

Ari and Shira Sorko-Ram, founders of Maoz Israel, passing the baton of leadership to Kobi and Shani Ferguson during the Maoz Generations Conference

 SINCE 1976
maoz israel
REPORT

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GENERATIONS

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

It was about 8 p.m. as our family and team of twenty+ Israelis, mostly from the Maoz team in Israel, gathered near the entrance of the airport near Tel Aviv. Our flight wasn't until after midnight, but for weeks we had seen photos on the news of security lines of 3 and 4 hours and we weren't taking any chances. Ben Gurion International Airport, Israel's main airport, was experiencing the same difficulty as many other businesses around the world—a lack of workers and a sudden high demand for flights.

Getting to the airport with our whole team was a miracle in and of itself, as a good number of them had never been to the U.S. and some had been denied visas in the past. I'm not going to say we had to bribe some people to get visa appointments at the U.S. embassy, but with COVID knocking out normalcy of anything to do with bureaucracy, I will say it took prayer and...ummm, creativity, to get those visas.



I was so proud of the pilot and crew who got us to New York 30 minutes early.

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A spontaneous Maoz Israel Music moment: Thais and Tanya worship with Andrew on guitar

That is, I was proud of them until we were informed we would have to sit on the runway for those 30 minutes because the airport didn't open until 6 a.m! It was hard to comprehend how one of the busiest airports in the world (in the city that never sleeps) was closed at any given point in time, as Israel's tiny airport runs flights around the clock and only shuts down a day

here or there for holy days. But it was still faster than taking a boat across the ocean, so I counted my blessings.

Other than the Department of Agriculture at U.S. customs deciding our kid's peanut butter sandwich he hadn't finished while on board was a threat to national security that required the searching of all my bags, the trip went rather smoothly.

From the airport we rode a bus past Manhattan on our way to Pennsylvania and, of course, at least half our team pulled out their phones to take photos. For a good number of our group, this was their first time in America—let alone NYC. So, I didn't mind the "Uber tourist" vibe we gave off.

A Dream Come True

The dream of taking a group of Israelis to minister outside of the country has long been on our hearts. Though Maoz had previously sent groups to take part in different conferences in the U.S., this time was different. This was the first time, that we were able to bring over a dozen musicians and singers as part of *Maoz Israel Music* and the first time we would also put on our own event.

Four groggy hours later we were pulling into Messiah College in Pennsylvania where the MJAA (*Messianic Jewish Alliance of America*) has held their annual week-long conference for decades. Over those decades, Maoz partnered with MJAA and sent hundreds of Israelis to both experience the Messianic Jewish community in the U.S. as well as participate in the worship. It's a fun experience for Israeli believers, as in Israel they are often treated as scum for "betraying their ancestors" while at the MJAA they're treated like something just short of rockstars!

The audience at the MJAA is unique in that it is English speaking but is also used to singing Israeli/Hebrew worship songs and was able to engage

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Spontaneous worship in the lobby with the *Maoz Israel Music* team at the MJAA conference



Ari having fun behind the scenes with Hank Rich who was responsible for bringing *Maoz Israel Music* to the MJAA



Prayer time in the green room before heading up worship and speak in the evening service

Tanya Kadin, Shani Ferugson, Ray Ramirez and Thais Schucman lead worship with the Maoz Israel Music team

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with our mixture of worship in both English and Hebrew. By the end of the conference the leadership said the only major complaint they got about our team was that we weren't scheduled for more evenings of worship.

At the end of the week, we all piled into two vans and began our descent to Texas. Wanting to give our Israelites a taste of the south, at our first overnight stop we boarded an old steamboat and took a trip down the Mississippi River. It was hot and muggy for about 15 minutes until the thunderstorm hit. Pretty much everyone on the top deck ran for

cover but we Israelis stayed up on top and got soaked. We are desert creatures, so rain in the summer is a magical experience.

It took a few days of driving 10-12 hours a day, but at long last we pulled into the parking lot at Baruch Hashem Congregation in Dallas where Maoz' Generations Conference would take place.

Generations

If you've ever planned an event, I think you'd agree that taking on a conference in the U.S. from Israel was more crazy than sane. But we did feel it would be worth the effort. First, the transition of leadership from Ari and Shira to

Kobi and me took place during pandemic restrictions—which meant we couldn't have a public honoring of their life's work. It is rare that all four of us are in the U.S. together and even rarer to have such a huge delegation of our Israel team with us. This event would be a great opportunity to celebrate my parents and let our readers and partners who have supported us for decades come meet them and the team.

Second, the celebration of the work of one generation passing on to the next was the perfect backdrop to highlight the power of the "ancient Jewish secret" of living in a way that will matter 100 years from



Kobi and Shani Ferguson sharing during “Israel night” at the MJAA Messiah Conference

now—and that became the theme of all the messages we shared.

Third, giving the whole scope of what Maoz does is not easy because Maoz has so many aspects. Often our readers and partners will hear about our humanitarian efforts with *I Stand with Israel* and then be surprised to later learn that we also print books and Bibles, or have a recording studio in Jerusalem. They don’t know we’ve been involved in planting congregations or hosting national leadership conferences for decades or have a whole program to train young musicians and worship leaders. There’s always just so much to share about in Maoz, and even things we can’t advertise but can share in person. So, we wanted to create an opportunity for everyone to absorb the different outreaches at their leisure throughout the event.

It was fascinating to meet people who have followed Maoz and my family “since I was this tall” and encouraging to hear them say things like, “We met Ari and Shira 30 years ago and have supported them ever since. When we heard Maoz was transitioning to new leadership, we weren’t sure the ‘new Maoz’ would be capable of carrying the load, but after this conference we are completely confident in the next generation of Maoz!”



The after-party at the conference included good food, good music and a whole lotta dancing



The Maoz Publishing station: Ari signing his new book "God's Perfect Plan"

The Day After

The worship was powerful, the messages engaging and the conference an overall success. But we knew what was coming "the day after." Christy Wilkerson, our international administrator—who had been with us for some 35 years and helped grow Maoz from its early days of Ari and Shira with one assistant in Israel to what it is today—was leaving us.

It was inevitable. Her kids and grandbabies were on the East Coast and these are the important years of childhood. We also knew we had no idea who would replace her. At the beginning of the trip, Kobi and I prayed the most spiritual prayer we knew to pray about the situation, "Help, Lord!"

This was a position that required an incredible amount of trust,

which isn't built in a day—but we weren't ever in the U.S. long enough to build such a relationship. We also needed someone solid who had years of experience in non-profit administration, excellent people skills, and a passion for Israel. We had no idea how we were going to find someone with THAT combination.

Gateway Connections

There was only one place that I personally have visited every year since 2014 (except 2020 when everything was shut down) and that was Gateway Church in Southlake, TX. They had invited me years ago—and every year since—to participate in their annual international worship leaders' weekend representing Israel. It's been an all-around magnificent experience, getting to



Alisa stayed backstage to make sure all the Hebrew lyrics and their translations were showing on the screens properly

know the people there and so many others visiting from around the world including Peru, Taiwan, Brazil and even Iran—the list goes on. The time spent fellowshiping and leading the weekend worship in multiple languages is a cultural feast. Despite my preference for staying in Israel to focus on Maoz' work and raise our family, I really consider that week a highlight each year.

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People beginning to arrive at registration for the Maoz Generations Conference



The *Maoz Israel Music* station: CD's, hats shirts and even necklaces made from Hamas rockets being sold with 100% of profits going to support Israeli worship leaders

The *I Stand with Israel* station: Flipping through the "Faces of I Stand with Israel" picture book that showcases the many individuals and families that Maoz partners have helped



During those years, casual but solid relationships were built. Eventually, we even began collaborating with some of the musicians we met on recording projects from our studio in Jerusalem. One of those collaborators was Kevin Melton,

who is a music director at Gateway Church. During the COVID lockdowns, we worked together on Evan Levine's worship album, among other things. So, when it came time to plan the summer worship tour we thought it was a

great idea to have him join. We could get to know him better (which helps when collaborating overseas) and he already knew all the songs we were doing because he had helped with the recordings.



Top: Participating in the Shabbat service at Baruch Hashem Congregation during the conference, Ari Sorko-Ram walks the Torah Scroll through the crowds as is Jewish tradition

Middle left: Evan Levine and Shilo Ben Hod lead worship with original music produced by Maoz Israel Music

Middle right: Next Generation: Illit Ferguson, 17 leads a worship devotional

Right: A special Q&A time with Ari and Shira and Kobi and Shani hosted by Adam McCain, pastor of Hill City Church in Dallas





Take the vision and
run with it! One
generation blesses
the next

I can't exactly explain how it happened, because Israelis take time to let outsiders into their inner circle, but our all-Israeli tribe took to Kevin like jam on toast. By the end of the trip, Kevin even had his own Israeli nickname. On the final night he shared with all of us, "I have been on many ministry trips, and was impressed to see 24 people in constant close quarters and a demanding schedule without any blow ups. That speaks volumes as to who you guys are." His experience was not just a compliment. It was an answer to our prayer. Before we travelled, we prayed as a team that others would experience the unity and camaraderie we have in our work in Israel on a daily basis—and that happened.

When we arrived in Dallas, Kevin's wife Rachel, who has also worked

at Gateway Church for over a decade, joined us at the conference. I don't think any one of us fully grasped that those eight years of relationship building at Gateway would be a determining factor for finding a replacement for Christy when the time came. But after the conference we were enjoying our first moments together without any schedule crunch, Christy's leaving came up in a passing comment. As the conversation progressed we realized Rachel could be a perfect fit. One conversation led to another and we decided to invite Rachel to lead our Maoz U.S.A. team. She said, "YES!"

It was a two-day drive to Vail, Colorado in 1988—where Ray and Christy connected with Ari and Shira—and destinies were entwined. And, in a way, it was a two-week

drive in 2022 with Kevin with Rachel joining at the end that would play a role in entwining the destinies of the next generation of Maoz leadership.

There are many challenges that come with running an organization in Israel with eight branches in other countries. The most significant of them is building a team (from a distance) that can work seamlessly with the team in Israel. Few things, however, are as encouraging as watching God orchestrate this transition without us even lifting a finger to advertise the need. It means He had this planned all along. It means He has more things in store for Maoz' mission to make believers strong in Israel and see all Israel saved! ■

The Calling of My Life!

When I met Ari and Shira, and began serving *Maoz Israel Ministries* 34 years ago, I had no inkling what lay in store for me. Yes, I had dedicated my life to God, to my husband, to my two sons...but I knew there was another avenue of service God had in mind for me, as well. And, although at first, Maoz was simply a job opportunity...quickly it became a life calling.

The JOY, the stretching, the relationships, the work, and the PRIVILEGE of serving the Jewish people truly became a fulfillment of a Word from God in my life. My grandmother served the Jewish people during her lifetime, going door to door in her hometown, sharing the Gospel in her Jewish neighborhood. Quickly, I realized God had given me the same opportunity, using my own gifts and talents of administration. And I have loved every minute of it!

I've seen the ministry prosper, grow exponentially, adjust to the times and the seasons, and now transition leadership to Kobi and Shani. In every phase, there have been delightful times of victory, and challenging times of growing. Through it all, I've served with my whole heart!

Now, as I turn to the next season in my life, I am so thankful God has placed Maoz in the capable hands of Kobi and Shani to carry on with the vision of making believers strong in Israel.

I'm grateful I have had the privilege of knowing and loving our partners—both here in the USA and around the world. Our partners are the very lifeline of Maoz and are vital to the success of our ministry.

I have loved working and collaborating with my wonderful U.S.A. team, and our international Maoz offices and their teams. What a magnificent staff God has given to us to carry on with the work of Maoz Israel Ministries!

And truly, I have absolutely LOVED travelling in the Land! Israel has become my "second" home. Seeing the Land, loving the people, and seeing the ministry flourish has been one of the most thrilling parts of my time with Maoz. What a privilege!

I want to introduce you to Rachel Melton, who will be taking the helm of MAOZ USA. She is a seasoned believer, an administrative genius, and a wonderful match with Kobi and Shani, as they, together, will lead Maoz to higher levels of effective and impactful ministry.

I encourage you to get to know her! She is going to be a wonderful addition to our team!

Ray and
Christy
Wilkerson

It's been a ride of a lifetime! And I'm so thankful to have shared it with all of you!

-Christy

P.S. And, in case you are wondering, Ray and I have bought a lovely little farmhouse on an acre in North Carolina, three minutes away from some of our grandsons (ages 1, 3, 5, and 7), and plan to spend some time making an impact in their lives and enjoying all the perks that life with grandchildren bring!



Kevin and
Rachel
Melton



October 2022

Shalom from Jerusalem!

“To hear you worship was a taste of eternity and the grandness of God,” a woman told us at the end of our night of worship. **Statements like this make all our efforts worth it.**

We always appreciate hearing that **“the music is amazing”** and **“the sound was great”** as excellence in our craft is how we give honor to the Lord. But our purpose for flying **halfway across the world, getting up on a stage and worshipping before a crowd** was to create an atmosphere in which **people would experience God** in a way they hadn’t in the past.

This is a calling given to the Levites of old and still remains on Israel today – **to lead people in worship into the presence of God.** It’s a calling that was never intended to stay in Israel, only to spread from Israel. **And we want it shared with the world!**

That’s why we, as a unified group of musicians, technicians, admins, and artists are **committed to building a vibrant and healthy community of creatives** who are able to impact the whole body of believers in Israel—not just by our new music, our state-of-the-art studio, and our videos, but also by how we live, how we create, how we get along, and how we **“do life”** together! When Israel prospers spiritually, **the world will feel its effects.**

Elections are coming up and the people’s votes will affect our lives. **“But we believe those who write the songs of a nation, can affect it just as significantly.”** If we do our part and you do yours...**our destinies will be intertwined.**

We have been in the process of forming a partnership with a top music distributor for several years (as COVID gridlocked the process) and are about to finalize the genre of worship **Maoz Israel Music** needs. We believe **Maoz Israel Music** is one of the ways we will impact our community of **Hebrew-speaking believers** in Israel and **from there reach the world!** It’s been promised: Out of Zion, the world will be blessed! **We (including YOU) are a part of that becoming a reality!**

In His service,

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

Kobi and Shani Ferguson



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