

Moti, together with other congregational leaders perform a Bat Mitzvah at Tiferet Yeshua congregation.

FEBRUARY 2022 | SH'VAT-ADAR 5782

The Only One Who Made it Out

As told by Moti Cohen to Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

It was Lag Ba'Omer, 33 days after Passover when Israelis get together and light bonfires all over the country. I was on the beach with my friends from boarding school and one of them came up to tell me they found the guy I had been waiting to kill. We were a group of 20 and this guy was just there alone with his younger brother. Everyone looked at me expectantly. They would join in—I just had to start the fight.

I think you'll have to understand my background to fully appreciate what happened that night.



I come from a traditional Jewish family—not super religious though. Our expression as Jews focused on things like not driving on the Sabbath, celebrating the Jewish holidays, things like that. Growing up, I had many behavioral and educational problems due to severe dyslexia. At that time though, Israel's educational system didn't know how to handle learning disabilities. My teachers just thought I was being disruptive in class on purpose and they made me repeat the first grade.

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
www.IsraeliWorship.com

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Eventually, someone realized I genuinely had trouble learning and placed me in a special ed class. They were unsure what my problem was, but it didn't really matter. In those days every grade had one special education class for all the problematic kids, no matter their diagnosis.

At the age of 10 I still struggled with elementary reading and writing. My school made several attempts to relocate me to a suitable class, and during the process I was left at home for months at a time. So, as a 10-year-old I would hang out with 16 or 17-year-olds from the streets. We would do lots of stupid things. Once, we were messing around and I lit a fire on school property in our neighborhood, and the fire quickly spread to the school building itself. A police investigation of our family ensued and officers from social welfare got involved. Again, they tried to find a suitable framework for me, but none could be found. So, at 12 years old, I was taken from my family to an institution for problematic boys in Pardes Hanna, a nearby town. Most of the kids there were between 14 and army age. I was put in the class of the youngest kids.



Sixteen year old Moti with his boarding school friends at the national youth conference

were behaving recklessly and they needed to remove me to save the other children. The only positive thing that happened there was that, for the first time, I was properly diagnosed. They found that I was severely dyslexic, and finally understood my behavior. I was only allowed to go home once a month, so my father would come to visit me all the time. He wasn't a big talker, but he showed his love by just sitting with me,

the Ministry of Social Welfare, with the social worker of the neighborhood—with anyone who would listen. Finally, after a year, I was transferred to a boarding school in Petah Tikvah. This was a big improvement for me because the first institution was more for criminal teens while the new boarding school was more for kids whose family situations were problematic.


Since I was 13 years old by then, they placed me in the 7th grade but quickly realized my academic level was closer to that of a third grader. My lack of knowledge wasn't just academic—it was also cultural. I remember my classmates laughing at me because I didn't know the words to "Hatikva"—our national anthem—something Israeli children learn by heart very early in school. One of the teachers saw my struggle and took me on as her special project. For the next three years, she invested in me and every day after school

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It was a very hard place with lots of violence—even the instructors used violence. My parents were very upset with this decision, but social services had a warrant against me. They insisted I was the reason my siblings, friends and other kids in my neighborhood

bringing me things I needed and switching out my dirty clothes with clean clothes my mother had washed for me.

For a whole year my parents fought to get me out of this institution. They would meet with



I studied three additional hours of reading, writing, math and basic history.

Mad at the World

Though academically things progressed well, as a person, you could say my most dominant character trait was anger. I was mad at the whole world. I was a child who wanted to be home—to be with my parents—but I had to be at an institution. The longer I stayed there the more frustrated I became. Often, when a situation arose that I didn't know how to solve, I immediately reacted with violent behavior.

One of the most significant run-ins I had as a teenager was when I was 16. A friend and I were walking down a street when we passed by this known troublemaker. He stared me down and when I looked over and met his eyes he challenged me, "Why you staring at me?" I replied that I wasn't staring at him. I knew this boy. I knew he was a serious criminal and that I was forbidden to associate with him. He got up in my face, ripped my necklace from around my neck and asked again, "Why you staring at me?" I pushed him away and he pulled out a knife and slashed my left ear with it. Blood went everywhere. An ambulance came, police came, the whole area was cordoned off like a murder had taken place. They caught the guy because he lived right there, but he was back on the streets almost immediately.

I burned with rage over what happened. I told everyone I knew that I would pay him back—I would kill him. I became obsessive. It wasn't normal. I couldn't sleep at night; I would just lay there envisioning myself stabbing him with a knife. I bought a knife and waited for the opportunity for revenge.

A Lifeline?

Just a few weeks before this happened, my friends from the boarding school, Meital and Hila, told me for the first time about Ari and Shira and Jews who believe in Yeshua. I remember thinking, what nonsense—there is no such thing. The girls told me they had met some nice young people on the beach and had gone to several of their meetings in Ramat Hasharon. I had a number of questions and Meital didn't have answers. "Just come to Ramat Hasharon and meet these people; they can give you answers," she told me. I finally agreed to go, but only to prove to her that they were clearly not Jewish and that there is no such thing as a Jew who believes in Yeshua.

When I visited for the first time, I remember thinking I clearly didn't agree with what they were saying, but there was something unusual about them. It was something impossible to describe with words—a special light in the eyes of these people. I wouldn't have used these terms then, but today I would call it a genuine joy and peace. I could also see that these people believed with all their heart—they weren't trying to trick us.

They told me about Yeshua using only Scriptures from the Tanach (Old Testament). But I decided I would read the New Testament for myself. I even took a pen to mark all the places in the New Testament where it says to hate the Jews and other anti-Semitic sayings.

First Impressions

I remember the first time I opened the New Testament. I was at my parents' house and I closed the door to my room so

I wouldn't have to explain what I was doing. There were three first impressions I had when I began reading. First, I loved that the New Testament was in modern Hebrew [as it was translated from Greek]. I could understand what I was reading! Studying the ancient Hebrew of the Tanach in school is difficult even for normal Israelis. How much more for someone like me...

Secondly, I was immensely impacted by the first chapter in Matthew that showed Yeshua's lineage was Jewish—via King David himself! It was such a revelation to me that Yeshua was a Jew!

The third thing that struck me was the Jewish context of everything mentioned. I saw Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles), Passover, Shavuot (Feast of First Fruits)... I didn't see Christmas, Easter and other unfamiliar practices. I was looking for things that spoke against the Jews. But all I saw were quotes from the Tanach and stories about healing Jews, not killing them.

Still, there was a barrier; I could not accept Yeshua. My grandfather was a Jew, my grandfather's grandfather was a Jew, and most certainly there were times they were persecuted but held fast to maintain their Jewishness. And here I was, the firstborn son in my family, their legacy—the continuation of their story. If I believed in Yeshua, it would be the betrayal of my entire family line that had fought to keep their Jewish traditions and had fought to come to the Land of Israel. How could I, having been privileged enough to be born in the land of my ancestors, break away from this heritage?

My heart and my head fought intensely. I spent a lot of time talking to Ari. I don't recall

all that was said, but I remember I would leave those meetings with joy in my heart. That was how Ari became my spiritual father.

The Conference

The youth conference was a turning point for me. The messages of Scott Wilson from Texas really touched my heart. I remember the sentence that he repeated many times: “a tiny seed [good or bad] will bring forth big fruit.”

An inner struggle began in me. I said to myself, “I do want the love of God, but I don’t want Yeshua. I want God, but I don’t want Yeshua.” As I wrestled within myself, the pleasant sensation became stronger. The next thing I remember is that Shani was standing beside me and started to pray for me. Others joined in, but I remember every time I opened my eyes, I saw her praying. I remember she asked me if I wanted to pray to accept

Yeshua while I was still struggling within myself.

I finally surrendered within myself and said, “If through Yeshua I’ll get God’s love, I am ready to accept Him. I’m ready to accept Yeshua.”

I left that conference so happy and full. It was Passover break and I went straight home and told my parents, my siblings, my friends—everyone—about my experience. “Look how happy I am!” I told them, “You can only receive this joy through Yeshua!” The sensation remained very strong for weeks. I think everyone thought I had gone a bit crazy.

In the beginning my parents were very much against it. Everything that I thought they would say, happened—that I betrayed the family, that I had converted to Christianity. They said, “Yeshua is worse than Hitler; He is the one who influenced Hitler, and that’s why six million Jews were killed—because Hitler was also a Christian...” These were all the same things I had thought before I learned they weren’t true.

Just a few weeks later, the holiday of Lag Ba’Omer arrived and we were preparing our bonfire at the beach. Some of our group were wandering around and came

across the teen who had cut me with his knife—the one that for months I had sworn to kill.

They ran to tell me and everybody was just waiting for me to have at him. They had picked up my offense and were eager for a big fight. There was immense pressure. I had talked big and my honor was at stake. But, in that moment, I realized I didn’t hate him. I wasn’t even angry at him. Most importantly, I didn’t want to hurt him and I didn’t care about protecting my honor. I told my friends to let him go and the guy ran off as fast as he could.

My friends knew me. They knew I had been talking about Yeshua. But they knew that violence was a way of life for me—that I had sent people to the hospital more than once. “What happened to you? Why did you release him?” they asked, unable to grasp what they had just witnessed. I think I was just as shocked at myself as I explained to them that because I believe in Yeshua, I can no longer be violent.

I spent the rest of my high school years telling everyone about Yeshua and many of them came to the services at Ari and Shira’s congregation. Once, a friend of mine, Uri, came to visit. He had fallen down some stairs six months before and everyone knew he had had severe back problems ever since. Ari said that he would pray and there would be a miracle. Ari prayed and suddenly he could bend down and do all kinds of things that he was not able to do before. Uri started to laugh, asking, “What is this? How can this be?” God simply did a miracle. I shared with many of my friends during those years and even now 25 years later, I have not given

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On the last day of the conference, I watched the youth dancing and singing songs. I had all kinds of thoughts in my head when I saw them jumping and dancing. From my experience, when you wanted to pray to God, you solemnly read the Siddur (prayer book) at the synagogue. Their free exuberance was very odd to me.

As I was thinking about all this, I began to have strange sensations in my stomach. At first I thought I’d eaten something bad, but then I realized that it was a pleasant feeling and it was spreading through my whole body. As I was sensing this, I felt/heard in my head, “You’re feeling the love of God.” After a few minutes, another thought came to me—“This love of God I’m feeling comes through Yeshua and in order to receive the love of God, I need to receive Yeshua.”

up on the seeds that were sown in their hearts.

My father put a lot of effort into getting me out of the bad neighborhood where we lived. He finally succeeded and my family moved to a safer neighborhood though by then I myself was already in the army. One day my father visited his old synagogue and bumped into one of my old friends. He was a drug addict, skinny and had lost all his teeth. He told my father, "Moti is the only one from our neighborhood who succeeded!" He went down the list of all my childhood friends: "This one died from an overdose, that one was murdered, another is in prison..."

That day, my father, who had always opposed my beliefs, went home and told my mother that he decided not to argue with me anymore about Yeshua. He might not agree with me, but he recognized that I was the worst kid in the neighborhood, and it was clear that my faith saved me from that life. It was fascinating to me that he had this revelation in a synagogue—but from that day forward he never challenged what I believed.

How Can I Help?

When I was in school, we were usually picked up by someone from the congregation so we could attend the Shabbat service. So, as soon as I got my driver's license, I offered to help drive people there as well. Many people don't have cars in Israel and buses don't run on the Sabbath—so the only way they could get to our meetings consistently was if we picked them up. For a while my dad even let me borrow his car until Ari gave me his to use that could seat more people. I would leave my house at 8 a.m. to get several loads of people from different cities to Ramat Hasharon by 11 a.m.—and then not get back home until 8 p.m. after dropping them off.

As I grew in the Lord, I was encouraged to be like a big

brother to the youth in the congregation. I didn't know much in terms of being able to teach, but a couple, Sean and Ayelet Steckbeck, poured into me during that time.

I wanted badly to be able to pour wisdom and understanding into new believers like Ari had poured into me. The first time I gave a message to our group of teens I felt like everything had come full circle. I was a guy who had struggled to read anything—let alone the Scriptures—and here I was reading verses and teaching about them. God also reminded me that I had been taken out of my neighborhood because they said that I was dragging all the kids in my neighborhood down. Now, God had turned things around and I was working hard to pull the youth to safety. ■



Moti finished high school after his army service and during this time was completely healed from dyslexia. He later earned a master's degree in Biblical Counseling at Israel School of the Bible. He and two other youth leaders, Eli Birnbaum and Shmuel Salway picked up a youth group that Yoel Goldberg had started before going abroad for a season. It became one of the best youth groups in the land at that time, with the most activities and largest number of youth. Moti, now married with a family of his own, became an elder at Tiferet Yeshua

congregation, but his passion for those struggling on the streets never left him. He volunteers several days a week together with other believers providing the homeless, drug addicts and prostitutes with a nourishing meal and someone to talk to and pray with them if they so choose. When our Maoz team went down to photograph his work, they

commented on the careful attention to detail Moti gave to each person that came. "He made special soft sandwiches for those who had lost their teeth and provided other types of food that addressed different dietary requirements of those who came to him."

The original article written about Ari & Shira and the youth conference.

The News & Police

HOW IT ALL BEGAN - PART 12

By Shira Sorko-Ram

It was Passover break in 1996 when a woman walked into our first National Messianic Youth Conference. She introduced herself as Rona Shemesh,¹ a journalist from Israel's largest newspaper, *Yediot Aharonot*. Young and charming, she told us she had come to visit her brother on the kibbutz where we were meeting, and had heard there was a Messianic event happening. She was intrigued and asked if it would be all right if she sat in on some of the meetings.

Messianic Jews in Israel faced very real persecution on the job, in school and with neighbors. And because we were a tiny minority in the land, many believers were cowed into

a semi-underground mode. But it was our children, who were still growing in their identity and understanding of God and the world, who suffered most. A child from a Messianic family was often the only believer in his or her entire school. We knew that bringing together other young people like them to publicly celebrate our faith in Yeshua would be incredibly strengthening. Full of expectation, six congregations sent their youth and leaders to participate in this conference.

We had nothing to hide so we told the journalist she was welcome to sit in on the services. She met with a number of the teenagers and talked to them about their faith. She was amazed to see young people so turned on to the God of Israel

[1] Not her real name

and she commented to us on the positive influence this conference was having on our youth. After the conference, she called one of the youth team leaders and said, "I have been so moved by what I have seen, that now that I am home, I am afraid to turn on the TV or the radio for fear I will lose this wonderful feeling. The public needs to know about you all," she enthusiastically exclaimed.

Hunting Souls

Three weeks later, a full four-page article about the conference appeared in the weekend magazine section of her newspaper. The title on the cover page screamed "Tsayyahdey Hanefashot"—translated as "Soul-Hunters" or "Soul-Stalkers"² (a common term to describe how Jews view the Christian Crusaders who forced Jews to convert or die "in Jesus' name" in the Middle Ages).

In blaring headlines it began:

At the start of the Passover vacation, 120 Israeli teenagers took part in a three-day conference of Messianic Jews who believe in Yeshu [an unbeliever's way of spelling Yeshua's Name]. Some of them are deprived children, some of them from traditional homes, most of them without their parents' consent...

The article then mocked God, blasphemed the Messiah, and represented the conference as something akin to a Satanic cult:

A girl named Dorit ascends the stage; she looks hysterical..."Satan," she shouts and cries with the background music, "Satan hates you; he wants you to die! Receive God, so you can have control over your lives. What do I have in my life?" She sobs, "There is nothing..."

Shemesh summed up her "impressions":

The message given at the conference: the world is filthy, and you losers will die anyway like that drugged Rebecca (a girl who died of an overdose of drugs). So, if you must die, why not go to heaven? The hell which you are going through now is nothing like the hell which awaits you there, once you die of a terrorist attack, or who knows what.

Saving Israel with Chocolates

We had also invited a dynamic youth group from Chicago called "Souled Out." A common icebreaker for youth meetings in the U.S., they threw out a few handfuls of candies, along with half a dozen CD's from believing artists (which at the time were difficult to obtain in Israel).

The journalist's description, however, exclaimed that "showers of chocolates and discs" were thrown at the youth. She carefully removed any reference to the God of Israel and explained that through these gifts, the Messianics "close in bit by bit on the mixed-up souls" of the teenagers.

From a legal standpoint, the most serious accusation of the newspaper was that **the Israeli teenagers attended our religious event without their parents' permission or knowledge—a crime punishable by prison.** (As if 120 young people could disappear during Passover vacation from their homes without a trace for three days.) All through the article, Rona insinuated that the young people were victims of severe emotional and spiritual manipulation.

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The paper splashed photos with blurred faces of the attending teens—including our son Ayal—with captions like, "they use music to push their message", "16-year-olds in crisis", "a bigger conference planned for the summer," and "the parents don't know."

What the newspaper failed to state was that out of 120 youth, 114 were from Messianic homes. And no one was more thankful for the conference and the fruit that came from it than the parents. The other six teenagers who came as a result of relationships with our two teenage children, brought written permission slips from their parents who, although they didn't personally agree with our belief, were thankful for the positive influence we were having in their kids' lives.

[2] Yediot Aharonot, April 19, 1996

When the article came out, there was understandable outrage from the participants of the conference. However, we could not have anticipated the outrage against the article expressed by our unbelieving friends who knew the wild description of us in the paper did not match reality.

Do We Sue the Largest Newspaper in Israel?

We had been living in Israel nearly thirty years at that time, and had had numerous articles written about us, as had other Messianic Jews in the land. Though they never advocated for us, most of them were relatively fair and surprisingly, occasionally even sympathetic to our beliefs and our rights to believe the Bible as we understand it. We took the exposure each article offered in stride—like the necessary birth pangs that come with introducing such a new—or reintroducing such an ancient—concept to Israeli culture.

We considered on a personal level that perhaps Rona did indeed experience the magnificent presence of God at the conference. But once the feeling faded, did she either allow her ambition as a rising journalist to push her to write a sensational story or was she perhaps pressured not to write a favorable article by religious influences?

Israel's Attorney General...initiated criminal proceedings against us with possible penalties of prison. We concluded we had to fight back!

“Messianic Jews have Committed Criminal Offenses”

We wrestled with the question of confronting the paper as we felt great consternation over the potential fallout of this vicious and deceitful article. We were concerned this article would reinforce the negative perception that existed in the collective Israeli consciousness—that Messianic Jews are cultish, prey upon children, and are ultimately unscrupulous “charlatan Christians in Jewish clothing.” **In addition, we felt great concern and sorrow for the leaders of the other five congregations who were now also under criminal investigation. After all, we had been the ones who invited them to participate with us in the conference.**

To bolster her article, Rona contacted the General Director of the National Council for the Welfare of Children. She presented him with her story, and included his response in the article. The headline ran: “Yizhack Kadman: This is a criminal offense.”

“The facts are severe, from an educational and lawful point of view,” claimed Kadman. “Anyone who attempts to convert anyone to their religion for the exchange of anything material or other [like candy], is breaking the law, to the best of my knowledge, which penalty is prison. According to the description, we are dealing with people who have committed criminal offenses. The first thing that needs to be done, is to make a complaint to the police, and we will be the first ones to do this...We need to prevent deprived children from falling into the hands of charlatans.”

Kadman proceeded to contact Israel's Attorney General, and initiated criminal proceedings against us with possible penalties of prison. We concluded we had to fight back and procured Attorney Gili Harish, one of the best lawyers in the country.

Our attorney explained to us that reporters can say anything they want about their “impressions” of an event. Here slander is legal; newspapers are quite free to distort and falsify facts, especially concerning believers in Yeshua the Messiah. **But it is illegal for them to falsely accuse us of criminal activities. After prayer and counsel, we decided to sue this media giant—on this point only.**

Under Investigation

Unfortunately, even when you are innocent, nothing happens quickly in the legal world. Six months later, we received a phone call ordering us to appear at the police station for questioning. We produced for them the parents' permission documents, but they began their interrogation by asking us in great detail what we believe, and what the difference is between Messianic Judaism and Christianity. Though the circumstances were uncomfortable, we saw it as an incredible opportunity to have the undivided attention of the police as we preached the Good News for several hours!

We also told them about the lives of Messianic Jews in the land—that they serve in the army, pay their taxes, celebrate the Biblical holidays; in short, the Messianic community is made up of hardworking, law-abiding citizens.



Original photo spread published in the 1996 Maoz Israel Report

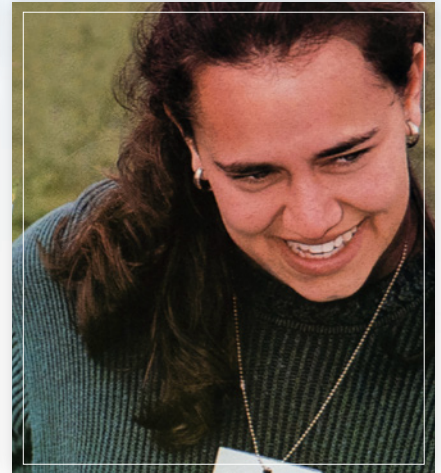
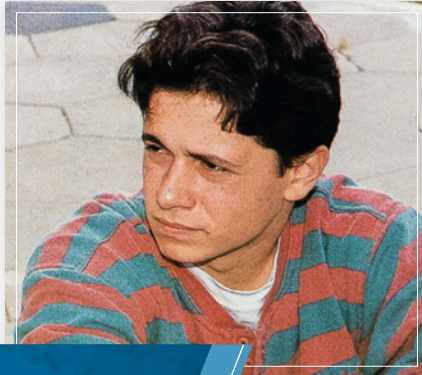
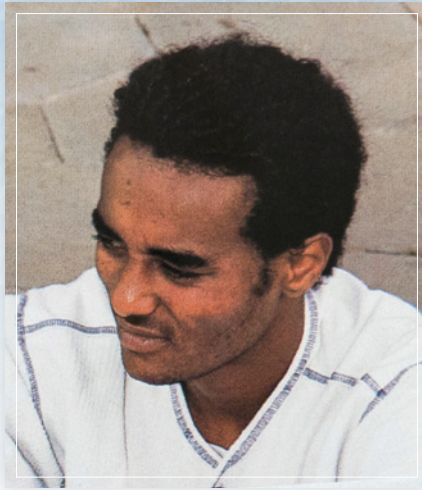
We could feel immense pressure coming from the ultra-Orthodox behind the scenes with their demands to ban all Messianic youth meetings, even with parental permission. The leaders of the other cooperating congregations were all under investigation. When the police reported they had found no violation of the law, the Attorney General demanded they reopen the investigation a second time. Finally, the police closed the case permanently having found no criminal offense.

To us, however, the most unfortunate part of the year-long investigation was the harassment of the unbelieving parents who had given permission for their teens to attend the conference. Parents told us they had received intimidating calls from the journalist and also the police warning them of our “Christian” cult and inquiring if they were aware of the harmful nature of the conference. Police warnings like this would scare any parent.

Our Suit Against Yediot Aharonot

While the criminal investigation took a year, the lawsuit against the paper dragged on for three, with many delaying tactics from the newspaper’s side. They tried in every possible way to get some of the non-Messianic parents to testify against us. No one did.

Finally, our lawyer advised us that if we won the case and received financial damages and apologies, the whole story would again be splashed all over the papers, this time in other newspapers as well. He felt, because of the length of time that had elapsed, most people would have forgotten the contents of the offending article. A court decision would mean all the obscenities and vulgarities concerning our faith in Yeshua would be dredged up again. It would be better to have the newspaper quietly write a personal letter of apology to us, he counseled. We agreed.



Looking back 25 years, one of the most beautiful long-term fruits that came of this conference is Moti Cohen...one of the six unbelievers attending that conference.

Believing youth that attended the conference

Translation of *Yediot Aharonot* attorney's letter read as follows:

In the article published on 19.04.1996 titled "Soul Stalkers" were found several statements that were not accurate regarding the issue of parents' permissions. It was found that permissions were indeed given by the parents for the participation for their children in the conference. This and more: In regard to the writings under the picture of one of the youths that read: "The parents don't know," it was found that the statement was not correct and the parents of the youth in the picture did know. My clients apologize for the errors in the article. With regards, Mibi Mizer, Attorney.

Our lawyer believed that because we took a legal stand against the most powerful paper in the country that they would be more cautious before

publishing fallacious articles about Messianic Jews in the future. For the most part, this was an accurate assessment. And as a final stamp of approval that we had handled the situation wisely, without our requesting such, the judge ruled that the newspaper pay court costs.

Looking back 25 years later, one of the most beautiful long-term fruits that came of this conference is Moti Cohen. He was one of the six unbelievers that attended that conference and gave his life to the Lord there. He would go on to become a youth pastor and eventually an elder at Tiferet Yeshua congregation. Growing up with a rough background has given him a unique heart for hurting people for the past 20+ years and he has shown his faith by his works on the streets of Tel Aviv and with Messianic youth groups throughout Israel. Fruitfulness that remains to this day!

Read his story in this issue. ■

To be continued next month...

February 2022

Blessings from Jerusalem!

“I take seriously preparing boys for their Bar Mitzvah – making sure they understand not just their Torah portion but the foundations of what they believe as they enter manhood. I am especially passionate about pouring into new believers just like Ari poured into me,” Moti concluded after sharing his testimony.

It’s easy to rejoice together when we **“know the rest of the story.”** Especially when the story is like Moti’s where we get to see how God has given him a beautiful family and a purposeful life serving others and impacting lives for the Kingdom.

We don’t always know what part of the life we live before the Lord will have a long term impact on the lives of others. And even when we get to see the fruit, it is mostly encouraging on a personal level.

On the other hand, when the long-term impact is the result of a collective effort from our Maoz team, **local believers and Maoz supporters like you** – a story like Moti’s is a win for all of us together.

Long-lasting fruit is often something we only get to **witness after we’ve been working at something for many years–decades even.** Which is why we love being a part of the story of Maoz that has been **plowing and sowing in this land for more than four decades.**

Maoz continues to be **heavily involved** with supporting Moti’s work at **Tiferet Yeshua congregation** and on the **streets of Tel Aviv.** When you are a part of the Maoz family – **through your engagement, your generosity and your prayer influence,** these Kingdom wins are your wins just as much as they are ours!

How about we go get some more fruit together?

Your fellow harvesters,

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

Kobi and Shani Ferguson





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something to
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