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Lead the *Worship*, Lead the *World*

By **Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson**

For Israelis, having scientists and engineers build amazing new machines and technical processes that improve the lives of people all over the world is a tremendous source of pride. A few short decades ago, a few million people who didn't have a place to call home, are now finding cures and treatments for diseases and helping struggling cultures around the world. There's something in us as a people that finds deep satisfaction in blessing others, even, or perhaps especially, blessing cultures that don't like us at all.



But while Israel's "leadership" in areas of medicine and technology are often recognized on the world stage, her contributions to the music world are often overlooked. In the 1970's Israel twice won first place in what has become the world's largest and longest-running singing competition (though many Americans have never heard of it)—the *Eurovision*. That they won, however, is less the point than the songs that brought them to victory. The 1978 song which Israel sent to represent the nation was called "Abanibi." Originally written

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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Representing
Israel, the
Milk and Honey
band win first
place with the
song *Hallelujah*
in the 1979
Eurovision



with children in mind, the chorus “Abanibi Abohebev Abotobach,” is simply the phrase “Ani Ohev Otach” (I love you) in a silly kids form which adds the “b” sound after each syllable. The next year Israel submitted its second winning song called “Hallelujah,” a song of gratitude for many things in life that concludes with “Hallelujah for all that has happened, and for all that is yet to happen—Hallelujah!”

Over the decades, Israel’s culture seemed to long to be “like all the other nations.” The arts played a role in this process as Israel’s artists produced songs, films, books, and plays that glorified wickedness. As is common with Israel, once they follow in a direction, they eventually lead the way. The next time Israel would win the *Eurovision* was twenty years later when they sent a transsexual singer named Dana International who won with the song “Diva” that celebrated women as sensual goddesses.

The change didn’t happen overnight, but the downturn was steady and consistent, and affected a variety of areas in Israel’s society. Among the standard social problems, Israel distinguished herself in areas such as political corruption, becoming the first democracy to send both a former president and a former prime minister (and other senior government officials) to prison for crimes like bribery and rape. Not to be outdone, Israeli business leaders also made headlines with illegal activities, both inside the country and internationally.

No matter what, Israel was destined to lead. It just wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Back when the Children of Israel began their journey of being transformed from slaves to God’s representatives on earth, they were given instructions on how to live as a light to the nations. But their time in the desert wasn’t just about learning the rules. It was also about being empowered to follow them. That’s where worship came in.

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Dana International
in performance

A People of *the Presence*

When you think of Jews today, you likely envision imagery of shofars, prayer shawls, Hanukkah and matza. But when God called the children of Israel to be a light to the nations, He was not tasking them with opining to the world on the best ways to keep kosher. He was tasking them with being a people where Gentiles could come and experience the most Powerful Force in the universe. He was calling them to be a people who carried with them the Presence of the Living God. And as the Lord is enthroned on the praises of His people—they needed to become a people who knew how to praise and worship.

Worship not only gave God the honor He deserved, it created a space for God to dwell among His people. God's presence by its very nature empowered them to live a life worthy of their calling. This is why the role of the Levites as “worship leaders” was so crucial to Israel's existence as His representatives on the earth.

At various times in Israel's history, the Levites became corrupt, or the role of the Levites was neglected by the other tribes. In either case, things did not go well for Israel during those seasons. Nehemiah famously confronted Israel's leaders for neglecting the care of the Levites and their role before the Lord. His reinstating of the Levites to their posts played a crucial role in Israel being properly restored as the people of the Presence of God in the Land of Promise.

As we know, God does not change, and His ways in the Bible are our guide today. If Israel's ability to fulfill her calling so clearly required the role of the Levites, why would it not then clearly require it now?

Who's your *Tribe?*

For the record, God originally intended for a select group of people to be chosen from each tribe for this role.

The plan changed when those from the tribe of Levi—Moses' tribe—distinguished themselves as the only ones who didn't worship the golden calf as God's presence rested on the mountain nearby.

Today, for Jews, the issue of seeking out our tribal origin is a difficult one. Over the centuries, we've been exiled—then driven—from country to country for thousands of years. We've lived in hiding, changed our names, given our kids up to be temporarily (and sometimes permanently) cared for by Gentiles, and even keeping our identities secret from our children and grandchildren to protect them. By sheer probability there are Jews alive today who will never know they are descendants of the priestly tribe.

On the other hand, I've heard stories of people who immigrated to new lands and when asked what their name was, and decided Cohen made a great-sounding last name. Ultimately, perhaps King David serves as our model worshipper as he had more influence on worship as we know it than anyone else in the Scripture—and he, like Yeshua, was from the tribe of Judah.



Worship leader Yazeed Sakhini sings the sermon on the mount from Matthew 5 in Arabic in front of an audience of Muslim and Christian Arabs in Nazareth.



Young worshippers in training as part of the Maoz Israel Music program

Levites Today

It was this revelation that inspired us to launch **Maoz Israel Music** and use it as a platform to assist artists and musicians who love Yeshua in fulfilling their calling to lead this nation in the worship of the living God. By reintroducing this vital piece of God's prophetic puzzle, we are doing our part in God's work of restoring the nation of Israel and preparing the world for the return of Yeshua to this earth.

What do modern-day Levites look like? First of all, outwardly, they look like regular everyday people. Our team is very diverse in their backgrounds and skills, but what we all have in common as Israeli citizens is our love for our people and our desire to use our gifts to make the God of Israel known among the nations.

Making Yeshua Famous

"All this music you put out... Are you trying to make worship artists famous?" The question was asked of Kobi as he was sharing the vision of **Maoz Israel Music** and modern-day Levites. "I'm trying to get Israeli worship in front of people in Israel and all over the world." Kobi responded. "I want to make Yeshua famous. And worship artists who are famous have a platform to make Yeshua famous."

What Christians abroad don't always realize when they see our beautiful studio and the efforts we make to get Israeli worship out in the market is that there is little glory in being known as a follower of Yeshua in Israel. It's not a fun kind of famous. It makes one (and one's family) a target for harassment and persecution. The artists and worship leaders who put themselves out there as Jews who represent the Lord are doing so in a hostile environment. But it is what they have been called to do. They understand the impact their worship is destined to have on their people—and the nations. After all, he who leads the worship, leads the world. And so they pour their hearts into their calling, just like their ancestors, just like the warriors of old, just like the carriers of the presence of God they were born to be.

Kobi going over
song list for Arabic
worship project

Andrew

ENGINEER/MUSICIAN

Andrew, our studio engineer, grew up in California and had a dream of living and working in Japan. But he had friends in the Messianic Jewish community in California and was curious about Israel as well. So he decided to take a tour of the Holy Land to see some of the sights he'd read about in his Bible.

One of his friends had a contact with a local Israeli ministry and while he was in the country, he decided to look them up. It was during a visit to their office that he met a young Israeli woman named Shani (not Ferguson) who was working there. The rest, as the poets say, is history.

"We quickly realized that my meeting her was what God had in mind from the beginning regarding my visit to Israel," he recalls.

In order to stay in touch with his new friend, Andrew volunteered with an Israeli ministry and stayed with them for many years, eventually marrying Shani and buying a house with her in a village near Jerusalem. Although he had long given up on the idea of living in

Japan, Andrew had a passion for music and decided to study sound engineering in Tel Aviv. Ironically, it was Maoz' *I Stand with Israel* fund that put him through school not knowing they would be the ones who would ultimately enjoy the skills he would acquire.

"I started working for Maoz full-time towards the end of 2018 and a year later COVID began to be an issue," he said. "But even when lockdowns started we were able to continue working because the music was considered an essential service by the government. I love music but growing up in California, I never dreamed I'd be able to work in this field in Israel. It's such a blessing to be able to do what I love, working for the Lord as part of a great team like the one we have here at Maoz."

"I love music but growing up in California, I never dreamed I'd be able to work in this field in Israel."

—ANDREW

Stefan

MUSIC COMPOSER

Stefan is one of our musical composers. He was born in Romania and came to Israel with his parents when he was four years old. As a young man, he moved to Jerusalem and began to attend a congregation that soon hired him to work as a janitor. But we sometimes saw him taking breaks from pushing his broom to write on small sheets of paper, and when we asked him what he was writing he said the songs that God had put on his heart.



Left to right:
Andrew, Roman,
Stefan and Shani in
studio control room

We promised him that one day, when we had the opportunity, we would hire him to write those songs. In 2016, when we finally opened the studio we had dreamed about and prayed for, he was the first person we called on.

"At times I write my own songs and compose drafts which are later taken to the main production area and developed until they're ready to be released," he said. "At other times I do the same with the songs of others who'd like to develop a song from just a melody. Some of the worship songs sung today in congregations across Israel were birthed in this manner."

Examples of songs that Stefan has worked on that many people in Israel would recognize are

Ein Elohim Acher (No Other God), *Lo Amaher* (I Won't Hurry), *Kes Ha'Rachamim* (Throne Of Mercy) and *Sha'areh Ha'Shamaim* (Gates Of Mercy).

"I want to continue working and developing in the crafting of music," he said. "My hopes are to see more and more creativity released as we produce this music to give glory and honor to Yeshua and to be a blessing to the world around us."

"I would like to encourage people to not give up on the gift that God has given them no matter its size, big or small. God can make a way for their gift just as He did for me."

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—STEFAN



Birgitta

SINGER/SONGWRITER

Birgitta grew up in Estonia before moving to Israel with her family when she was 12. When she was 17, she began having occasional contact with Maoz because she had competed in Israel's version of "American Idol" and eventually became involved in worship music in her own congregation.

"I met my husband at Bible school in Estonia when he was one of my students taking a Hebrew language course I was teaching," she said. "He was Jewish by birth but didn't know much about the culture and wanted to know more. But it turned out that he was more interested in the teacher. I wasn't interested in him at first, but he won me over and we're now raising our children here in Jerusalem."

Over the course of time, Birgitta came to work at Maoz full-time as the assistant in charge of organizing schedules for the staff and the distribution of the music that is produced at the studio.

"I am here today because a lot of people who inspire me are here," she said. "The human value of this place takes it to another level. The people who have gathered around this idea, this vision, carry something that's very different, unique and very important."

"This place is special because of the understanding people have about sharing the gifts that God has put in you and not holding it to yourself or your own career. It's almost like a kibbutz mentality of sharing and building each other up, to help each other and create something together. I've always longed to be part of something bigger, and in a very natural way that has occurred here."

"I've always longed to be part of something bigger, and in a very natural way that has occurred here."

—BIRGITTA



Birgitta and the Maoz Media team (Ruben, Tim, Alisa, Dana) at the end of a long day of filming the music video for her new song "All of Creation"

Gabriel

PRODUCER/MUSICIAN

Gabriel was born in France and immigrated to Israel with his family when he was six. He started playing the drums at that time and grew up in the musical community in Israel. He began working with Maoz while serving in the Israel Defense Forces and when he was offered a full-time position to run the operations of the Maoz recording studio in Jerusalem, he gladly accepted.

"When they shared their plan for *Maoz Israel Music* and the vision to see the restoration of modern-day Levites, I knew this was the place for me," he said. "I was beginning a life dedicated to serving in worship just like the Levites did in Bible times in this very city! Today, I not only manage the studio, but mentor and produce music for

young up-and-coming musicians and worship leaders across the country. There's just nothing like this anywhere else in the country and I'm beyond honored to be part of it."

"When I started it was just me and Stefan but now the team is up to 13 people and I'm hoping for many more musicians to join in our efforts. God will bring the people He wants to be here; we're not in control of that. I would say that He is running the show. New people come sometimes in very unexplained ways; they just show up and start talking to us and soon the relationship blossoms and it's obvious that they were meant to be here."

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—GABRIEL



Happy New Year from Jerusalem!

January 2023

Did you ever wonder what came first, **light or sound?**

We know that God began the physical universe by creating light – but **He created it with the sound of His voice.** This means His voice was the first substance to cross over from the **Spirit realm** into the **physical world.**

Perhaps this is why light can open our eyes to understand our physical surroundings while sounds like music can **open our soul to experience His presence** from the spirit realm.

In a way, light and sound are the same substance. **Both are waves, simply vibrating at different frequencies** and so we experience one set of waves with our eyes and the other with our ears. But **both** are an **expression of the goodness of who He is.**

And so when God called **Israel to be a light,** it should not surprise us that being a light involves the creation of beautiful sounds of music of worship.

Songs that were written in Israel thousands of years ago, and recorded in the Bible, **still impact worship worldwide today. Has it not changed you? Brought you closer to the only One who is worthy of worship?**

Those songs recorded in the Bible were not written and arranged haphazardly. They came out of a **dedicated community of Psalmists who trained from a young age to serve before the Lord.** Singers, musicians, and songwriters with a calling to open the space between heaven and earth with the sounds of worship.

At Maoz, we understand the need to help the poor, grow congregations and build strong families and communities – which is why we pour our hearts and time into doing all these things.

But our passion to care for our brethren and build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth does not overshadow our **ultimate calling to worship.**

We know that God deserves the worship of all of creation. We also understand our enemy's first transgression was to try and steal it for himself. **He has not turned aside from this goal. That is why we are at war for the heart of worship.**

I once heard of a man who had a dream in which he saw thousands of young people with hands raised, dancing wildly in a club scene. In the dream a voice explained to the man, **"The believer's worship is not just for intimacy with God, it is warfare against the powers of darkness. What you are seeing here is the other side of the battlefield."**

For the past several years we have worked intensively – even during the lockdown months – to produce worship music worthy of our King. The majority of our efforts have gone to recording **original Hebrew and Arabic music** – though we've managed to pull off a few songs in English and French.

The vision of Maoz Israel Music to raise up modern-day Levites begins with talented, committed children all the way up to seasoned musicians, singers and songwriters

But creating great music that no one ever hears about is not a good plan. And so, we spoke with **Integrity Music** about distributing our music. *"We've enjoyed the peaks of what the world would consider successful careers. Our hearts now are searching for where God is doing new and unique things around the world that we can get involved with – and what you are doing is exactly what we're looking for."*

We were supposed to release the new music within months, but **unfortunately between the complexity of registering songwriters who are Israeli citizens into a U.S. system and other pandemic delays, the process ended up taking two years.** All the while the new music we were producing kept piling up on the shelf.

The **good news** is, we've completed the process and **starting this January** we will begin releasing those songs online through **Integrity Music**, our new distributors.

You can help Israel be a **light to the nations in worship** and send songs forth from Zion by sponsoring a child's early music training, supporting **Maoz Israel Music** production in Jerusalem, or simply enjoying and sharing the music online!

However you get involved, **we hope the sounds coming from the City of Worship will empower you to be who He called you to be.**

For His Glory,

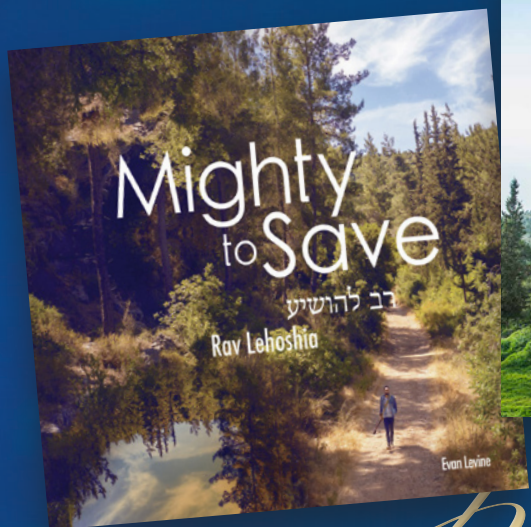
Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi and Shani Ferguson



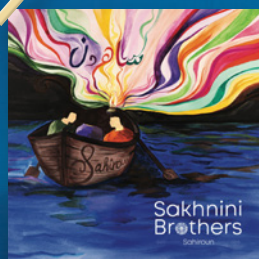
Kids like Stephanie have come a long way in the Maoz Israel Music program - from early shy days to award winning.





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Worship



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