

Desu, Stefanos,
Asaf and Pastor
David and his wife
Tigist at the
New Year's
celebration



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The Boys from Beresheet

By **Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson**

When Kobi and I originally spoke to Pastor David Safafa about his vision several years ago, we asked him, “Are you looking to plant a congregation for Israeli Ethiopians—or for Israelis?” He responded, “I know right now the congregation is largely young Hebrew-speaking Ethiopians, but when I originally put the vision down on paper, I wrote that I wanted to plant a congregation “for all the tribes of Israel.”

“Then, we’re in!” Kobi and I responded.

This past New Year’s, Beresheet (Genesis) Congregation in Jerusalem—which Kobi and I have been involved with in leadership almost since its inception—we’re celebrating the second full year since moving into an “official” meeting place. David Safafa, who began it all with a vision to reach young Ethiopians—presented his team of leaders.

“These are my leaders,” David said proudly. “They’ve all been in some sort of military or criminal prison at some point, but now they’re

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here serving the Lord with everything they have.” We all laughed, knowing that their stories are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the testimonies held by the members of Beresheet Congregation.

“I know they’ve only been believers a few years, but we have to share some of these testimonies,” Kobi leaned over and told me. “People need to know God is plucking out so many Israelis from the path of destruction—almost like He’s not asking permission; He’s just doing it.” I smiled and said, “You know we can’t tell *all* of their stories... we’ll get them in trouble!” We both laughed and agreed, “But, we can tell enough to show God is moving!”

Desu

I was 4 years old when I stepped off the plane that had just landed in the Promised Land from Ethiopia. I don’t even remember the day, except through a photo that was captured of my brother, mother and me. My youngest sister was strapped to her back. The only reason I know of the photo is because it became an iconic photo (shown on the right) that was hung from a government building symbolizing the Ethiopian Aliyah (immigration).

We were placed in “an absorption center”—a neighborhood of caravans in northern Israel that was entirely

made up of Ethiopian immigrants. It was a place where you focused on learning Hebrew and the “new world” of Israel.

After two years we moved to an apartment in another northern city on the coast. It was the wild wild west where kids wandered around without supervision.

I remember being in charge of watching my two-year-old sister, Emuna, and just leaving her at the park

to play with other kids. The streets and playgrounds were full of everything from toddlers to teens with few or no adults to watch them. It is a miracle that nothing terrible happened to her. (Today she is grown, a passionate worship leader—and is the writer behind the well-known song “Kama Hesed” that is sung all over the country and has been translated into multiple languages.)

When I was about 9 years old, I remember walking through my neighborhood from school when someone called me a “goy” (gentile). It didn’t even hurt my feelings because I didn’t understand what they meant. I was Jewish; why would they call me a gentile? I came home and asked about it and found out my mother was telling everyone she had had a vision of Yeshua (Jesus) and now believed in Him.

Even at my young age, I was mortified, as was my oldest brother David. We were grandsons of the great Rabbi Lakow Imharen in Ethiopia! We would have nothing to do with this pagan idolatrous Christianity. But my rejection of my mother’s beliefs didn’t push me to search for God. If anything, it pushed me away from religion.

Boarding School

By the age of 14, I was smoking weed regularly and towards the end of my eighth grade year I was kicked out of school for slapping my principal in the face for no reason at all. So, the

following year I was shipped off to a boarding school for at-risk kids. It was actually one of the best things that happened to me. And though I didn’t give up on my drug use, the framework there helped me get serious about my studies.

Just as I was packing up for summer break after completing the tenth grade, I got a call from my mother, “When you leave, take the bus to Jerusalem; we’ve moved.” So I found the right bus and arrived at my new home in yet another Ethiopian-dominated neighborhood.

Summers were boring, but I made friends, and this of course meant we got into a lot of trouble. Some of it was simple kid stupidity; some of it was criminal. But



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◀ Ceremony celebrating completion of training

Finishing up a training exercise in northern Israel ▼



for some reason, I always seemed to get away with it. By God’s mercy on me alone, my group of friends only ran into complications with their stunts when I wasn’t around, which is probably the only reason I don’t have a criminal record today.

I spent an extra year in my high school so I could finish all my studies and from there was drafted into the military as a soldier in the Golani combat unit. We fought in Operation Cast Lead in Gaza and saw to it that many terrorists ended their careers in that battle. I managed to make it through without PTSD and other issues some of my fellow soldiers would walk away with. I did, however, slip a disc in my back and the repercussions would last for years.

My army service lasted 3 years and for the first 2.5 years I was all in. It was the last 6 months where everyone in my unit seemed to reach the end of their rope. We had no real battles to fight but we still trained hard as if a battle were just around the corner. Everyone started acting out; they frequently ended up in military prison and even some with criminal records. I will add that since that time, the army has changed the way it relates to the tasking nature of combat units—as it does a disservice to the nation to have teens fighting wholeheartedly for their country only to finish their service with a criminal record.

For over two years, I would only get to go home once a month and I made so little money (700 shekels—about \$200 a month) that I couldn’t afford the basics. So I went AWOL. Three weeks later I turned myself

in and was sentenced to 14 days in military prison. I can’t say going AWOL was the best decision, but it did assist with a series of events that allowed me to receive more income and I spent my final 6 months working in the kitchens on base.

In hindsight, the kitchens weren’t exactly safer than the combat unit. I have a scar on my back from when a guy stabbed me. But that’s a story for another time.

When I completed my army service, I did what many combat soldiers do upon release—I got a job in security. Among other things, my company provided undercover services of protection for Jews living in dangerous Arab neighborhoods. Our job was simply to escort them from their home to a safe edge of the neighborhood when they wanted to go out. I worked there for three years until I decided I would really like a career in civil engineering. Three months into my studies, my cousin told me about an opportunity to become a firefighter. The idea was riveting to me.

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Desu in his firefighter days



The physical training was difficult, challenging—and thoroughly enjoyable. Most people have no idea of the in-depth knowledge that firefighters must have as they go into all sorts of unknown situations. We had to learn the different treatments for different age groups, know the nature of different terrain and how chemicals react with other chemicals and under what conditions.

My firefighter years were adventurous to say the least. Between putting out fires, and my after-work party life, I stayed busy. I met a girl at one of the clubs and we began a relationship. We had a child together and then managed a year of marriage, but our relationship was in constant turmoil.

From my early teen years smoking weed became a part of my life. I nicknamed the drug “my bestie” as it was always by my side. I worked as a firefighter for 8 years. I saw a lot of destruction of property, but the most difficult memories I have were when lives were lost. Somehow

witnessing all this death and destruction, for the first time, I began considering how God had rescued me throughout my life time and time again.

I remember one day thinking to myself while stoned, “You’ve tasted of everything, you’ve done everything you wanted and you are left empty.” I began praying within my haze of thoughts asking God, “Are you real? Like in the Bible stories? I want to understand—and know You—if You’re real.”

I came across a book called *Yeshua in the Tanach (Old Testament)* by Meno Kalisher and it really helped me understand who Yeshua was to us Jews. Still, my actions didn’t change for a while. What began changing was my conscience. My conscience used to be dark and I could do anything without feeling bad about it.

But then one day I went to a club with my friends. I was as high as at any other time but as soon as I walked in the door it was like something in me woke up. My high disappeared and it was like being at those parties where everyone is dancing to music with headphones on and you’re standing there watching in silence. I felt so disconnected from the entire scene—I just turned around and walked away without saying a word to anyone and went home.

I returned to my ex and we remarried, though for reasons I’ll explain, the second try didn’t last but a few months before we were back in divorce courts. Soon we were expecting our second child. I can’t say there was a day where I changed from darkness to light. I would say I drifted towards the Lord. I was still doing drugs, but I stopped going to parties and my thoughts went more towards the Lord. I began praying and reading the Bible. But my wife hated everything about this change in me.

She was fine with my having the boys over to drink and smoke, but if she caught me on my knees in my room praying it was like the evil spirits in our house would go crazy and she would start screaming at me. The stronger I felt I was becoming spiritually, the more the situation at home deteriorated. My mother was

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Desu in his study days ▼



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Finally, one night my wife gave me an ultimatum—“Choose between your Yeshu (the Jewish slur for Jesus) or your family.” I told her I had no choice but to choose Yeshua. Her parents came over, and cursed and spit on me. It was a terrible scene with my daughters crying and me running out of the house with my phone and my pajamas.

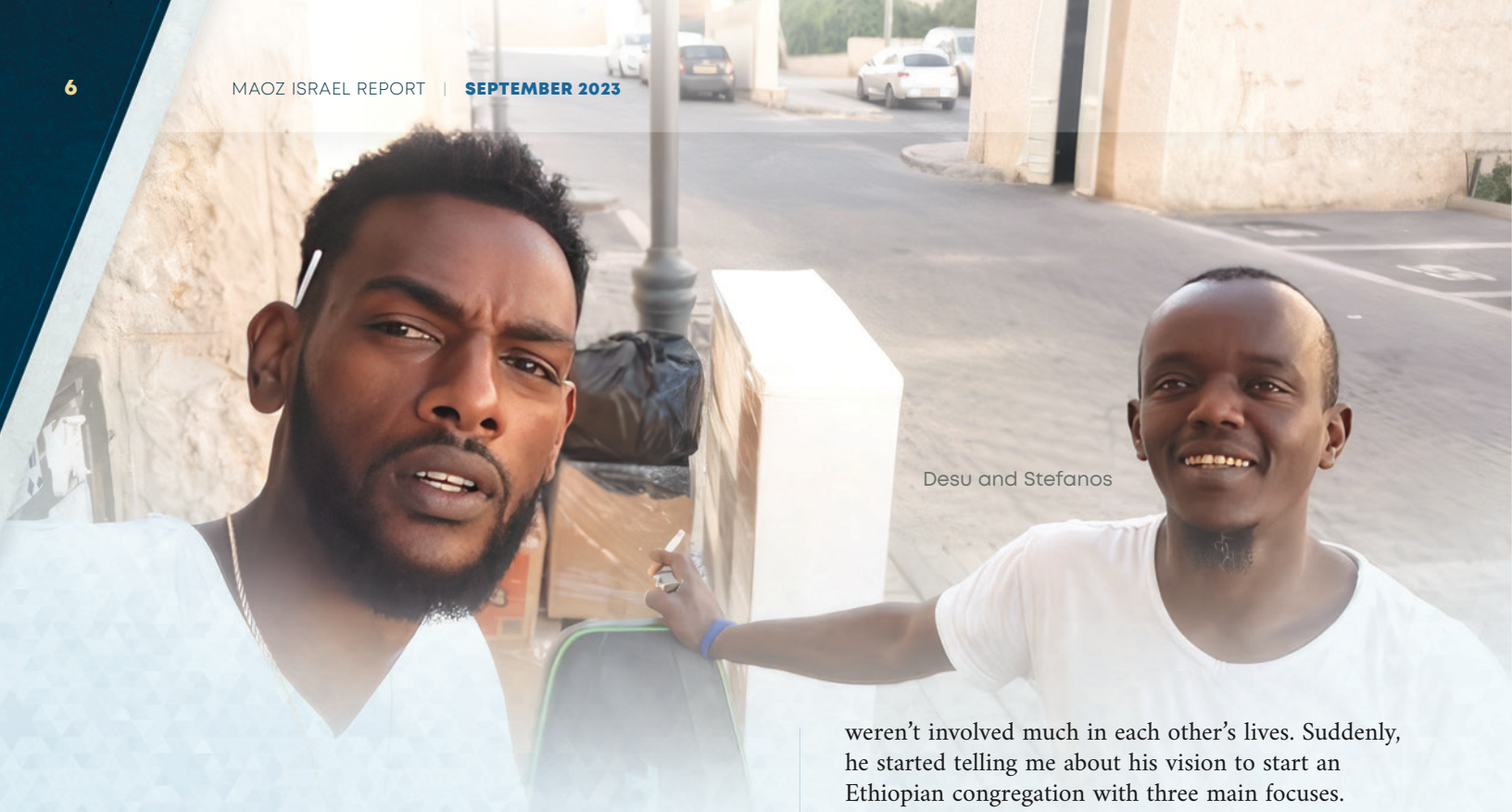
This was an incredibly difficult season in my life in the natural, though spiritually it was a time of great growth. I moved in with my mother and slept on my mom's couch. Then my previously damaged disc (which had already been treated surgically once) ruptured again. Suddenly, my last bastion of stability—my job—was stripped from me. In the period of a month I had lost everything I held dear.

Desu met Tali while serving in Beresheet. They fell in love, were married in the congregation and have just welcomed their first child into the world.

Rescue

I had a few months of paid leave because of the injury but I could barely move that entire time. I spent my nights weeping and crying out to God. My mind was in torment because I had lost my family and I had no idea how I would pay child support once my sick leave ran out. I spoke with my sister who was earning her degree and she told me I should take a career finder's test to see what I would be good at. I laughed when the results came back “civil engineering” since that was what I had already begun studying all those years ago. In fact, I already had three months of studies under my belt towards a degree.

Still while I had some direction for the future, I had no immediate funds for the upcoming child support. I knew if I didn't pay it on time I would fall into the deep and complicated hole of Israel's debt collection system that could ultimately land me in debtor's prison. I was three weeks away from the alimony due date when I spoke with a woman who worked for a non-profit that helped fund students during their time at school. I only gave her a bit of my story and she told me she'd get back to me. With one week left to my due date she texted me that they would cover the child support costs for the length of my studies. Soon after I discovered I had access to some injury insurance I had had and suddenly I could not only just make sure my kids were



Desu and Stefanos

fed, I could focus on my studies and be able to eat at the end of the day!

You cannot imagine the joy and gratitude I felt. It was a complete rescue from the total train wreck my life was headed towards—and it was clearly God who made it happen.

New Life

When my mother had come to the Lord during my childhood, my sister Sapir followed her almost immediately. My oldest brother David was very hostile to the idea until he had an experience and then at the age of 14 went all in. I never bought into the idea as a child. And perhaps it took me so long to give in to the Lord because I was so upset at my family for “abandoning our Jewish roots” for what I considered a pagan belief.

Now as I was finally understanding what it felt like to have your heart captured by the Lord I had to do something so others could experience this. I wanted to do something for Him that mattered but I wasn't sure how.

Then one day I was talking to my brother David. For years, he had pursued a career as a lawyer so we

weren't involved much in each other's lives. Suddenly, he started telling me about his vision to start an Ethiopian congregation with three main focuses.

- Reaching the lost who knew nothing about the Lord
- Reaching those who once knew the Lord and had fallen away
- Reaching the children of believers in rebellion—especially the children of leaders

He would build this congregation in such a way that all of the above would feel at home no matter where they were in their stages of returning to the Lord. Oh, and of course—most uniquely—this would be the first Hebrew-speaking Ethiopian congregation in the country.

Having a congregation for young Ethiopians who did not have a good congregational option because all the other Ethiopian congregations were in Amharic was an epic vision for me. Of course, David already had me at “reaching the lost...”

Then one day soon after, I happened to see a friend of mine in the grocery store, Stefanos, whom I hadn't spoken to in a year. We had been best buds during my party years, but had gotten into a fight a year before over some drug issue. It was a chance meeting and I wanted to make it count. I wanted to tell him about Yeshua, but should I start by apologizing? Yeshua was a highly delicate topic to discuss with a Jewish person—let alone an Israeli. Did I even have enough of a relationship with him to present him with such a life altering message? ■

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To Be Continued...





Happy High Holidays from Jerusalem!

We have had the **privilege of teaming up with one of the most exciting works of God** that we have known in Israel. Two years ago, **David Safafa began a congregation for Hebrew-speaking Ethiopians** and is now seeing Israelis from **all backgrounds coming to know Yeshua the Messiah.**

This plan of God began to unfold when nine-year-old David, immigrated with his family to Israel. His mother, **the daughter of a famous Ethiopian rabbi came to the Lord supernaturally and a few years later, David realized Yeshua was real!**

David always seemed to be a success in whatever he set his heart to do. He graduated university and became a lawyer and a businessman. And then came the moment when he realized **he was pursuing earthly success—and God’s call for him would look very different than this.**

David, now in his early 40’s, is a pastor in Jerusalem with an incredible gift of outreach to the lost; he has a congregation of **some 60 Ethiopian Israeli young people—almost all of whom are brand new believers.** David is training them up for leadership. You can see their caliber of quality and integrity as soon as you meet them. And the main reason that the congregation can’t grow faster is **because there is no more room in this tiny packed “hall.”**

Because this congregation is in Jerusalem, the costs are **more than one can imagine. Rent is 17,000 shekels (\$4,550) a month!** Do the members give God their tithes? **The answer is YES!** But for most, their wages are tiny. To launch and sustain a congregation in Jerusalem means **daily miracles are needed. And yes! Miracles are happening.**

Partners of Maoz with vision and a heart for Jerusalem, are giving to keep this congregation alive and growing. **And now we are looking forward in faith to expanding the size of the hall—because we must!** It just so “happens” that there is empty space on the other side of the hall where the walls can be moved to **seat more than 100 people.**

And because David’s vision is a Hebrew-language congregation, **more new Israeli believers** are coming to the Lord that are from different ethnic backgrounds!

We offer you the opportunity **together with David and us,** to sow and reap a harvest in the City of the King, Jerusalem.

All Israel shall be saved!

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi Ferguson
President & CEO

Shani Ferguson
Chief Creative





EXPERIENCE

THE LAND OF

ISRAEL

Ancient stones testify of the story of Israel that began thousands of years ago. But Israel's story—ordained by God—continues today.

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MAY 9-18, 2024

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