

## **My Testimony**

**A believer's testimony from European non Eastern countries (Sephardic testimony)**

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### **The Sovereign God**

We are all well aware of the suffering of Jews in Europe during World War II under the Nazi regime. No other people suffered more or lost more lives than the Ashkenazi Jews. What is less well known is the suffering and persecution of the eastern Jews in Arabic countries, who escaped with little more than the clothes on their backs.

My family lived for countless generations in Iraq. In fact we used to joke that our ancestors were those of the people of Israel who stayed in Babylon when King Coresh allowed the Jews to go back to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem. Apparently they had a good life in Babylon and did not want to leave!

In the late 1930's and early 40's the political situation in Iraq deteriorated. Persecution increased and laws were passed that discriminated against the civil rights of the Jews. Increasing numbers of Jews fled the country. The harsh atmosphere in Europe also affected the Jews of Iraq. Eventually most of the Jews had to flee, leaving behind their homes, their livelihoods, and the wealth accumulated over generations. The Jewish community in Iraq was highly educated and cultured, and had been well-placed and influential in all strata of Iraqi society.

In the early 40's my relatives, including both my then-teenaged parents, had to flee the country. My grandmother had lost her husband when only 19, and was left with a small daughter and a baby, my father, on the way. My father recalls the tragedy of never having known his own father. His uncles were concerned that his young mother would not be able to raise two small children without a husband and livelihood, and had decided to adopt and raise my father. However, when fleeing from Iraq the family split in two – some crossed over to then - Palestine (the state of Israel had not yet been established) and some crossed over the border into Iran. My father was with the family that moved to Israel, while his mother and sister moved to Iran.

Shortly after his arrival in Palestine, my father was recruited to the *Palmach* (the Hebrew acronym of *Plugot Machatz* meaning "..."). The *Palmach* was founded in May 1941 in order to support the British army in its stand against the approaching Nazi forces. However, the British administration in Palestine ordered its dismantlement in 1942 as the threat of invasion receded. Instead, it became the elite striking force of the *Hagannah*, the underground military organization of the Jewish settlement in Palestine. From 1945 through to 1947 the *Palmach* was engaged in bringing over 67 ships loaded with tens of thousands of Jewish refugees, survivors of the murderous Nazi regime, in defiance of restrictions placed on immigration by Great Britain, the region's mandatory power.

My father spoke fluent Arabic and thus participated in *Palmach* operations smuggling Jews from Lebanon and Syria into Palestine, before the declaration of Israel's Independence. He was captured by the Syrians and sat in prison for some months

before he managed to escape. For his heroism, and because of his expulsion from Iraq, he was officially recognized as a Prisoner of Zion.

### **Family reunion**

Some years after the state of Israel was established in May 1948, my father determined to look for his mother, sister and other relatives in Iran. He came back empty-handed. At the same time, unknown to him, his sister came to Israel to look for him and the rest of the family, and was likewise unsuccessful. It was many years before they finally found each other in a bitter-sweet reunion. By then my aunt had married an Iranian Jew, but remained childless. My father married the cousin he had grown up with.

When I was two years old, my mother took my brother, my sister and me to Iran to visit our relatives. Though the visit was meant to have been for the two summer months we ended up staying with them for nine months – life was good in Iran in those days. At the end of that visit, my mother decided to leave me in Iran with my uncle and aunt, in order to save their marriage. Since they were not able to have children they had been considering divorce. My parents' sacrifice, through the mercy of God, helped save their marriage.

So although a Sabra, Israeli-born, I was raised in Iran from the age of two. I attended the Jewish school attached to our synagogue. Jewish life under the Shah's regime was safe and we enjoyed good relations with most of our neighbors. We were able to live our Jewish life with no interference and there were shops where we could buy Kosher food and products imported from Israel. The Israeli consulate in Tehran was very active and maintained good relations with the Shah. In fact often fresh strawberries, avocados and other products were imported to the Shah's palace directly from Israel.

### **The Islamic Revolution**

The revolution began in 1977. Before the fall of the Shah's regime in 1978, the Israeli authorities (consulate) asked me to be ready to leave the country should the political situation deteriorate. I was an Israeli citizen, and many other Israelis could have been at risk in the revolution. However, my uncle was loath to send me back to Israel, as he had lost his nephew there in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. The 19 year old soldier had been declared a Prisoner of War, and then Missing in Action, and it was only much later that the family learned that he had fallen in the Golan Heights in the first days of the war. This tragedy had such an impact on my uncle and aunt that they determined to do all in their power to avoid my compulsory draft in Israel.

In those days many Jews in Iran sent their children to the UK or to the USA for higher education, and my uncle determined to get me to one of those countries as soon as possible. The search began immediately and in just a few weeks, by God's sovereign plan, I was accepted to a boarding high school in San Diego California. Somehow, miraculously and after much effort, I obtained a student visa from the US embassy in Tehran (the same embassy that later was captured by the revolutionary forces). Soon I found myself halfway across the globe in a somewhat hostile place. The international school was filled with Persians and Arabs, and my survival instincts warned me that I had best not tell anyone that I was Jewish. My relatives also encouraged me to keep my identity secret, after all, I was a 16 year old Israeli citizen who had just fled from Iran and the Islamic revolution.

### **Hearing the Gospel**

Some months after my arrival in the U.S., a cousin invited me to attend a Bible study. I would often spend the weekend with my cousin and his family. I recall being at that study and hearing the name of Jesus more often than I had ever heard before in my life. To me Jesus was the prophet of the Christians, just as Mohammad was the prophet of the Muslims and Moses was ours. At the end of the Bible study two of the men and my cousin decided to sit down and share the Gospel with me.

My cousin realized that most of what was said in the formal Bible study had gone over my head because of the English. So he and his friends sat with me afterwards and began to explain. They opened the Bible to Genesis chapter 3 and began to read the story of the fall. This of course was familiar to me, as my grandmother had often told me the story of Adam and Eve and how after they ate from the apple tree, their eyes had moved to the middle of their faces. She believed that before the Fall their eyes were on the top of their heads! When my cousin and his friends read Genesis 3:15 they asked me if I knew what this verse was about? Of course I had no clue! I said no – they responded, ok let's move forward. They had already piqued my curiosity.

Then they began to go through some of the messianic passages in the Old Testament, particularly those of the prophets. Many of these verses were new to me. My cousin would often stop his friends in order to explain the verses to me in Persian. After about 45 minutes and after explaining to me some of the messianic prophecies, they turned to the New Testament. This got me very nervous, and my cousin noticed. However, by this time I was also ready to hear more, particularly as I had not yet received an explanation of Genesis 3:15!

They opened the Gospel of John and began to explain to me from the scriptures that Jesus had fulfilled all the prophecies of the Old Testament we had just read, and many more. It was then that they finally explained that Jesus, who was born from the seed of the women, and through the Holy Spirit, was the one that God was talking about, and that in fact already in Genesis 3 God had revealed his plan of salvation for mankind.

The first thought that came to my mind was that if this is really true, then how is that for so many years I have not heard of it. In fact, not one of my relatives either in Israel or in Iran has ever heard of it. I then said something to the effect that if this is true, then God will reveal it to me. At the time I was going through a time of rebellion in my life. Being far from my family and in the American culture, I had more interest in what life could offer than in God. But this encounter really made me think. Before departing, they told me that if I wanted to know more about Jesus, I should read the Gospel of John.

When I returned to my room in the dormitory, I realised that God had already planted a bible with a New Testament in my room. I pulled the bible out and began looking for the Gospel of John. This was the first time in my life that I had ever held a New Testament in my hand. I began to read. For six months, almost daily, I read passages from the Gospel of John and other portions in the New and Old Testament. During this time my cousin and another friend would often come and visit me.

### **New Birth**

It was during these six months that God put together the pieces of a big puzzle for me. Whenever I read something in the New Testament, I would recall something of the Old Testament from the synagogue or my grandmother's stories, which by now I realized were not always accurate. And each time it was as if God were placing another piece of the puzzle in its exact place. Finally, after six months of searching the Lord convinced me that Jesus is the promised messiah of the Old Testament, the Jewish messiah.

The event that finally clinched things was a pool game! The student lounge in the dormitory had a pool table and a ping pong table and some other fun games. I became fond of pool and enjoyed playing it. Though I was getting better and better, there was a Persian guy that was nicknamed the Shark, because he was unbeatable. One day it was my turn to play against him. Soon he had finished all his balls except the 8<sup>th</sup> ball and I was left with three and it was now my turn. The balls were arranged in such a way that I had no clue how to go about them. He gave me a hint saying if you hit this one here then it will move there and from there to the hole. It was a triangle shot that I had never tried before but I decided to give it a shot. Just before hitting the ball I said in my heart "in Jesus name" - and I won the game. The first time that I, or as far as I knew anyone, had beaten the unbeatable Shark. (By the way I promise that since then I have never used the Lord's name to win a game!)

Some weeks later I was baptised at the New Life Presbyterian church in San Diego. And of course I soon wrote two sets of letters to my parents and to my uncle and aunt about my new discovery. I learned very quickly how they all felt about it, through an uncle who came to visit me in San Diego. He told me that it would have been less shameful for the family if I had been a drug addict or a criminal sitting in a prison, than to become a Christian!!!

After completing my high school studies, I continued to higher education and graduated from San Diego State University with a degree in computers and business administration.

### **Back to Israel**

After graduation I joined my family in Israel and prepared to fulfil my mandatory military duties.

Eventually when my family realized that my faith in Jesus was not going to disappear, they disowned me. They told me that I was not their son any longer and cut off any relationship with me. When Eti and I were married no one from my family attended our wedding.

Because of my academic degree I was able to serve the military in the computer field rather than as a combat soldier. Thus the wishes of my uncle and aunt were fulfilled. I became an officer in the Israeli military and rose to the rank of Major. Though I had planned to pursue a military career and retire with a pension at the age of 42, God had different plans. Upon my call to become an Elder in Grace & Truth Christian assembly, I was given the choice to either leave the military or resign my eldership. Both my wife and I prayed and thought through the two choices but in the end, only one of them made sense to us. I left the military! Amazingly, in the loving sovereignty

of God I was hired as a civilian the very next week, at the same military base and with twice the salary!

As a civilian I worked in various positions both as systems analyst and project manager. At the same time, I continued to serve the church as an Elder. In addition I was asked to be the chairman of the local board of HaGefen Publishing. God in his goodness gave my wife and me many opportunities to serve Him.

Some years earlier, on my second date with my wife-to-be, I had told her two things. First, I outlined for her the five points of Calvinism. She had absolutely no idea what on earth I was talking about. Second, I informed her that though I did not know how or when, I planned to study at the Westminster seminary in California. I guess I must have told her other things as well, since she agreed to marry me! In God's sovereign plan, eleven years passed by before my dream could be realized. Finally, in 2002 we left Israel with our two little daughters and moved to beautiful San Diego for three years. While studying at Westminster, we attended the same church where I had been baptised almost two decades earlier, and I served there as an intern. This ministry provided me and my family with training and experience, and prepared us for the work in Israel. We are thankful for this great opportunity for hands-on training and spiritual growth.

Towards the end of my studies the church asked me to consider serving as assistant pastor for five years. Though I felt greatly honoured, I believed that the Lord was calling us to return to Israel and to minister there. We saw the great need of the growing church there.

In May 2005 I graduated from Westminster Seminary and the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies (IRBS) in California. This was a dream come true, in God's timing and by His grace! A month earlier, I had accepted the position of Israel Field Director for Christian Witness to Israel. The work was familiar to me and dear to my heart, as I had served for years as chairman of the local board.

In July 5<sup>th</sup> 2005 we left the States to return home and embark on the ministry to which God has called us. We believe that through many circumstances, God has prepared us for the task that he has put before us.

Looking back I am grateful to the Lord for what he has done in my life and the opportunity to be part of his kingdom and to share in bringing the Gospel to my people, the Jewish people. And I am grateful for all those who helped me in this calling, including many who are sitting in this room and listening to me. To Him alone be the glory.