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An Arab in the **Promised Land**

As told to **Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson**

I was born into a Christian Arab family in Nazareth and grew up there. My mother was Catholic, my father Greek Orthodox.

The Christian Arab community is largely nominal and made up of various high-church streams such as Coptic, Catholic, Armenian, Maronite, Orthodox, etc. In Arab culture, you are born into whatever religion your parents were. If your parents are Muslim, you are Muslim. If your parents are Christian, you are Christian.

There was a Baptist church in Nazareth that had actually been planted by one of our distant relatives. But in Nazareth, Evangelicals in general were outsiders. Their New Testament was different, and they wouldn't pray to Mary and the saints. They baptized only upon a profession of faith rather than as infants, and they had strange services that were unpredictable because they didn't use liturgy. So, everyone in our community viewed Evangelicals as a crazy, pitiful off-branch of Christianity.

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Like Bethlehem, Nazareth's cultural Christian population once a majority, is now a minority because of the influx of Islam.

We celebrated Easter, Lent and a variety of Saint holidays. And Christmas we celebrated twice each year, because my parents' churches had different traditions. On December 25th, we visited my mother's Catholic family, and then January 6th, we celebrated with my father's Greek Orthodox family. And yes, we got presents both times!

We knew nothing of the Jewish holidays. They were only relevant to us when roads would be closed for holiday parades (which meant some of the kids in my class wouldn't have a way to get to school).

While Nazareth is an entirely Arab population, the city of Nazareth Illit (Upper Nazareth) is a mixed community of Jews and Arabs. I never knew any of them but vaguely remember hearing that some were Ethiopians and others were Russians.

Nazareth is an entire world to itself. In fact, if you wanted to live your entire life, work, raise a family and not leave your neighborhood—you could. I spent my entire childhood in Nazareth, only occasionally traveling abroad to visit family or to Haifa, to go to the beach.

So, when I finally ventured out after high school, I felt like a tourist in my own country. On paper, Israeli Jews and Arabs are the same. Our taxes, healthcare, utility companies and other basic rights are the same.

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I understood enough Hebrew to get around.

But, the popular

TV shows, nationally

beloved songs, music artists, and inside cultural jokes—I didn't know any of them. I found when I met Syrians, Lebanese and other Middle Easterners, I had more in common with them even though they lived in a different country. So when I see Israeli Arabs step into Jewish circles in Israel, I appreciate the frustration they can feel because culturally we are so different. I also understand why sometimes they eventually leave.

The Miracle that Changed Everything

When I was a teenager, our family witnessed a sudden and supernatural healing of a terminal illness in our extended family. It was then and there that my parents and siblings realized Jesus wasn't just a cultural fairytale. He was real and He wanted to be a part of our lives. And so, my entire immediate family became what the West calls "born again."

From that point on, we took our faith seriously. It was a Baptist pastor who had walked through the family



Left: Conferences like Dor Haba bring Jewish and Arab youth together to worship and explore the arts. For some Arabs, this is their first time meeting Jewish believers.

Below: “Raise Us Up” worship video filmed at Dor Haba conference with Illit Ferguson, Siyonna and Zack in Hebrew, English and Arabic



miracle with us and so we began attending his Baptist church. His church was small and he did not have musicians. So, the worship part of the service was just playing prerecorded CDs.

Since we have always been a musical family, we naturally filled in the musical needs and became the worship team. All these changes resulted in a lot of raised eyebrows and many arguments with friends and extended family. I wouldn't say they ostracized us, but we now saw the world differently, so our shared experiences weren't the same.

Soon after, my oldest brother heard about some youth conferences and attended several. That was the first time any of us would meet Messianic Jews. I remember the state of confusion each of us experienced as we wrestled through the idea of Jews who believed in Yeshua. “What do Jewish people have to do with us Christians?” we would ask each other. To us, being a Jew meant you believed in Moses, not Jesus.

We had heard the Christmas story dozens of times, but neither us nor our parents had any idea Yeshua was Jewish and that the Bible was written by Jews. In Nazareth today, I would say most Christian Arabs know nothing of the connection between Jews and Yeshua.

Israeli Worship

I was still in high school when all this was happening, so I wasn't processing this theologically when I was first impacted by the Israeli worship.

By now, my brother was being asked to play at a bunch of conferences, and he would come home and practice the songs on the piano. I was mesmerized by the chord progressions and melodies. At home, we were exposed to Western pop music and as musicians, we enjoyed listening to movie soundtracks. But in the world of Nazareth, everyone listened to Middle Eastern music. I had only ever heard Middle Eastern style worship and was fascinated when I heard Israeli Jews singing worship songs—in Hebrew and with a Western sound.

When I completed high school, I wanted to study music production, recording and composition. I especially wanted to study the Western sound and found a four-year music school in central Israel. It was hours away from Nazareth, but I met a believing Jewish couple named Ari and Shira Sorko-Ram who invited me to stay with them while I was studying.

As we developed more relationships with Jewish believers and Evangelical Christians from abroad, we were often asked to participate in conferences and even international music tours.

Two significant things happened during this time.



Greek Orthodox monastery in Israel where praying to Mary and dead saints is an integral part of the faith.

In our upbringing, Jews had nothing to do with our Christian identity. We never saw them as believing in the same God as we did, so none of us understood Israel's reestablishment as a fulfilled promise from our God.

Israel setting. We had gone through a significant change in our faith before the Lord and enjoyed our common faith with Jewish believers and Evangelicals, but we had never really sat down and processed our identity as Israeli Arabs.

If you talk to the older men in Nazareth, they will explain to you that the issue of the Arab identity in Israel is more about stability than ideology. The Middle East is historically an unstable region and therefore, choosing a side is dangerous. If you go back a mere 100 years, this region has been ruled by the Ottoman Empire (Muslim), then the British Empire (Christian) and now Israel (Jews).

FIRST: Old Man's Advice

At some point, I noticed my brother began turning down invitations to conferences. While we would gladly play in services or conferences for the love of God and music, we were often highlighted as

the token Arabs in a pro-

It is not uncommon historically for a new ruling power to kill off any perceived competition in a conquered area, to better control the population. Just in the past year, this happened when Syria fell and a mass slaughter ensued. And in Gaza, just recently when the ceasefire was declared, Hamas emerged from the tunnels and killed off hundreds of Gazans from competing gangs.

In the late 1940s, when Israel's army arrived at the doorstep of Nazareth's mayor, Yusuf Fahoum, they asked him a simple question, "Do you want to fight, or will you surrender?" Yusuf is credited for saving Nazareth that day by surrendering and accepting Israel's sovereignty over the land. Today, Nazareth is a thriving Arab city whose residents have full rights as Israeli citizens. But to most of the Arabs there, this "Israeli generosity" is only relevant so long as the Jewish state exists.

In our upbringing, Jews had nothing to do with our Christian identity. We never saw them as believing in the same God as we did, so none of us understood Israel's reestablishment as a fulfilled promise from our God.

Besides, choosing to support Israel and serving in its army would mean fighting against our own Arab people. On the other hand, choosing the "Palestinian" ideology meant you had to hate Jews and embrace a narrative

that supports terrorism and violence. Both were extreme to us. Picking a side meant declaring war on the other side. Peace only existed amongst people who did not take a stand.

And so, our family, like most of our community, was taught in school to exist in the middle. The middle was a place where you held no political persuasion, no matter who ruled the land, and simply didn't talk about it.

On the other hand, Jewish believers and especially Christians regularly made bold declarations of support for Israel as a nation. And so, when we would be asked, as part of a worship set at a conference, to play Israel's national anthem with an Israeli flag behind us, it felt like we were being asked to take a public political stance, when we ourselves had never processed what we believed about the situation.

Besides that—our heart was to reach Muslims all over the Middle East with our worship, *and branding us with pro-Israeli politics would close doors before we even knocked on them.*

SECOND: One New Man

As my four years at the music academy were coming to a close, I realized even before I received my degree that I did not connect with the secular music industry.

In school, we wrote and produced some good songs for class projects. We were even given opportunities to get the songs we wrote on the radio and play on big stages with famous people. But it all felt empty and pointless. I was even offered to teach at the academy, but I didn't like how the music industry was all about getting famous and making money.

I had loved music because I had experienced it in a worship setting. My father had raised us with the understanding that music was a sacred tool for worship. Therefore, I only ever wanted to create music to give glory to God, not solely to entertain people.

Around this time, I was staying with the Jewish couple. Ari began to talk to me about the One New Man spoken of in the Bible. His explanation of how we were all destined to be one before the Lord changed everything for me. Suddenly, uniting as Jews and Arabs was not only plausible—it *was destiny.*

City of Worship

It was a difficult realization that after four years of studying, I had no framework in the real world to use what I had learned. But I am not the type to sit still



Mayor Yusuf Fahoum signs the agreement with Israel after the War of Independence.

for long. So, I decided to apply for work in sales. My plan was to make money in a regular job so I would be able to make music on the side, the way I believed it should be done. I called my brother to let him know I had gotten a job and was moving to a nearby town. Our music would be put on pause for a while. His answer surprised me.

“Why don't we try working with Maoz? We already have years of relationship and mutual trust with them. They value the sacredness of worship like we do. We are skilled musicians, we speak fluent Arabic, Hebrew and English and want to reach the Arab world with the Gospel. These are skills Maoz values.”

This was the conversation that changed everything. Maoz welcomed us in, and we took the reigns of everything that had to do with their Arab outreach. I had only been to Jerusalem once as a child and a few times as an adult to play music, but Nazareth was too far to drive daily. So, I packed up the world I knew and moved to this ancient City of Worship.

Eventually, my brother and his wife also joined the team and now we spend our days exploring new avenues to reach the Muslim world with the message that changed our lives. And of course, producing a blend of Middle Eastern and Western music for the glory of God.

Major vs. Minor

I grew up thinking I was part of the majority. I would see a few Jews eating at a restaurant in Nazareth and think that we, as Arabs, were the majority. When I left Nazareth, I realized Arabs were the minority in Israel. In the world beyond that, Christian Arabs are a

To evangelicals, the connection between Bible prophecy and modern Israel is clear. In the Christian Arab world, it is never discussed.

minority in the Arab world. In fact, we are such a minority that many people think the words Arab and Muslim are synonymous. When we travel abroad to play our music, it's not uncommon to be greeted by Muslim Arabs who came to hear us play because they had never met an Arab who wasn't Muslim.

I could go back to the safe place that is Nazareth, where I am in the comfortable majority. But I can see something a lot of people around me can't see. The Bible promises something greater than mere political agreements can offer. I see a place where the Gospel is able to unite Jews and Arabs in ways politics never could. I can see that together we can be a powerful force to change our world. And I believe I can be a bridge to help people get to that place.

The Bible is clear that the One New Man has one citizenship that matters. I believe in a future where



Yonatan Sindel/Flash90

there is less hate and more love for the King of the Jews, who was slain for the sins of the entire world. And perhaps it will mean redefining what it means to be an Arab in the Promised Land, an older brother in the story of the Jewish people.

I understand there is a price to pay—and the road to a paradigm shift can be a lonely one. But I am already part of a team that believes it can be done. ■

Ephesians 2:11–19

Consider this New Testament passage in context of the article you just read and the Middle East conflict. Gentiles simply means nations or people—and Arabs are one of these peoples spoken of here.

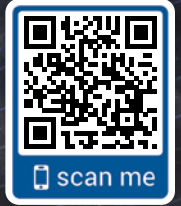
¹¹ Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹² **In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them.** You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³ But now you

have been united with Messiah Yeshua. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Messiah. ¹⁴ For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, **he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.** ¹⁵ He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. **He made peace between Jews and**

Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups... ¹⁷ He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. ¹⁸ Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Yeshua has done for us. ¹⁹ So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. **You are members of God's family.**



February 2025



Shalom from Jerusalem!

From the early years of Maoz, Ari and Shira understood the importance of the Arab population in the story of modern Israel. **The salvation of Muslim and cultural Christian Arabs is one of the most powerful testimonies of transformation that Jews can witness.**

For decades we have supported local Arab pastors as they minister to the ultra-minority of born-again Christian Arabs. But as you can see from this month's article, the Arab community is a very closed one. One that is not quick to trust outsiders, and one that is constantly on the defensive from the growing Muslim demographic around them.

There is not one big conference or outreach that will solve this issue. This is a region of deeply steeped traditions and belief systems that have evolved from centuries of conflict and survival. But we are here for the long haul.

And there is a way in. **It will require shining a light delicately, from the inside of Arab culture, and we would love for you to take part in helping make this happen.**

As you may have noticed, we kept the names out of the article, to give you as much insight as possible into a hidden world without damaging the integrity of the work. Our Arab outreach is currently publishing educational materials for print and online, and of course—**producing Arabic worship.**

We know many of our readers who love Israel also **have a unique love for the Arab people. And so, we hope you will join us and embrace this opportunity to give directly to reaching them with the Gospel.** This outreach annually costs \$95,000 and as this budget grows, so will the places we can reach!

Your partners in the Harvest,

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi & Shani Ferguson

Kobi Ferguson
President & CEO

Shani Ferguson
COO



Wissam Nassar/Flash 90

Building Relations with the Arab World begins with speaking their own language

The New
MaozArabic

ما نقوم به من نحن تعمق أكثر [يشترك](#) [ينفرد](#) [AR](#) [Q](#) [maoz-israel](#)

تقوية إسرائيل في الرب

معوز تعني القوة

عبادة جديدة من القدس

في قلب صلب مدينة القدس القديمة، ستجد مجتمعًا من مُركّبي المزمار المعاصرين يقضون أيامهم في تأليف وإنتاج موسيقى عبادة جديدة داخل أستوديو بمساحة 3000 قدم مربع. جميع أنواع الموسيقى مسموح بها.

لقد تنبأ أن كلمة الرب ستتطلب من صهيون، ونحن ببساطة ترسلها في ترقية من مدينة العبادات

[استمع إلى الموسيقى](#)

كيف نساعد

معوز للموسيقى

بنفس الرؤية والدعوة كما كان الحال مع اللاويين القدماء، تعمل معوز للموسيقى على تنمية قادة عبادة شباب وإنتاج موسيقى عبادة أصلية في أستوديو الموسيقى الخاص بهم في القدس.

[اكتشف المزيد](#)

معوز للتبشير

تهدف منظمة ماوز أوت ريتش إلى تقوية المؤمنين في إسرائيل - من خلال إنشاء الجماعات ودعم الخدمات الشبابية، والتوعية في الشوارع، ومخيمات الشباب والمؤتمرات للقادة.

[اكتشف المزيد](#)

ربطك بقلب الله لإسرائيل




نحن نتفهم التحديات التي يواجهها المؤمنون الإسرائيليون يوميًا. منذ ما يقرب من 45 عامًا، ساهمت معوز إسرائيل في توعية العالم بكيفية عمل يسوع في أرضه.

[عن معوز إسرائيل](#)

الحياة القوية تخلق شاهدًا قويًا

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