficult for the Israelis to engage.

As the vision was to have a completely Hebrew-speaking congregation, it was time to take the final plunge. Ari gave the congregants a two-week notice that the message—and worship—would be in Hebrew with an English translation in the back. Within two weeks the number of attendants dropped to a mere dozen.

For the energy in the service, it was a dramatic change. But that was when they really began to build an Israeli congregation. ●

To be continued next month...

February 2021

Shalom from Jerusalem!

Can you even imagine not having your family? Not enjoying your brothers and sisters around the dinner table? Not having a place to call “home”?

Ari experienced this growing up, but God, **in His mercy, surrounded him with people** capable of raising him to be an accomplished adult! **How different** his life would have been, and yours and mine, too, if the people who dedicated their lives to **care for children like Ari**, had not been there when Ari needed them?

What if you could be involved in establishing an emergency home? What if this **haven belonged to a believing family? And in Israel!**

Trauma during childhood can have a life-altering effect on a child. And being able to take in children in such a state and provide them with the care they need to heal can **turn a traumatic moment into a life changing experience.**

There are hundreds of kids every year in Israel who are rescued from **dangerous family situations**, and need short-term emergency housing. **So when we heard Evan’s HaTikva Project was purchasing a home and placing a believing family in it to care for the least of the least, we knew our Maoz partners would want in on the blessing.**

HaTikva Project signed on the house in January and have **already raised \$600,000 of the \$700,000 needed** to purchase and renovate the house. A foster care approved believing family will live there and be **available 24/7 to receive the kids who need it most.**

They pick up the keys in May and we are believing for them to have it **entirely paid off** by then so they can be free to focus on what matters most.

So we are **partnering with HaTikva Project** to provide a safe haven for Israeli children—for a day, a week, a month or longer. This home will provide an **environment of love**, nurturing, and peace as they find their way that God destined for their lives.

Be a part of impacting the lives of the hurting children of Israel.
They are worth it!

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi and Shani Ferguson





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