



Joseph stands on the Mount of Olives and prays for Jerusalem

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# When Ethiopian Jews Came Home

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

Joseph (not his real name) was nine when his grandmother boarded a plane to the Holy Land and left him alone at the airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Someone had messed up. He was supposed to be on that flight, but his promised ticket had not arrived. Paperwork in Ethiopia is a messy thing. Joseph doesn't have a birth certificate, so he isn't actually sure he was nine at the time, but it was close enough. Still, as chaotic as the system was, they couldn't allow him on the plane without a ticket.

His grandmother couldn't stay with him. She had been on a waiting list for years and if she missed this flight, she might never get another chance to leave. The Jewish agency

promised he would be on the next flight out the following day, but until then he was on his own. Joseph grew up in an isolated village and only moved to the city with his family for a few months as they awaited their turn to fly out. So when he left the airport alone that day, he had to guess his way back to where his mother was staying with his brothers on the other side of the city.



Because of the hostility Ethiopians had towards their Jewish population, Ethiopian Jews often lived in villages rather than in big cities. Though they had lived in Ethiopia for thousands of years, they were nicknamed by locals *Falasha*—invaders.

**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

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When anything went wrong in Ethiopia—anything from the curse of a witchdoctor to a strange illness or natural disaster, it was *always* the fault of the Jews. The more isolated their community, the less they experienced the persecution. There had been periods when they were not allowed to own land as Jews, but in the villages they were at least freer to maintain their Jewish identity and traditions.

Strangely, while Ethiopians reviled local Jews, the government nonetheless had no interest in letting them leave the country. Ethiopia, being a communist country, meant many backroom deals had to take place to rescue Jewish Ethiopians. Some of the deals could only be made with neighboring countries which required Ethiopians to trek on foot across their country into Sudan before they could be airlifted to safety. In the 1980's and 90's, Israel sent many planes to airlift tens of thousands of Jews from Africa

## Jerusalem the Mythical

To Jews in Ethiopia, Jerusalem is a mythical land of paradise. In Ethiopia they even have a song they sing to the migrating storks. In it they ask—“Oh stork, how is Jerusalem our land?”

So when Joseph finally arrived in Israel to be reunited with his grandmother and cousin, he was sure he had arrived in heaven itself. Upon landing, however, he was handed a gas mask. At the time, Joseph remembered feeling so grateful for the gift—any gift really. That was until the sirens went off and everyone's panic made him realize the mask was to help keep him alive. It was during the Gulf War, and Israel was being fired upon by Iraq's Saddam Hussein.



A Jewish community near Gondar where Joseph is from

***To Jews in Ethiopia, Jerusalem is a mythical land of Paradise. In Ethiopia they have a song they sing to the migrating storks. In it they ask – “Oh stork, how is Jerusalem our land?”***

When the war ended a month or so later, Joseph began the slow and tedious process of assimilation into Israeli culture. His mother and brothers joined him within a few months of his arrival, though his step-father (his father had died before he was born and his mother had remarried) wouldn't be able to join for another two years. Needless to say, the road ahead would be long.

## The Plight of Ethiopians

Israel is good at responding to emergencies. So, when the Israeli government realized the plight of Ethiopian Jews, planes were chartered, and complex and even dangerous military operations were executed to rescue them and bring them home. What Israel wasn't great at, was considering the vast cultural gaps between Ethiopian village life and modern Israeli life,

and then planning out long-term cultural assimilation solutions. This would explain why the assimilation process for Ethiopians was a bit like hitting a brick wall and then sinking into quicksand.

Having come from nations all over the world, Israelis are used to different skin tones in the Jewish community. But it was the association of Ethiopian Jews with their ancient culture that made it difficult for immigrating Ethiopians to get past stereotypes. Overcoming stereotypes from the outside would be one thing. But, perhaps the most difficult challenge they would encounter was that of their family structure.

In Ethiopia, the husband was the exalted head of a family unit. He was part of a hierarchy that was respected and revered. The man knew his place, and enjoyed the satisfaction that comes with providing for his family. The

women occasionally worked in nearby fields, but their primary job was homemaker.

In Israel, the men and women were equal legally and culturally and women worked jobs just like the men. When it came to learning the language and adjusting to the new culture, the women often fared better than the men. Work opportunities were the same for both men and women, and the wives who had previously been dependent on their husbands' skills in agriculture or a local trade, could now bring home greater incomes. The father, no longer the knight in shining armor, now struggled to discipline his kids, who had learned the not-so-subtle art of Israeli chutzpa.

This new paradigm began to tear at the family fabric. Youth found their new role models in the black American rap culture. The young generation of Ethiopians so intensely desired to be part of their new land that they embraced Hebrew and refused to speak Amharic. This furthered the disconnect between the generations who were previously very tight knit.

Despite Israel being a land of immigrants, Israeli culture tends to be tribal and does not always quickly embrace newcomers. So, while the young generation had abandoned their Ethiopian roots, they still had ways to go before they would master Israeli culture. This state of limbo between cultures resulted in an identity crisis for many Ethiopians. The fathers had lost hope they could build and support a family, and the younger generation was losing hope they would ever feel like they belonged. This vulnerability made some susceptible to street life and substance abuse—and everything that comes with that scene.

### When Yeshua came Himself

Joseph's family moved several times during his childhood, experiencing difficulties at each stop, and eventually settled near Haifa. In one of those locations, his grandmother came home one day to see her apartment being broken into. The trauma of the experience gave her multiple heart attacks and within months she passed away. It was just one more hit to the once-



Ethiopian Israelis hold up photographs of their relatives outside the Israeli parliament (Knesset) in Jerusalem in hopes of acquiring permission to bring them to Israel.

loved fantasy of a beautiful Israel. Still, it wasn't all bad. With immigrant subsidies from the government, they were eventually able to purchase a small apartment. Joseph was a teenager by this time and attended a religious school. He was zealous about everything he learned and often served as the cantor during ceremonies.

He was close with his family, but when his mother came home one day and explained to him and his father that she believed in Yeshua, Joseph was livid and threatened to report her to the authorities. He and his step-father formed a bond in their opposition to what his mother had done. It would take some explaining, arguing and praying, but eventually Joseph's father came around as well.

When Joseph heard this, he was beside himself. In one of their arguments his mother tried to explain how real Yeshua was to her, but Joseph finally responded, "If Yeshua is real and wants me to follow Him, He can come tell me Himself." A few nights later, Yeshua came and spoke to Joseph Himself.

Being a devout Jew, Joseph had never heard much about Yeshua—



At the Western Wall: The older generation of Ethiopians who immigrated to Israel proudly display their ancient styles and traditions.

except in bad generalities, of course. So seeing Him in a dream sitting on a throne surrounded by bright light did not happen because of any previously seen or described imagery. “It was so real, even years later,” he said. “It’s as real as you sitting in front of me. He spoke to me for a while, and as He spoke it was like His words went inside me, changed me and filled me with the power to do what He was asking me to do.”

Joseph woke up and immediately told his mother, “I believe.”

“My friends, classmates and teachers were vicious towards me,” Joseph said, thinking back on the early days of his born-again life. “Our Ethiopian friends screamed at us, ‘We left Ethiopia to get away from people who believed like you!’”

“I knew what I believed was real, but it was difficult for me to take another round of social rejection. I had spent years learning the language and culture and had finally made friends—and now I was figuratively leaving everything again. Still, I could feel God close—like a mother who holds her newborn.”

“Some of my classmates tried to get me in trouble with the principal, but while he was hearing rumors about my new beliefs, he was also hearing about me volunteering my time to help others in need. So, while everyone standing there was expecting him to berate me, instead he was suddenly encouraging the other students to act more like me.”

### From Barely Surviving to Thriving

Joseph had always enjoyed helping others and doing it with his whole heart, so with his newfound knowledge of Yeshua, he quickly found his place in the local youth group and worship team. After high school he went

on to study economics and business management. He received a scholarship that covered his education and housing but when it came to food and other basic items,

within a few years had established his own practice as a lawyer. It was never about going at it alone, so he connected with dozens of other Ethiopian lawyers for collaboration.

***When you asked me to marry you, you told me you were going to be a minister. I’ve been waiting for you to keep your promise.***

he was on his own. So he worked at everything from cleaning to tutoring. “Sometimes, there was no regular work, so to get money for food, some of us worked as political activists in those days. We didn’t care what the party was or what the signs said. It was about survival. We just knew we’d be paid the next day and would be able to eat.”

University was challenging, but during that time Joseph got to know the woman he calls to this day “my lady.” He talked her into coming to study at the university with him where they would both get their degrees. And eventually with the blessing of both sides of the family, they planned their wedding. Though they were among the first to do it, their decision to blend Ethiopian traditions into an Israeli ceremony felt natural as they understood the importance of embracing their new world without rejecting the old one.

After they married, Joseph was drafted into the army and there, as seemingly everywhere else, he excelled. Upon completing his service, he considered how best he could be a blessing both to his community, and to God’s kingdom. He was good at business and economics, and had a heart to help people especially in complicated legal or business matters. He did his internship in the Knesset and

He also volunteered his time working with youth and tutoring new immigrants in Hebrew, and even offered his legal services for free to the less fortunate.

Things were going good. No. Things were going great!

If his goal in life was to help people and make a good living doing it, he was on the right path.



Some Ethiopian immigrants struggled during their mandatory service in the army, others excelled. However, either way, their time in the military helped solidify their identity as Israelis.

### When Silence Speaks

Joseph’s reputation was growing when a few large companies approached him. One of the job offers included work he loved and flying back and forth to Ethiopia. There was no reason he could see not to take the job so he began the training process.



The beautiful city of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia did not have the modern technology Joseph was used to

However, when Joseph arrived in Ethiopia on his first trip, he ran straight into a wall of silence. No internet, no phones, no TV. No distractions. “It was overwhelming at first,” Joseph shared. “I’m a guy who’s constantly surrounded with people and activity. And suddenly my ears were ringing from the silence. Suddenly, it was just me and my Bible and God. And all I could hear was Him telling me I was supposed to be in ministry.”

His career wasn’t an easy thing to give up. It was worthy work and he loved it. In this current line of work he knew his family would be taken care of financially. Life as a minister could mean he would struggle to provide for the woman and children he held dear. Grasping the gravity of the decision he needed to make, he decided to go on a 40-day fast. After all, this was what people in the Bible did when they were at a crossroads in their life.

By the end of the fast the answer was clear. What wasn’t clear was how the love of his life would feel about his decision. She knew the ramifications of such a decision.

Her response floored him. “When you asked me to marry you, you

told me you were going to be a minister. I’ve been waiting for you to keep your promise.”

“Looking back, I know if I had continued in the path I was on, I would already own my own home and my family would be surrounded by the goods this world has to offer. But I also know we would be miserable in the midst of it all because the one thing the world cannot offer, for any amount of money, is the joy and peace that comes with the knowledge you are in God’s will and He is pleased with you.”

## Next Generation Ethiopians

It’s a natural occurrence for immigrants from Russia, Ethiopia, America, Asia and Latin America, to name a few—who are believers—to plant congregations in their native tongue. Those congregations attract other immigrants like them and are an incredible source of fellowship and spiritual encouragement in a challenging country such as Israel. What comes less naturally and must be a conscious effort is the transitioning of any such congregation to the Hebrew language once enough of

the congregants have been in the land for years.

The only other way a Hebrew-speaking congregation will be birthed is when the Sabra generation (native-born) or those who came at a very young age and grew up in Israel, branch out to plant an entirely new work. And this is exactly what Joseph had in mind when he laid out the vision for their congregation. It would be the first Hebrew-speaking Ethiopian congregation in the land.

**“I knew my people had a deep desire to be a part of Israeli culture so I understood it was crucial that our spiritual expression would be just as Israeli if we were going to raise up the young generation of Ethiopians in Yeshua.”**

Joseph and his wife gathered their three small children in the living room and began to pray. Soon, friends began to join and very quickly their entire apartment was packed for each meeting. With the meetings taking place in a residential area on Shabbat, the neighbors soon began complaining about the noise from the worship and fellowship.

Today, the less than two-year-old congregation has moved to an industrial area and continues to grow even during the pandemic. Especially in this small country, the rate at which this congregation has grown is evidence of how ripe the harvest is among Hebrew-speaking, Ethiopian Israelis. So it comes as no surprise that God chose someone with such a deep, spiritual passion and commitment to serve his generation. God knows there’s a lot of work to be done. ●

# Israel's Second Underground Railroad

By Shira Sorko-Ram

HOW IT ALL BEGAN - PART 5

In the late 1800's Jews began answering the call to return to their ancient homeland. Unfortunately for many, the way was blocked, first by the Turks and then by the British who controlled the land at that time. This resistance gave birth to a sort of "underground railroad" of boats landing in the dead of night near the seashores and overland treks through mountain ranges or deserts. As the story has been passed down, Ari's mother, who was fleeing persecution in Russia, was on one of those boats that was turned away. She would, instead, settle in the United States and though she never lived to see it, her son would fulfill her dream of moving to the Promised Land.

In an ironic *déjà vu*, when Israel declared its independence, it would be Israeli rabbinical authorities who would stand in the way of some Jews trying to return to their homeland.

Early on, the Knesset passed a law establishing that any person who could verify just one Jewish grandparent would receive Israeli citizenship—as this was the standard by which Hitler identified Jews to be taken to concentration camps. This meant one need only be one-quarter Jewish to be eligible for Israeli citizenship. But later, at the insistence of the ultra-Orthodox, an amendment to the law was added: "and has not voluntarily changed his religion."

It should be noted, however, that no one has ever heard of a Jew who has converted to Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, pantheism, New Age, atheistic humanism, or the occult being

refused entry to Israel because of his religion. This ruling targeted Jews who believe Yeshua is the Jewish Messiah. The law was designed to keep Messianic Jews out of Israel. How strange. Hitler didn't make that distinction. A Jew who believed in Yeshua would have still been sent to the gas chambers.

This hostility towards the Jewish Rabbi, Yeshua, was why the second "underground railroad" developed in the late 1900's. Without modern technology, our process of helping Jewish believers make aliyah was tedious, but today there are some tens of thousands of Israelis who believe in Yeshua as their Messiah. Many, if not most, are the fruit of the early Jewish believers who received citizenship and worked to build the Messianic Movement. If asked point blank, Jewish believers would never lie to the rabbinical authorities about their faith, but with a little coaching, we and a few other Israeli believers were able to help them maneuver wisely and with integrity through the pitfalls of the immigration process.



## Gary and Shirley

In the mid-1980's, Gary and Shirley Beresford were two of the growing number of Jewish believers who attempted to answer the call to immigrate to Israel. Born and raised Jewish on all sides, the two became believers while living in Zimbabwe when they befriended a man and his wife, who were the only known Jewish believers in the whole country at the time. As the Beresfords studied their Bibles, they learned that in the latter days, Jewish people would return to their ancient home. They eventually began feeling the tug towards Israel, though Shirley was initially turned off by how primitive

Israel was in comparison to Zimbabwe at the time!

Unfortunately, when they finally decided to make the move, one of their adult children opposed their faith and reported them to the Jewish Federation. This began the snowball that would turn into a landmark Supreme Court ruling against Jewish believers in Yeshua.

For centuries Jewish tradition has designated a person a Jew if his or her mother is Jewish, even though in Bible times, a Jew was known by his father's identity. In a bizarre twist of irony, the Beresfords would be denied citizenship as Jewish believers because both had Jewish mothers. Had even one of their mothers been a Gentile, there would have been no rabbinical standing to say that as a Jew they had left the Jewish faith!

## We Get Involved

When Gary and Shirley originally moved to Israel, they joined our congregation in Ramat Hasharon and Ari and I were closely involved with their case. "You need to fight this," we told them. "Even Jews living in blatant sin are considered Jewish. If the rabbinical authorities get away with determining that believing in Yeshua the Messiah makes a Jew into a non-Jew, this could mean a complete shutdown of immigration of Messianic Jews whose only crime is their belief in a Jewish Messiah whom rabbinical leaders have hated for millennia."



Ari and Shira Sorko-Ram in the 1980's

Without any legal status in the country, the Beresfords were in Israel as tourists only and forbidden to work, so we wrote about their case extensively and helped raise funds to cover their legal costs. Believers around the world rallied in prayer and support to keep them in Israel. Understanding the gravity of the situation, attorney Jay Sekulow tried to help us with advice at the time. This was bigger than just one couple; it was a challenge that had to be contested.

The united prayer momentum for the case by both locals and believers abroad was the greatest we had known, which is why it was so crushing when the ruling was passed down from the Supreme Court judges on Christmas Day, 1989 denying the Beresfords citizenship.

However, Israel is not a country for the weak and we were determined to keep fighting on with them. We continued to finance the Beresfords' court case with yet another appeal. But



Ari (left) standing next to Shirley and Gary Beresford as they prepared for a congregational event in the Maoz Ministry Center



Israeli believers staged a protest in front of the prime minister's office for the Beresfords. On that same day, Hamas activists held a protest on one side of the street and religious Jews were on the other side demanding the Golan Heights remain part of Israel. Though journalists had arrived to cover the land controversy, Israeli believers found themselves in between the two camps and thus ended up being covered by the media literally around the world.

after nearly six years of court delays, on July 2, 1992, the Supreme Court ruled against the Beresfords' request for citizenship for the final time.

The court then demanded \$6,250 from the Beresfords and two other families who were also denied—because they lost the case! Our wonderful Maoz partners did not fail these Messianic pioneers, and we were able to pay in full.

But faith is a funny thing. And prayers that may seem unanswered do not go unheard. For the first time, there became a growing awareness about Messianic Jews in Israel. In addition, Christians all over the world were suddenly hearing about the unique identity



of Jews who accepted Yeshua as Jews. The Beresfords received invitations from many countries to give their testimonies and explain Messianic Judaism.

### Answered Prayer—God's Way

Perhaps some prayers are answered immediately and miraculously, while others are answered in completely different ways, other than as expected. Even

though we lost their case, by the time the ruling came down against the Beresfords, Israel had its hands full with nearly a million Russian Jews who were flooding the land. (Not a few of them had recently been born again in massive revival meetings in Russia!)

This influx meant the clerks who used to busy themselves researching each individual's personal beliefs were too busy to do anything but try to document the tsunami of Russian immigrants swarming in through Israel's gates. Within months of the landmark decision against the legitimacy of Yeshua as a Jewish belief, many Messianic Jews from the west were also succeeding in receiving their citizenship. In fact, at one point, so many believers were getting citizenship we had to search everywhere to find locals to come alongside and help them assimilate.

One of those people who applied was Michael (not his real name) and his family. A high-profile Messianic leader arrived first to apply for citizenship and was supposed to return with the rest of his family within an allotted time. He and his wife Sarah (not her real name) had planned the momentous return trip to receive their citizenship. However, just days before the flight, Michael broke his leg and couldn't make the trip.



***For the first time, there became a growing awareness about Messianic Jews in Israel. In addition, Christians all over the world were suddenly hearing about the unique identity of Jews who accepted Yeshua as Jews.***

This was their one chance for the family to receive citizenship, as they did not have unlimited funds to come back and start the process over again. So, Sarah came alone. Of course, if Israel is anything, it is a country with an endless supply of obstacles. So, though Sarah pushed through and flew on her own, upon arrival, she was sorely disappointed to find out all government offices had gone on an extended strike.

Sarah and I prayed earnestly. We decided to go to the office of immigration anyway. We arrived at 6 a.m. to be at the front of the line at the 34-story Shalom Towers, then the tallest building, not only in Tel Aviv, but in the entire Middle East. The immigration offices were there, but the news had informed the public they were only taking emergency cases.

Even at that early hour, large crowds were forming outside the building, undeterred by the declared strike. Every so often a guard at the building's front door let a few at a time enter the building. We got in.

When we finally made it to the right floor, a tight mob of about 50 people were already swarming the locked door. Every five minutes or so, a guard would

open the door. The people would shout out their requests and the guard would point at them in the chaos and say, "No! You can't enter! We are on strike!" and lock the door. And the scene would repeat.

In those days Israel knew nothing about queues so I stretched my elbows and feet out as far as possible to keep newcomers from trying to crowd in front of us.

Slowly, we inched up to the front of the mob. The door opened. We spoke in English! "Emergency!" (A broken leg is an emergency, right?) "My friend is here to get her citizenship. Her husband broke his leg and couldn't come so it's an emergency!" Then I stuck my foot in the doorway.

The guard looked at us and let us in. We were ushered to several different people and eventually found ourselves in front of a clerk who began searching for Sarah's application in a messy mass of papers spread across his desk. If he couldn't find the papers, there would be no way to get the stamp of approval.



A million Russians flooded Israel within a few short years when the USSR fell. Their coming marked a turning part in many areas of Israel's culture and development.

***“My friend is here to get her citizenship. Her husband broke his leg and couldn’t come so it’s an emergency!”  
Then I stuck my foot in the doorway.***

Then suddenly Sarah watched as a paper sort of flew up into his hand as he was sorting. She looked and there was no window open, but a puff of wind had seemingly moved it—and it was her application.

The clerk looked at the paper, and said, “We can’t process this. You are supposed to have your children with you so they can be

sworn in...” But then his phone rang while another clerk with a ream of papers entered the doorway. As our clerk was talking to this man and also on the telephone, he absent-mindedly signed the paper and handed it to Sarah.

When we took the signed papers to the final official, the lady asked, “Where are your children?” Sarah answered, “I was told I didn’t

have to bring them.” She answered, “Do you have your husband’s ID?” When the official looked at his picture, she said with a smile, “Oh yes! I remember your husband! He was a very happy man!” As we walked out of Shalom Towers, I turned to my friend and said, “Whew! That was the opening of the Red Seal!” Another born-again Jewish family reached Israel!

This was just one of many miracles like this at that time. Over the next few years, the Lord allowed a

stream of fine Messianic leaders and young Jewish believers into the land—who would help build the foundation of the Messianic movement that today is alive and growing.

Time heals many things, and the son who turned in the Beresfords has since apologized. And just to prove the many prayers for the Beresfords not only brought answers for others, a few years later the Beresfords reapplied and were quickly and quietly granted citizenship in the land of their ancestors—the land of their Messiah.

For sure, challenges still remain for immigrating Jews who call Yeshua their Lord, but in private, the government, the army and local residents have begun to appreciate the loyal, law-abiding and hardworking nature of Israel’s Jewish followers of Yeshua.

Even in Ezra and Nehemiah’s day, when the Jews returned to Israel, decades passed between the time the first pioneers arrived until Jerusalem would be completely restored and the people returned to their ancient Scriptures and practices.

As Ari and I looked back at the decades we had now spent in Israel, we could honestly say, there was a long way to go, but solid progress was being made. God’s Kingdom was advancing, and He was using us, His servants, to push forward. But when it came to some of the best and worst days of our lives – they were still ahead of us. We were just getting started. ●



Ari and Shira in the 1980's were always dreaming of the future.

To be continued next month...



Dearest Maoz Israel Partner,

May 2021

Shalom from Jerusalem!

There are hundreds of personal stories of “coming home to Israel” just like Joseph’s. We hear them every week. Some wring out our hearts in compassion for the hardship of their journey. Other stories, like Joseph’s, buoy us toward hope!

Regardless of the obstacles that immigrants face when coming home to their Land, one of the things that stoke the fires burning within us is to help them to get a firm footing.

**After all is said and done, we are passionate about making believers STRONG in Israel.**

Of course, after reading my mother’s account of helping immigrants find their way to Israel, you know by now, this is nothing new to us. **It has been the vision since the beginning!**

Ethiopian believers in particular face excommunication from their close knit communities when they make a stand for Yeshua. We need to have a warm community ready and waiting to embrace them.

The time is ripe for us to be able to make a significant impact on the Ethiopian community here in Israel – and in turn for them to make a significant impact on the Body of believers in this land.

Joseph’s congregation is pioneering a movement. We know a little bit about pioneering in Israel and we believe our Maoz partners will want to get in on the ground floor of growing, supporting, and covering them in prayer.

Come with us, and let’s make a difference!

*Kobi and Shani Ferguson*

**Kobi and Shani Ferguson**





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