

SINCE 1976



"Brit Olam"
(the Hebrew
version of *The
Narrated Bible*)
on display at
the Israel Bible
Society shop in
Jerusalem

JANUARY 2022

TEVET-SH'VAT 5782

Why Israelis Don't Read their Bible

(and what we did about it)

By Shira Sorko-Ram

Several years ago, one of our neighbors who had served in a number of positions in the Foreign Ministry (most recently as Israel's ambassador to a South American country), passed away. We went to visit his wife, as they had been our cordial friends for many years. She was a highly educated woman of Mizrahi [Middle East] heritage, who spent her days teaching Jewish children and adults the Bible

and Hebrew literature in the nations where her husband served. We talked about her new loneliness and comforted her as she wept. Then, as usual, she began to ask us about our faith. We explained to her, as we had several times, why we believe that true Judaism, as the Old Testament prophesies, must have a Messiah who sacrifices his life to atone for the sins of our people.

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Suddenly she interrupted us, and said, “I want to tell you something. When I was in South America, someone asked me if I had ever read the New Testament. I told them, ‘No, I have not, but I am willing to read it. Just give me a copy.’ I then took it home and began to read it.”

“Never have I been so disappointed in what I read!” she exclaimed. “First of all,” she continued, “the New Testament is written in very inferior Hebrew. Perhaps the purpose of Yeshua’s disciples was to write to the common people,” she explained, “but in doing so, they completely ruined the beautiful Hebrew language—the language of the prophets!”

“Secondly,” she exclaimed, “the writers of the New Testament, when quoting the Jewish Scriptures, actually misquoted them! As I was reading the New Testament, and I would come to quotations of Moses or the prophets, I would look it up in the Tanach (Old Testament), and there would be that exquisitely beautiful Hebrew. Then I would look at how Yeshua’s disciples quoted them, and I saw they really spoiled the Hebrew

language!

This alone made it obvious to me,” she concluded,

“that Yeshua was not a legitimate representative of God or the prophets.”

She then went on to describe the beauty of the written word of the prophets, her love for her rich heritage and the strength that she draws from its pages. She added that if we ever wanted her to teach Tanach subjects in our classes for Messianic Jews, she would be delighted to do it!

“I took the New Testament home to read,” she said.

“Never have I been so disappointed! Yeshua’s disciples misquoted the Old Testament and ruined the beautiful Hebrew language of the prophets!”

The Language Barrier

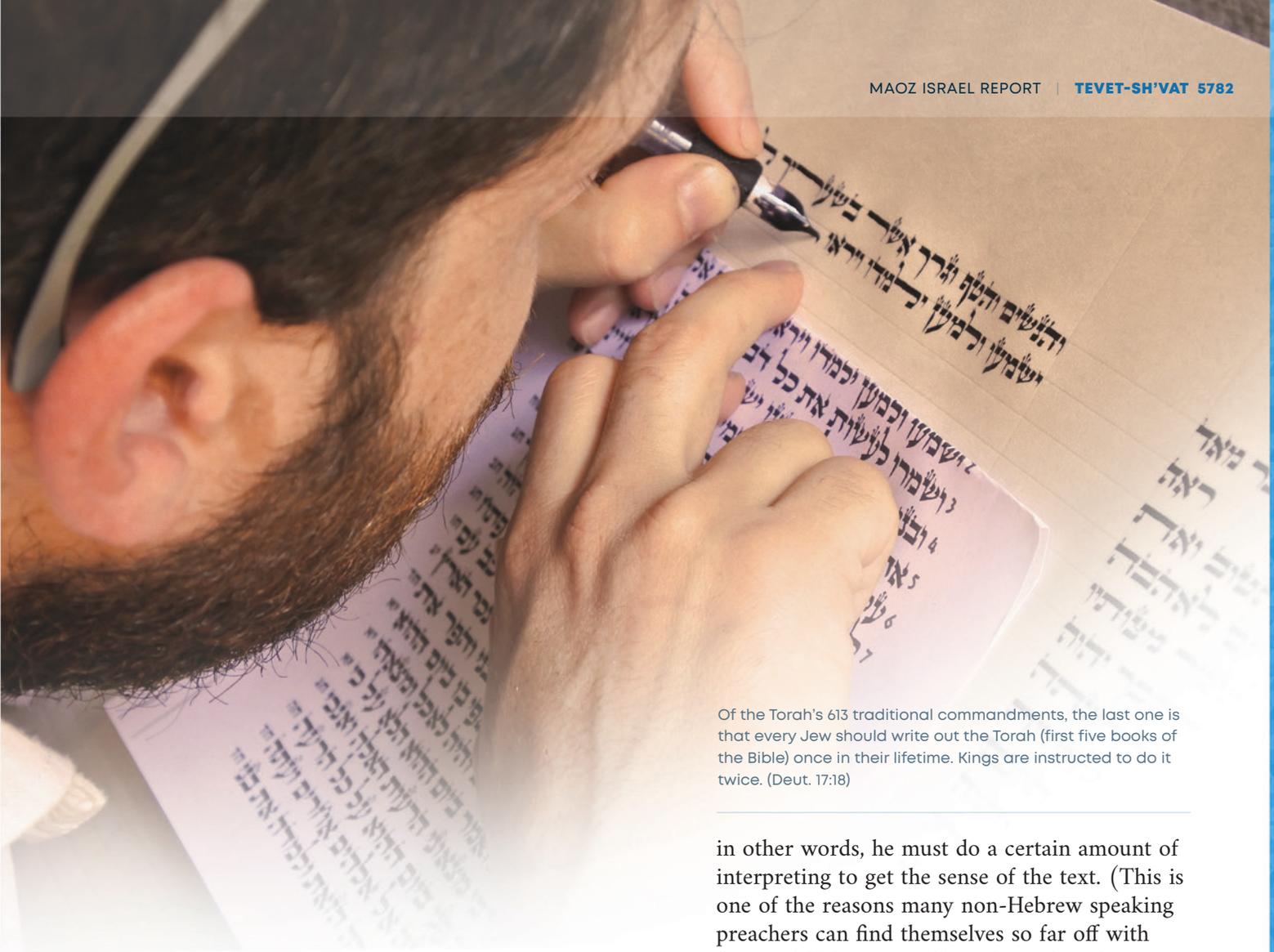
Believe it or not, one of the most significant stumbling blocks to Israelis receiving salvation is rooted in the language of the Old Testament itself. Israelis today speak and read modern Hebrew. The Torah, the Prophets and the historical Books of the Bible are all written in ancient Hebrew. The beauty of the language cannot be described. The rabbis have a saying that when a person reads the Bible in any other language besides Hebrew, he is like a groom who kisses his bride through a veil.

This comparison of the Old and New Testaments as literature were not new to us. We had heard these comments many times. They come from a certain sector of Israeli society—those who are middle aged or older, well-educated, and steeped in Jewish tradition (which is different than Orthodox religion). They would consider themselves traditional Jews.

The New Testament Quotes from a Greek Translation

As educated as our friend was, she was surprised when we explained that the oldest known New Testament manuscripts were written in Greek. And that the Hebrew New Testament she was reading was actually a 20th century translation. We explained that some scholars do feel that parts of the New Testament may have been originally written in Hebrew, but until now, no such Hebrew originals have been found.

And while some Jews may look at the Greek-written New Testament as proof of its foreign nature, the Old Testament itself was also widely read in Greek several centuries before Yeshua was born. This translation, called the Septuagint, was translated for Greek-speaking Jews by some 70 revered rabbis and scribes living in Alexandria, Egypt, and was used by Jews and new Christians throughout the world during the Second Temple Period. It is from the Septuagint that the New Testament writers



Of the Torah's 613 traditional commandments, the last one is that every Jew should write out the Torah (first five books of the Bible) once in their lifetime. Kings are instructed to do it twice. (Deut. 17:18)

quote Old Testament Scriptures and why the wording is different from the original ancient Hebrew.

Interestingly, because all other languages are translations, when a person reads the Old or New Testament in another language, say English or Spanish or German, there is no perceptible difference in the quality of the literature of either.

Beautiful but Complicated

If the hurdle for older Israelis is the “plainness” of the New Testament writing style, the roadblock for the younger generation is the complexity of the Old Testament!

The issue is that the Old Testament was written between 2500 and 3500 years ago. Even though Israeli children learn to read portions of the Bible in school, by the nature of Hebrew, a single word often has multiple meanings. One can only know the meaning by context. Therefore, the reader must choose a meaning;

in other words, he must do a certain amount of interpreting to get the sense of the text. (This is one of the reasons many non-Hebrew speaking preachers can find themselves so far off with “original Hebrew word” teachings based on an afternoon or two of studying commentaries.) I realized just how difficult the ancient language of the Old Testament really was for most people when many years ago, I spent time with a professor of Bible from the University of Tel Aviv. He used to come over frequently to discuss the Bible—Old Testament and New Testament portions—and often after reading the Hebrew he would then ask to see my English Bible to verify the meaning!

Witnessing Takes Time

The ancient Hebrew dynamic greatly affects the process of witnessing in Hebrew. When speaking to an Israeli about the prophecies and the promises of God, you cannot easily “pop off” verses to corroborate your message. To grasp what you are trying to explain, the average person will have to slowly read the text, mull over the meaning, and at times deal with the possible vagueness of several optional interpretations. For this reason, it often



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Though Israel has strayed time and again from the ways of God, they have managed to pass on a deep love and appreciation for the Words entrusted to them by the Creator of the Universe.

Although I have read the Bible through each year for many years, I was struck by how much better I understood both the smaller details and the bigger picture with this new arrangement.

takes time for a sincere seeker to get enough information from the Old Testament to enable him to see that Moses and the prophets really do point to Yeshua as the Lamb of God, the Son of God, and our Messiah.

A Bible, A Bridge

For decades Ari and I, our congregation and Maoz prayer warriors—have prayed into this dilemma. The ancient people of God should be able to read with understanding all of His written Word.

God has known about these difficulties since the beginning of time—which means there was a solution to this obstacle. We just had to seek it out and pray it through.

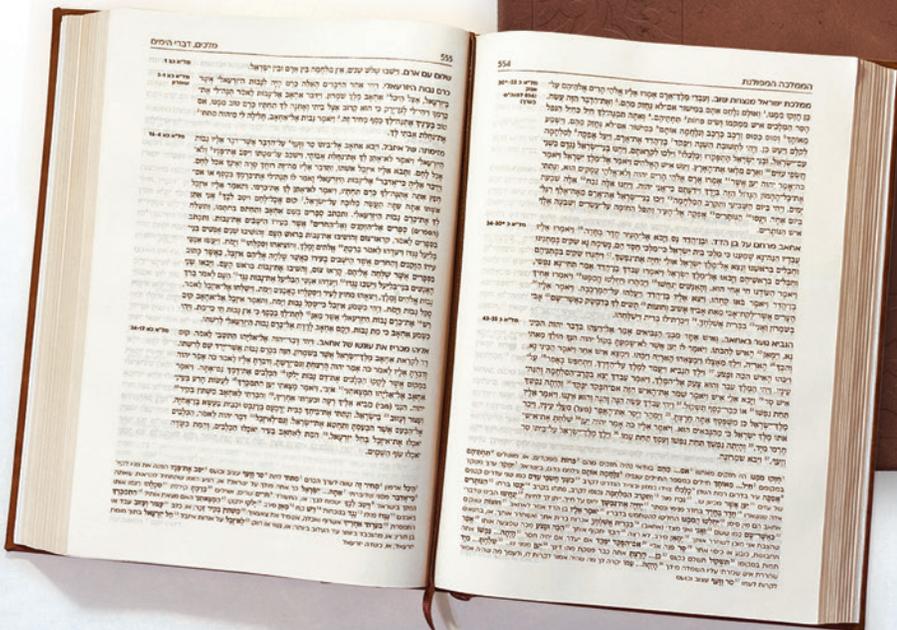
About five years ago I stumbled across *The Narrated Bible in Chronological Order* by F. LaGard Smith. The designer of the book had taken the Scriptures and rearranged them into story form chronologically, giving context to Moses, the prophets and psalms by inserting them into the Bible's story line as they took place.

Although I have read the Bible through each year for many years, I was struck by how much better I understood both the smaller details and the bigger picture with this new arrangement.

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of impact this Bible would have on Israeli readers. Ari and I approached Victor Kalisher of the Bible Society in Israel and together we agreed to take on the monumental project of creating a Hebrew version of this Bible. The original Hebrew scriptures unchanged. And to resolve the language barrier, we added a dictionary at the bottom of each page that would give clarification of the more difficult words.

We knew this book would address the very roadblocks we had been praying through for years! Israelis who want to read and understand the entire Bible for themselves now have the tools to do it. After three and a half years of collaboration with Israel's Bible Society and over \$500,000 raised from Maoz partners, this Bible was introduced in an online event to over 50 Messianic leaders from across the country. Many more leaders who couldn't make the event approached us later, excited

about what this Bible has to offer our people. **When they tell us, "We want to get one for every elder and deacon in our congregation—and for new believers in our Bible studies," it's clear, they, too, understand this Bible can bridge the gap between modern Israel and their ancient Scriptures!** Finally, we can begin a clearer conversation with the people of the Book! ■



After 3.5 years of work, Brit Olam (lit. Eternal Covenant), the Hebrew version of *The Narrated Bible in Chronological Order* is out!

HOW IT ALL BEGAN - PART 11

A Spark in the

Thousands of Israeli mourners hold vigils in the plaza where Rabin was assassinated.

Singer Miri Aloni stands between Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres as they all sang the "Song of Peace" — minutes before the shots would be fired.



By Shira Sorko-Ram

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the man of peace, spoke at the largest peace rally of his life. It was held in downtown Tel Aviv at the Plaza of the Kings of Israel on Saturday night, November 4, 1995. Over 100,000 admirers had come to celebrate the arrival of peace to the Jewish state, under siege from constant terrorism. One of Israel's controversial folk songs of the 1960's, "The Song of Peace" was featured in the program (it's lyrics challenged the glorification of religious efforts and victory by war). Rabin was not a singer—especially in public. This night, however, he joined along with one of Israel's pop artists, and sang with the crowd:

*Let the sun rise and shine to the morning,
The purity of prayer will not bring us back.
He whose candle's been blown out and is buried in the dust,
A bitter cry won't wake him up, won't bring him back...
The joys of victory and songs of praise won't help us.
Don't say, "The day will come."
Bring the day, because it is not a dream.
And in all the plazas, shout only peace.
Don't whisper a prayer,
It's better if you sing with a great shout a song of peace.*

Afterwards, Rabin folded the words of the song and put it in his left shirt pocket. He thanked the mayor of Tel Aviv for arranging the peace demonstration and told him this had been one of the happiest nights of his life. A few minutes later, that paper would be pierced by a bullet hole and saturated with blood.

On Sunday morning, November 6, when the gates were closed to prepare for the funeral, tens of thousands would be left waiting in line to bid farewell to the slain prime minister. During the 20 hours that Rabin's body had lain in state in the Knesset, more than one million Israelis visited the Knesset. Over the next seven days, another million would visit the grave—nearly half of the entire population of Israel at the time.¹

Dark

Dignitaries from 86 nations arrived to honor a man esteemed by the rulers of the world as a great statesman. The images were surrealistic—King Hussein of Jordan and his queen weeping; the incredible pathos in President Clinton's parting words of "Shalom, Haver" meaning "goodbye, friend." The gesture did not go unnoticed by Israelis and even years later, cars could be seen driving through Israeli streets with "Shalom Haver" bumper stickers.

Heaven and Curses

It struck us as very strange that even though Yitzhak Rabin was not known to believe that there is a God, his widow, his granddaughter, and many public figures addressed Rabin as being in Heaven. It was as if this nation, of which a majority were professed atheists or agnostics, could not bring themselves in this moment of death to believe that's all there is.

But many ultra-Orthodox had a different sentiment; many of them saw Rabin as a threat to the destiny of Israel because of his determination to give away land to grant a Palestinian state. The assassin was an Orthodox student from an Orthodox university with two other Orthodox accomplices.

A further representation of hatred was the casting of an ancient Orthodox curse made public two weeks before the death of Rabin. We quote:

"Yitzhak Rabin does not have long to live. The angels have their orders. Suffering and death await the prime minister,' or so say the kabbalists who have cursed him with the *pulse denura*—Aramaic for 'lashes of fire'—for his 'heretical' policies. 'He's inciting against Judaism,' says the Jerusalem rabbi who, clad in tefillin,² read out the most terrifying of curses in the tradition of Jewish mysticism—opposite Rabin's residence on the eve of Yom Kippur."

"And on him, Yitzhak son of Rosa, known as Rabin," the Aramaic text stated, 'we have permission ... to demand from the angels of destruction that they take a sword to this wicked man ... to kill him ... for handing over the Land of Israel to our enemies, the sons of Ishmael.'"

"The rabbi, who wouldn't have his name published but identified himself as a member of the far-right Kach movement, said the curse generally works within 30 days. This curse was made on October 3. Rabin was killed 32 days later."³

For most Israelis, however, the murder was unthinkable. We Jews may fight and bicker amongst ourselves, but with so many enemies worldwide, we would never turn on our own. On the seventh day of mourning, Acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres stated, "I have never seen such mourning among our people, as I see now."

Renewal Conference in Jerusalem

John and Carol Arnott from the Airport Vineyard Congregation in Toronto, landed in Tel Aviv just hours after Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated. The Arnotts, who have a deep love for Israel, had been invited by us and eight Israeli pastors and leaders to minister at a three-day conference in Jerusalem, November 6-8. Instead, they arrived to a nation in catastrophe.

The question was, should the conference be held at all? Much prayer and fasting in Israel, and around the world, had gone up for this conference. Hadn't God known all these events from the beginning? How could we do anything except press on? What hope is there for Israel, except for God to pour out His Spirit?

[1] Israel's 1995 population, 5.3 million

[2] phylacteries

[3] Jerusalem Report, October 16, 1995

The first service for pastors and leaders was scheduled for 1:00 p.m. Monday—the exact hour the body of Yitzhak Rabin was being taken to its final resting place. The hundred or so Messianic leaders who had managed to detour around the many closed roads of Jerusalem, came together, and we sat and watched the funeral on a television set the hotel provided. After listening to a number of the speeches by world leaders, we turned the sound off the TV, leaving only the faces of the mourners as they wept.

With heavy hearts we began to intercede for our nation with tears and petitions to God for mercy upon our government and our people. We prayed for revival and salvation to come to Israel—that they would receive hearts of flesh, and release from their spiritual prisons. We worshiped God in singing without musical instruments, as is the Jewish custom in times of mourning. As the casket was lowered into the grave, we again turned the TV sound up and witnessed the burial. And we said goodbye to Yitzhak Rabin, the leader of our nation.



Ari and Shira's son Ayal Sorko-Ram and Chip Kendall (who now works with Maoz in the UK!) were among those on the worship team in this first national youth conference.

HaSharon Congregation Continues to Grow

We returned to our congregation with new fervor to reach our nation. And God was faithfully bringing His lost sheep to us.

Miriam, a young computer analyst, began visiting our services via her sister's encouragement. She shared with us how she had searched far and wide for God: "I sought Him in all kinds of Orthodox groups. I took in Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism); I attended services of Chabad and of the Breslev ultra-Orthodox sect for two years. But what they were teaching didn't seem realistic. Mostly because I saw they talked one way and lived another. I was looking for something deeper."

"My sister had gone to the U.S. and had had a life-changing experience. When she came back, she took me to the home of Yacov Damkani, an Israeli evangelist, who explained to me the way of salvation. When my sister told me about HaSharon Congregation, I decided to attend."

"After a number of months, I seriously considered that I was hearing the truth. One day during that time period I was standing in front of the bank downtown [Tel Aviv], withdrawing money out of the automatic bank window, when I saw a friend.

Suddenly I said, Oh, I've got to run," and I started walking very fast for no reason. Minutes later a huge explosion thundered behind me. The force of the blast hit my back and I started running, too afraid to look back.

Over 600 attended the conference each of the two nights when the services were open to the public. Somehow the news had gotten out. A good number came forward to accept Yeshua as their Messiah, and many received deep healing in their lives. The services lasted until midnight as people waited on God. Only because the hotel turned off the lights did the people go home.

We started to talk. And then I found myself saying, “Oh, I’ve got to run,” and I started walking very fast though I wasn’t really going anywhere in a hurry. Two minutes later I arrived at the corner of Chernokovsky Street when a huge explosion thundered behind me. The force of the blast hit my back and I started running, too afraid to look back. I think 12 people were killed and 100 wounded in that terrorist attack. Nothing was left of the automatic bank window. I knew then that God was taking care of me. I knew deep in my heart that Yeshua was my Messiah.”

Miriam came to our Saturday morning service after the explosion and gave thanks to Yeshua for saving her life and publicly accepted His free gift of salvation that day.

A Flock without its Shepherd

About a year before, Ari and I had met Ed and Cathi Basler from Chicago, IL. Their youth ministry had begun by chance when their teenage kids began bringing their friends over. Their home became a sort of refuge for hurting kids and a youth outreach developed from there. By chance—or destiny—they had brought some of their youth group to Israel and were in the country when Rabin was shot.

Of all the demographics in Israel, surprisingly it was the youth who seemed to take Rabin’s assassination the hardest. Cathi and I walked through the plaza among thousands of youth where the assassination had taken place, stunned at what we saw. Night after night, in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the people of Israel came from every corner of the land spending the nights at the grave and at the plaza where he was killed; crying, singing mournful folk songs of life and death, lighting thousands upon thousands of candles, and just sitting Shiva.⁴

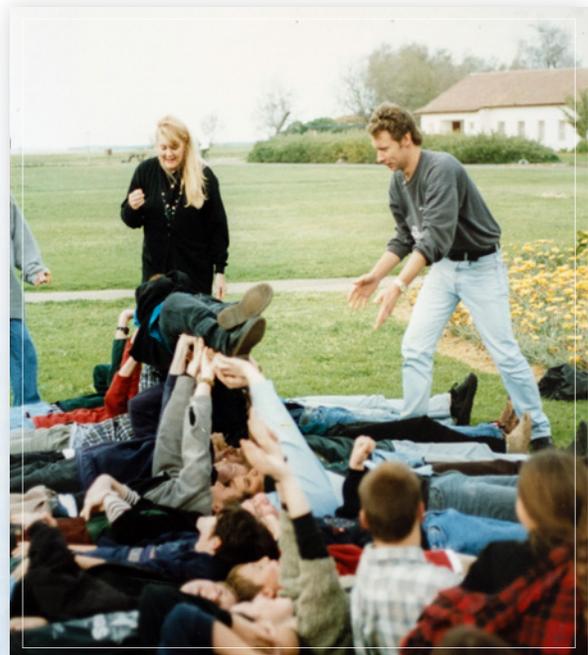
No Israeli prime minister had ever been assassinated before. *The Jerusalem Post* observed, “[The assassination] has turned their [the teens’] world upside down, destroyed, in one violent explosion of hatred; the foundations of their sense of security—someone they thought would always be there to protect them—was torn away without warning.” The countless letters and poems were wrenchingly personal, as if written to a beloved grandfather rather than a political leader.⁵

The messages were plaintive: “How could you leave us?” “I thought you’d always be here,” “Who will watch over us now?” Children sat on the floors of their schools, staring at their lit candles. It was bewildering since in life, we had not sensed that Yitzhak Rabin was seen as a father by the youth of the nation. Somehow his death had ripped open the deep emptiness of a lost nation and the children were giving expression to it.

We Have to Reach Our Youth

We ourselves were overcome with grief for these lost kids. “We have to reach these youth,” we kept saying over and over as we walked between the clusters of memorial candles and groups of teenagers with guitars. The burden was doubly heavy as Ari and I were also grappling with the struggles of our own two kids who were teenagers trying to stand against the wave of atheistic and hedonistic culture in Israel.

Especially in those early days of the Messianic movement, children of believing families in Israel often found it a continuous struggle to serve God. Their feelings of isolation as a tiny minority tended to make them fearful and even ashamed to speak of their faith. Addressing the issue of isolation was a great place to start. So, we put all our strength, faith



Afternoon conference activity building trust and demonstrating the strength that comes with unity.

[4] Seven days of mourning

[5] November 10, 1995



and passion into preparing for our first national Messianic conference for youth!

It took a few months for Maoz partners and members of our congregation to raise the funds for the event...including providing transportation and covering costs for children who could not pay to attend.

A total of 130 teens gathered in a kibbutz in northern Israel for three days and two nights during the Passover school break. A couple dozen leaders from six local congregations and several youth groups served as a committee overseeing the conference. We would all sit under the intense, dynamic, and anointed ministry of Youth Pastor Scott Wilson whom we had invited from Dallas, Texas.

For the teenagers, it was a fantastic time to meet other believing kids their own age—as most of these youths were the only Messianic believer in their schools. To be with 130 kids who also follow Yeshua, was really a spiritual banquet for them all and many testified the conference helped them understand that God had not forgotten them.

The experience set the kids on fire! We all knew we were granted a glimpse of what God was ready to do with our youth. We received phone calls from around the country from pastors and parents who told us that their children had been radically changed. All the congregational leaders who had been involved were in agreement—we were elated! But what next? The seeds sown were fresh. They needed to be cultivated. The immediate answer was already at the door as Ed and Cathi's youth ministry called "Souled Out" were already making

arrangements to come back during the summer break to spend time with the believing Israeli youth! It would be the beginning of a movement.

We said 130 Messianic teens attended the conference. But in truth there were only 124, because six of them were still unbelieving teens who had been attending our congregation including our weekly youth Bible studies. These were literally kids off the street. They wanted to attend this conference because we told them they would meet many believing youth their own age. One of those six teenagers would become a national Messianic youth leader, and continues to serve today as an elder in Tiferet Yeshua, the congregation we founded.

During the youth conference, we met a Tel Aviv journalist who heard from her brother living on the kibbutz that an interesting group called Messianics were holding a conference there. She asked to sit in on some of the meetings, and told us she was overwhelmed with the stories these youth were telling her. She was deeply impressed to see these Israeli young people joyfully and deeply living their faith in God through Yeshua. In short, God's anointing and favor was strongly present in this wonderful youth conference. It was a tiny spark of hope during a dark season of brokenness in Israel's young generation.

But by reaching the next generation, we had touched an area that caused great fear to the ruler of this earth. And we had no idea of the backlash we were about to face. ■

To be continued next month...

January 2022

HAPPY NEW YEAR from Jerusalem!

It's January already and we begin this new year with **so many questions!**

Will Israel's borders reopen to allow the Maoz Israel Independence Tour? Will we be able to bring a group of a dozen Israeli musicians and worship leaders to the US for the summer? How many Israelis will experience God for the first time this year? What new breakthroughs can we facilitate in the lives of believing families? How many new songs of worship will we send forth from Zion this year? When will we complete the children's *Action Bible* in Hebrew? (hint: by spring!)

If you've kept up, for the past year we've been telling parts of the incredible story of hardships and breakthroughs my parents experienced in their pioneer efforts in Israel. **They didn't get through it on their own. Thousands of Christians and Messianic Jews around the world held their hands along the way for YEARS. They prayed, they gave, they encouraged – and the Kingdom of God is **stronger in Israel because of them.****

As Maoz enters its **46th year of existence**, we continue the vision not just to see all Israel barely make it into the Kingdom of Heaven, but for the **Body of believers in Israel to thrive and become the light to the nations** they were always called to be. Will you **walk with us** and **watch God's plan bloom before your eyes?**

Will you commit to a monthly gift for this calendar year? **\$25? \$50? \$100?** Invested into efforts with eternal value? Then this time next year you will be able to look at our year end summary and know **you were a part of making that happen.**

Thank you for believing in us! Thank you for believing in God's ability to save this nation.

Blessings and shalom,

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

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

P.S. We still have a few calendars available for the year 2021-2022 for a gift of \$35 or more!



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