

Stefanos

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The Boys from Beresheet

By **Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson**

PART 2

Last month I told you the story of Desu, one of the three “boys” who, together with Pastor David Safafa and his wife Tigest, make up the leadership of Beresheet (Hebrew for Genesis). It is one of the youngest and fastest-growing congregations in Israel. And by youngest, I mean both natural in age—and young spiritually, as the majority of the congregants have come to the Lord

in the past few years through David Safafa and Beresheet’s outreach.

At first, I attempted to squeeze a summary of all three of their testimonies into one article. But I quickly realized each was unique and it would be so worth taking the time to share the testimony of each of these young men. So without further ado—here is testimony number two!

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Stefanos (on left) praying for members of the congregation

Stefanos

I was born in Wonji, Ethiopia, near a larger town ironically called Nazareth. We lived in a small home built from mud bricks in a neighborhood of homes that looked much like ours. We had a yard of dirt. Nothing grandiose but it gave us room to run around and play. My father worked as head of the guards at a paper mill and my mother took care of the kids at home.

I knew of places that existed outside of Ethiopia, but Israel was not one of them as my parents told me nothing of my being Jewish. This was largely because my mother had left home at 13 for the promise of a family who said they would fly her to the U.S. to further her education. In reality, they kept her in Ethiopia and made her into their housekeeper. So, at the age of 14 she ran away from them and took on various jobs until she married at the age of 18. She never went back to her family and thus abandoned anything having to do with her Jewish heritage.

Israel was not even a speck on my radar. I knew of places that existed outside of Ethiopia, but Israel was not one of them, as I knew nothing of my being Jewish.

Then suddenly I remember as a child, there began this chatter between my parents on the topic of Israel and our Jewish heritage—and making Aliyah (immigrating)! And before I knew what was happening, at the age of 10, the fifth of 6 children, I was stepping off a plane and into my new home in Jerusalem.

As with most Ethiopian arrivals, we began our journey in a caravan absorption neighborhood with programs designed to teach us Hebrew and integrate us into Israeli culture. After learning Hebrew, I was placed in a religious Jewish school and within two years we were granted benefits to help us purchase our own apartment. My mother stayed home with us kids and my father took on cleaning jobs. My dad loves cleaning. He's 80 and he still cleans and is always looking for more hours to clean!

“On paper” as they say, I had it better than most Ethiopian Aliyah stories because I had both parents married and living at home. But paper is paper, and reality is always more complex than paper.

I passed each grade somehow, but never did well in school academically and of course by the ninth grade smoking weed was the standard pastime of everyone around me. My final three years of high school were spent in an agricultural boarding school where I learned to work the land and care for farm animals. Like my dad, I love the sense of accomplishment that comes with hard work, so I did well in that setting.

Stefanos building the stage in Beresheet's newest meeting place



When army time came, I wanted something challenging, so I requested to be placed in the Golani combat unit. Unfortunately, they didn't see me as a good fit and gave me an incredibly mind-numbing job. After two years of struggling in this position the army released me into civilian life.

For the first time, entirely on my own and without any formal skills or licenses, I landed a job as an assistant to an electrician. It was a good job. But two years into it, a friend of mine connected me with an entertainment production company and I jumped at the opportunity. The next amazing five years of my life I spent building stages for huge events all over the country.

I loved the dynamics of this job. I got to work with my hands and every day we were somewhere else building something different. These years had many good memories, but the constant weed smoking took its toll on my mind. I lost motivation and one day, at the age of 26, I just left the job and never went back.

Between the ages of 26 and 32 I lived the life of a common criminal. I didn't even have to try. Everyone in my neighborhood lived like that; it was how normal life was done. I was arrested several times and had my house searched by the police more than once. Of course, they found stuff, and I eventually spent a year in prison.

Around the age of 30 I met a woman named Masret. We developed a relationship quickly and by the time I

These are the three members of Pastor David Safafa's leadership who inspired the writing of the "Boys of Beresheet." If you haven't had a chance to read Desu's testimony from last month I encourage you to do so as the stories of Desu, Stefanos and Assaf (which you will get to read about next month) are fascinatingly intertwined from childhood all the way to their time of transformation into the growing men of God they are today.



Between the ages of 26 and 32 I lived the life of a common criminal. I didn't even have to try. Everyone in my neighborhood lived like that; it was how normal life was done.

was sent to prison we already had two kids together. Masret had her own addiction problems but while I was in prison, she put herself through a rehab where she was not only delivered from her addiction but came to know the Lord!

That year in prison, away from my family, tamed me. Once I got out, I didn't want to do anything that would risk me going back to prison. But I couldn't seem to give up smoking weed. I got a job as a mover (which I still do today) and did everything I could to be around at home for the kids.

I had a friend named Desu I had known from my trouble-making years. We were always together doing the craziest things. Then sometimes we'd be smoking weed together and Desu would bring up reading



Stefanos and Masret finally tie the knot before the Lord and the congregation



Stefanos and Pastor David Safafa celebrate at the wedding

Scriptures. I would tell him I wasn't interested because my mind was so hazy I couldn't even understand what he was talking about.

Then, just before I ended up in prison we had a big fight, so it would be a while before I'd see him again.

About a year after I got out, and just before COVID hit, my sister, who had been a believer for a long time, came to me and asked me if I would go with her and pray with Pastor Tal, an Ethiopian pastor in Jerusalem. I have no idea why I agreed. I was high and my thoughts were fuzzy so I just thought to myself, "Sure, I guess it can't hurt."

Then one day I went to the grocery store and bumped into Desu... We started talking when I realized Desu was witnessing to me. I laughed when I realized it and told him, "I'm already with the Lord!"

I met the pastor, and he asked me to read the verses—from Ephesians about not wrestling with flesh and blood. I read it but I didn't really understand what it was talking about. Then suddenly I began crying with no idea why. The experience was powerful and I left that place born again! When I went home that day, I wanted things to change. We would start over. It was like getting to know my children's mother all over again.

As part of turning my life around I tried attending Pastor Tal's congregation. However, as amazing a man of God as he was, the members of his congregation were older and the meetings were in Amharic which I could understand, but couldn't read or write as I had been educated in Israel. So sitting through the services was difficult for me.

Then one day I went to the grocery store and bumped into Desu. It had been over a year since we'd had our big fight and it seemed we both felt it to be a good time to make up. We started talking when I realized Desu

was witnessing to me. I laughed when I realized it and told him, "I'm already with the Lord!" It was a strange conversation since we had both known each other from a world of drugs and troublemaking and suddenly both of us were using phrases like "God is good!"

I told him of my struggle with finding a congregation where I could be with likeminded believers but who spoke Hebrew. He got all excited and started telling me about Beresheet (Genesis), the new congregation his brother David was planting in his home. I was all in. Since then, our congregation has moved three times because we've grown so fast. I spend all my free time helping any way I can. I go anywhere I'm asked to help anyone who needs it, and I love using my skills to fix anything in the congregation's building where we meet. I even had the privilege of helping Ari and Shira pack up their home when they were moving to be closer to where Kobi and Shani live.

It took another year or two as COVID hit right around this time, but as we grew in our faith, Masret and I spent time getting counseling and stabilizing our lives and just this spring officially tied the knot before the Lord and all our friends and family.

Every time Desu and I look back on our journey together we just can't believe how far we've come and ended up on the same team! But of course, if you noticed in the photo there are three of us on David's leadership team—Desu, myself and Assaf. And you could argue that Assaf's story is crazier than both of our stories combined. ■

To Be Continued...



Emuna

The Girl who Wrote Songs

I started writing songs when I was 8 years old.

My mother raised me to love the Lord and I had a very childlike faith. I used to write songs from a place of innocence and an expression of how much I loved the Lord and how close I felt to Him.

If someone threw a melody or a beat at me. I was always able to come up with lyrics and rhymes for it. It flowed out of me like water and I was known by my friends and family as "the girl who wrote songs."

And then over the years, things happened. People would make discouraging comments—even unintentionally. These comments about how simple-minded and simplistic my songs were sowed seeds of doubt

in my heart and slowly I began to believe that writing music wasn't for me.

I lost confidence in everything that had to do with music. I had more confidence in my ability to clean a house than to write music. And with that loss of faith, suddenly I wasn't able to write anymore.

I joined in on the vision of Beresheet early on when it was just getting started. My brothers, David and Desu, of course knew about my childhood love for worship and asked me to lead worship for the services. I actually laughed when they asked me because it had been so long since I had seen myself functioning in that capacity, I felt no connection with musical instruments or singing.

But they were super encouraging that this was my gifting. I remember the first time I started playing chords and opened my mouth to sing to Him it was like it wasn't me singing—it was Him singing and flowing through me.

It was an incredible experience for me to suddenly find my place as a worship leader. But still, I felt something holding me back. It was a feeling of unworthiness—like I sinned

too much, made too many mistakes and wasn't good enough for this position.

We've had several times of extended corporate fasting and praying where everyone joins in and gives up food or media or something of worth to them in an effort to grow closer to the Lord and to each other. Then we get up early—like 5 or 6 am—to read scripture and pray together on zoom or in a meeting place. Each time the Lord addressed something in me that would peel off a layer of what was blocking me from being closer to Him and being able to be who I needed to be for Him.

And it was from this place of feeling everyone else was more worthy than me to worship—let alone lead worship—that the Lord spoke to me, "You won't tell Me who I can and can't use and I've chosen you to glorify My name. I don't need you to keep trying to fake-it-till-you-make-it. Be open about your brokenness and then you will both be healed and experience power from that broken place."

It was during one of those fasts that I was sitting and playing the piano and the reality of everything Yeshua did for me hit me so intensely. I owe Him everything and yet He is the one who came down from heaven and gave His life for mine—how overwhelming is His grace!

I started looking over all the members in the congregation in my mind, knowing where they came from and knowing where I could've been today without God's intervention and thought, "Where would all of us be, if not for You?"

The lyrics spilled out of my simple thoughts. "God, I've seen what You've done in my life, who can tell me You aren't alive? I'm so full of gratitude!"

The words were so simple, the concept so basic—and I even used street slang which isn't usually accepted in Hebrew songs, let alone worship songs. But the song struck a deep chord with everyone who heard it in the congregation. In the end, it was the simplicity of how I could relay this truth that everyone could relate to. I never dreamed the song would reach so many nations, and in the Hebrew version too! ■

Emuna leading worship at Beresheet Congregation



October 2023



Shalom from Jerusalem!

The Jews of Ethiopia had dreamed of returning to the Holy Land for generations. In our generation, this dream became true. Today, over 180,000 Jews of Ethiopian background reside in Israel. Half of them were born in Israel.

But coming from a very impoverished nation, they came with little education and skills for living in Israel. And Israel wasn't the heavenly Jerusalem they had imagined.

Many Ethiopian Jewish immigrants have fallen into a criminal path, while others have defied the odds and worked to be successful and an asset to the nation. Yet only 4,000 young people of this community have managed to receive a higher education!

Some of the greatest "success stories" are those who have met Yeshua and received Him as their Lord. These young people are on fire for Yeshua; they are smart and energetic, ready to serve and witness at every opportunity. And, by the way, with their gifts of evangelism, there are new Israeli believers from different backgrounds now attending Beresheet!

Several of the members of Beresheet Congregation in Jerusalem have terrific talents in praise and worship—like Emuna who wrote *Kama Hesed (Overwhelming Grace)*! As first-generation immigrants, none of the families they grew up in could afford proper music lessons and so they learned what they could entirely on their own or with a few "lessons" here and there.

There are some who have worked long and hard to save up to purchase basic instruments and are learning from friends or YouTube clips. These precious people are hidden gems who have proven they can create something beautiful with the breadcrumbs they have received—but we want to see what they can do with a whole bakery!

Israel is an expensive country, especially when it comes to music, but we are eager to give these young people every opportunity to study musical instruments and enhance their singing abilities for the glory of God. We need to raise \$2,500 a month (or \$30,000 for the year) to cover the costs of music studies and technical training for sound production, along with the cost of equipment. There are about 10 of them already involved.

They have been told by so many they will never be good enough. But we invite you, our Maoz partners, to give them a chance to prove the naysayers wrong and that God is able to do above and beyond our wildest dreams.

All Israel shall be saved!

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi and Shani Ferguson

Kobi Ferguson
President & CEO

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