



Benjamin Netanyahu



Yair Lapid



Naftali Bennett



Gideon Sa'ar



SINCE 1976

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# Four Elections in Two Years: **WHY?**

By Shira Sorko-Ram

One of four men will win the race to be Israel's next prime minister. By default, the office of prime minister is won by the leader of the party who can put together a majority coalition of at least 61 seats in Israel's Knesset (parliament). Usually, it is the leader of the largest party who wins. Nevertheless, with so many smaller parties in the race, the reins have occasionally been handed to the leader of a lesser party with more allies. March 23 is the big day.

Interestingly enough, the majority of Israel's citizens vote conservative. Though Israelis are incredibly liberal on social issues, the need for

security, due to being surrounded by Jewish-hating nations, takes priority in people's minds over internal issues.

In many ways, for the past 13 years Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party have served our nation well. He has been a ferocious "mother bear" in protecting us. With enemies on every side, Netanyahu built and led a formidable military. He also stood up to President Barack Obama even as the latter signed a treaty with Iran, allowing it to go nuclear by 2030. (Iran is already busy producing uranium according to IAEA inspectors.)

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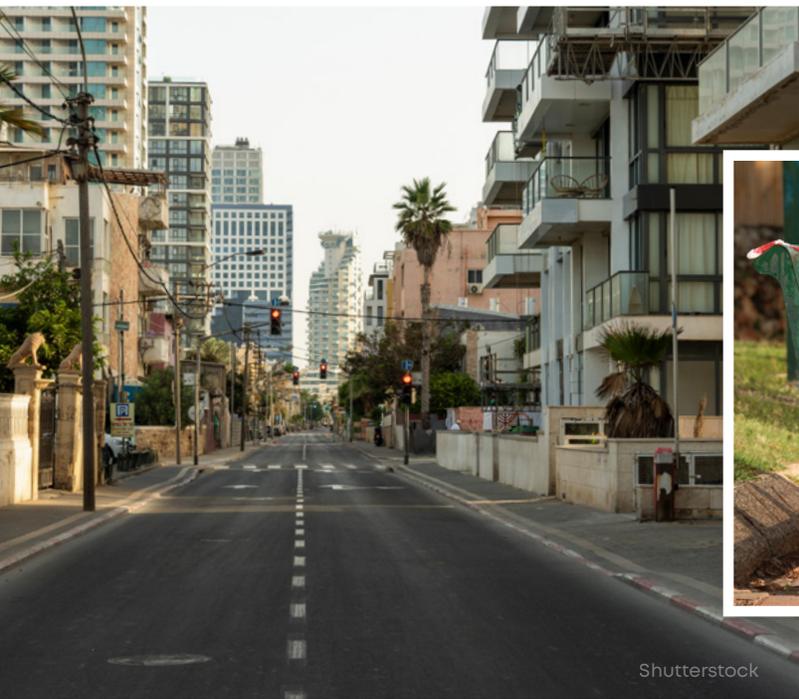
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Tel Aviv, dubbed the city that never sleeps shut down during the lockdowns. Joggers were tackled and fined by police as were parents who left their cramped apartments to take their kids for a walk.

Netanyahu and President Trump did things no one had dared to do—crown Jerusalem the capital of Israel and declare it and the Golan Heights a non-negotiable part of Israel. Together, both heads of state brought peace between Israel and four Muslim countries, with more to come. These moves have gone a long way toward extracting Israel out of the dark ages in terms of international legitimacy.

There is no question Netanyahu has done a good job over the years of moving Israel away from the socialist sphere into a solid capitalistic culture. (Many of Israel's early pioneers had come from Russia.)

So what's the problem? His weakness is in the *way* he rules—which has become more obtrusive in the last few years as threats of a

Park benches were blocked in the attempt to discourage pedestrians from congregating.



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corruption trial intensified. Much of his dilemma

evolves around his high-flying lifestyle. He has given preferential treatment to friends for huge governmental purchases and favors to newspapers that wrote approvingly of his administration.

Desperate to avoid investigations of his conduct, he has manipulated the norms regarding the rule of law according to Israel's leftist media. As the Haaretz newspaper wrote: "Netanyahu adopted hallmarks of a monarchical regime, both in terms of the concentration of power and decision-making in his hands ... and in terms of his style of conduct and that of his family ..."

What is true is there are many political leaders inside Israel who once worked with him closely and now despise him. In fact, out of seven administrations where he has served as PM, he has never completed a four-year term due to his inability to hold together a coalition. Yet the people of Israel remain divided in their support for him.

## Then Came the Virus

After the third election last March, seeing the crisis of the corona pandemic intensify, Blue & White

leader Benny Gantz decided to break the impasse of a deadlocked government (no one was able to create a coalition) by deciding to join Netanyahu in the last election. The two leaders agreed that each one would be prime minister for half a term.

But the public didn't believe that Netanyahu would keep his promise, and sure enough, before it became time for Gantz to take the reins, Netanyahu brought the coalition down, believing he could win the next election without Gantz. With a solid coalition, he thought he might be able to pass a law giving immunity to criminal convictions for prime ministers in office.

To his credit, Netanyahu succeeded in ordering the earliest shipment of COVID virus vaccines sent outside of the U.S. As of March, about half of the entire country and the vast majority of at-risk population has received the vaccine. While the long-term benefits or risks of the vaccine are yet unknown, in the short term it has resulted in a sharp statistical drop in deaths and critical cases.

On the flipside, however, Netanyahu has struggled this past year to control the spread of the virus. The actions of both the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox



Jews) and somewhat to a lesser extent, the Arab community, threw a wrench in the works. From the beginning they paid little or no attention to the rules set by the Israeli cabinet for what was to be a short lockdown. The Haredim continued to have circumcision ceremonies, weddings, and funerals with hundreds and even thousands in attendance.

An exceptional plan was put together early last year, which seemed to have every chance of defeating the spread of the virus. The plan was to divide Israel into four degrees of lockdown when the spikes began to hit the nation. Cities and areas were marked green, yellow, orange, and red according to the percentage of active COVID cases. The extent of the lockdown would depend on the color of the area. Since there were many areas with few cases, much of the country would be able to carry on—especially schools.

## Haredi Defiance

Very soon, however, the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) cities and communities became the most extreme red areas. Although the Haredim are only 12% of Israel's population, they have had 40% of COVID cases. When the authorities tried to lock down the red areas where the ultra-Orthodox lived, they demonstrated in the streets by the thousands and fought off the police.

Not wanting to alienate the ultra-Orthodox, whose political alliance is critical for his coalition, Netanyahu opted to lockdown the entire nation. The absurdity was seen by all. While police gave tickets to Tel Aviv citizens who ventured out of their houses to sit on park benches, the Haredim were not stopped from any of their activities. The police explained that forcing the Haredim to observe the lockdown would have

caused bloodshed and torn the country apart.

As a result, the nation was placed in lockdown three times—for a total of four months—the longest of any country. If there's anything we've learned about COVID it is that it is no respecter of persons. Just because someone has a good reason to participate in a socially-risky activity does not make them immune to the illness. However, we've also observed (and experienced ourselves) that social interaction and the ability to work and provide for one's family are crucial pillars of a healthy society.

So many small businesses, including restaurants, health clubs, cleaners, beauty salons—actually all Israel's malls—have been devastated. Many children may have to repeat this year's grade.

The forced isolations really helped bring the numbers down the first two times. But the third time the numbers did not go down! Obviously, Israelis were worn out from taking precautions and had lost faith in their leaders who were time and again filmed attending crowded social events of their own.

Desperate to lower the number of sick, Israel shut down its international airport. And still, while Israeli children spent more than four months learning at home on Zoom if they had a computer, everyone watched the ultra-Orthodox schools and yeshivas remain open in defiance of the law.



Tens of thousands of Haredi Jews crowded the streets for a funeral coming in contact with the vehicle (pictured) and later the stretcher inside it that carried the body of a rabbi who died of COVID.

Getty/Menahem Kahana

## New Elections with New Contenders

For the past several elections, PM Netanyahu has won by a slim majority. Is there anything different about this election? Possibly. Hopefully. Only God really knows who would be the

best leader for Israel. Whoever the next PM is, he will need a solid majority for his coalition. The slimmer the coalition, the more demands the smaller parties will make, and the harder it is to get anything done. (Arab parties are anti-Zionist - against the

existence of the state of Israel) and up until now Arab Knesset members have never joined a coalition.

Other than Netanyahu, there are three other strong candidates for creating a coalition. Here is a brief description of each.

### 1 Gideon Sa'ar Tikvah Hadasha Party; "New Hope"

Sa'ar has been a faithful Likud ally of Netanyahu for years. However, in early December he decided to leave Netanyahu and form his own party—particularly because of Netanyahu's ongoing legal malaise. He is a secular resident of culturally liberal Tel Aviv with a celebrity news anchor wife.

He is seen as an honest politician who keeps his promises. He is actually more to the right than Netanyahu. While the Prime Minister has, at different times, considered creating a Palestinian state (under tremendous world pressure) Sa'ar said he "would

oppose a Palestinian state in the heart of our homeland." He feels it "would only undermine stability and security in the region." Most Israelis agree with him.

Practically speaking, he feels he could get along better with President Biden because of the closeness Netanyahu had with the Trump administration. His policies would basically mirror those of Netanyahu, without the baggage that comes with a person in office too long and fighting a criminal court case.



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### 2 Yair Lapid Yesh Atid Party; "There is a Future."

Lapid was a journalist and a television news host before he entered politics in 2012. His father was a Holocaust survivor and a politician who was a strong enemy of the ultra-Orthodox. The son is less extreme, but as prime minister his platform includes passing a law that insists ultra-Orthodox men must serve in the army.

There is no doubt that the Haredim are a mammoth challenge to the Israeli nation. They are multiplying much faster than the rest of the population. They refuse to serve in the army, and a large percentage refuse to work, and instead study in their yeshivas. They will join just about any party that will give them enough stipends to have large families without needing to earn a living. Since numbers don't lie, one day the nation will implode over a population that doesn't work or serve in the army, but demands handouts.

Lapid is left-leaning on the peace process. He would be ready to halt construction in Israeli settlements.

He is willing to seek a Palestinian state if the Palestinians will stop their violence. (So far, for over 70 years, the Palestinians have not agreed to such conditions.) Lapid's platform includes putting an emphasis on civil life—such as health, education and policing—a needy area that Netanyahu has neglected.

He wants to decrease the size of the prime minister's committees and limit the terms of a prime minister to eight years. Being from Tel Aviv, he would allow non-Orthodox movements to perform religious conversions and weddings, and have them accepted as legitimate by the state. He wants all Jewish religious movements to be able to pray openly at the Western Wall. Until now, the Haredim have not allowed non-Orthodox Jews to pray as a group at the Wall, nor do they allow women to read the Scriptures there. He even desires to work to create a Constitution for Israel, something that has not happened over 70 years because of the ultra-Orthodox.



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### 3 Naftali Bennett Yamina Party; “To the Right”

Wikipedia



Bennett was born in Haifa of American parents who observe Modern Orthodox Judaism. They made aliya before he was born. His family then spent several years of his childhood in the U.S. before returning to Israel. He served in combat operations as an officer in Israel’s special forces. Bennett went on to create several highly-successful software companies and sold them for about \$300 million. He entered politics in 2006 serving as Chief of Staff for PM Netanyahu.

Naftali Bennett is a businessman par excellence. He is a brilliant strategist in Israeli politics with clear goals and targets. His solutions to very difficult issues are amazingly clear-cut and doable. His problem has been because of his capabilities, Netanyahu has worked to keep him suppressed.

His policies on Judea and Samaria are firm. He opposes the creation of a Palestinian state. He is for investing in building roads for Palestinians so they can travel in their own areas without checkpoints. His plans include creating joint industrial zones for Jewish and Arab workers because, he says, “Peace grows

from below—through people in daily life.” A firm believer in the free market, he believes in less government regulation of the private sector because, he notes, private businesses are the engine of economic growth.

So what is his greatest challenge in receiving enough votes to become the next prime minister? It would appear there are not enough modern religious observant Jews in Israel! This nation is divided mostly between ultra-Orthodox observers and ultra-secular Jews.

His role in the building of the next coalition is one of the more interesting to watch as Bennett is seen to be the kingmaker of this election. Because while he is both religiously and ideologically on the right, he does not like the corruption and extremism of the Haredim and would be inclined to form a coalition with the left if it meant more freedom for Israeli citizens. It’s a gamble, but if played right he could find himself at the top of this newly shuffled deck.

## How will the elections affect the Messianic believers in Israel?

While the Body of Believers in Israel tend to be conservative socially, they vote both left and right. This is because voting “right” is largely a stance for morality and security while voting “left” is seen as making a stand for religious freedom.

On the right, the Haredi Jews have made themselves enemies of the Messianic Jews, fighting growing Messianic congregations and attempting to close businesses owned by believers. And because they have been the most faithful allies of the Prime Minister in office for a long time, they have a powerful influence.

On the left, seculars tend to be more flexible with people of faith like ourselves, but they also back abortion, do not revere the traditional family, and teach in the schools that the Bible is a great tradition, but there is no God. While these practices may be abhorrent to the Haredim, under their rule, they’ve done nothing to restrain the anti-Biblical communities. Abortions are free and easy to get and there is no resistance from anywhere coming at LGBTQ activists who are now influencing school curriculum.

Ultimately, only God knows who will be the best Prime Minister for Israel in this election. We are earnestly praying that God’s will shall be done in this election as it is in heaven. May God use the politicians, and choose some to even be allies of Israel’s Messianic Jewish community. ●



# The First Congregation

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

HOW IT ALL BEGAN - PART 3

## Kehilat Hasharon

Ari and Shira's congregation was not the first congregation planted in Israel, but it was the first of its kind—unapologetically geared towards building a Spirit-filled Hebrew-speaking community of Israelis. For various reasons, the congregation that began in Ari and Shira's living room in a suburb in Tel Aviv had to move several times, and each time they would lose people who couldn't make it to the new location. Their congregation needed stability. They needed their own place.

Owning land in Israel is a very complicated endeavor. The simplified explanation is that 85% of land in Israel is government-owned. So even if a private person purchased land, the government could come and cause problems if they didn't like the activities occurring on that property. So, when considering a land purchase to house the congregation, Ari and Shira knew they would have to purchase private land.

In 1979, around the time their daughter, Shani, was born, they found just the property. It

was located in the middle of acres of strawberry fields 10 minutes north of Tel Aviv in a town called Ramat HaSharon. They built the biggest structure they could legally build on an eighth of an

acre. The basement would be the meeting place, the main floor would serve as a place for fellowship, and the floor and a half above would be their living space.

You likely will not be able to fully appreciate the chaos of caring for a three-year-old and a newborn while communicating with the house building contractor in your not-mother-tongue of Hebrew during the early days of Israel. But surely, as you can imagine, very few things went smoothly.

Still, in the end it was built, and whether the arch in the entrance was crooked or not wouldn't matter in light of eternity. Their congregation finally had a permanent home in Ramat HaSharon. It would become known as Kehilat HaSharon (The Sharon Congregation).

With their core group in place, Ari and Shira set out to bring other Israelis to the Lord. They shared with anyone they met and offered to pray for them—allowing the power of God to speak for itself.

The most memorable part of those early days in Ramat



Kehilat HaSharon was the largest congregation in the country at the time.

HaSharon was the steady flow of miracles that convinced Israelis that God was not only real and powerful, but cared for people on a personal level. Once word got out that God was answering prayers, believers and unbelievers from all over the Land visited the congregation.



Freda Lindsay (Shira's mother) and Ari dancing in their backyard sukkah during the Feast of Tabernacles.

## A New Model

As the congregation grew, leaders from other Spirit-filled groups around the country visited to learn what was being done so they could replicate it in their hometowns. However, when Ari explained the pillars of their congregation were Worship,

the Hebrew language, the Holy Spirit and celebrating the Biblical holidays, some of the leaders were taken aback.

“You’re Judaizers! You cannot follow Yeshua and celebrate Jewish holidays!” they retorted. Ari explained that Yeshua celebrated these holidays and the term ‘Judaizers’ was used in the Bible describing Jews who were trying to force Gentiles to keep Jewish law. “One cannot Judaize a Jew,” he quipped, “and there was never a scripture that instructed Jews to abandon their roots when they accepted the Jewish Messiah.”

Slowly (very slowly), the idea began to gain acceptance. Whether other congregations were Spirit-filled or not, a Messianic Jewish identity in Israel began to take hold. You *can* be a Jew, live a Jewish lifestyle, and believe in Yeshua!

## 40+30

In May 1988, Israel was celebrating 40 years of statehood. New Israeli Messianic groups were forming across the country; it seemed like a wonderful time to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost) with a national Messianic conference. It would be another one of those ‘first-time’ events in almost 2000 years.

The challenge at the time was finding a hotel that would allow them to worship and speak about Yeshua in a Jewish context and

**“You’re Judaizers! You cannot follow Yeshua and celebrate Jewish holidays!” they retorted.**

allow them to use electronic sound equipment on a Sabbath that was also the holy day of Shavuot. Tourism was down at the time as a Palestinian uprising, now known as the First Intifada, was six months into its six year reign. Hotels were desperate for income, but no hotel would risk losing their Kosher license for one conference.

The Diplomat Hotel in Jerusalem, however, was going bankrupt, so the owner didn’t care about backlash from the Rabbinical authorities and opened wide the doors to his 500-room hotel. Ari and Shira would have had no way of knowing at the time how significant this event would be, but the amount of enthusiasm for the conference from both believers in the land and abroad offered a hint.

Sid Roth, a Messianic Jewish leader from the U.S., brought over the largest tour ever at that time—nearly 500 people—to attend the conference. Another 725 local believers from every corner of the country would also attend from both Charismatic and non-Charismatic communities. The interest was so overwhelming that in the end, they had to turn people away. At the last minute, a group of about 50 Honduran

tourists arrived who had flown in especially for the conference. Ari and Shira didn't have the heart to turn them away, so they quickly found them lodging in a nearby hotel called Eden.

Well-respected speakers from both Israel and abroad spoke. The first Messianic bands "Lamb" and "Israel's Hope" from the U.S. had everyone dancing as one. Their music added a richness to the Messianic identity. The Israeli press covered the conference. The realization to the small local group of believers—that they were really part of something bigger—impacted local believers long after the conference ended.

At some point, the mixing of various streams of believers into one worship service, came to a head when an Israeli leader walked out because others around him were praying in tongues. Some of the people were discouraged by the sudden walkout, but many

stayed well into the night praying and seeking the Lord together. They would later testify they sensed something significant had happened. Even those leaders who found the tongue-speakers to be heretical would admit in hindsight that the best thing about the 1988 conference "was that it happened."

That the conference would leave its mark on the hearts of those who were there would be evident in the years following. But it would be three decades before Ari and Shira would be stunned by the added significance of the time and location of that national worship gathering. Almost exactly 30 years later, as Israel celebrated its 70th anniversary, the U.S. would be the first nation to officially recognize

Jerusalem as the ancient and present capital of the land and people of Israel.

The U.S. purchased two properties as they worked out the logistics of the Embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem—the Diplomat Hotel and the Eden Hotel. As for the Hondurans who joined their hearts with Israeli believers 30 years before in that exact hotel? Their country has decided to move their embassy to Jerusalem as Israel's legitimate capital!

Following the conference, people arrived from all over to visit Kehilat Hasharon. It seemed in every service that at least one person would come to the Lord. Seeds of faith sown for years were finally starting to bud.

Within months, however, Ari and Shira would have to make one of the most difficult decisions of their lives.



▲ Ari immersing a new believer in the most accessible place possible - the Mediterranean Sea.

◀ The Shavuot Messianic Conference of 1988 had over 1200 in attendance and had a lasting impact on those who attended.

## Family First

Raising kids in ministry is no easy task no matter who you are or where you live. It is likely, however, that Ari and Shira's son, Ayal, was in the top 1% of most difficult humans to raise while planting a pioneering work in a then developing country.

Those are just some of the highlights. Life with Ayal was a constant tornado. However, the real issues became apparent when he started school. There were no diagnoses at the time for behavioral or learning disabilities, let alone training for teachers to know how to handle such kids. And so, Ayal was in constant trouble at school.

simply told him he was too dumb to learn. When Ari and Shira heard this, they knew they had to take drastic steps to help their son.

About that time, a minister's wife visiting Israel just happened to hear that the Sorko-Ram's needed help for their son. She was an expert in children's learning disabilities and after a quick test, she told them Ayal had classic dyslexia and ADHD. Soon, Ari and Shira learned there was a special school he could attend in Dallas, Texas that could essentially teach him how to learn. But that meant leaving everything they had spent over a decade painstakingly building in Israel.

Even as they weighed their options, they knew another year of Israeli school for Ayal was out of the question. So they handed the congregation over to

***Following the conference, people arrived from all over to visit Kehilat HaSharon. It seemed in every service that at least one person would come to the Lord. Seeds of faith sown for years were finally starting to bud.***

Ayal only sat still when he was asleep. He was an out-of-the-box type kid—meaning if there was a box around, it would surely not look anything like a box when he was done with it. In light of that, he was rarely taken to visit other people's homes as he would take everything he found apart—from cabinets to radios—but would have no idea how to put them back together.

At the age of two he climbed over a ledge and fell two stories, cracking his skull on the edge of a banister. At three he found an unmanned golfcart and drove it through the front of a building—with his two-year-old sister in the passenger seat. Around the age of four he was carried in by a woman during one of the worship services in Ramat HaSharon. He had been running around outside and she had hit him with her car. Being the committed team they were, Ari took Ayal to the hospital, and Shira stayed to finish out the service.

Beyond the chaos, however, the biggest problem was that Ayal was not learning. He simply could not remember anything he was taught. By the fourth grade, unable to write his own name in Hebrew correctly, his teachers



Ayal, Shira, Ari and Shani in the 1980's

several leaders from their core group who gave them a warm goodbye party.

Despite never having learned in English, within months Ayal was thriving in his new school. He still couldn't read or write well, but he was improving like never before.

***Unfortunately, the warm well-wishers who had seen them off were not there to greet them upon their return. The congregation had collapsed, and rumors were flying everywhere. Ari and Shira were devastated.***

Two significant things happened during the two years they lived in Dallas before returning to Israel. First, was a fateful service the Sorko-Ram's attended in which a minister prayed for Ayal and right then and there in front of everyone he began to read. And while he never did well in a sit-still-and-listen setting, his ability to learn and his memory changed dramatically. Apparently, God didn't deem some things requirements for a successful and happy life as today Ayal is happily married and runs his own nanobiotechnology company.

The second significant thing was a chance meeting between Ari and Shira and Ray and Christy Wilkerson. They would meet on a two-day family road trip, and by the end of the trip a lifelong relationship had begun. Christy began part-time office work for Maoz and would go on to become Maoz Israel's international administrator, a position she still holds today.



Ari and Shira on the trip where they met Ray and Christy Wilkerson.

## Homecoming

With Ayal's education back on track, and some overseas admin help in Dallas, the Sorko-Rams returned to Israel after two years abroad.

Unfortunately, the warm well-wishers who had seen them off were not there to greet them upon their return. The congregation had collapsed, and rumors were flying everywhere. Ari and Shira were devastated. They knew they had done the right thing to prioritize their son, but seeing so many years of effort dissolve into nothing hurt deeply.

While they were processing the shock of what greeted them upon their return, they received a message from a godly man they respected:

It was simple, "If you can forgive completely and move on, the Lord will be able to use you on a much greater level in Israel."

In hindsight, some quality leaders were raised up out of that early congregation. And two congregations would be birthed from the ashes of their work—two congregations that still thrive today.

But hindsight is 20/20. At the time, all Ari and Shira could feel was the loss. They resolved to find other ways to build up the Messianic community in Israel. But they were determined never to plant another congregation. Ever.

To be continued next month...



March 2021

Shalom from Jerusalem!

**Significance...it's what we all long for.** When we are young and life is in front of us, we mostly focus on fun, adventure, thrills and love. But after a few years go by, we realize that what we really want to do, to be, to create, is something significant with our lives.

**Here in Israel we carry a double passion, to live a life of significance for the Kingdom of God, and to make the gifts of our Maoz partners matter in light of eternity.**

Some people write songs that last well beyond their lifetime. Some paint. Others write books or give speeches. **All of those things have the possibility of outlasting** our finite years on earth.

But most of us will leave behind our story...**the story of our lives.** How we lived. What was important to us. Who we impacted. **Where we chose to make our mark with the few years we lived on earth.**

**That's why a will is so very important. It completes the story of our lives.** It shares the tangible fruits our lives created. And it impacts others' lives long after we have left this earth.

As you gather up your paperwork of the activities from the past year, take a minute to consider the coming years. **Consider writing your will and including Maoz Israel Ministries in it.** The Kingdom will be blessed, and you will have made a **significant contribution to the lives of many.**

We want your partnership with Maoz to be a way **you can live a significant life!**

**Kobi and Shani Ferguson**

*Kobi and Shani Ferguson*

**P.S.** Let us know when you include Maoz in your will. Or call us if you need help. You will be blessing the Kingdom and His people long after you have arrived in heaven! That's a wonderful thought!





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Or consult your lawyer to include a bequest in your will for Maoz Israel Ministries.