



Kobi sharing at the one year anniversary of Joseph's congregation moving into their first facility - which they've already outgrown

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Lawyer-Turned-Pastor

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

They are less than three years into the plant, but it's being called one of the fastest growing congregations in Israel—though their unimpressive “main sanctuary” holds less than 50 people. The majority of the growth is very much under the radar with a network of home groups popping up in towns and cities across central Israel. It's hard to know how Joseph (not his real name), the lawyer-turned-pastor we wrote about last spring, manages to keep up with all the young leaders he's raising up. But somehow, he manages to make

everyone who links arms with him feel like a close family member. The neatest part about this young Hebrew-speaking congregation is that the growth is not from those migrating from other congregations. Most of the congregants were brought to the Lord by Joseph himself, or by the ones he brought to the Lord and then raised up to do the same. I'd give you details with numbers and places, but the more I tell you, the more I'm exposing to the organizations that exist with the stated purpose of irradicating Yeshua from Israel.

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Shabbat services are entirely in Hebrew - though they like to finish off with a rhythmic song in Amharic that livens up the place.

Kobi and Joseph first connected just before COVID hit. Joseph was sharing about his vision to plant the first Hebrew-speaking Ethiopian congregation in the country. “It is time,” he said. “My people immigrated decades ago from Ethiopia and many of us know Hebrew better than Amharic—some of us don’t know Amharic at all. We need a congregation that will address the needs of the younger Ethiopians who have spent most or all their lives as Israelis.”

Despite the restrictions and lockdowns, Joseph’s congregation steadily grew from nothing to several dozen in the first year.

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Since helping fledgling ideas grow into mature works in Israel is one of Maoz’ passions, we knew we wanted to get involved in seeing this new congregation succeed. The more we observed how Joseph was training and discipling his people, the more we could see he was a leader who non-

Ethiopian Israelis would be blessed to sit under as well. “Are you wanting to plant a congregation for Ethiopian Israelis, or do you want to plant a congregation for Israelis?” we finally asked him. He smiled, “When I laid out the vision for this congregation, I wrote that I wanted it to be a congregation for all 12 tribes of Israel!”

Our family has made this congregation our home base. Interestingly enough, though the services have a distinct Ethiopian flare, every week we see non-Ethiopians gravitating to what can best be described as a very spiritually refreshing

experience. The congregation is made up of mostly young adults and young families. Kobi and I, being in our 40’s, are often the oldest people in the room!

Joseph’s gifts as both a bold evangelist and an attentive pastor would be a unique combination anywhere—let alone Israel. For sure there are few leaders who would know how to help mentor this gift-combo from a place of experience. So, the other day, I sat down with Joseph to get a peek into his early experiences and what he feels Christians from around the world would benefit from knowing about reaching Israel with the Gospel:

Do you remember the first time you shared about Yeshua with someone?

“I do! The first time I witnessed to someone I was a teenager and had just recently received Yeshua. I came from a very traditional Jewish family with a strong Jewish identity. Understanding how Yeshua was a part of the Jewish story was so exciting to me, I knew I wanted to tell someone but I didn’t know who to pick. Then one day I got in a cab with an Arab taxi driver. I barely knew how to explain what I had to say in Hebrew since spiritual concepts include words that are not common in everyday conversations. I was full of passion and boldness and was hanging over the front seat as I fired all the information I had at him.

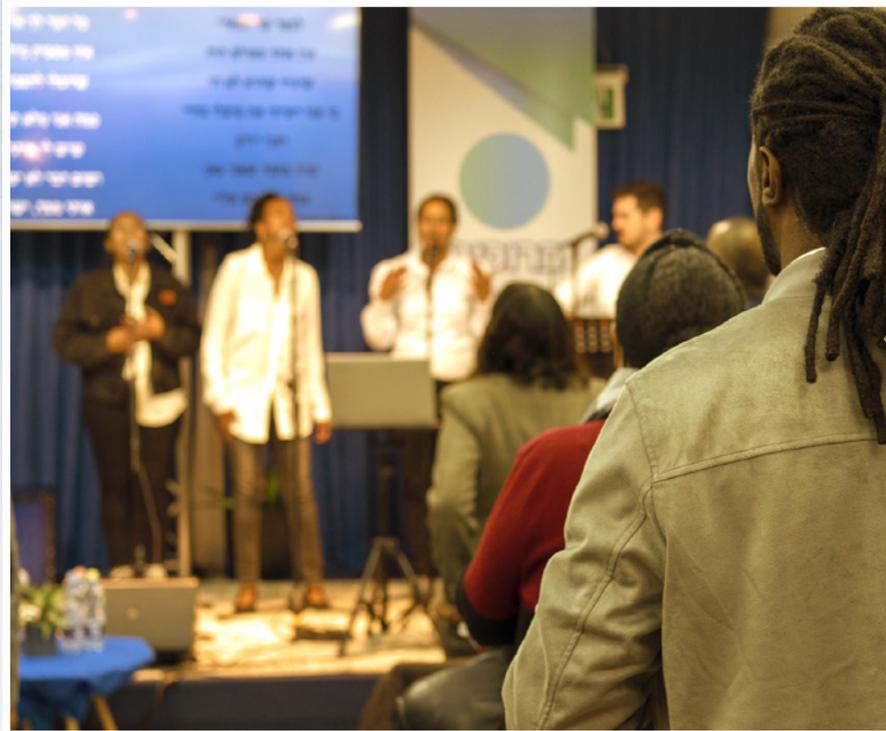
“The cab driver seemed fascinated by me. I don’t know if he was more stunned that a Jew was talking about Yeshua or that a teenager was talking to him with such passion about his life.

“I left the cab feeling on top of the world. I had done it! I had shared about Yeshua. I had given my testimony. I’m sure in my excitement I mixed up some things, but the core of my message was clear—Yeshua was the way to our Father God. He forgives sins and I knew Him personally.

“Talking to my family was a different story. Coming from a very conservative, traditional, and sometimes ultra-Orthodox Jewish extended family, I expected their responses to be harsh. I wasn’t wrong. They would look me in the eyes and rebuke me. Israel is a very tribal culture and being ostracized by one person can mean being ostracized by their entire circle of friends and family. Therefore, as a teen, experiencing such rejection from my extended family was difficult for me.”

Was there a point where you realized witnessing was more than just telling people about Yeshua?

“Though I was excited to tell people about Yeshua, I quickly learned that how I lived my life affected people more than how well I presented my beliefs



The worship team leads the congregation with Hebrew songs (some original!) and then likes to close out with one or two traditional rhythmic songs in Amharic

in words. Israelis are rarely impressed with anything. We live in a difficult country and life is hard. Perhaps because of that they take notice when people around them are in a good place. When I was in the army I was asked over and over, “What is this peace that we feel in you?” Clever phrases would have little impact if people saw me lose my temper or cheat on a test the day before. On the other hand, simple words—or even no words at all—spoke volumes when people watched me walking in the ways of the Lord (even if they didn’t know to call it that).

“When I studied in a high school Yeshiva (religious Jewish school) my fellow students complained to the head principal regarding my talking about Yeshua. I was so nervous about being called in, but because I was such a model student, nothing ever came of it.

“In college the same thing happened. My own roommate complained to the dorm supervisor that I was holding Bible studies in my room. We were friends but in that area he wouldn’t compromise. When I was brought in to meet with the head supervisor, I explained

that what I was doing was completely within my rights as an Israeli in a democratic nation. He knew I was the guy who studied hard, helped others and won the “cleanest dorm room” contests. So, after we met, the supervisor brought the dorm guys together and told them they should all be like me. Though he just meant for them to act like me, no one could deny that my beliefs and my behavior went hand in hand.”

There are many ways to witness. What ways have you found to be least effective in Israel?

“I don’t think there’s a perfect way to witness. I also wouldn’t take it on myself to declare certain ways of witnessing as “bad”—but there are definitely less effective methods in different cultures.

“First, anywhere we go, I believe we should understand the culture and people around us before we take it upon ourselves to represent the message of the Gospel. For example, if a woman goes into an ultra-Orthodox synagogue—she shouldn’t expect them to listen to a single word she has to say—as they are not allowed to speak to women. Or, if I were to stand on a street corner in Israel with a sign and start yelling out my message, the only response I would expect to receive is jeering and maybe even a few rocks thrown my way.

“Culturally, cold-turkey witnessing doesn’t really work here for several reasons. One is that Jews have a strong sense of identity that is tied to their history. Telling them to believe differently than their parents—and ancestors—is like asking them to switch planets in their mind. Another reason is that historically there’s just so much bad blood between Jews and those who claim to be the followers of Yeshua; there are simply other important conversations that need to be had before you can even approach the subject.”

You’ve lived in Israel for decades—most of your life—you’ve surely seen many international groups come to Israel, some with a strong desire to witness to Jews. What are your thoughts on those efforts?

“I’ll begin by saying I believe internationals come to our country with good intentions. I believe they are good people who love the Lord. But as Jewish believers in Israel we spend a good bit of time clearing up confusion created by visitors with good intentions and no cultural understanding. There are also all sorts of cultural nuances and language



barriers we encounter when Israelis hear the Gospel in English for the first time instead of Hebrew.

“One of the more basic issues that comes up is that Christians will come and tell Jews they should convert to Christianity. There’s just nothing in the Bible that says in order for Jews to believe in Yeshua they have to stop being Jewish. It’s the opposite actually—the apostles had to clarify to the Gentiles that they *didn’t have to become Jewish* in order to believe in Yeshua. They had to clarify this because, at the time, belief in Yeshua was recognized as a Jewish-only belief. So we have to spend time explaining to them that following Yeshua doesn’t mean abandoning the heritage of their ancestors.”

What would you tell Christians who come to Israel and want to share their love for Yeshua with Israelis?

“If someone just wants to check the feel-good box of ‘I witnessed in Israel’ then they can do what they want. But if Christians want to see long-term fruit of mature disciples in Israel, I recommend two things. First, take time and learn about Israel, its culture, and its history.

“I don’t want to discourage visitors from befriending Israelis and being open about what they believe—after all, God will always have the last word on how He wants to reach Israelis. But it’s important to understand there are thousands of years of the complex relationship between God and the Jewish people laid out in countless pages of Bible verses and another couple thousand years of the complex relationship between the Gentile Church and the Jews after the final pages of the New Testament were written. You can’t just step into that dynamic and blurt out what you have to say—even if you feel it is from the Lord—and expect all that to disappear.

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“This leads me to my second recommendation which is to make every effort to team up with mature local Israeli believers who can take the reins once you have returned home. Bringing someone to the Lord is like having a spiritual baby. You don’t have a baby without a plan of how to care for it after it’s born—you know it cannot fend for itself. Going to a foreign country and bringing someone to the Lord and then leaving without finding someone who can care for them is just as irresponsible. But if you’re in relationship with Israeli believers who are set up to care for new believers then your impact will be long term—and you may even be able to return to the land years later and enjoy fellowship with the person you brought right up to the gates of heaven.”

Seeing where Joseph’s congregation was a year ago when we first wrote about him (See *When Ethiopian Jews Came Home* in the May 2021 issue of *Maoz Israel Report*) and where he is today is evidence of the favor of God on his work. The main sanctuary is packed, the youngest kids learn their Shabbat lessons on the kitchen floor, older kids learn outside on the patio and the teenagers have taken over Joseph’s tiny office space. These are good problems to have. We will work through the growing pains together. Surely, the intensity with which those he disciples seek God cannot go unnoticed by the throne of God and we look forward to see what this mustard seed will look like a generation from now. ■



There is no shortage of testimonies of breakthroughs and miracles shared every week

One of the youth leaders from *Souled Out* shares during a service at the Heart and Soul Cafe - Souled Out's home base in Chicago



Souled Out Comes to Israel

HOW IT ALL BEGAN | PART 13

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

The first summer *Souled Out* came to Israel, they arrived with a bus full of American teens and youth leaders. They were a youth group from Chicago headed by Ed and Cathi Basler, and they had come to spend an entire summer month in Israel—to find a way to bless Israel. The goal was to meet Israeli believers and get a pulse of what God was doing among the youth in Israel at the time. They met a few local believers—among them were my parents—Ari and Shira.

The following summer they brought another bus full of American teens and youth leaders with enough room to include a few Israeli believers in their program. Three of us Israeli believers joined—my brother and I, and another kid named Stefan

(who today works with us at *Maoz' Fellowship of Artists*). The plan was to hit the streets with worship and dancing to reach everyday Israelis with the message of Yeshua. For *Souled Out*, however, no outreach would be attempted before the entire team spent time learning about Israeli culture with a local Israeli evangelist.

The following summer a few more Israeli believers joined and less American teens could fit in the bus. Every year following, the trend continued—more Israelis, less Americans, until finally, a little over a decade later, the reins of leadership were handed over to locals to continue the work entirely by and for Israelis. I won't say everything about this process went smoothly; nothing in Israel ever does.



Friends from *Souled Out* with Shani (blue shirt) celebrating an Israeli birthday

However, I will say that I can't think of another "outside" ministry that has had both the "at the time" and "long term" impact that *Souled Out* had on my country because of their approach to reaching Israelis.

I don't know if it was intentional from the beginning, or if they just followed the stepping stones the Lord gave them along the way. But the pattern of humbly bringing what they had to offer to the people of Israel long enough to show local leaders how to do it (and then letting them adapt it into a more Israeli expression) is the difference between outside ministries that sprinkle rain on the Body in Israel, and those that dig wells for us to drink long term.

The Year before *Souled Out*

It was December 1995 and I was moving back to Israel. I had completed just over a year of high school in a tiny town in east Texas—"population two shrubs and a tree" as they liked to say there. My parents felt a year away from the spiritual

intensity that is Israel would do me good, so they sent me to a ranch for teens out in the middle of nowhere. They had one stop light in the whole town and the annual parade extended what seemed like a few hundred feet from the school through that stop light.

The boys in my high school wore tighter jeans than the girls, and liked to stuff a can of tobacco dip in their back pocket. Having that round circle from the dip can faded onto their back pocket was the essence of cool. Though the town was tiny, the public high school, with over 1,000 kids, was the biggest I had ever attended. Their country accent was incredibly thick and I remember at least once getting questions wrong on a quiz because I literally couldn't understand what my math teacher was saying.

I had heard of cheerleaders before I came there, but this school also had "Belles." I never quite

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HOW SOULED OUT BEGAN



Ed and Cathi Basler with their four children and Ayal Sorko-Ram (right) who spent a year with them while in high school

The Baslers birthed *Souled Out* in their living room almost by accident. Ed and Cathi had four kids (one adopted as a teen), and when their kids would bring over friends, Ed and Cathi (or Mr. Ed and Mrs. B as everyone called them) would hang out and love on them. The Basler home, just outside of Chicago, became known as the place to be if you wanted to hang out but not necessarily go out. It also became known as a place where kids who didn't get a lot of love at home could go and enjoy a warm family environment.

Even before she was married, Cathi had a heart for Israel and even considered moving there. Although it didn't pan out for her to live in Israel, that never dampened her passion for the people of Israel. Taking care of the youth who flocked to her home came naturally, but taking on

young Israeli believers became a must in her book when she heard the desperation of believing Israeli parents. "The Lord called us to Israel," these pioneer Israeli believers lamented; "We left everything and brought our families here. We have worked tirelessly to build a community of believers and raise up our kids in the fear of the Lord the best we know how. Then, at 18 years old, we are required to sacrifice our children; hand them over for several years to serve in the army—an incredibly secular and all-consuming environment—and we get our kids back broken and godless."

The days following PM Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, Ed and Cathi were in Israel again. If there was a time to experience the depth of Israeli youth this was it. In the aftermath, the Basler's and my parents walked through the

downtown Tel Aviv plaza where Rabin was murdered, and where for weeks young kids gathered weeping, singing songs, or lighting memorial candles and staring aimlessly into the flames. Something had to be done to address the condition of Israel's youth—Israel's future—and they would start by strengthening a small number of Israeli-believing youth first. The timing couldn't have been better as my parents had been wrestling with what to do with my brother and me (who were struggling through our teen years) and had already planned a national youth conference for the following spring. When Ed and Cathi heard about the conference they asked if they could send their youth leaders to participate and further learn how Israelis did ministry. The rest is history.

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understood the difference, but the Belles had more glitter on their outfits; they wore sparkly cowboy hats, always bobbed their heads to begin a routine and had these “spinnny” sticks they threw around like you see in gymnastics at the Olympics.

There were white and black kids in the school and everyone mostly got along—until they didn’t. Growing up in Israel, I only understood the world to be divided into cultures and citizens of different countries. Israelis—having immigrated from all over the world—had a wide variety of skin tones, as did my parents. So, skin variety within a country meant nothing to me because I had yet to learn American history. Once in the cafeteria line I mentioned in passing my father being dark skinned and that he had sported an “Afro” in his younger years. All the black kids in the line got so excited that my daddy was “one of them.” It was really cute—any teen wants to feel accepted into a special category—but I had no idea why it mattered so much to them. As far as I was concerned, the only categories I clearly fit into were Israeli and Jewish—and in those categories I was entirely alone.

To this day I am probably the only Jewish person many of my former schoolmates will ever meet. And while many of the students and staff were excited about the idea of going to school with an Israelite, very few of them understood that meant going to school with someone of a different culture who processed the world differently. My feisty “Israeliness” got me in trouble more often than it didn’t, and I often spent hours in detention with no clue what cultural taboo I had violated. Still, with all the awkwardness, my time in east Texas played a defining role in my life and relationship with the Lord and I wouldn’t trade that time for the world.

In the spring of 1996, I visited Israel on spring break and attended the now infamous national Youth Conference. That summer I returned to Israel for summer break and spent a month running around Israel with some of the coolest people Chicago ever produced, as far as I was concerned.

It was now December and I was going home for good—back into the spiritually challenging land

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of Israel. Ed and Cathi Basler invited me to spend winter break with their family and all the friends I had made during the summer months in Israel. It was the first time I got to experience American family holiday traditions—and the first time they’d had an Israeli join them. Despite me explaining in my classy Israeli teenager style that “Christmas was stupid,” they had presents ready to give me as everyone sat in their jammies Christmas morning. From the birthday cake they baked for Yeshua to the bizarre cats-with-different-sized-bells-display-thing that rang out Christmas melodies, the experience was a cultural smorgasbord.

Apparently, I went home and talked up the fascinating experience, because every year going forward, the Basler’s home became the coveted place for Israeli believers to be invited for winter break. For the record, being Jewish, I hadn’t grown up with Christmas and the experience didn’t make me want to celebrate Christmas going forward, but I very much enjoyed the family warmth they had to offer and how they made a point to celebrate Yeshua and His Jewish origin.

Souled Out Impacts Israel

I returned home to finish out my 11th grade year and when the summer arrived, so did the Baslers with a busload of *Souled Out* teenagers. There were several things that made their visits so influential to our then small and geographically spread-out group of Israeli believers. First, young Israeli believers were used to being the only believer in their school or town. And they were accustomed to small congregations with simple worship on a guitar or piano. And while some of the “larger congregations” that had 50-100 members enjoyed classes during the services for young kids, there weren’t really programs for teenagers. Suddenly, dozens of literally sold-out-to-the-Lord teens showed up at our doorstep offering friendship and even



Souled Out understood that building long-term relationships was the key to making a lasting impact in Israel.

One of *Souled Out's* youth leaders speaks at a youth service in Israel

helping us find other believing friends locally. It had the “fresh troops” effect on us in Israel.

Second, as this was before the age of media access on the internet, *Souled Out* brought lots of tapes and CD’s of Christian music that Israeli believers didn’t even know existed. This proved an effective alternative for believing youth who were struggling with the pull of unedifying worldly music. Third, *Souled Out* understood that building long-term relationships was the key to making a lasting impact in Israel. So, when they came, we did outreaches together on the streets, but it was clear their priority was spending time with us, befriending us, and encouraging us.

One of the Basler teens recently reminisced, “I remember one of our first visits hanging out with some Israeli teens when a pastor’s kid asked me, ‘Are you guys going to leave and disappear just like all the other groups who come here do?’ She was so emotionally tired of making friends with amazing internationals who just came for a short time and then disappeared without a trace. I told her,

“We want to be here for you for a long time, and as long as God keeps opening the door for us to come into the country, we’ll be here. And when we’re in the U.S. we can write and call each other.” They kept that promise and came even during times of upheaval when buses were being bombed and rockets were flying overhead. If anything, they recognized Israeli believers needed them more during such times. They came during summer break, winter break—and then sent smaller groups every few months in between.

In hindsight, *Souled Out's* destiny seemed to be directly intertwined with their work in Israel. They became a bonafide youth group the year they began coming to Israel. And without planning it, the year they handed the reins over to local Israelis, their work in Chicago also ended. And though a time came where the trips to and from Chicago ceased, I can say with certainty many Israeli believers my age (myself included) are who we are today in large part because of the friendships and experiences we had with *Souled Out*. ■

To be continued next month...

Shalom from Jerusalem!

According to our definition at Maoz, a **“successful impact”** in Israel is an impact that can still be seen years, if not decades, after the initial activity took place. After living virtually my entire life watching ministries work in Israel, there are two things that have been ingrained in my heart when it comes to successfully impacting Israel. **1. You will not have a long-term impact on Israel without involving local Israeli believers. 2. Local Israeli believers will have much less of an impact on Israel without the help of Christians from around the world.**

More often than not, Israelis—even Israeli believers—like to feel they can do everything on their own. Internationals for their part, tend to think what works back home will work here in Israel. **It takes maturity to recognize we are a Body and God designed us to need each other.**

God’s Kingdom is best built when we are all engaged in what God is doing. Therefore, it is our prayer at Maoz that you will know what role God has laid out for you to fulfill in your own personal life—and how it intersects with Israel.

Can you pray? Can you give? Can you study and then teach and train those around you when it comes to Israel?

Want to understand Israel firsthand? Come and visit us at the Maoz Headquarters when you’re in Jerusalem, or connect with us when we’re in your area. **(Stay tuned! We’re bringing a whole team from Israel to the U.S. this summer!)**

This month we highlighted Joseph’s congregation. We know they will continue to grow without our help. But we also know they can **grow faster and healthier if our Maoz team and partners engage in building the work together.** We will be working with them long-term on this congregation plant and would love it if you also adopted them into your prayers.

When you pray, **you are part of the story God is writing for Israel.** When you give, you are part of the **Kingdom advancing in Israel.** So come with us! Help us build a Kingdom with eternal rewards.

Your fellow harvesters,

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

Kobi and Shani Ferguson



COMING THIS SUMMER

MAOZ MUSIC

Worship Tour

July 3-8

MJAA Conference

Harrisburg, PA

July 13

Night of Worship

Houston, TX

July 15-16

Maoz Connect Conference

Dallas, TX



 **maoz israel**