

End of an Era: Sorko-Rams Pass the Leadership Baton

Ari Sorko-Ram was an unlikely choice. Nothing in his background hinted at the destiny God had in mind for him. He never knew his father. His mother, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, suffered from Russian pogroms and domestic abuse and was unstable. He was even separated from his six brothers and sisters at the age of 2 and was raised in a boys' school. It was a rough beginning.

As a teenager, Ari was invited to a youth camp. There, a counselor treated him with great kindness and, at the end of the camp, mentioned to Ari how thankful he was for Ari's Jewish heritage, which had brought salvation to him as a Christian.

The following year, Ari began to study the Bible and found he had endless questions. He decided to return the next summer to the camp, where the counselor invited him to personally study both Old and New Testaments with him. He explained the Good News to the teenager in a way that made sense, and Ari found his Messiah.

Two days after receiving his new life, Ari had a supernatural encounter with God, who revealed himself to Ari as his Father. Growing up without a father present in his life, it was the first time Ari understood the undeniable love God had for him as his Father. This dynamic revelation became the foundation for Ari's destiny as father to many new believers in the faith.

His path to that destiny, however, was anything but direct. As a young man, Ari lived in France, serving with NATO, and was on the French national and international rugby team. His success took him to America, where he played professional

football in the NFL. He returned to college, studying psychology. He became a deputy sheriff in the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. And then he became an actor and a member of the Screen Actors Guild, starring in movies and television series on a regular basis.

A Chance Meeting

And that is when the tipping point came. On a whim, Ari phoned a new friend who was the editor of the *Hollywood Reporter*, the newspaper for "the industry." It so happened that Shira Lindsay was visiting this reporter, whom she had met in Israel when directing a documentary film on archeology with the world-renowned professor Yigal Yadin, who was at that time conducting a dig on the ancient site of Meggido (called Armageddon in the New Testament).

Shira was in the U.S. looking for Jewish believers who would be willing to move to Israel in order to form a core that could help pioneer a Messianic movement in Israel. Yes, there were a few Israeli Jewish believers in the 70s, but very, very few.

At that meeting, Ari, a working actor, met Shira. She made her appeal. Ari, a bright and talented young man (after all, at the time, he was a working actor in Hollywood with plenty of opportunities for a bright and lucrative future in the industry) did not instantly respond. In fact, he laid out a list of 23 things "God would have to do" in order for him to commit to spend a trial year of his life in Israel.

When all 23 conditions were met, including an acting job in Israel, Ari got the message. He took off for Israel!

During his 12-month commitment to Israel, Ari immersed himself in the study of the Hebrew language. He understood the dynamic of speaking the same language with those whom you wish to reach. Having an affinity for languages (he can speak English, Hebrew, German, French and now is studying Chinese), he knew

if he wanted to be taken seriously as a voice for the Good News in Israel, he would have to have a vocabulary to communicate to those in high places, as well as the down and out.

Ari's one-year commitment has turned into 37 years—in fact, a full lifetime of commitment. He fell in love with Shira. They married. They had two children. And Israel became their home.

During those early years, David and Joel Chernoff (LAMB) came to Israel for a few weeks to help Ari and Shira with the first few Jewish believers who had answered the call to come and live in Israel. Then others followed—David and Lisa Loden, pioneers in Messianic music; David and Martha Stern, of *The Complete Jewish Bible*; and a few others. The Lord simply was assembling the first core of Spirit-filled Messianic Jewish believers in the land.

Together, Ari and Shira made a personal commitment to spend their lives impacting the Jewish people in Israel with the truth of the Good News—the truth of the Messiah, Yeshua.

Early on, they committed themselves to the people, the language and the culture. It was a common bond they had with each other and with their people. They made a formidable team—Shira was the “can do” person, and Ari loved and connected with people. What a duo!

Back to the First Century

Shira and Ari recognized the need to build a community where they could worship together. Not a synagogue, steeped in tradition. Not a church, which in Israel represents simply non-Jewish. But a Messianic Jewish congregation, a community of Israeli Jewish believers in Yeshua where the message of the Messiah would be presented in the context of Israel. It is a place where the power of the Spirit was welcomed in Hebrew and in Israel's cultural context and genuine, real worship in Israel's music genre in Hebrew. There needed to be a community

for real relationships. And there had to be an atmosphere to experience the love of the Father. It had to happen!

Their first worship team was Shira at the keyboard and Ari singing. And Ari would preach. He didn't really feel he was that gifted to lead a congregation, but the need for a community of believers who worshipped in Hebrew, prayed in Hebrew, studied the Word in Hebrew and celebrated the biblical Hebrew holidays was a driving force. Through the years, Ari and Shira planted several pioneer congregations.

Alongside this activity, Ari and Shira created a Messianic helps ministry called Maoz and began hiring sabras (native-born Israelis) to help in their ministry endeavors throughout the country. Together they worked to find strategies that would reach Israelis with the gospel and help others to do the same.

It was early in the 1990s when they staged an outdoor concert, complete with mime, dance and music, in Tel Aviv. It was an instant success. Israelis were drawn to the outdoor concert and then invited to hear more at a nearby Messianic bookstore/coffee shop, Dugit. They were bombarded with people who responded, wanting to know more about Yeshua.

But what happened next set them on a course of action. Yes, the concert drew the people. But at the coffee shop, there were not enough Israeli Hebrew-speaking believers to talk to the people. There were simply too few local people grounded in their faith and prepared to share the gospel. It was a revelation and a dilemma.

A few weeks after the outreach, Ari and Shira realized that without "laborers in the field" and no organized follow-up in place (those who were equipped and empowered to share the Good News and disciple new believers), any outreach efforts would be short-lived.

1995: Starting a New Congregation

One afternoon, Shira simply asked Ari, "Have you ever thought about starting another congregation?"

Ari knew the ramifications of his answer. He understood the challenge ahead. And he asked for wisdom and counsel from his heavenly Father. In his own words, he says, "I never considered myself a congregation leader or shepherd. I didn't feel that was my gifting. But I did know I could present the gospel in a very constructive and effective way. And although in the natural, the concept of 'family' was not something I grew up with, I knew my heavenly Father and knew that His love was something I could communicate to others."

And that is when Congregation Tiferet Yeshua (the Glory of Yeshua) was born—at the time, a radical departure from what many believing communities in Israel looked like. The congregation was going to be Israeli in every way—language, culture, celebrations. They were going to establish a Hebrew-speaking-only, Spirit-filled congregation. This congregation was going to be committed to one thing: reaching Israelis!

It might sound simple, but at that time many congregations in the land were made up mostly of immigrants and tourists, had services in English or Russian with translations (most leaders in the land had emigrated from America or Russia) and simply did not provide an atmosphere where native-born Israelis could identify culturally or spiritually.

Hebrew Only

Ari and Shira began with another couple and two ladies, and a little group of Hebrew-speaking Israelis who were hurting, hungry, destitute or hopeless began to grow. Ari instinctively became a father to many in the Faith. He loved them, cried with them, taught them, visited them and helped them grow in their faith, within the safe environment of a caring and believing community.

Ari's supernatural encounter with his Father, God, truly

positioned him—not in status, but in relationship—to become a father of the faith to many in Israel. God the Father, as the center of Ari's life, became his focus.

The congregation was at the core of the activity and outreach of Maoz Israel Ministries. The congregation provided the people power, the engine and the stability to reach other Israelis with the gospel. Many around the world had already realized the power of a community of believers, but with such a small bunch of believing Israelis, this was new territory in Israel.

They began meeting in the basement of Ari and Shira's house and eventually moved to downtown Tel Aviv (above a pool hall!). But it wasn't the four walls that attracted the people. It was the unconditional love, the safe place, the Israeli culture. That is what drew them to worship together. And, oh! What worship!

Ari and Shira knew all along that a worshipping, Spirit-filled congregation was a key to reaching Israel. They poured their lives into the people. They established worship teams. They began a youth ministry, children's ministry, small groups, prayer teams and discipleship programs.

In fact, for the last 36 years, one of the greatest legacies of the ministry of Ari and Shira and the congregations they have pastored are the leaders who are serving all over the country now. Ask many of them, and they will affirm that Ari and Shira were instrumental in some way in empowering them, launching them, inspiring them and resourcing them in their own kingdom endeavors.

Ari and Shira are definitely Webster's definition of pioneers: "a foot soldier whose duties include going ahead of the main company to construct things to pave the way for them ... a person or group that is the first to do something or that leads in developing something new." They forged ahead with

vision and faith.

The Next Generation

A few years ago, Ari sensed it was time to identify those leaders who would be qualified to lead the next generation. As he and Shira looked over the possibilities, they saw so much potential—but there was still work to do. They had a fine group of young men and women who were called to the marketplace. But where was the Israeli couple or couples called to lead the congregation?

They began to meet with young professionals in their congregation, some who had never entertained the idea of taking a leadership role within the congregational framework. They opened their home for an intimate time of sharing, teaching and mentoring.

Their dream of handing over the congregation to a seasoned sabra was before them. They clung to the scripture in John 15:16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.” They realized that all of the years of plowing the ground and planting the seeds would be in vain if there were not those who were trained to continue the work they had begun. That’s when the Holy Spirit took over.

Asher Intrater, certainly one of the most seasoned Bible teachers in Israel today, known around the world and a close friend of Ari, visited the monthly leaders’ meeting. It was there he was inspired as he observed this talented group of 25-30 Israeli young adults hungrily absorbing the mentoring from Ari and Shira.

A few days after the meeting, Ari and Asher met. With the same vision and DNA, it seemed like the most natural conversation in the world—with far-reaching ramifications. Asher agreed to lead Congregation Tiferet Yeshua with the ultimate goal of

equipping this core group of sabras to lead the congregation and future generations. In his own words, he says, “I feel anointed to lead the congregation and continue to train the sabras. I’m ready to go the distance—whatever it takes!”

And that is exactly what is happening today at Congregation Tiferet Yeshua. This is an answer to prayer! Asher is already known, trusted and loved by the congregation, having served as an elder there a few years ago. Asher, as pastor, will continue to impart, direct, cast vision, equip and empower this next generation to penetrate all sectors of society in Israel—government, the arts and entertainment, education, politics, justice system, family and religion. Only then can all Israel be awakened to the gospel!

The Local Congregation

Ari and Asher realize the vital importance of a local congregation. It is a hub of activity, training, nurturing and vitality. And it is also an environment to learn, grow and serve.

Congregations in Israel are the foundation to sharing the gospel with Israelis. Without it, there is no rudder. That’s why Ari and Shira are committed to seeing congregations all over Israel flourish. They believe the congregation is a safe place and a springboard to spend time in relationship, to serve in the local body and to be trained and empowered to go out and fulfill their own destiny.

Of course, on a practical note, that takes resources—people, finances, prayer. All are ingredients necessary to undergird the young congregations in Israel. And with the help of its partners, Maoz will continue to financially support the Tiferet Yeshua congregation to be a light in downtown Tel Aviv.

As Ari and Shira release the day-to-day responsibilities of leading a congregation, they are not leaving the congregation.

Ari, in handing over the leadership to Asher, now functions, at Asher's request, not as father but as grandfather. It's a role he is quite comfortable in.

Truly, the commitment has not changed. Because of their core beliefs, Ari and Shira will continue to stand with the Messianic Jewish community in Israel—mentoring leaders, helping financially, combating persecution and standing strong beside the growing number of wonderful Israeli Messianic leaders throughout the country working to see all of Israel saved.

Reaching Israel Through Media

Maoz, under the leadership of Ari and Shira, will also continue to lead the charge in Hebrew language book publishing, Internet evangelism in Hebrew, training leaders in national conferences, Messianic music and educating the worldwide audience to stand strong with Israel. And with such a strong background in media, Ari and Shira are focused on reaching the next generation of Israelis—in Hebrew—with all of the technology that is available.

It's a gigantic task. But after all, this is what they were born to do!

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