

Joy for Ashes

**Areas governed by Germany
and the Soviet Union in Poland in 1940**



**The border of the areas governed by Germany
and the Soviet Union in Poland in 1940**

JOY FOR ASHES

The story of

MICHAEL
YARON

a Messianic Jew

KAIJA TAIVAL

päiväosakeyhtiö

From the Finnish original work
Iloa tuhkan sijaan
Messiaanisen juutalaisen Michael Yaronin tarina
translated by *Maija Harper*

Unless indicated otherwise, Bible quotations are from
the New International Version (NIV, © Biblica)

Copyright © 2015 by *Päivä Osakeyhtiö*
PL 10, 13101 Hämeenlinna, Finland

Cover design by *Marko Soini*
The photo of Jerusalem by
Freeimages.com / Marketa Skornickov
The photo of Michael Yaron by *Pavel Karlin*

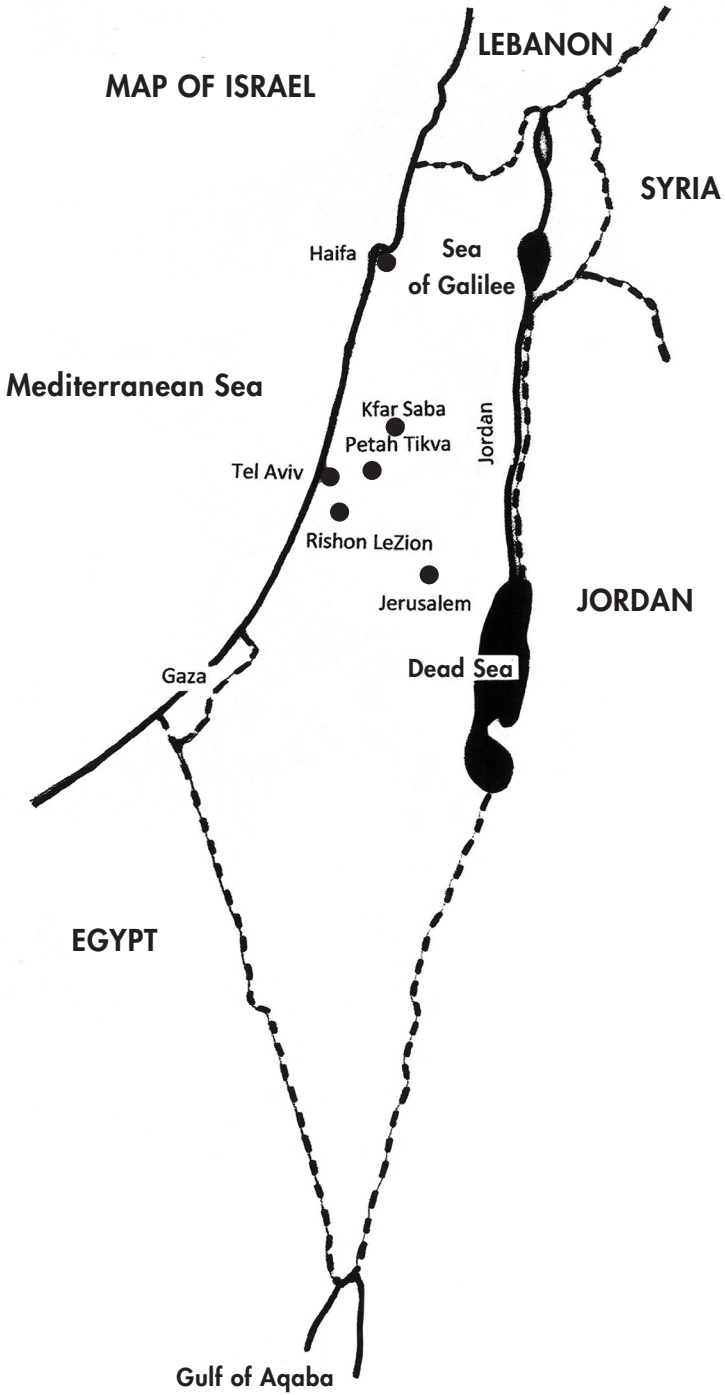
ISBN 978-952-475-734-8
Finnish library classification number: 10.2

Graphic design and layout by *Päivä Osakeyhtiö*
Printed in the EU in 2015

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	7
1. In the care of loving parents.....	11
2. Business as usual until... ..	25
3. Off to study in Siena	35
4. New beginnings in Rome and Germany	45
5. Congregational life and studies.....	58
6. Back to the Promised Land.....	77
7. Love and romance	88
8. Pastoring a growing congregation	98
9. Fellowshiping at Tehilat Yah	115
10. To Finland and the wider world.....	122
11. Beit Margoa and its residents.....	135
12. Marianne's story	146
13. Grandfather's story	154
14. Jürgen's story	163
Finally	168
References	171
Appendix 1: Jewish Sabbath, biblical feasts and national holidays	173
Appendix 2: The Nicene Creed, teaching on law and grace.....	189

MAP OF ISRAEL



FOREWORD

I love books. Christian teaching and biographies above all have been my favourites during the past thirty-six years as a believer. From my reading, I have learnt how Christ has worked and still works in the lives of His own. The Messiah (The Anointed One) has brought us grace and forgiveness, love, peace and rest. He has promised to be with us every moment.

In biographies — if written honestly — one can read, among other things, about the spiritual and mental battles people are fighting. There are victories; there are defeats. There is great guidance. There are big tasks; there are smaller tasks. Afterwards, we can see the loving hand of Jesus in everything.

I am interested in Jewishness. After all, Jesus was born a Jew among Jews. He himself uttered the strong words: “For salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

I have prayed much for Israel. A couple of years ago I received a fresh awakening regarding Israel and the Jewish people. I wondered what I could do for Israel. Having written many books, the answer to my question was clear: Lord willing, I would write a book with an Israeli context.

I was planning to write a biography. My friend Anja Kolehmainen, who lived in Israel for fourteen years, suggested the

Israeli pastor Michael Yaron, whom she knew well, as the main character for the book. Michael works as a pastor of a Messianic congregation in Israel, but he also has many connections abroad. We shared our plan with him. We agreed that all three of us would pray at length to find out God's will about this project, and we came to the conclusion that the book would indeed be written. Anja became the interpreter.

The book began to take shape through Skype, the Internet phone, but, together with my interpreter, I also made an interview trip to Israel. We also met Michael in Finland, while he was on a speaking tour. For this book project not to sound too simple, I must add that in the interviews, Anja and Michael spoke Italian, which they both know well, and Anja then interpreted into Finnish for me.

The book's name, *Joy for Ashes*, is based on the words from the book of Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound . . . To provide for them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." (Isaiah 61:1, 3 KJV) Apart from his own struggles, the ashes represent the effect of the Holocaust (i.e. the persecution of the Jews during World War II) on Michael's family.

At times, while working on the book, tears have come to my eyes because of the tragic events it relates. Other times I have laughed because humour is woven into the story. The heart-warming love story of Michael and his wife Marianne are on its pages, as well.

Naturally, Michael's story conveys an Israeli atmosphere. He has also studied in Italy and travelled abroad extensively, so the book brings an aroma of many countries and cultures.

Those sisters and brothers in the faith who have interceded for the book have been irreplaceable, as have my critics. My

husband Timo Taival and my friends Jussi Asteljoki, Marjaana Nikula and Kaija Antola have given constructive criticism. They have given me many good tips on how to make the book better. Finnish teacher Ulla Lahtinen has honed the Finnish. I also thank Publishing House Päivä's managing director Merja Pitkänen and publishing editor Marja Sevón.

May you have blessed moments as you read!

Kaija Taival



1.

IN THE CARE OF LOVING PARENTS

In Israel, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is observed as a day of repentance. God gave the commandment to mark this solemn day to Moses. It is a day when almost all Jews fast over a twenty-four hour period. They start the fast — going with neither food nor drink — on the previous evening at about five o'clock and continue till the following evening.

Seven-year old Michael Yaron and a friend of his decided: “We’ll also fast!” The boys made this promise to each other though boys usually start fasting only at about thirteen years of age. Michael, however, was very determined, even as a child.

The boys fasted all night. The following morning they were very hungry and especially thirsty. Nevertheless, they went to play football in a nearby park. The exercise drained Michael completely of all his strength. He went to lie down on a park bench and fell asleep.

– I woke up when my dad, Victor Yaron, together with a policeman, came to shake me awake. He got worried when I didn’t show up at home and they couldn’t find me anywhere, Michael recalls.

But the fast did not end there. Several times during that day the boys went to the synagogue. The Yaron family were a secular Jewish family, but even they went to the synagogue on holy days and on other occasions, as is customary with secular Jews. Many adult religious men spend almost all of Yom Kippur in the synagogue.

– Fasting and attending the synagogue made me feel that I was a proper Jew, Michael remarks.

So the boys still had nothing to eat or drink. That is what they had solemnly decided. With gritted teeth they fasted. At last, it turned seven o'clock at night and it was alright to break the fast. Later on Michael found out that his friend had let him down. He had been eating at home, as if no promise had been made!

After that time, the now fifty-eight year old Michael has fasted on nearly every Yom Kippur in his life.

Michael's family lived in Israel's second largest city, Tel Aviv. Michael was born on 2 April 1957 in the hospital of the nearby town of Petah Tikva. He was never told his exact birth measurements but, probably, he was on the small side, as has been the case all his life. According to Jewish custom, baby Michael was circumcised on the eighth day of his life.

First, the Yarons lived in downtown Tel Aviv near the Kings of Israel Square (presently Rabin Square). From there they moved to a flat with three rooms, a kitchen and a balcony, situated near the main street which Michael remembers well. Both houses were near the sea, as the centre of Tel Aviv is close to the Mediterranean shoreline.

Michael spent most of his early childhood with Mum, Ilana Yaron. Dad had an academic degree and he worked in a hospital laboratory. He was well educated, but lived on a small salary. Besides his main job, Dad often worked evenings and, sometimes even nights, in a private laboratory. Mum also had an academic degree and at first she worked in the same laboratory as Dad, but then stayed at home to look after Michael. She was also a

beautician by training and did facial treatments at home. Three and a half years after Michael's birth his little brother Gabriel made an appearance.

Mum had many friends. She used to go and meet up with them in the coffee shops and at the swimming pool. Often they were Jews from a Polish background like herself. They had regular contact with Mum's cousin as well. Little brother was pushed in a pram or a pushchair, until he was able to walk along. Michael had a very warm and close relationship with his mother.

Once at the swimming pool Mum had a surprise plan. She told the lifeguard to throw Michael into the water so that he would learn to swim. The boy should learn to be brave; that was Mum's principle. The lifeguard did throw Michael into the water, but carefully, so that there was no danger of an accident.

Michael's father was also from a Polish background. Mum and Dad spoke Polish at home. Michael understood it and could speak some; to this day he still understands it. His grandfather on Dad's side had emigrated from Poland to Haifa in Israel after World War II. Unfortunately, both he and Dad's mother died so early that Michael has no distinct memories of them.

Dad had two brothers. They left Poland during or after World War II and each went his own way: one brother moved to Italy, the other to New Zealand. Both uncles had survived the Holocaust (i.e. the mass destruction of Jews during World War II), as had Michael's parents. The uncle in Italy had a daughter, but Michael never met her.

– Dad's family has completely disappeared from my life, says Michael sadly. And Mum was the only child in her family.

From his childhood, Michael particularly remembers a friendly paediatrician, whom he got to know quite well.

– We visited him often. I cannot recall the reason for those visits; I don't remember being ill. It is likely that the visits had something to do with my small stature. When she was a little girl, my mother's father told her that the injections would not hurt, and yet they had been painful. Now Mum prepared me by

telling it like it is, that it hurts. I appreciated her being honest. Then she used to add: “But you’re a hero, you’ll make it!” — Mum herself used to watch with some trepidation as I got the jabs, Michael says.

While the ladies in the family ate little and were slim, they started to feed Michael cream and other delicacies. As a result, he put on too much weight and always craved sweet stuff. In order to compensate, he would eat a slice of cake while running, in order to burn the calories he had consumed.

— Today, nearly fifty years later, and after having studied medicine, I know that in order to consume the calories contained in a slice of cake one has to run quite a distance, Michael chuckles.

They used to go downtown to meet friends and friends would drop by at the flat. Relatives would also come for visits. Frequently it meant enjoying good Polish food together: delicious chicken breast and potatoes were often on the menu. The specialty of maternal grandmother, Mila Bronowski, was traditional borsch soup.

Music was a shared interest in the family. Dad would play the accordion at home and sometimes sing, too. Grandmother was a professional violinist; in her time, she had played in Poland in the Lublin Philharmonic Orchestra. Mum’s cousin was a piano teacher and sometimes played at the family get-togethers. Mum’s uncle was a double bass player, but he did not perform at family gatherings. Polish polkas and 1960s dance tunes were the music played at the family gatherings. Grandmother would occasionally also play classical music. Michael remembers some dancing, too, with Dad or Mum. When he was a bit older, he would be asked to sing, as he had a fine voice.

Dad also liked to play the accordion at home for his own amusement, and the whole family enjoyed hearing his playing. Michael had a keen interest in music. There was a gramophone at home for playing old-fashioned records, and a transistor radio for listening to music. Michael listened to the popular 1960s

pieces like waltzes and tangoes, some jazz, too, and later on the Beatles. When he was of school age, he started attending a conservatory to study music. At first, he played the guitar and had a chance of practising on the harmonium also. Later he would have liked to take up the piano, but realised he was too old to learn to be a good piano player.

Michael was a happy, lively boy. Sometimes he would get into mischief, and Dad might get the strap out, but that didn't happen too often.

When Michael was already at school, Dad bought him an umbrella out of his meagre supply of cash. It had to be left outside the classroom during lessons. When Michael was leaving to go home, he could not find the umbrella. At home Dad was angry: "Why have you lost your umbrella?" But he bought a new one. The same thing happened again: Michael came home without the umbrella.

Now Dad was really angry. A third umbrella was purchased. Michael could not find that one either as he was leaving to go home. At this point Dad understood that the umbrellas had been stolen. Humbly, he said: "Please forgive me! I was wrong to be angry at you."

– Though Dad worked hard, our financial situation was not very good. When it came to income, we were probably a bit below average. We could not have everything we wanted, but lacked nothing essential. In spite of cash being scarce at times, we children got pocket money. We were able to buy the occasional ice cream and other goodies.

When Michael was nine or ten, Dad bought a car, which was a big event for them. The boys, who were used to Tel Aviv and Haifa, got to see Eilat, Jerusalem and many other locations in Israel. Michael especially remembers the town of Nahariya in northern Israel. There the family rented a house beside the sea for a week. Michael greatly enjoyed the seaside coffee houses where 1960s music filled the air. The parents loved the seaside life, and passed their affinity on to both boys.

Michael experienced first love before school age. The object of his love was Lea, age five. Michael even had a photo of himself standing hand in hand with Lea. The feeling was mutual. However, by the time he got to school, another girl captured his heart. Lea went to the same school. When Michael and Lea bumped into each other in the streets of Tel Aviv some fifty years later, they recognised one another. They reminisced on the years in-between, but neither of them mentioned the childhood crush.

Michael did not envy anyone for their riches, but being popular with peers was important. He had lots of mates and a few good friends. He did not stand out from the crowd; he was an ordinary boy. Nevertheless, he was popular with the girls! When children used to write the name of the boy or girl they loved on bits of paper, girls would write Michael's name almost without fail. Whereas Michael, who did not want to hurt anyone, wrote all the girls names on his piece of paper. One reason for his popularity may have been his blue eyes and blonde hair of his youth, which were rare.

Up to age ten, Michael went to a school near his home. Later, he moved to a bigger one further away, but both schools were within walking distance.

Michael was a good, diligent student. He remembers having many kind and pleasant teachers. The school programme included subjects like domestic science. Usually the schools served a meal. School books cost money.

Michael remembers that in his childhood he only met Jewish people. If anyone in the family married a non-Jew, people strongly disapproved — they didn't do it to their face, but behind their back. Michael attended a secular Jewish school. There was another school nearby for children from religious families. Religious Jews — men and boys — wear a kippah: a small round cap. By wearing it, one means to show respect to God. It also signifies that God is holy, above man, and that there is a gulf separating God and man. As secular Jews, Michael's Dad and

both boys only wore the kippah on feast days.

At school, Old Testament stories were taught from a book geared for children. Michael knew that God existed. Moses's example was fascinating: if God spoke to Moses, why could he not speak to Michael also? They studied the lives of Abraham, Joseph, David and Daniel.

– I thought it was great that those heroes of faith were so strong in their reliance on God, and also courageous, Michael remembers.

The Yarons often celebrated Passover in Haifa with Grandfather Alexander and Grandmother Mila Bronowski. Sometimes they would go to friends' houses or to a hotel.

With his mother, Michael often visited the grandparents in Haifa, about a hundred kilometres from Tel Aviv. That was also the common holiday destination for the children. Michael had a great liking for the town of Haifa: the nature of Mount Carmel is beautiful, and, partly situated on a mountain slope, Haifa has breathtakingly beautiful views of the sea bay. With his brother and grandmother, Michael would walk in the lovely parks. One could see the Mediterranean and the harbour from the grandparent's window. Grandfather would often travel by boat on business abroad. Grandma would point through the window at a ship and say to the Yaron boys: "That's Grandad's ship coming, let's go and meet him." Then they would be off to get to the harbour in time to meet Grandad, and so the harbour became a familiar place.

Grandad worked as an advocate. When Michael was a bit older, he was occasionally allowed to visit the courtroom when his grandfather worked on a case. Those visits were exciting.

– Grandad often spoke of his court cases. He also spoke of World War II and his experiences during the Holocaust. I liked listening to him.

Even as a small boy Michael came to the conclusion that only his patient grandmother could get along with grandfather. His

wish was everyone's command, and if things did not go his way, they would hear about it – be it adults or children.

Mother was not always on good terms with her parents.

– Once Mum quarrelled with her parents while we were visiting them. When we were about to leave to go back home to Tel Aviv, Grandad was still angry and would not give Mum money for the return journey. That's why I had to tell a lie on the train and say I was younger than I actually was, to stretch the money we had to cover the fare. With me being small, there was no problem, Michael recalls.

Still, the dishonesty bothered both of them. On looking back, Michael knows that in general, Grandfather supported them financially.

At school, the Holocaust Memorial Day was an annual event. It is commemorated one week before Independence Day which usually falls on a day in April or May. Because the Jewish calendar follows the lunar cycle, the festive days are not always on the same date in the Gregorian calendar.

The Holocaust Memorial Day is a very sombre occasion. When Michael was at school, there was a certain pattern to the memorial event. One of its items was a play. Even at a young age, Michael was good at acting and he, for instance, had the role of a boy whose father was taken from a ghetto — the Jewish quarter — to a concentration camp. Often he also sang, either on his own or in the choir.

As far as atmosphere goes, the joyful feast of Purim was quite the opposite of Memorial Day. It centred around the story of Queen Esther who was Jewish. The Old Testament tells us how in 400 BC, during the Jewish exile in Persia, Esther saved the kingdom's Jewish population from destruction.

– The whole day was taken up with a sort of masquerade. During the feast of Purim children often dress up, especially as the characters in the book of Esther. At one Purim feast, I was dressed as a Polish shoeblack during the era of the Holocaust. I

wore just the right clothes, a hat included, and carried all the shoe shining tools. Everyone knew what I was, Michael remembers.

Michael's favourite subject at school was natural science.

– I loved and still love animals. I would have wanted us to have a dog, but we never got one. Instead, we had many other animals: a guinea pig, a lizard, small parrots and a snake in the cellar.

Michael dreamt of being a vet. His model was the excellent Doctor Doolittle in a television series. Michael used to watch the programme on a black and white TV set that people started having when he was about eight or nine. He used to think that a vet mainly sits in an armchair, and people bring him their small pets, like cats and birds, for treatment. He had no idea that a vet would also have to do less pleasant work and take care of kibbutz cows and other big animals.

– Once, by accident, our guinea pig was left out in the sun on the balcony without water, and it died. To me this was a major tragedy and I cried a lot, Michael regretfully remembers.

Michael taught some tricks to one of the parrots. It would come and sit on his shoulder. In his naivety, Michael thought that the bird would stay on his shoulder even on the balcony. Of course, it recognised its chance of freedom and flew away.

– It was a sad incident, Michael recalls. Of course a tame parrot that has lived in a cage won't survive in nature. I waited every day for what seemed like ages for it to come back and, naturally, I never saw it again.

In those days Tel Aviv used to have a zoo right by the centre. Nowadays it is on the outskirts of town. Michael's maternal great-aunt worked at the zoo, and so the Yaron family could go in free of charge to see the animals. Michael went there almost every day and often his little brother went with him.

– I felt that many of the zoo animals got to know me. One of the leopards would walk in step with me, as I paced along this certain corridor, Michael laughs.

There was a small pet shop on the zoo grounds, run by a

couple. The husband's name was Arie, which in Hebrew means 'lion'. Occasionally, Michael would spend time in the pet shop. They had a big parrot that knew Polish swear words.

Great-aunt advised Michael to always say goodbye to Arie. So whenever he was leaving the zoo, Michael would go to the lions cage and say: "Bye, bye!" He got the man's name mixed up with the lions! When a bit older, Michael used to help out in the shop during holidays and even got paid for it.

At school they had to prepare small research projects on different issues, and Michael did one on chimpanzees. He even took pictures of them with Dad's box camera. The photos served to liven up his talk. Dad did photography as a hobby, and sometimes Michael borrowed his camera.

Books on animals as well as other books interested Michael. Adventure stories fascinated him, for instance Jules Verne's *Round the World in Eighty Days*. Michael also read literature on the Holocaust and different wars at a fairly young age. The history of Israel was another important topic at school. It was a way of creating love for one's own country.

At home, Michael found his father's book on human anatomy from his student years. He started studying it with a couple of his best friends.

– I played at being a university professor. I taught them and held them an exam every week, says Michael with a smile.

On Saturday evening, or Sabbath Eve, the school showed movies which drew big crowds. Children were able to watch comedies like Charlie Chaplin films and cartoons. There were Mary Poppins, Peter Pan and Walt Disney movies. A hit among them was also the story of Robinson Crusoe.

– I liked the old black and white films most and I enjoy them still, Michael remarks.

There were visits to real movie theatres, too. Being of small stature, Michael was often thought to be younger than he actually was, and sometimes they did not want to allow him in to watch the movie, so that he was left out a few times. At the cinemas,

he watched children's movies as well as "innocent" adult movies. When he got older, it was American westerns and war movies. They also showed films made in Israel. Movies were part of the entertainment, before TV sets became common.

His small height also provided a temptation for mischief. Michael used to visit a swimming pool with his friends. He bought many cheap children's tickets and easily got them with no questions asked, as he looked younger than his age. Then he gave some of the tickets to his bigger friends, who should have paid more for their visits. With this, he assured himself of popularity!

Despite small dishonesties here and there, in general Michael had a sensitive conscience. For some unknown reason he once borrowed a vase — plastic and not worth a lot — from a friend and then lost it. He was ashamed and started avoiding this friend. He did not dare to confess his carelessness. In the end, he went to his friend's parents and confessed with tears that he had lost the vase. What followed? The friend's mother gave Michael another vase. Later on Michael was shocked to learn that this friend had committed suicide.

Friends were mainly his school classmates. They were both boys and girls. It was fun to play sports together. A nearby park was the place for football and other ball games. Little brother was so much younger that he had his own friends, but both played football together. Neighbourhood streets were also play areas. They were dirt streets; asphalt was not yet in use.

If, let's say, boys about four years older came to tease them and took the ball, Michael would walk towards them with a threatening attitude and snatch the ball back. The boys would get scared and run off. Mum had always taught Michael: "You need to be a hero. Be brave and don't cry! If someone hits you, hit them back!"

– I didn't go in for the hitting, except for some blows with my little brother during our small skirmishes. Otherwise I got on well with him.

When Michael was quite little and playing on the sand in the park, someone on a bicycle ran into him. It resulted in a partially torn ear lobe and a trip to the hospital. Some years later, when Michael already knew how to swim, someone accidentally kicked his ear, while he was under water. A nurse looked at the ear and said: "It's only a little bleeding. This is not serious." Fortunately, due to his meticulous character, Dad wanted it checked by a doctor in the hospital. There they said he had done well coming. It was serious. The kick had burst the eardrum; untreated, it might have led to a serious hearing impairment.

– Dad acted wisely, Michael evaluates. I had to spend a month in Haifa with my grandparents to recuperate from that ear incident.

Another hard blow during my childhood was a tonsils operation. It did not go quite according to plan:

– The operation was meant to take place under anaesthesia, which was not successful, however, and I woke up in the middle of the procedure. I saw nightmares and horrifying visions and heard the doctor's voice. When I opened my eyes, I saw blood on the doctor's hands and on my chest. That was terrifying!

On the whole, Michael and his little brother felt that they were loved and contented as children.

– Mum and Dad really loved us, Michael gratefully remembers. Life was reasonably safe. As a child, only fear of the dark seemed to threaten my existence. Yet seeing Mum not faring so well brought suffering. She used to quarrel a lot with both Dad and her parents. She was often nervous and irritable.

Once, when Michael and Gabriel came home from school, Mum was in the bathroom behind a locked door. They called for a neighbour to help and he managed to get the door open. Mum was lying on the floor, unconscious. That was a shock for the boys. For quite some time, Mum had not been doing so well. She suffered from nightmares and had started using medicines. Behind the nightmares was the reality of having had to live as a child, amidst the horrors of the Holocaust.

Michael never heard much talk on politics. Of course, the conflict between Israel and the Arabs was often present.

The so-called Six Day War was waged in 1967, from 5–10 June, between Israel and an Arab coalition of three nations, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The conflict started when Egypt blockaded Israel's shipping in the international waters of the Straits of Tiran and removed the UNEF peacekeepers from the Sinai Peninsula, replacing them with their own troops. This was the reason for Israel to perform what was declared a pre-emptive strike that managed to put the Egyptian Air Forces out of action in a few hours. Jordan, on its part, attacked Israel's West Jerusalem. At the outcome of the war, Israel was in control of the Sinai and Gaza from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Golan from Syria.¹ In this historical moment, the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount came into Israeli hands again.

– We children had no fear of war, while the adults understood that the threat was real. In the end the alarm came: the Six Day War had started. Everyone had to seek shelter. My brother and I were at school at the time and we went to a bomb shelter with the others, Michael relates.

Probably due to her horrible war experiences, Mum did not go to a shelter, instead she started running to the school bare feet to save her children. The guards tried to stop her. “Get off the street quickly!” they shouted. Mum did not pay any attention, but continued running to the school in panic and got her children home. Windows had to be covered in all the homes, and bomb shelters gave protection to the people.

An uncle in New Zealand sent the Yarons airplane tickets so that the family could escape the war and move to his place in New Zealand. At the last minute, Father decided they would not leave Israel.

– The Six Day War as such was not a horrible experience for me, because the news mainly spoke of victories and the war lasted such a short time, Michael says.

– At that time we lived with our great-aunt, next door to the zoo, where she worked. People feared that a bomb might hit the zoo and the animals might break out of their cages and get on to the streets. That is why a police guard was there all the time, in case that would happen. If a lion had managed to break free, it would have been shot at once.

The joy over the military victory was tremendous. People on the streets were rejoicing and singing a song about Jerusalem, which was now entirely in Israel's hand. The song, familiar even in Finland, begins with the words: "The mountain air is clear as wine..."²

– For my mother, experiencing the war was not about being victorious. It seems to have brought back childhood horrors and was a terrible shock for her.

Then, something happened that was completely beyond our fathoming:

– It was Thursday, an ordinary school day, some time after the Six Day War. When we were out playing after school, our great-aunt suddenly came to fetch us to her house. In the evening Dad came and told us that Mum had died. "Mum is no more. She died without suffering," Dad said.

– I repressed his words and the message they were carrying so strongly that the first thing I blurted out was: "Tomorrow's Friday and there's this birthday party. Can I go?" Thus Michael describes one of the most difficult days in his life.

They never discovered the clear cause for Mum's death because there was no autopsy. It remained an unsolved riddle.

2.

BUSINESS AS USUAL UNTIL...

In Israel, the week following someone's death is a week of mourning. Dad, however, tried to cheer the boys up by taking them out every day to an amusement park or just to play.

– He succeeded in stopping me from thinking about the loss of my mother. But that is also the reason why my grief managed to hide deep inside of me, only to re-emerge many years later, Michael reflects.

Life got back to normal, as much as was possible. Michael remembers getting over his mother's death quite quickly. His father continued to work long hours and sometimes even through the night. Still he tried to arrange for as much time as possible to be with his sons. Michael deeply loved his Dad, and both boys felt loved by their father. Dad would often take Michael to visit his workplace, the laboratory. Michael greatly enjoyed watching him at his work. A lady friend appeared in Dad's life, and the boys formed a good relationship with her. She had a daughter about Michael's age. They did not live with the Yarons, however.

– We got on well with this lady and used to play with her

daughter, the three of us together. We did alright, Michael describes that new situation.

As much as they were able, grandfather and grandmother tried to help the family financially and otherwise. Occasionally, Dad hired domestic help, all ladies of mature age. Michael especially remembers a Romanian home help who used to come for a longer period of time. She was a warm, motherly person, like most of the helpers whom the Yarons employed.

– I still have the memory of her always cooking the same food: breaded chicken cutlets, Michael remembers with amusement.

At school, Michael and his brother always stuck together. Michael had a good reputation and did well at school and he showed no symptoms of his difficult situation. At times, they would visit great-aunt and her daughter. They were like a safety net. Nevertheless, the boys spent considerable amounts of time by themselves, even at night, when Dad was at work. As the older brother, Michael looked after his little brother.

The boys were keen football players.

– On one side, it was my brother with his class team and on the other it was me and my class team. He was good at football. Dad would sometimes take me to play in the Kings of Israel square in Tel Aviv which was all sand, and then come and collect me later. Occasionally, he would stay and watch us play; at times he also played on my team which made me so proud of him, Michael recalls. Every once in a while, Dad would also take me to see football matches. In high school I also played on the school volleyball team.

Sports were also shown on the TV. One of Michael's cherished memories is of Dad, little brother and him sitting on the living room sofa watching the World Cup. The Germany-Holland game was most memorable and there is a photograph of that time, too.

Michael continued going to the cinema, often with his brother. That and listening to music filled much of his leisure

time. Reading was an important pastime and he frequently got books out of the library.

– I read many kinds of adventure books. I think it contributed to my being linguistically gifted. My Hebrew is rich and nuanced, Michael shares with satisfaction.

– I also used to really like writing stories and poems, and they would get published in the school magazine. Unfortunately, they have all disappeared.

In high school Michael became familiar with Greek mythology, especially Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. At the religious instruction classes at school, while still fairly young, Michael was introduced to the Talmud, the Jewish religious oral tradition that was later written down. He found it interesting.

The Talmud contained rabbinical interpretations and conversations about the Torah, the five books of Moses. There was a lot of wisdom in the texts: amongst other things, they dealt with ownership rights. To Michael the famous Jewish sage Rashi came across as especially intelligent. Michael believes this old rabbinical wisdom is often up to date and carries relevance even for modern questions.

At age thirteen a Jewish boy goes through a period of religious instruction, at the end of which there is a celebration called Bar Mitzvah. For girls, the age is twelve.

Prior to his Bar Mitzvah Michael went to a rabbi for private instruction. While he learned to sing the Old Testament texts, his main emphasis was on those parts of the Torah that he would perform at his Bar Mitzvah. As part of the course, he also learned to use the prayer shawl. Michael's relatives came for the celebration in the synagogue. Michael was given a silver-coloured prayer book that probably had genuine silver woven into it.

He needed to catch a bus to visit the rabbi. A bicycle was always attached to the stairwell of the house.

– Whenever I came out of the rabbi's room, I let the air out of the bicycle tyres, for no reason whatsoever. I had nothing against the owner of the bicycle; I didn't even know him. Sometimes

the bicycle was stored away in a more hidden place, but I always found it, emptied the tyres and ran.

– Much later I often wondered why I had to behave in such an unpleasant way. What would have happened had I been caught? I must have carried out the operation at least ten times, and I enjoyed it. I think it goes to show that even children are drawn to bad action, Michael ponders.

At age sixteen Michael travelled abroad for the first time in his life to attend a language course in England. He spent a month with an English family and went to lessons in the daytime. He did learn English, but as is typical with young people, he preferred going into town rather than concentrating on his studies. For a teenage boy, it was great to see London, as well as other places in England. His father travelled to England to join him for a while.

– To be able to spend time with Dad in a foreign country was great. It brought us closer. The time in England was also significant because, for the first time, I met my uncle and his daughter from New Zealand. It was also the last time I saw him because he died soon afterwards.

Sometime later, Michael began feeling lonely, even though he had friends.

– At nights, sometimes till late, I would sit by myself in the kitchen thinking about the loss of my mother. The suppressed emotions began to rise to the surface.

On 6 October 1973, on Yom Kippur, the sixteen-year old Michael sat in the synagogue. Father and brother had stayed at home. Suddenly, the alarm sounded. Everyone left the synagogue to find out what had happened. Michael also went home and saw Prime Minister Golda Meir and Defence Minister Moshe Dayan speaking on television. A war had started. Egypt and Syria had attacked Israel.³¹

– I think I'll always remember the moment Golda Meir

announced that there had been an attack against us from both south and north.

Michael mentions that as far as the Israelis were concerned it was a most unwelcome day for a war to start. On Yom Kippur people fast, so the Jews were physically weak. On that one day in the year there are no normal broadcasts on Israeli radio or television, so getting information to people was very difficult. People went to the synagogue, and when the alarm sounded, it was difficult to get home, because nobody drives on Yom Kippur.

– Israel was taken completely by surprise, Michael estimates. After the victory in the Six Day War people generally thought that even if there was another war, we would definitely win. Though there was an awareness of the threat of a possible attack by the Arab countries, people were quite indifferent.

– The first days of war proved to be difficult. At night we would watch on TV what had been going on during the day. Every night there were humorous programmes to boost the morale of the people. They included satirical performances that dealt with the war.

The school children did their share to help defend the country: they prepared sand bags which were used to build a kind of wall around the school buildings. The youth were also involved in voluntary work. Otherwise, people stayed at home.

– The Israelis were united as one in their epic struggle to defend their homeland, Michael recalls.

Israel fought tenaciously. Syria managed to capture significant areas on the Golan, and Egypt took a segment of the Sinai. Some other Arab countries gave military support to Egypt and Syria. The Arab countries had more soldiers, airplanes, tanks and warships than Israel. Israel got war materials from the United States; the Arab countries got them from the Soviet Union. After a few weeks of fighting Israel had gained the upper hand. The Syrians were driven from the Golan Heights past the ceasefire lines of 1967. The Egyptian troops were surrounded in Sinai, and the Israelis were able to cross the Suez Canal. The UN Security

Council made an appeal for a ceasefire in their resolution 338 on 22 October 1973, but the fighting continued for some time on all fronts. The Israeli parliament, meeting in the Knesset, approved a ceasefire proposal on 24 October. Military action ceased on 26 October 1973.

– I was proud to be a Jew, especially after the Six Day and the Yom Kippur Wars, Michael says.

Even though the sense of loneliness persisted almost as a daily reality, life also offered many pleasant things. Michael loved the sea. He went swimming in the sea as soon as he learned to swim. During high school he participated in a sailing course. The sailing boats were big: they could take ten to fifteen people on board.

– After the course we would sometimes hire a sailing boat with my friends. Once I fell from the boat into the cold sea, Michael recalls.

Michael also started dating, but it was nothing serious. One just had to have a girlfriend like everyone else. Michael was almost eighteen, when he was out with his girlfriend one night, because Dad was having a party at home with his friends. Michael came home way after midnight and was surprised on entering: the party should have been going on still, but he found the house empty. There were signs that the party had taken place.

– I wondered about it. I was about to call Dad's lady friend, when the telephone rang. It was the hospital where Dad worked. He had been brought there and I needed to go to him quickly. I took a taxi, and it felt like a long ride.

– At the hospital Michael was told that his father had been in an accident. He had started feeling bad at the party. His lady friend had told him to go to the nearest hospital, but he had insisted on going to the one where he worked. He drove by himself. On the way, apparently he suffered a heart attack. As a result, his car careened off the road, hit a tree, and he lost his life.

Due to heart trouble, Michael's father had already spent some time in hospital a couple of years earlier. He started smoking

when in the ghetto in Poland and that was causing him heart problems, among other things. During that spell in hospital Michael had spent much time with him.

– There was a bridge near the hospital. I walked along the bridge and wondered what I would do now, with my Dad gone. It felt like my world was breaking into pieces. How shall we manage now, who will look after us? What shall I say to my brother? He was only thirteen. The questions were spinning around in my head.

– I took a taxi and went home. I didn't say anything to my little brother that night; we only spoke in the morning. Of course I didn't sleep all night, Michael says as he describes the devastating experience.

The following day Grandma came to help and be with them. She wanted Michael to be able to concentrate on the matriculation exams that would start soon. Those exams are very important in Israel, and they are oral exams.

In Tel Aviv, there were two schools that were of a higher standard than others. Michael's school was one of them. When the school headmaster found out that his father had died, he came over to the Yaron home and said to Michael: "We know you and your success at school. We have never done anything like this before, but we will give you top grades for the exams without you having to participate in any way at all. We know what has just happened to you and that you would have done well in the exams." This was a unique offer.

But Michael did not accept it, as he wanted to do the same as everybody else. He did pass the exams with good grades. He says that he had his grandfather as an example of perseverance and toughness. The attitude was: "We will pull through this!"

– Preparing for the exams helped me not to think of my father's death. On the other hand, I didn't deal with my grief at the time; in the same way I hadn't grieved over losing my mother. The emotions only welled up later, Michael reflects.

Soon after the death of his father Michael's relationship with

his girlfriend ended. Just when he needed support, she was not able to give it. Neither were Father's friends and family acquaintances there to help ease the grief which both boys experienced.

- Not one of them called to ask how we were doing. Fortunately, our great-aunt on Mum's side of the family who lived near the zoo, and her daughter, cared about us and helped wherever they could.

They saw the family acquaintances once a year as they came to visit father's grave on the anniversary of his death, which is customary in Israel.

After his father's death, music became the means for Michael to deal with his feelings. He loved music and playing an instrument and had some playing lessons, even though he did not dream of a career as a musician. Grandfather was so concerned that Michael's musical interests would hamper his studies that he did everything to try and stop his grandchild from musical involvement. He even went to Michael's music teacher and asked him to discourage Michael from pursuing his musical hobbies. Michael, who cherished music so much, was deeply hurt. Grandfather was of the opinion that one needs to invest all efforts into one's studies. A good profession was important: being a doctor, a judge, or an engineer at the very least were Grandfather's favourites.

Michael did plan to study medicine, not just to fulfil Grandfather's wishes, but also out of his own desire. Dad had been a laboratory technician, which was also in the medical field. Michael had always had a great interest in biology. The childhood dreams of being a vet taking care of small birds, which he picked up from a TV series had faded, but the career of a doctor looking after people did seem appealing.

First, though, there were the three years of military service. As he started it, Michael was eighteen and had only just finished school. In the Israeli Defence Forces some special consideration

is given to those whose parents have died. They are not trained to fight on the front line so Michael was made a paramedic in the Air Force first aid unit. For three months he attended a course in the same hospital where his father had worked and also died. This was not easy for Michael and brought back a host of painful memories.

In his early days at the air base emergency station, a funny incident occurred. It was the night when Michael was in charge for the first time. One doctor and some nurses were asleep, on call to be wakened and summoned to work if needed. The operating theatre was always the first to be set up. The doorbell rang. Michael immediately pressed the alarm button to alert the nurses and the doctor. Only after that did he go to the door to check what the matter was. At the door, he found a soldier who could not sleep because of a sore toe caused by a mosquito bite and asked for some cream to help ease the pain. How easily help was found for this soldier, and how big the preparations had been! Michael certainly had a word or two to say to the soldier in question.

The paramedic training with expertise in rescue missions fitted in well with Michael's plans to study medicine. The training was interesting: it included learning about the effects of air pressure in an airplane, for instance, and all the different things that can happen. During the first year of his military service Michael lived in Tel Aviv in the family's old rental flat.

- There wasn't much free time, but when I was off and came to the home from where my brother had moved to a boarding school near Haifa, I felt pretty bleak, Michael recalls.

After a year Michael moved to Haifa to live with his grandparents. The military service continued at a base near Haifa. There was still little free time, as an air force paramedic had to be on constant call, ready to treat people injured in a helicopter accident, for instance. He worked under nurses and doctors.

During his high school years Michael got used to having gardening jobs in the summer. Even with being in the military

it was possible to work, because for orphaned or lonely soldiers the service was eased in such a way that they were able to have jobs. Michael worked as a night porter and a theatre nurse in a hospital. There were other jobs also, like cleaning stairwells and houses. This enabled him to rent a flat in Haifa after having lived with his grandparents for a while.

During his time in the military, the thought was born in Michael's mind to go and study medicine in Italy. There were many Israelis studying at the medical faculties of Italian universities. It felt like hardly anyone would miss him in Israel: only a few of Dad's friends kept in touch, and he had already left behind his own friends in Tel Aviv. Besides, his uncle, who was a doctor, lived in a city near Siena. Of course, another motive was to experience something new. Grandfather was all for such a choice.

So Michael started to prepare for his studies by attending an Italian course that would help him manage in the new country as well as he could.

While doing military service, some would use alcohol, drugs or tranquillizers. There were also those who tried to steal drugs from first aid. Sometimes people would be brought in who had tried to commit suicide.

– I have never had an alcohol problem. My way of seeking comfort used to be pornography, Michael shares.

He concluded his military service in 1978 and started to prepare for studies at the medical faculty of the University of Siena in Italy. Michael passed the entrance exam and was able to plan the start of a new life in Italy. He expected much of his future.

3.

OFF TO STUDY IN SIENA

Michael left for Italy on his own and, on his arrival, there were no familiar faces waiting for him. He travelled to the port of Ancona by ship, as he had too much luggage for travelling by air. There were maybe seven suitcases and bags, but he stopped short of taking any furniture! His place of study, Siena, was only a train ride away from Ancona, but there was little time to change trains. Fortunately, paid porters were available!

Michael's first impression of Italy was that people were open and friendly and, being a sociable person himself, he paid close attention to people's behaviour. There were plenty of restaurants and coffee shops, and the food was good. Siena was fascinating because of its history: the town centre was built in the Middle Ages. The high street was an important promenade where people would walk in the evenings, meet each other and have a bite to eat. Michael's lodgings were not in the centre, but they were within walking distance. He had a room in a house where someone let out lodgings to students. His room had plenty of paraphernalia from Israel!

Michael's uncle, his father's brother, lived in Italy. He had come from Poland after the war to be a doctor in a city near Siena. Michael went off to meet him. He had written to his uncle that he was coming to Italy. He went to his uncle's door and rang the bell, but there was no answer. One of the neighbours suggested that maybe he did not want to have any dealings with his nephew. The uncle had turned Catholic so that no one would know about his Jewish background. It seems that because of the persecution during the Holocaust, this was a traumatic issue for him, and he was probably afraid that any contact with Michael would expose him. So Michael never got to meet his uncle or his daughter, either.

The University of Siena consisted of different buildings on the outskirts of town. Michael went to the lectures in the morning. When they ended, he continued studying at the university library and only returned home in the evenings. He did not attend a language course like most Israelis, even though the language of study was Italian only. If he had attended an Italian course, his studies would have taken a year longer as well.

The beginning turned out to be hard because of the language problem. Michael recorded the lectures, so that in the evenings he could check the unfamiliar words in a dictionary. There were no computers available then. All the exams were oral. For his anatomy exam, for instance, he learned things by heart, as he did not understand the text completely. Yet the exams went very well.

In the first years, Michael's grandfather paid for his studies. The study fees were not large, but the books needed for medical studies were not available in the library. They were hefty volumes and cost a lot in a bookshop. Of course, on top of that, he had to pay his rent and buy food.

When Israelis came to Siena to study, they tended to mix in their own groups, without really getting to know the Italians. They even lived close to each other. Michael chose not to follow that pattern: straightaway he started to get to know his Italian

fellow students. He only spoke Italian. The Israelis were often a little arrogant. In a way they had a reason for it because usually they did well in their studies. To begin with, Michael was also very critical of both the studies and the society. Partly it was because everything seemed to work badly, even different kinds of strikes made everyday life difficult. Then one local person lost his patience with Michael and said to him: "Is there any sense in your attitude? You come here, we give you a chance to study, and you're dissatisfied."

– This was a wake-up call for me and made me want to really delve into Italian society and get involved in it. Instead of complaining, I started to value the things I gained from Italy. I had a real interest in European culture. It is very different from the Israeli way of life. I talked to Italians a lot and took part in nights out and various hobbies. We used to do plenty of singing, Michael describes his early times in Italy.

Opposite the house where Michael was living there were Israeli and Greek students. Once, one of the Greeks came to the door to borrow some olive oil. Michael's answer was direct: "Your tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes and you Greeks destroyed the oil in the temple of Jerusalem. No, you can't have any oil!" The caller was taken aback till he realised Michael was just joking, in this case about the history of the Greeks and the Maccabees, and, like his father, enjoyed a bit of humour.

Outgoing by nature, Michael quickly got to know a local girl, Fiorella, and through her many other Siennese people. He also developed a deeper appreciation of the culture.

Michael became a fan of the traditional annual horse race, the *Palio*.⁴¹ On one hand, it was a playful event; on the other, it was exciting and even brutal. There are several wards in the town, and at the Palio, each has its own race horse. In the centre of Siena there is a seashell shaped square called Piazza del Campo. The horses are raced around the *piazza* in a competition that takes only a minute and a half. The jockeys who ride bareback are in danger of falling between the horses. The horse that reaches the

goal first, even without the jockey, wins. The track is stony and slippery. If a horse falls, it sometimes has to be put down. The jockeys are allowed to use sticks, even to hit the other horses and, at times, the blows fall on the other jockeys.

Preparation for the Palio takes a long time. In the week preceding the race, the jockey may even sleep in the stable to make sure that no one will harm his horse.

The flag parade, flag throwers, songs and costumes alleviate the brutality of the race itself. The winning horse will be celebrated for a long time. Many tourists stream to Siena for the Palio. It is a big tourist event. Before a certain race, Michael followed a man who was able to direct tourists to the vicinity of the racecourse in countless languages. Michael asked him: "Have you really studied so many languages?" The man answered: "I've only studied enough to know how to say 'straight on', 'right' and 'left' in different languages."

– Once a TV or a newspaper reporter happened to interview me. I carried a ward card linked to the horse race. Foreigners did not usually have those. The reporter wondered how I as a foreigner could be so enthusiastic about the Palio. I made up a story: "All of Israel looks forward to this day. Everybody there watches the Palio on TV." When the interview went public, the Siennese were proud and the Israeli students amused, as nobody in Israel knows about a horse race in Siena, Michael laughs. These days, he adds, I wouldn't be so ready to come up with stories like that.

Fiorella knew some of the jockeys and introduced them to Michael. On one occasion some jockeys in their unusual outfits came to pay a visit at Michael's flat. The other foreign students wondered what sort of clowns they were and what Michael had to do with them. In general, his Israeli student friends thought that the way he had integrated into Italian life was peculiar. People also knew Michael at the university, as he was lively and outgoing, and excelled in his studies.

In Italian society, it was typical to queue for everything. If it

was queuing up for a new visa, it could take hours. The exam system at the university functioned in a similar way: there were many who wanted to take exams and only a few professors to test them. It could mean that only a hundred students would be given access to take a certain exam. The rest would have to wait until the following summer.

– For this particular exam there were two examiners: one let students through easier than the other. I decided to go and queue up in the street the previous evening, so that I would be first in line and able to see the “more lenient” professor. I spent the whole night outside in the street. I was not the only one there, others queued up also. At last, at six in the morning, we were able to get inside, and at eight o’ clock we could take a number. Just at the moment when I could have taken the first number, I had to go to the toilet. I was really disappointed, but then the student who got in before me was not able to answer the questions and gave up straight away, so I did get the gentler professor after all. I passed the exam. All is well that ends well, Michael grins.

Many Israeli students slept in the day if there were no lectures, and studied at night. The town was less noisy and it was easier to concentrate. They recommended it to Michael and even managed to persuade him. So he bought some earplugs and tried to sleep in the day, but nothing came of it. Instead, he just tossed and turned in bed. Then, while still night, he thought now is the time to study. He drank a few cups of coffee and settled at a desk to read. At that moment, the electricity went off in the whole area. Reading by candlelight was not successful, and when he tried to sleep, it did not work, either. Michael concluded that reading at night was not the studying style that suited him best!

At the university, between lectures, there was talk about studies and medicine, of course, but also about politics. The Italians were very interested in Israel, but usually they took the Palestinian side of the conflict. Michael had to take a defensive stand.

He constantly followed what was happening in Israel, mainly

on TV. He watched a lot of TV because it was a good way of learning Italian. His language skills improved all the time, but there were also some funny slips of the tongue. Instead of asking for stracchino, cheese, for instance, he asked for straccio instead. The latter means ‘a rag’.

Once he wanted to order a gas bottle for cooking — in Italy, they are delivered to your house and installed in place. Michael was supposed to ask the salesman on the phone: “Could you come and change a 20kg bombola, gas bottle?” He remembered the word wrong and said: “Could you deliver a 20kg bambola, doll?” The man answered: “Listen, we sell gas bottles, not dolls.”

The Israeli students usually went back home a couple of times a year. Michael did not go at all for a few years, not until his brother invited him to his wedding. It was August, a really hot month in Israel. Maybe that was partly why his brother, the bridegroom, was dressed quite casually. In European style, Michael wore a suit and a tie. Before the ceremony, some people came to congratulate Michael and asked him where the bride was. Michael looked more like the groom than the groom himself!

Next in Michael’s life there appeared Gabriella (not her real name), a beautiful, dark-haired Siennese girl. She was involved in the arts. During his friendship with her Michael became even more familiar with the attractive Italian culture. He also visited the countryside with Gabriella.

Once Gabriella’s parents invited Michael over for dinner. Gabriella’s father made a point of knowing a few words of Hebrew. When the steak had been served on everyone’s plate, he used a Hebrew word: “Here you are, this is ‘hard’ meat!” He kept repeating: “This is ‘hard’ meat!” Michael tried to suggest that it might be difficult to eat, if it is so hard. The man had tried to say that the meat is kosher, acceptable for a Jew to eat. He got the word wrong, as it is so similar in pronunciation to another one. Kosher in Hebrew is kasher and the word for hard is kashe.

Gabriella moved in with Michael, as their relationship was becoming more serious. Grandfather, who was like a father to Michael, came to Italy to get to know the girl. He really liked Gabriella.

It was customary for Israeli medical students only to stay in Italy for three years, as long as it took to collect enough points for studying medicine at home. Michael also had enough points from his studies up to that time. But the relationship and his real love for the country made him stay on in Italy.

Michael and Gabriella started to discuss marriage. Michael assumed that the girl would move with him to Israel, but both she and her parents considered it an impossible thought. And yet, Michael had a strong desire to have a family of his own.

At the same time, while outwardly everything was fine, some dark shadows began to appear: Michael started feeling oppressed by the difficult issues that had not been dealt with, mainly the loss of his parents, their lot, and the hard life they had lived. The university studies also demanded increasing requirements from foreign students, which did not make things any easier.

– I still did well in my studies, but life felt bleak. Even when the sun was shining outside, the birds were singing, and the world looked glorious, it was dark in my heart. I often shut myself in my room, Michael recalls.

Support came from a Catholic priest who had an office in the centre of Siena. It was possible to pop in between lectures, and Michael went there fairly often. This priest led groups who went on pilgrimages to Israel. The priest listened to Michael's problems, but also spoke to him about God and even about Jesus. Yet in no way did he try to convert Michael to Catholicism, though he sometimes read aloud from the New Testament during the meetings.

Michael had previously had some contact with the Catholic Church when a friendly family wanted to take him to midnight mass at Christmas. The church was packed. Suddenly people moved to the centre aisle and formed a queue.

- I thought I was supposed to join that queue. When I progressed further up the queue, suddenly there was a priest in front of me who said: "Open up!" He put a small round piece of bread into my mouth and it just melted there. Much later I understood that it was a communion wafer. I had no idea what it was all about, Michael recalls.

Michael also kept in touch a little with the Jewish synagogue. In Siena and in nearby Florence there lived many Jews, some of whom were considerably wealthy. Michael's student friend told a story that illustrated the cultural differences very well. Once at Easter he had been invited to Florence to take part in a Pesach or Seder meal (see appendix 1). He agreed to go. At the meal, there was also a Jewish man, who had moved from Russia to Siena and who had a very gifted six-year old son, a child prodigy, one might say. The boy knew Russian, Hebrew and Italian, played the violin well and even danced. He played the violin during the meal. After his performance, the Florentine rabbi started to interview him. He said: "You are a clever boy: you play well and know many languages. Now tell us Florentine Jews what you eat at Pesach?" The child answered: "Chocolate eggs, of course!"

The boy's father was very embarrassed. The Jewish people are particular about what they eat at Passover. Usually they eat unleavened bread during the Passover week. The child genius had attended a Catholic school. He had learned that at Easter chocolate eggs are the standard delicacy.

It was during the summer months when Michael travelled to Germany for the first time to meet his grandfather who was there for his work. Grandfather was looking for non-Jews who had assisted Jews during World War II. Not everyone was chosen to enter the list honouring the "Righteous Gentiles among the Nations". Rather, the activities of each candidate during the Holocaust were carefully investigated. Grandfather was also looking for Holocaust survivors. He was in the process of founding a home in Israel for elderly people who were Holocaust survivors.

While visiting Europe, Michael's grandfather often stayed at a Christian convalescent home in the town of Bad Nauheim. There were many psychologically stressed and ill patients at the home, all of whom were looked after by an experienced nursing staff.

At the convalescent home, Michael, for the first time, got to know people who loved Jesus from their heart. They said Grace before mealtimes and sang Christian songs. Michael thought it was beautiful, but he did not really understand any of it.

Michael had agreed with Gabriella that she would follow him by train to Germany, but she never came. When Michael got back to Siena, he understood that she did not want to continue the relationship. One of her reasons for breaking up was Michael's lack of interest in art.

- Well, as it was art she mentioned, I suddenly became interested — I had to. I started studying the Baroque and other schools of art, and visiting the Siena and Florence museums with Gabriella. In spite of my efforts, the relationship started to turn into a platonic friendship and then it ended. I had dreamt of a family of my own, but now that dream was dashed. I was very disappointed and felt rejected, Michael explains.

Michael carried an Old Testament with him as he went to exams. He also used to pray beforehand for the exams to go well.

After things ended with Gabriella, Michael got to know Swiss Birgitta. She became a good friend, but things never progressed further than that. Michael and Birgitta spent a lot of time together:

- I already owned a Fiat 500. A little man in a little car, Michael says jokingly. At weekends, we would go on outings to the countryside. It was wonderful and refreshing. Round about Siena there are beautiful vineyard estates, surrounded by oak trees, sunflower fields, villages on top of hills... we also watched a lot of old Italian films, many of them comedies. My spirits were lifted.

Birgitta happened to live above a language school. She knew many foreign students from there, and Michael's international

circle of friends expanded. Medical students usually concentrated exclusively on their studies, but among the other students there were many who mainly wanted to have a good time.

In time, the friendship with Birgitta petered out.

Michael had to move away from his flat. One living arrangement after that was sharing a house with an older person, whom Michael also took care of. It was part of the rental agreement and meant paying less. At one place, his housemate was a peculiar man. He would slam doors and go for days without speaking to Michael.

Michael's studies were at a stage where he had to do medical research as part of the required curriculum. From the beginning of his studies, he had been interested in psychiatry, though his study was general medicine. His studies had included children's neuropsychiatry. Michael heard that in Rome there was a gifted Jewish professor, who was especially famous in the field of neuropsychiatry. This professor agreed to tutor Michael's final thesis.

– So I decided to go to Rome to continue my studies. Even though the years in Siena had sometimes been difficult, I especially remember the beginning there as one of the best times in my life. It was certainly much better than I had expected, Michael is pleased to recall.

4.

NEW BEGINNINGS IN ROME AND GERMANY

The Fiat 500 was packed to the roof with stuff as Michael drove towards Rome. He had been there a few times previously.

His living arrangement would be in the so-called Roman ghetto, that is, in the middle of the Jewish quarter around the famous synagogue of Rome. He had been promised a room in a Jewish children's home that was located there. He would work there in return for his board and lodging. Michael would work among the children: he would conduct the mealtime prayers and help them off to school and with different leisure activities. There were about fifteen children, and more in the evenings, who attended different clubs. Michael was also supposed to attend the synagogue and religious gatherings in general.

Everything went as agreed at the children's home. Michael thinks now that maybe he was unconsciously searching for God to fill his emptiness, and that was the prime reason why he sought out the Jewish community. He apparently assumed that by serving God like the godly Jews, he would feel the touch of God, so he started acting like those around him. Characteristically, he quickly got to know many members of

the community, including the famous chief rabbi.

After some time, Michael felt a sense of disappointment in his religious exercises and in doing good works. They did not help him find God.

– I realised that even if a person on the outside attempted to do good works, their heart did not necessarily change. Change needed to come from the inside, from the heart. I had been to the convalescent home in Germany several times. I had watched the workers there who behaved truly lovingly.

From the Jewish teaching he had received, one passage in particular stuck in his mind: “‘You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:13–14). Michael prayed to God: “How on earth can I find you, since these religious practices haven’t succeeded?” On one hand, Michael notes, my studies made up a great part of my life and they were going well but, on the other hand, I felt anxiety.

– I lived in darkness, Michael says. I was seeking for God and I was seeking for myself. I was questioning the meaning of my life and the reason for being on this earth. I would wander in the streets of Rome at night. All the grief caused by the loss of my parents and the hatred I felt because of my relatives lost in the Holocaust rose to the surface. My feelings of searching was typical of the children of Holocaust survivors. In my case, I felt even more lost because I was an orphan: I felt guilt, shame and loneliness. But, it seems, at the same time I had also inherited a strong will and the ability to survive from my grandfather. And I still believed in God.

Michael missed his brother, too. Only rarely did the two contact each other. Once, his brother and sister-in-law visited him in Rome.

At times, Michael went to meet his grandfather at the convalescent home in Bad Nauheim. He would take part in the prayers there. The workers would sometimes try to speak to

him about Jesus, but Michael did not understand any of it, and they didn't put any pressure on him. The atmosphere was very good, and Michael felt that those people were different from the people he had met so far in his life, but he did not understand what it was.

Jürgen, especially, became a good friend. He was a carpenter by trade, but did all kinds of handyman's work at the home. Jürgen was about thirty, medium sized, black-haired — not very German looking — and very friendly.

Jürgen and Michael always spoke in English. Michael did not know German.

– The more time I spent with Jürgen, the more I started to feel bitterness towards him. I thought about the fact that he belongs to the nation that persecuted us Jewish people. In my heart I carried hatred towards the Germans. I started to attack him. I blamed him and tried to hurt him. I wondered how he could always be so patient and friendly.

Once, Michael needed some money and he borrowed a sizeable sum from Jürgen, knowing that Jürgen did not have a lot either. Michael promised to pay him back the next day, but then he came up with a plan to cause Jürgen to lose his temper: the next day he straightaway told him that he did not have the money to pay back the loan. How annoyed was he when Jürgen remained calm, while Michael was so nasty to him. Jürgen did not lose his temper even now, but instead offered Michael another large sum of money, considering what Jürgen had at his disposal. It was all he had, and he said: "This you don't need to pay me back!"

At this point, Michael felt enraged.

– I had behaved badly towards him, and still he managed to be as friendly as ever. Finally, I asked him directly: "What is it with you, that you're always so patient?"

In response, Jürgen shared that a few years ago he was very ill and depressed, due to drug use. Nothing helped, but then one day he got to know someone called Hanna. Hanna told Jürgen

about her faith and prayed for him. Jürgen found the Saviour, was completely healed and able to return to work. While thus sharing his faith with Michael, he added: “I know your God, the God of Israel.”

This kind of talk inflamed Michael’s rage even further. “I’m an Israeli and I have studied the Old Testament. This man is not well read, and he’s a German to boot, and he claims to know the God of Israel better than I do,” Michael fumed. Jürgen gave Michael an English New Testament, but he threw it away in anger and disdain. Michael returned to Italy with conflicting emotions: he bitterly resisted all that he heard from Jürgen, but at the same time, Jürgen was so alive with his testimony of God’s Word.

– I saw something in him that attracted me, and I felt jealousy. How could a non-Jewish German know God better than I did! At that time I did not read the Bible, but he was my Bible. In him I read the kind of peace I had never had and was seeking with all my heart. In him I saw the unconditional love I was so longing for and the joy I had never known. He was a living letter to me. Like most Israelis, I was like a *sabra*, a cactus with sharp spikes. In order to eat a sabra, one needs to wear gloves and carefully peel off the skin with a sharp knife. It takes time and effort, but in the end one can reach the soft and sweet fruit underneath. I felt that Jürgen did the same thing with me. Though I used all my spikes on him, he always treated me with love and patience. In this way, God was able to operate in my heart, making it soft and working out the readiness to encounter him, Michael describes.

Michael had heard about the Messiah, but Jesus being the Messiah — or Jesus being God himself — was out of the question and just a deception.

On Michael’s next trip to Germany Jürgen gave him a second New Testament, not knowing Michael had thrown away the first one, but with a sense from God that he had never yet read it. He did not give up and encouraged Michael to read it. This time around, Michael did, but not in order to seek the

Messiah. He was going to prove that the New Testament does not hold the truth.

To his surprise, the book opened his eyes: while reading the Gospel of Matthew, he encountered a Jesus who did good. Jesus healed the sick and spoke of love. Where was the bad Jesus that he had heard about in Israel? He knew that Jews had been persecuted and killed in the name of Jesus during the Crusades, for instance, and in World War II. He assumed that the evil side of Jesus would be revealed later in the book, so he read the whole Gospel.

In Jürgen, Michael saw the kind of love that he had been seeking for a long time. But, his pride didn't allow him to believe that a German had found the God in whose existence Michael also believed. But what was God like? He had but vague ideas. He grasped that through what Jürgen had told him he, too, could find what he had sought and hoped for all his life. The words he read in the New Testament had such an impact on him that he was sorry for his earlier behaviour and asked Jürgen to forgive him.

Because of Jürgen's witness of God's love to him, he started going to the convalescent home in Germany during his university holidays, even when his grandfather was not there.

Once, at Christmas, Michael accompanied Jürgen to a Christian home. There he felt drawn by a wonderful atmosphere, though at the same time he felt an outsider among these believers.

After Christmas, at New Year — while still in Germany — Michael planned to go and celebrate at some place where there would be young people. Jürgen had other plans, though. He asked Michael to accompany him to a small village near Munich to welcome in the New Year. Jürgen had to ask many times before Michael agreed. He hoped that there would be many young people gathering there to celebrate. So off they went. The journey there was long and arduous with all the snow.

The first Christian meeting started in the afternoon. When

Michael went to the church hall, he could only see old people. Realising there was nothing to do now except sit down, he found a seat among the people. Then the programme started. The language was German, but he could hear the name of Jesus repeatedly. Probably, Jürgen tried to interpret, but Michael heard nothing of it. This was because he was getting more and more annoyed. After a while, he got up and left the hall. Jürgen followed him.

– Angrily, I asked Jürgen: “What do you mean by bringing me to a place like this at New Year? Now you can take me to the first train, so I can get away from here!” I have always shown my feelings, and by now I was very angry, Michael describes.

Hanna, through whom Jürgen had become a believer, came up to them. She was about seventy, and one could tell straight-away that she had peace in her heart. Her presence got Michael to calm down. Hanna explained that the roads were blocked because of a snowstorm. If the weather cleared up towards the evening she would take Michael to the train. Hanna did not know English, so Jürgen had to help translate their conversation.

In the end, Michael stayed on but did not take part in the meeting. As evening approached, young people started to turn up with guitars and harps. Now Michael decided that he would stay for the evening and night to celebrate, after all, but “first thing in the morning, you’ll take me to the train,” he insisted to Hanna. “Of course, of course,” was Hanna’s answer.

There were about one hundred people by then. The old and the young were together, which made an impression on Michael. Everyone got a piece of paper with a Scripture written on it. They all read out ‘their’ Scripture and introduced themselves.

– I was touched by the Scripture I got, Michael recalls.

People sat around at tables and had an evening meal. There were prayers and a lot of music: Jürgen played the guitar and sang, someone played the harp, and there was a Hammond organ player. Michael, too, was invited to play the electric organ and sing Hebrew songs. The New Year reception ended after mid-

night. Hanna, Jürgen and Michael went into Michael's room. There, Hanna used a drawing to illustrate the gospel. She drew a cross between man and God. The access to eternal life instead of eternal damnation was only through Jesus. It helped open up the message of the gospel to Michael. They talked until four in the morning. Jürgen was so tired because he was speaking English to Hanna and German to Michael.

The following morning, everyone in the house woke up to someone playing on the organ. The English lyrics to the song say: "Tzena, tzena, join the celebration! There'll be people there from every nation. God will find us dancing in the sunlight. Dancing in the village square!"⁵¹ Michael no longer wanted to leave because he had such peace and felt good.

The time soon came, however, to leave the place of the celebration and return to the convalescent home. Now Jürgen had the courage to invite Michael to a church meeting. At first, he resisted. "It'll be dull, I'll get bored there," he thought, but in the end he decided: "I can join in the middle of the meeting and stay at the back. There it's easy to make an escape. I might even find a nice, placid German girl there."

People sang worship songs and hymns at the meeting. Of course, there was a speech as well. "Oh my word, how boring," Michael thought. Then suddenly a woman stood up and started speaking. Michael's ears pricked when he heard the word Israel. Jürgen whispered that it was worth listening, as it might be for Michael.

The lady gave a prophecy that went something like this: "There is someone here from Israel. I have brought you from Israel to the country of your enemies. There is much hatred in your heart, but I want to do my work in you. I will change your heart, now full of hatred and bitterness, into the likeness of my heart. Your heart will be changed from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. You don't know me much yet, but I will glorify my Son Jesus to you, and you will get to know Him with all your heart. And when you are ready, I will send you back to your

own country. You will speak of me to your own nation and will show my power. Whoever believes will be saved.”

The meeting was recorded, and from the cassette tape recording Jürgen translated the prophecy for Michael and wrote it down. Michael thought of an Italian proverb that fitted the prophecy so well: “If they are roses, they will bloom.” In other words, if the things spoken were the truth, they would come to fulfilment.

Michael returned to Italy and came back to Germany in the spring, at Easter time. His spiritual thirst was great. One morning he woke up and without knowing how, he knew in his heart that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.

– Only later on I realised it had to be God’s Spirit revealing to me that Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead. One cannot have such a revelation without God’s Spirit. I understood that only based on Jesus’ work on the cross I could be connected to God, the Father, and have eternal life instead of eternal damnation. I had been learning about this from the New Testament, but also Hanna’s drawing of the way of salvation on New Year’s night helped me understand those spiritual realities, Michael shares.

Jürgen asked Michael to join him at an Easter retreat. It would take place at the same church hall where they had celebrated New Year. He did not have to ask twice, for Michael was more than happy to join. It was 2 April 1983, Easter Saturday, and Michael’s birthday: he turned twenty-six. The Danish pastor Ulf Oldenberg was preaching at the retreat.

– Ulf Oldenberg was a very humble man, Michael evaluates. Many times I saw him on his knees. Once he wanted to talk to me and said that he had a word of knowledge for me. The words he said were the words Jesus used to describe Nathaniel: “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (John 1:47). Oldenburg felt that I was like Nathaniel. It comforted me.

He proceeded further and asked Michael if he would like to give his life to Jesus. He exhorted Michael to be completely

honest before God. The pastor added that now was not the time to care about other people's opinions.

– I wanted to run from the room, but Jürgen stood at the door, Michael recalls. And, yes, I knew that I had understood the significance of Jesus and I really needed to consider what I should do. The situation was ambivalent. I was horrified at the thought of what people would say if I became a “Christian”. I was also afraid of confessing Jesus as my God, because I was still unsure of whether I'd be committing a sin against God by believing that Jesus is the Messiah. It would be a sin if it turned out Jesus is not the Messiah. Yet, I reached the conclusion that now was my time and in spite of my inner conflict, I felt that I'd happily give up everything just to gain Jesus.

– Michael knelt down and said: “God, I don't know for sure if Jesus is the Messiah or not. If he is not the Messiah, please forgive me for this. If he is the promised Messiah, show it to me by healing me completely. I ask you, Jesus, to be my Redeemer.” Michael also asked for healing, because physically he was in a weak state. In reality, the symptoms he had were psychosomatic (physical symptoms caused by emotional problems). Michael waited for a healing miracle to take place or that he would experience something very wonderful, like bells ringing and angels descending into the room, but nothing special happened. Ulf and Jürgen rejoiced, but to quote Michael, he was “a big question mark” and had doubts. “Maybe this was nothing, maybe Jesus is not real after all,” he thought. It all remained unclear. Ulf and Jürgen explained to Michael that believing in Jesus is based on faith, not feelings.

It had been a solemn moment of choice. Michael had not in any way felt coerced by these Christian believers. He knew well that he was a sinner and in need of a Saviour.

Then, on the following day, as he travelled back to Italy, things started happening...

– I received a wonderful peace in my heart and experienced healing of my psychosomatic illnesses. For instance, I had suf-

ferred from bad stomach issues and they disappeared. At first, I questioned whether the disappearance of the physical symptoms were linked at all to my becoming a follower of Jesus. The symptoms stayed away, though, and I was reassured that Jesus had removed them.

– The peace also stayed with me. All my anxiety left me, and the feelings of pain, sorrow and heaviness that I'd carried for years disappeared. All of a sudden, a sense of joy and happiness replaced those negative emotions. This, too, was a permanent change, Michael rejoices. I received “the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair,” as is written in Isaiah 61:3.

Of course, Michael shares realistically that this personal encounter with God, of being born again was just a start into a new phase in his life. Gaining joy, deeper peace, and security in the faith was gradual. Becoming a believer was a start to spiritual and mental growth.

– Until now, God had been Elohim, holy, distant and impersonal. Now He became Abba, a personal and close Father. I began to feel that I was in God's arms like a baby in its father's arms. The baby will not fall. In the same way, God was like a refuge for me to trust in. I also started to feel God as a friend who comforts and who speaks with me and with whom I have a special connection. My relationship to God had clearly changed.

– When I was still a young follower of Jesus, Jürgen took me to a place called *Rettungsarche* (ark of salvation), where he had stayed as a young believer. It was a sort of community-style centre for searching people or new followers of Jesus. More mature believers offered their assistance in prayer and counselling, and the grounds offered much nature and space to spend time praying and seeking God's presence. Twice a day people celebrated *Andacht* (time of devotion). To this day, I still marvel that I was eagerly waiting for these times. Each *Andacht* lasted one and a half hours, including a message in German, which I did not understand, yet each time, I left the

Andacht filled with joy. It was my first love for God.

Once, Michael took part in an annual Israel conference. Every day, there were meetings in German.

– Even though I understood nothing of the speeches, my love for Jesus was so great that I went there just to be in the presence of the Lord. At that conference, for the first time, I met a believer who spoke Hebrew. He had a long white beard, and in my mind he looked just like Moses. His name was David Loden. He came from Israel and was a Messianic Jew. There I understood that in Israel there are Jews who believe in Jesus, and they call him Yeshua. He encouraged me to come to Israel, where the number of Messianic Jews was still very small, Michael recalls.

All kinds of items were being sold at the conference. Michael wanted to buy a big menorah, an Israeli seven-branched candelabra, which was expensive. Yet out of his little money he decided to buy one.

After the conference, a visitor who had come from a long distance gave Michael a lift back to the same convalescent home where he always stayed. Jürgen shared the lift. As Michael got out of the car and went into the home, he could not find the menorah anywhere. It had been left in the conference-visitor's car. The others shared their sympathy over Michael's loss of the expensive menorah. The visitor would probably never return to the home. Amidst the others, Michael knelt down and prayed to God to get his menorah back.

Suddenly Jürgen appeared with the menorah and handed it back to Michael. Jürgen told them: "I saw that the visitor, who was driving hundreds of kilometres back home, had the back door of his car open. I drove after him to the motorway and tried to gesture for him to stop. He drove fast and didn't notice anything. Then he stopped to get more fuel and I was able to tell him that his back door was ajar. As I closed it I noticed Michael's menorah on the back seat." This guidance from God was a great consolation and encouragement to Michael.

It was six months since Michael had become a follower of Jesus. The friends in Germany started to teach about believer's baptism, immersion into water.

– They told me to read the verses where Philip shares the gospel with the Ethiopian official who is then baptised. I had also thought that those verses were important. In the book of Acts (8:36–38) it says: “As they travelled along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?’ Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ The eunuch answered, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.”

Michael and his friends were outside, surrounded by a snowy landscape, when they encouraged him: “You could be baptised now.” Michael, however, wished to be baptised in Israel, in the Jordan River. The friends appealed to the same story in the book of Acts and reminded him that the Ethiopian official was baptised immediately. So they went to somebody's house and Michael, dressed in white, gave a testimony of his faith. Then he was baptised in the bathtub. Some twenty to thirty believers were peering in through the bathroom door.

– In my testimony I said that I was a sinner whom God had pardoned. The testimony was recorded. One of the people present, maybe wanting to do something good, sent the tape to my grandfather, without asking my permission. That caused a breach between me and my grandfather. He thought that I had fallen prey to some sect. He suspected that I wouldn't continue my studies, Michael regrets to say.

Grandfather had paid for his studies up to that point, but now he had to manage on his own.

– Of course, I would have wanted to share my faith with my grandfather, only to do it personally. From that moment on I understood much better what sort of a price Messianic Jews have to pay for their faith among their families. In Luke 14:26-27,

Jesus says: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters — yes, even their own life — such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

– Naturally, I wanted to be baptised, and at the time and afterwards I was filled with tremendous joy. I really felt that the “old man” (my sinful nature) had been washed away in the water. I thought I’d become more or less perfect. Then I noticed that I was far from perfection — I hadn’t even got rid of impurity. I was a sinner whose sins had been forgiven. For some reason, God has kept me in such a way that after becoming a believer I have not been in a relationship outside marriage.

– Even though we have received the Holy Spirit to live inside us, being set free from old habits and becoming whole takes time, Michael acknowledges.

Because of his Jewishness, Michael’s German friends set him on a pedestal. They said: “Because you are Jewish and a Messianic believer, you are doubly loved by the Lord. You are a son of Abraham both through your birth and your faith.” They always gave Michael the chance to share his testimony in front of an audience.

– I understood that God loved me. As a Messianic Jew, though, I started to think that God loved me even more than He loves others, Michael reflects.

5.

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE AND STUDIES

Michael kept visiting Germany, but continued to live in Rome.

When he returned to Rome after becoming a believer, he did not want to live at the children's home any longer. Living among religious Jews did not feel right any more. As if by a miracle, on the day he returned home from Germany as a believer, he met an elderly lady who offered him a place to stay at her house. Michael was able to move in as a lodger. Later, Michael witnessed to her about Jesus and she started to believe.

– I thought I was the only person in Italy who had faith in Jesus in his heart, but then I met a lady believer. Together, with her husband, they ran a Christian publishing house. They loved Israel. They took me to a church of about two hundred people that met in an old movie theatre. It was not a fancy place. Ex-drug addicts and people from the streets used to come in. I started to go to the meetings, but because of study and work engagements I only made it there at the last minute. At that point they were celebrating the Lord's Supper, at the end of the meeting, Michael recalls.

In order to get to the meeting, Michael had to take two un-

derground trains and a bus. Nevertheless, he made the journey to be there even for the last ten minutes. He was able to share in the Lord's Supper, in remembrance of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. He was also able to feel the real love of these people. They "spoke the same language" as they shared the same faith with him.

– God's love had such a great pull on me. Visiting that fellowship was enough to make me happy for all of the following week.

– It was new to me that complete strangers in the congregation might wish me peace and kiss me on the cheek like people do in Italy. They started calling me "brother". It felt good, even though I didn't understand that much about its significance, Michael shares.

– One couple especially took good care of me and also a sister called Stefania. She had a great love for Israel and was the first one who helped me get a revelation of Jesus as a Jew, besides him being the Messiah.

– When I started to believe that Jesus is the Messiah — even after I had received him into my heart — I was afraid that I'd have to give up my Jewish identity. Then I understood that I was a Messianic Jew, that is, a Jew who believes in his Messiah. I understood that it was just a turning of the heart, and that I'm still a Jew. I'm even more of a Jew than I was before because now I have the perfect revelation about who my Messiah is, thus fulfilling the new covenant Jeremiah describes (see Jeremiah 31:31).

– The name of the Messiah is not the Christian Jesus, but the Jewish Messiah Yeshua. I also understood that his Hebrew name means salvation. The name Yeshu that the rabbis have given him is a curse, as if he was Hitler or Eichmann. Praise God! his right name has been reintroduced as the number of Messianic Jews increases. The use of the name Yeshua has also increased in the media. Even film subtitles no longer read Yeshu but Yeshua.

While participating in the Lord's Supper Michael experienced fellowship with his fellow believers and with God. Sometimes

he felt unworthy to take part, but still joined in and received the bread and the wine.

Yet Michael started to see some things in that congregation that he did not like, and he found another, smaller one closer to home.

– I felt at home in this new congregation. The father of one family in particular became like a spiritual father to me. The congregation as a whole felt like a spiritual family. I even started to feel love and pity towards people, Michael recalls with wonder.

He relates an event that showed how he had changed. Earlier he had never given anyone anything material. Then someone asked him for money for a train ticket and Michael gave him the money because he saw the person really needed it. It surprised him, because he had always thought of himself as a selfish person.

Michael heard about an event that had taken place near his house, and it touched him a lot. A man who had just become a believer went to work at a petrol station. On his first day at work his boss said that he was going out to eat. He gave the keys to this worker and told him to take care of the station while he was out. After the boss had left two men appeared with pistols in their hands. They threatened the worker: “Open up the till and give us the money!” What did the worker do? Of course, he was frightened at first. Then he said: “Oh, so you’re going to shoot me? Go ahead! I’ll just get to go to heaven to be with the Lord!” The burglars quickly legged it.

Michael admired the man’s courage. He also loved Yeshua and was eager to tell people about it. He gave his testimony whenever an opportunity presented itself and even got acquainted with people in order to tell them about Yeshua. Most of them did not want to know, but some were interested.

Michael read the Bible a lot, especially the New Testament. From cassettes, he also started to listen to it in Hebrew. The forgiveness that Yeshua offered presented itself as the central issue in the Word. The power of God enabled him to engage in different kinds of ministry; Yeshua did give the power to pray

for the sick, for instance in the Gospel of Mark (16:18): “They [the believers] will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

– I prayed and praised the Lord. My own issues were at the top of my list, of course, but the people in the fellowship also had an important place in my prayers. I also remembered non-believers and, naturally, my brother, his wife and my grandfather.

Michael felt that in this congregation he could grow in the knowledge of Yeshua. But his journey of faith had only begun:

– In the beginning, Yeshua protects a believer like a child is protected. He doesn’t allow the enemy to attack much, Michael notes and continues:

– I was wrapped in cotton wool. I received love from brothers and sisters in the faith, not least because I was a Messianic Jew. In Italy, a Jew who believed in Yeshua was a wondrous thing.

Michael rejoiced in forgiveness, but on the other hand he felt that sin also persisted.

– There are battles in a believer’s life from beginning to end, he notes.

In the church he had been told that he was no longer Jewish; he was now an evangelical. At some point he started to doubt his own faith. “Have I done something wrong? What if I never did become a believer?” These were the doubts that sometimes entered his head. In the beginning there was also the thought that maybe, after all, he had committed a sin as a Jew to receive Yeshua into his life.

– Even though the Holy Spirit enters the heart when we first believe, the transformation of the mind takes time.

Michael shares a poignant story from the fellowship near his home: once a young boy who had recently become a believer came late to the prayer meeting. The pastor had just encouraged people to pray spontaneously. Everybody had prayed beautiful, well-constructed prayers. The boy just said: “Lord, I don’t know how to pray, but I want to thank you for the glass of water that I got. I was so thirsty.” Then the pastor remarked: “We know how

to recite the phrases that we have learned, but this boy prayed from his heart with real spontaneity!”

Michael sometimes visited the huge tent where the organisation Christ is the Answer used to hold meetings. The group did powerful evangelism to reach all kinds of people around Italy. Often, the speaker at the tent meetings was an American Messianic Jew. He was a theologian and a charismatic speaker.

– I was a very young believer. I wasn’t used to not being the centre of attention. In Germany, believers would always introduce me with admiration: “Here comes the Messianic Jew.” This time, I had simply been invited to the tent to hear the speaker, but I was asking: “Who’s in charge of this meeting?” I was referred to the senior pastor and introduced myself: “I’m a Messianic Jew.” I thought he would jump for joy on hearing it. The senior pastor only said: “I’m an Italian believing Christian.”

Though he saw that the pastor was busy, Michael continued: “I have a powerful testimony. I can be entertaining, too.” When the pastor still did not react, Michael said: “If you want, I can play some Hebrew music.” The pastor replied that their music group could also play Hebrew songs, but finally he gave Michael permission.

Then it came to Michael’s turn to perform. On the piano, he thought he pressed the C-chord, but heard a D instead.

– Suddenly my hands started to shake and I couldn’t even press the keys properly. The musicians had mercy on me. They came around me and started to sing and play well-known Hebrew songs. Horrified and ashamed, I looked at the pastor. The event was being broadcast live on the radio and TV.

– I asked: “Lord, why did you let this happen to me?” In my heart I felt that God answered: “I did not send you there. As you have brewed, so you must drink.” Afterwards I wrote a letter of apology to the pastor: I confessed that due to my pride I had wanted to be on display. He never answered my letter, Michael shares with some amusement.

At the university, Michael met a lady believer, Liliana (not her real name). Together with a couple of other believers she had a table with Christian literature on it. They would share the gospel with anyone interested. Michael, Liliana and another lady started to meet at Liliana's place. Michael still attended the fellowship near his home. Once that congregation was involved in a common project with many other churches when they put on a play that specifically targeted drug users. It was performed in a large movie theatre.

The play was based on real events in Italy. In the play, the father of a family uses drugs, and the life of the whole family is chaotic. The son, who is called Dario in the play, also starts using drugs. Then Dario, together with his father, goes to a Christian meeting. The father leaves before the end. Dario is on drugs, but when he is listening to the preaching, the drugs have no effect on him. He takes some more. Still there is no effect. Dario starts to suspect that he has been sold some bad "dope", that he has been cheated.

Then Dario realises that this must be God's doing. He starts to believe in Yeshua at the meeting, jumps up and down and shouts with a loud voice: "He's alive, he's alive" meaning that Yeshua lives.

The preparations for the play went on for a long time. Michael got the part of Dario. He grew his hair long and bought empty syringes every day to get into character. The man playing the pastor was a pastor in real life and a foreigner, Pastor Spredos (not the real name). The rest of the cast were ex-dealers and addicts.

It was time for dress rehearsals. Everybody was tense and nervous. Suddenly, a great argument broke out: people were accusing others, for instance, of not carrying enough stuff or not giving lifts to others to the rehearsals. The actors were almost in a fistfight with each other. Only Michael and Pastor Spredos stayed out of it. Then the pastor stepped up and said: "In Yeshua's name I bind all spirits of quarrelling." Immediately, a miracle happened: the actors started hugging and apologising to each other.

– I’ve never experienced anything so marvellous, Michael relates. I hardly knew that the powers of darkness existed and was amazed at the power of God’s authority.

When the play was performed, the theatre was full of drug addicts, black magic practitioners and others from the murkier side of life. When the performance ended, three drug addicts came up to Michael and declared: “Dario, we want to become believers!” They were much prayed for.

– That was my first fruit for my Messiah, Michael rejoices.

The connection between Michael and Pastor Spredos did not end there. Michael said to him: “I want you to be my pastor!” Pastor Spredos took him at his word and started attending the little meetings at Liliana’s.

Pastor Spredos knew the internationally known Bible teacher Derek Prince. In a way, he was Derek Prince’s “disciple” and had a vision and a love for Israel. He understood the position that Israel held in God’s salvation plan. He knew a lot about Messianic Jewishness. Derek Prince’s teaching had been a contributing factor in his vision for Israel. So Prince also became Michael’s human teacher to follow.

Derek Prince (1915–2003) was a British Bible teacher. He lived in the land of Israel, which was then called Palestine under the British Mandate, even before the founding of the state of Israel. After that he lived in many countries with his family. He was also a pastor in the United States. The Princes regularly lived in Israel. Derek Prince published hundreds of teaching tapes and about forty books.⁶¹

Michael reflects that he knows many pastors who are excellent Bible teachers, but do not say much about the Holy Spirit. Then there are pastors who emphasise spiritual gifts and speak a lot about signs and wonders, but they lack deep Bible knowledge. In Michael’s evaluation, Prince combined good Bible teaching with the use of the gifts. He also put the Word into practice. He acknowledged the reality of spiritual powers and delivered people from false spirits.

- In a balanced way, he combined sound doctrine with his teaching on the power of the Spirit, Michael defines. I used to listen to his teaching on cassettes and read his books. I also corresponded with him. In his letters, he gave me advice as to what books I should read. Prince was not Jewish, but he had a clear vision about Israel. Due to living in Israel at length, he knew what he was talking about when he taught about the Holy Land. Although I was surrounded by Christians in Italy, Derek Prince was important to me because he represented a link to Israel and the Messianic life there. Through him I was able to form a sound and solid basis for my faith.

The fellowship at Liliana's place also invited outsiders to their meetings, and once there were about ten people present, almost all of them women. Michael gave his testimony about becoming a believer, and those who did not know Yeshua yet received him into their lives. Later on, their spouses also became believers, so the group began growing slowly. Then Michael felt it was time to leave his congregation, even though it felt like home to him.

Because the numbers in the fellowship were so small, people did not just sit and listen to the pastor; everybody took an active role. Michael also invited people to the meetings, prayed for people and served with all his gifts.

Michael told Pastor Spredos that he wanted to be baptised with the Holy Spirit. The answer was: "If you are hungry for God, you can ask for it and it will be given to you by the grace of God!" He appealed to the words of Yeshua: "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7).

- So I asked, and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit by faith. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is a unique experience described in the New Testament, in Acts 2. After believing in Yeshua and confessing him as Saviour, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts. Then, when we ask in faith, God adds more of his Spirit until we overflow, giving us more strength and use of our gifts. It is much like filling a cup of water until it overflows.

In time, I saw the change it brought into my life, Michael

shares. Michael's landlady became a believer through him. Once she fell as she was reading the Bible in her rocking chair and received a blow to her forehead. She asked Pastor Spredos to come and pray for her. He was unable to go, but asked Michael to go instead and pray for the lady.

– Straightaway, I felt that God wanted to do something great, Michael recalls. I even called the lady to prepare herself because God wanted to manifest Himself. Her hearing problem came to my mind, but I didn't say anything to her at that point.

One of the lady's ears had been deaf ever since childhood, and in the other ear the hearing was bad also. In that ear she used a hearing aid attached to her glasses.

– The lady loved worship. When I came to her place, I put on a worship cassette and casually knelt down to pray for her. I never shared my thoughts with her and I didn't lay my hands on her. All of a sudden, I noticed that she was singing along to the songs on the cassette. As I looked at her, I could see that her glasses and her hearing aid along with them were on the table. I did a hearing test with her and I noticed that she actually heard with the bad ear and was able to stop using her hearing aid altogether. Her own doctor said later that it was a genuine miracle, Michael delights in the memory.

Pastor Spredos and his congregation started to call themselves the Nicene group. Someone said to them that if they do not come up with a name, someone else will and the name given by others might not be to their liking. The name referred to the Nicene Creed (see appendix 2). Priests knew immediately what it was about, but others needed explanation: the Nicene Creed was adopted in the early stages of Christianity. It mentions all the basic beliefs shared by all Christian denominations and groups. If they had called themselves evangelical, they could not have reached the Catholics, which is what most Italians are. In Italy 'evangelical' refers to non-Catholic Christians.

– I wanted to spread the gospel, Michael says. Of course, I

knew I was a Messianic Jew, but I felt that God taught me new things through different churches and congregations.

– Our Nicene group had a vision of winning the Romans and also the Jews living in Rome to the Lord. It is difficult to get Catholics to come to house meetings. So we started having meetings in an Anglican Church building. The Anglican doctrine is close to the Catholic one, and it's easier for Catholics to come there than into homes, Michael reflects.

The Nicene group called the meetings at the Anglican Church 'mass', so that people would not shy away from them. They had a liturgy of some kind, though not according to the Catholic doctrine. All worship of Mary and prayer to the saints was totally left out. The songs were from the Catholic Charismatic movement and were the same that the evangelicals sang. When it was sermon time, Pastor Spredos would give a message, often an evangelistic one.

At the end of the mass there was an altar call. While praying for people, gifts of the Spirit were used, also the gift of healing. People came to these 'masses' and they also became believers. The new converts would bring family members along, and so the gospel spread.

Michael felt that it was a positive approach. The message was presented in a way that fitted in with the customs and the style of the people for whom the events were created. Being involved with the congregational activity and listening to Pastor Spredos' teaching brought Michael a lot of joy, along with lasting peace from God in his heart. The meetings were first held at the home of Michael's landlady. When the fellowship grew, new house groups were formed. In the end, 20–30 believers attended the meetings, and they therefore moved to a meeting hall outside of Rome. Michael moved to live near the university with an Italian Jewish couple. The wife was confined to a wheelchair. Her husband was elderly and could no longer look after his wife. Michael assisted the lady wash herself, took her out, and looked after her in other ways, too.

Pastor Spredos loved Israel. He also had a vision of what the life of a Messianic Jew should be like. He felt very strongly that Michael had been misled when people had advised him to forget about his Jewishness as a believer in Yeshua. “Only now you are a real Jew,” he would say. He advised Michael to go to the synagogue to learn about his own roots. Michael followed his advice and started attending the synagogue. He felt that this was just the part that had been lacking in his faith. Earlier, he had also been told that the Jewish festivals or kosher-rules were no longer binding for him, that he was free of all Jewishness. Pastor Spredos said that, on the contrary, observing Jewish customs would be a good testimony to those Jews who did not yet know their Messiah.

In Rome Michael knew no Israeli people. Before, in Siena, the community was fairly small and the Israelis knew each other. Michael knew Italian Jews, but not a single Messianic Jew. He went to the synagogue and the Lord opened doors so that he was able to share the gospel with Italian Jews.

– I taught them Hebrew and prepared their children for Bar Mitzvah celebrations. I also had an opportunity to get to know Russian Jews, who had come to the Ladispoli reception centre outside Rome. I was able to share my faith with them and I learned a lot about their culture, which later proved to be important, Michael remarks.

For his part, he brought the Israel vision to the Nicene group. Once a month, people who loved Israel came to the Anglican church to pray for Israel, to the same church where Pastor Spredos’s group held masses. These friends of Israel received prayer letters from Israel and used them as guidelines. Michael started giving occasional teachings on Israel at these meetings. The Nicene group also began celebrating the Jewish festivals while they showed the Messiah at the centre of the feasts. They invited Jewish people to attend and they came, though none came to know Yeshua at that time.

Michael and Pastor Spredos became close. Both also learned

to know each other's past. The pastor told Michael about an incident from the time when they did not know each other yet. Spredos had been single for a long time and had really longed for a spouse. He said to the Lord: "I can't live alone any more! Please guide the right lady into my life." Once he felt that he should go and visit a certain church. The room was full with only one free seat. In the next seat sat a blonde-haired lady. Spredos said to God: "Maybe you brought me here today because of that girl. I ask you for a sign. There's only one free seat and it's next to her. Maybe it's for me. If the lady moves to sit in the next seat, it's a sign for me that I should start dating her."

Well, what do you know, after the worship the lady had moved to the seat next to her original one. Spredos made a bee-line for the vacant seat. He asked the lady if she was a believer. As a matter of fact, he did not even know much Italian at the time. The lady replied in the affirmative. Spredos shared boldly: "I believe that God brought me here." Then he explained about his prayer and went on: "I believe that God has his finger in this and that he has meant us to be together." The lady listened patiently. Then Spredos asked: "What do you think?" The lady's reply was: "You better ask my husband what he thinks. He plays the clarinet in the worship group!" Michael thought this was a good example of the super-spirituality to which we sometimes fall prey.

Pastor Spredos did get married in the end. Michael felt that he learned a lot not only from him, but also from his wife. He remembers an incident the pastor's wife shared with him.

It had been on her heart to testify about Yeshua to a work colleague in a bookkeeping office. That woman was both beautiful and successful. As Mrs Spredos shared about Yeshua, her colleague laughed in her face and said arrogantly: "Listen, I lack nothing in my life. I have good looks and a rich boyfriend with a Ferrari. What could faith possibly add to my life that I don't have already?" Mrs Spredos confessed that the life of a pastor's wife was not always easy, and her husband's salary was not large.

The conversation with her colleague had ended there.

Some time after, her colleague went on a holiday with her boyfriend where they were involved in an accident. While driving, their car collided with a truck and both of them died.

– It was a lesson about how we never know when our last moment comes, Michael comments.

The members of the Nicene group had all kinds of life stories. One lady that belonged to the fellowship had a husband, Massimo, who was not a believer. He came to the meetings, but then he always came up with some excuse as to why he could not stay for the sermon. He was a football fan and said he needed to go and see the match. His wife had to leave the meeting with him. “Oh, all these meetings and retreats!” the man would throw up his hands and moan. The situation took a new turn: Pastor Spredos was acquainted with a Sicilian pastor. Spredos suggested that Massimo travel with him to Palermo, Sicily, to meet the pastor, who had a large congregation there. Massimo did not want to go, but finally agreed. One needs to take a ferry to get to Palermo. On that ferry God just touched him, and he received Yeshua in his heart. Nowadays, he is a pastor and has been for the past fifteen years.

One other congregation member also had a spouse who never wanted to come to the meetings. He had a big motorbike and one day had an accident with it. The damage was not too bad, but he broke his leg and it had to be put in a cast. Two weeks after the accident the church went on a retreat for one week. The wife had already paid for participation and definitely wanted to go. The man said: “Who will look after me, if you go? I just have to come with you. I can’t stay here with my leg in a cast.” At the retreat, God worked in this man’s heart, so that he wanted to receive Yeshua, and he began living as a disciple.

Michael felt that God had given him the gift of pastoring: he would call believers to come together and ask people how they were doing. He also evangelised. After some time, Pastor Spredos left Rome. People were asking God who should be the

pastor after him. Massimo was chosen. He was a young believer and young in age as well, but God started to use him.

– Massimo was humble. In everything, we could see that God honoured him.

At the beginning, Massimo was a little unsure and he confided in Michael, who started to teach on Israel and other issues, too.

God directed Michael to live a life worthy of a child of God through different experiences. Even though the journey to the university was short, for instance, Michael would ride the bus for a short distance. He did not always get his ticket stamped, and did not always have money, either. As a believer, he learned, though, that such behaviour is not pleasing to God.

There came the time when Michael had to renew his visa. He needed photographs for the official papers. There were booths in Rome where you could pay and get an automatic photograph of yourself.

– I was in a real hurry. I had to have the photos for my documents the next day. There were no euros then, the notes were like 1000 lira. The photos cost about 2000 lira. I had 5000 lira notes, and the machine was supposed to give me change. I went to the automat, but it gave me neither change nor photos. The same thing happened three times: it was always a new machine and always out of order in the same way. I got no change or photos from any of them. Then I arrived at the fourth automat.

– When I put in the money, I felt the Lord say to my heart: “I took the money you should have paid on the buses.” And, at the fourth attempt, everything worked just fine with the photographs. Sometimes God uses methods like this to teach his children, Michael reflects, as he looks back on the incident.

Of course, life was not just about living with believers and going to meetings. Studying was hard work the whole time. Michael says that he did not study “four hours a day, but fourteen hours a day.” He had a hard time concentrating, which is why something that should take one hour of study, took two for

him. After all, he was not even studying in his native tongue.

– The dictionary became a good friend of mine, Michael chuckles.

Especially the fine details were difficult to remember. While studying, Michael tried to witness about Yeshua and was sometimes rejected for it.

He was interested in psychiatry and wanted to graduate in that field. Following his plan back in Siena, he started studying under a Jewish professor who specialised in children's neuropsychiatry in Rome. Later, he changed to adult psychiatry, however, and under a different professor. The study requirements included some research, and his topic was "Dream Interpretation in Freudianism".

Michael was allowed to watch and listen from an observation room, as his professor talked to a young woman. She was completely ignorant of the observer behind the mirror wall. The girl complained to the professor: "I have had therapy for many years, and it hasn't helped at all! Maybe I should pray to God." The professor commented: "You'd do well to forget all about God!"

Michael saw that the girl had deep mental scars. He thought that Pastor Spredos could deliver the girl from her bondage. As a student, Michael had access to the patient files, and he looked up the girl's phone number. He called her and explained how he had heard about her situation.

– I told her: "I believe it's possible for God to heal you! I know a pastor who can set you free. He could pray for you." Apparently, the girl's mother heard the phone call and called the professor.

When Michael came to the university the next day, the professor was very angry and amazed: "How dare you do something like this? You would send my patient to some Satan worshipper, to some exorcist to cast out demons! You will not be doing any research like that under me! You will do it theoretically, with no practical research."

– I admit that I did wrong in calling the professor's patient

but, on the other hand, I saw that only God could help the girl. I felt that God allowed it to happen to me, so that I would see that Freudian psychoanalysis had not helped that girl. It prevented me from getting too deep into psychoanalysis. It was also the first time I understood that being a follower of Yeshua meant I had to pay a price, Michael reflects.

Again, Michael changed professors. His next supervisor was a professor in neuropsychiatry, and the chosen research topic was “Depression and Its Psychosomatic Symptoms”. The idea was that people might come and complain about physical symptoms, when the cause behind them was depression. The topic related to Michael’s own experiences at the time when he had not yet come to faith in Yeshua. There was a theory side to the research, and he got his material from a vast number of books. There was also the practical side: Michael sent a questionnaire to 400 doctors. The questions were along these lines: “When the patient came in complaining of severe headaches, did you also find symptoms of depression?”

– I understood that in my studies I depended on God and his strength. By his grace I progressed well, Michael says, and give glory to God. He also remarks that he experienced the love of God through the research supervisor. He was understanding and took good care of his students.

Studies also included practice periods in the hospital. Once, the students met the professor at the cardiac ward. He wanted them to learn to listen to the heart.

He led a woman patient to the student group, and each one took turns in listening to her heart. The first student listened with a stethoscope. He heard extra heartbeats. The next one heard something else on top of that, as did the one after him. Then it was Michael’s turn. He listened and listened and in the end he said: “Excuse me, professor, I can be completely wrong, but I hear just a normal heartbeat. I don’t notice anything wrong with the heart.”

Then the professor exclaimed: “At last someone spoke the

truth! I wanted to test you. I brought a healthy person for you to examine!”

– That was a good lesson for me about the importance of speaking about things the way they are. In the past I had problems in that area. In different situations I had pretended to be innocent so as not to get caught, even though I had not been truthful. Now I prayed that God would help me so that each time I would fall and lie, I would have the courage to go and confess it to the person in question. To do this I had to humble myself. I felt as I brought things into the light that the enemy had no more power over me in this area, and I was set free.

Michael shares about an oral exam on pathological anatomy. One had to know the contents of many large volumes. The students utilised their short-term memory and got up at night to read, so that the time span from the reading to the exam would be as short as possible. Michael also got up at night to read for the exam. Terrified, he wondered how an earth he could go to the exam. “I’ve studied and studied and I still don’t feel that I know the stuff,” he thought. He prayed to God to help him.

Then, all of a sudden, at night, he heard himself speaking out what he had read in the books. He must have gone on for six hours, speaking the text from the books to himself. After the exam the examiner said: “We could swap places here. You know everything so well!” Michael still cannot understand how it happened, except that it was a miracle.

– What kind of help God gave me! Overall, I got excellent grades in my degree certificate for the whole of my studies, he rejoices and adds: Even for my research I got the highest grades possible. I concluded my studies *summa cum laude*. I didn’t think it possible to do so well in a foreign language. God showed me that if I trust in him, he really is able to help. “I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13).

After getting the final certificate, it was time to think about the future. According to the words in the prophecy Michael received

even before he became a believer, he would return to Israel one day. Pastor Spredos also supported the idea that Michael should return and continue his life in Israel. On the other hand, Michael felt at home in Italy and could get work there as a doctor. In order to practise medicine in Israel, he would have to take a big exam. He did not have a place to stay or friends waiting for him in Israel.

Michael travelled to Israel to show his certificate to his grandfather, who was very pleased. While in his home country, he got to know some Messianic Jews.

- I thought that I'd just visit the homeland, after which I'd return to work at the clinic in Rome, like my professor had suggested.

- I went to the Garden Tomb and prayed there. I thanked God for everything that he had done for me. I'm not a special seer of visions or a hearer of voices, but then I heard God's voice saying: "Your place is here. You need to come back." It was a unique experience for me. Those words from God caused a dramatic change in my attitude. Against all my earlier plans, Israel now became my only destination. At the same time, God worked in my heart: I was now convinced that my place was in Israel, says Michael.

At the time of his visit to Israel, he, like the boxer Muhammad Ali, had grand ideas about himself. These ideas were linked to the prophecy he had received in Germany. He showed the prophecy to all the believers he met and said he was the new Moses.

- They probably thought I was suffering from a Jerusalem complex, Michael laughs. On his return to Italy, he surprised all his friends by telling them that he was planning his return to Israel. Fourteen years earlier, he had left to go and study, laden with sad memories and heavy thoughts. Now, in 1993, having succeeded in his studies and having been saved and healed, he would return to his homeland. Everything seemed to be fine, yet a couple of months before leaving for Israel, something unexpected happened: the heavy memories and the old symptoms

returned, and Michael thought he could not go back in that state.

– The enemy tried to convince me that nothing had changed. I was returning to Israel the same as I had left from there. I would not receive it, but instead I declared: “No, I’m not returning as the same person I used to be.”

Michael asked Pastor Massimo to pray for him. Besides other things, he also started to go on walks for a couple of hours every night at about eleven or twelve, and asked God for strength.

– In that state of mind I could have thought: “What’s the point in anything!” I didn’t fall into that trap, though. I would often say to myself the words from Psalm 118:17: “I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.” In Italy, I often listened to an evangelical radio channel. I also listened to Hebrew New Testament cassettes. I sought the Lord in every way.

Michael’s seeking was not in vain: a week before he left, he was set free and returned to Israel in a state of mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

He summarises his time as a believer in Italy as “a real time of first love for the Lord and it hasn’t really been like that since. My prayer life was very intensive and I lived close to the Lord. He also carried me in and through my studies.”

6.

BACK TO THE PROMISED LAND

As Michael travelled back to Israel by plane, he had the largest amount of luggage allowed. Besides, he had three crates shipped over by sea. They contained Christian materials, mainly cassettes. Things like that would be considered taboo materials in Israel. Michael would have got himself into difficulties had the contents of the crates been revealed.

The crates arrived in Israel about half a year after the move. With a friend, Michael went to customs to collect them. They were silently praying to God, because it was likely that the customs official would open all the crates. The man sternly asked what was in the crates.

Before Michael had a chance to answer properly, the man looked at him and said: “Okay, you look like an honest guy. I’ll open the first box, and let’s see what we can find!”

With a knife, the man cut the box open enough to see a Jewish prayer shawl and a doctor’s stethoscope on top. The man said: “Aha, you’re a doctor and religious, too. We don’t need to examine these any further.”

– It truly was a miracle and the grace of God that he didn’t

see all the “Yeshua-stuff”, Michael beams as he remembers the incident.

After coming to Israel he was able to stay with his brother in Haifa for a while.

– I hadn’t wanted to come back to Israel, but I felt that the Lord called me to my homeland. The situation was not easy. I almost felt like an immigrant, though I was coming home to my own country. In a way, I had to start life from scratch. I was often asked: “How did you learn to speak Hebrew so well?” I was taken for a foreigner because I had picked up an Italian accent to my speech, Michael laughs.

From his brother’s place he moved to Jerusalem to share a rented flat with an Italian man. He escaped, as it were, to Jerusalem, as he did not want to go to Tel Aviv. In Jerusalem it would be possible to be a bit of a tourist without anyone recognising him. There were many sad memories connected with Tel Aviv as both his parents had died there.

The Italian flatmate was interested in Jewishness. Michael tried to talk about Yeshua to him, but in the end he became a Jewish rabbi. In Jerusalem Michael got to know Barry and Batya Segal, a Messianic singer and evangelist couple. He started to attend their congregation. Through certain brothers he also got to know another group, and they became his second “home congregation”. Michael also attended house meetings organised by the congregations. In this way, he found fellowship straightaway. In Italy, he had learned that going to meetings was important for a believer’s growth.

Derek Prince lived in Israel at the time. He wanted to meet Michael personally and invited him to the King David Hotel. That was the place where foreign statesmen and other politically important people would usually be accommodated.

Several times, Michael was able to visit Derek at his home. Each time, Prince would pray for his visitor at the end of the conversation. At some point he stopped this private prayer together.

– At first I was hurt when there was no more praying, Mi-

chael says. But then I understood that Prince acted wisely. He didn't want me to get too attached to a person, the famous Bible teacher. The first place in my heart had to belong to God and my fellowship with him.

Once, Prince invited Messianic believers to the Sea of Galilee. We spent the whole day listening to his teaching.

– It reminded me of Yeshua teaching his disciples in the same place. That seminar was significant to the whole Messianic body in Israel, according to Michael's estimation.

– I got to know Ted and his family. I used to visit them in their big house in Jerusalem, where there was always room for visitors. I dreamed that one day I could also have a house like that, where people could come and stay. Nowadays Ted and his wife Linda have a similar house open to visitors — “House of Blessing” — overlooking the Sea of Galilee, Michael remarks.

Michael lived right in the centre of Jerusalem, so it was easy for him to visit the Messianic congregations. He learned what a Messianic congregation really means and got to know many believers. While he had plenty to keep him occupied in the evenings, in the daytime he attended a course at Hadassah Hospital where medicine was taught according to Israeli and US requirements. Michael had studied to be a doctor according to European standards. Almost all the other participants were Russian. Some people recommended that he start attending the course in Petah Tikva near Tel Aviv, in the hospital where he was born.

Michael moved to Petah Tikva. He heard that there was a congregation nearby and that the pastor had Italian roots. The group met in a centre owned by American Baptists and called the Baptist Village. That is where he started going and he felt that he had found a congregation that really suited him.

When Michael went to a meeting at the Baptist Village for the first time, a lady asked him to pray for her daughter. Later, other people came to him, too, and asked him to pray for them.

– I fervently asked God to intervene on their behalf and I ministered deliverance. Pastor Tony and one of the elders, Fred,

started to wonder how this young man that no one knew started acting as a counsellor in their congregation. I confessed to them that I had acted wrongly. I apologised and said that I wanted to submit to the leadership of the elders, Michael shares.

First, he stayed with a couple that was part of the congregation, but then he moved to his own rental flat. A house group met at the couple's home and Michael was actively involved. Maybe from there word got around to the elders that he had a good understanding of the Bible. One day Tony came and said to Michael: "I can see that you have a gift for teaching. In the centre of Tel Aviv we have a Messianic evangelism centre called Dugit. There we would like to start having Bible courses, together with an evangelist, Avi. Would you come along as a teacher?"

Michael agreed, without knowing that Dugit was right next to the flat where he had spent his childhood and youth.

– When I saw the evangelism centre downtown in Tel Aviv, I understood that God must have planned it all. The Lord wanted me to face my past and find healing from the pain and the memories I experienced as a child and teenager. Facing my past proved to be a good thing. I began to experience healing of my inner wounds.

– Dugit was an outreach centre where people would come for tea and coffee. Someone talked to them and they were invited to the Bible classes. The ministry was successful. Among those who became believers, there was a fervently religious young man. Today, he is a pastor in Israel.

When Tony saw that Michael did well in his involvement with Dugit, he started to give him more responsibility in the congregation. Michael began to teach, preach and minister to people. He also began leading a house group and making house calls. A non-profit organisation called Love to the Needy was closely linked to the congregation. It provided aid for those in material need. Michael took an active part in it and later became the chairman of the organisation.

Michael moved in as a tenant with Bella, a Holocaust survivor.

Bella had connections to Germany and even knew Jürgen, who had played such an important role on Michael's way to Yeshua. Through Bella, Michael got acquainted with the so-called Doctor Finger's programme she herself was involved with. Among other things, the programme included fasting according to certain guidelines. Doctor Finger hoped that as a doctor Michael would come on staff with the therapy programme. Michael took part as a participant, but felt that it was not his path.

After moving to Petah Tikva, Michael signed up for a six-month course that gave points towards the exam which would qualify him to practise medicine in Israel. He did not, however, participate in a separate advanced course that would have given him many more extra points. Instead, he studied medicine on his own. The exam was considered to be very demanding, and hardly anyone passed it without the extra points from the advanced course. After writing the exam, Michael learned that he was one point short of passing. He asked God to show him whether he wanted him to be a practising doctor at all. Then he felt that God was saying: "You could have passed the exam, but I have other plans."

Michael moved to the Baptist Village. In the mornings he did voluntary work there and in return received free lodging. In the afternoons, he worked at Meir Hospital in Kfar Saba. It was fairly close to the Baptist Village. At the hospital, his duties were equivalent to those of a trainee. Michael's barrack room at Baptist Village was uncomfortable: the walls were made of brass sheets and it got very hot. Sometimes, he would get mouse visits. After some time, a better place became available, and he was able to move there. Today, the Baptist Village offers comfortable rooms.

Then, Michael changed jobs: he moved to work at the Beit Levinstein rehabilitation centre. The patients had sustained serious injuries and some had brain damage. There were wounded soldiers and people seriously disabled from traffic accidents. All these folks were in rehabilitation. Michael knew that he would not be doing this work for long. Even though

the work was hard, he wanted to do it faithfully and well.

Sometimes, the patients would go home at weekends and needed assistance there, too. Besides his regular job, Michael was asked to do this weekend work, which meant extra income. Taking it on would mean missing fellowship with other believers. The meetings took place on the Sabbath, on Saturday (see appendix 1). It would be difficult to carry on responsibilities at the congregation.

Michael chose to take the work: on weekdays, he worked at the hospital. On weekends, he looked after the trauma patients. He also spent nights at the patients' homes.

One Sabbath there was an unfortunate incident. Michael woke up in the morning at a patient's house. As he got out of bed, he hit his head badly on an open window frame. The blow was so hard that he saw the world whirling in front of his eyes. He had to go to the hospital for an x-ray. His neck stayed stiff for about a week and he felt nauseous too.

Every Monday, Michael used to go to the congregation's prayer meeting. His friends wondered where he was when he did not turn up. In the middle of the meeting, someone received a word for Michael from Jeremiah 17:21–23. "This is what the Lord says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors. Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline." Fred conveyed the message to Michael on the following Monday without knowing anything about his stiff neck. As a result, Michael stopped looking after patients on the Sabbath and attended the congregation. He only worked on the Sabbath day evening when, according to Jewish thinking, the day has ended.

– After this incident I have never worked in the daytime on the Sabbath, Michael remarks.

– Looking after the invalids was heavy. I realised that I had to

learn to live with people who had very big problems, and help them. I knew that I had to be faithful in my work, so that God could later bring to pass His ministry call in my life.

Michael's congregation at the Baptist Village had been meeting for six years, when some members, while praying together, received a vision of new premises for the congregation. They found a suitable place in a building under construction on an industrial estate in Kfar Saba. When the house was nearly completed, everything looked like plain sailing: the congregation would be able to buy the premises. They believed that the dedication service would take place on the following New Year. Invitations to the service went out and were even mailed abroad.

A large part of the finances had come together, but a big amount was still missing. About a fortnight before the New Year, the builder announced that he demanded the whole purchase sum before they could take charge of the premises. He would not install electricity or hand over the keys until everything was paid.

No one knew what to do. Pastor Tony left for Korea, hoping to receive support from there, but the results were meagre.

Finally, the people in charge of the congregation met at Ishai and Anat's house for prayer and worship. Michael was there, Fred from the eldership, and Karin, who was responsible for the youth at the time. They thanked the Lord that he had promised to look after his own. "We want to praise you in faith for being faithful and providing the money," they prayed. They trusted that their inner conviction was true: they would dedicate the new premises for the congregation at New Year. They declared victory in the Lord.

The meeting ended with a positive atmosphere. They were confident about God's answer. When these leaders were still in the hall and on their way out the telephone rang, followed by a delighted scream. Unexpectedly, the lady of the house received a call from Fred's wife Eva. Fred and Eva's American friend, who knew nothing about the lack of money, had heard God's voice

exhorting: “Give this sum to the congregation where Fred is an elder.” The sum was exactly what was missing from the price. They were able to have a joyful dedication service.

Soon, Michael moved again, now to his friend Yaron near the new congregational premises. Michael shared a place, because he had to get by with little money. There is an Israeli saying that somebody is like a wandering Jew.

– This is what I felt I was. The root of the saying goes back to the time when Jews had to wander from nation to nation and from place to place. They were not welcomed anywhere, but rejected instead, and they always had to keep moving on. I also had to move house very often.

Michael had always dreamed of living near nature. An opportunity opened up for him to move to Samaria to the Alfei Menashe settlement, which is in a strategically important area for Israel. It is on a beautiful hilltop with views all the way to Jerusalem. Jacob’s spring in Samaria, where Yeshua met the Samaritan woman is in the same area.

– The owners of the house went away for a year, and I was able to stay in their house. I would walk in the beautiful nature and pray much while I was walking. I felt at liberty in the countryside, away from big cities. I realised it was an ideal place for me. I remember the year I lived there. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was shot that same year — it was 1995.

Michael went to see Pastor Tony and asked him what he thought about Michael’s future. He had nearly passed the exam and, at the same time, he felt a strong calling for fulltime ministry: some day, maybe, he would become a pastor. Tony replied: “Both being a doctor and being a pastor are vocations. You cannot practise them at the same time. Fast, pray and see how God will guide you.”

Michael did as the pastor told him and received a conviction that he should not aim to be a doctor. He did not retake the exam. When Michael shared his call to pastoring with Tony, they agreed that Tony would train him both in theory and in

practice. While Tony was training Michael, they did a lot of ministry together.

– We were doing home visits and counselling, for instance. I felt God’s leading in the fact that Tony’s gifting was similar to mine: he was a shepherd and “father”. Pastors have different gifts: their main gifting may be that of an evangelist or a teacher. I believed in the prophecy I had received in Germany that referred to me as a shepherd for the people of Israel one day, or as a pastor. Whether it would take two years or ten years, the time when God would move me to that place of ministry was entirely up to him.

In general, there are tensions between people, even in a congregation.

– People have different personalities, that is why they do not always get on with each other, Michael determines. I would not say we had strong conflicts in our group. Part of a pastor’s training is to learn to handle disagreements on the basis of forgiveness, according to the model Yeshua gave us. In general, I felt loved in that congregation. The three years that Tony trained me were a very positive time. Living with different kinds of people was also part of God’s training.

Together with Tony, Michael also took part in a four-year theological seminar geared towards pastors on the job as well as prospective pastors. Less than ten students took part in this four-year seminar. The well-known Messianic Bible teacher Noam Hendren was the leader. The books and other materials were American. The students covered both the Old and the New Testament methodically, as well as practically, studying different aspects of pastoring. The teaching was pointedly theoretical, but Michael has positive memories of the many conversations they had about each of the topics under Hendren’s guidance. There was a lot of interaction between future pastors and pastors on duty which was spiritually constructive. He considered the course very helpful.

Following the theological seminar, Michael took a three-year

master's degree course on psychological and biblical counselling. The topics covered included different psychological theories, personality disorders, depression, fears and loss. After the counselling therapy course, Michael and others started to meet regularly with the people who had taught the course. In the meetings, they would cover the difficult cases each one had come across in their ministry. The meetings continue to this day.

– Both the theological seminar and the counselling course included much that was already familiar to me, but they introduced new things, as well, Michael comments.

Sometime before Michael started the pastors' theological seminar Michael had got to know a family that became very close to him. The name of the mother was Hallel. That name means 'praise' and friends thought the name really suited her. Hallel was born in Israel. She met a Jewish man living in South Africa, married him and moved to South Africa. The couple had three daughters. While living in South Africa, Hallel became a believer in Yeshua. Her faith caused a breach with her husband and he left Hallel and their three pre-teenage daughters.

Hallel moved back to Israel with her daughters. She joined the same congregation Michael was part of. One after the other, the girls became believers. They were talented young women and a real joy and ornament to the congregation. The daughters grew up, and at an evangelistic campaign, the middle daughter, Galia, got to know an Irish believer, David. They married in Ireland. The older daughter also got married and the youngest one joined the military. It was clear to them that after the military service she would not return to live with her mother.

Hallel heard about a Youth with a Mission counselling course in Scotland. She was interested in counselling, so she fulfilled her dream and decided to engage in this seven-month course. Before she left, she sold and distributed all her possessions, including her furniture. The members of the congregation watched and wondered about her activity. She said the Lord had spoken to her

clearly: “In time I will give you a new home!” Hallel concluded that furniture would be included in the package.

Before Hallel left, Michael met her a last time at the congregation. He said wistfully: “See you in seven months then!” Hallel waved her hand upwards and said: “Yes, unless the rapture comes and the Lord’s beloved are caught up to heaven before that. See you in eternity at the latest!”

So Hallel travelled to Scotland. She went to Ireland as well, to meet her daughter Galia, who was in the last stages of pregnancy. The baby had been given a name already, as the birth was imminent. They went for a drive. Galia drove, David sat next to her and Hallel was on the back seat. David later recalled that suddenly Hallel screamed to her daughter: “Galia!” and then there was a loud crash. They had collided with a truck. Hallel and Galia were killed on the spot, while David sustained no injuries.

When the tragic news of Hallel and Galia’s death reached the congregation, the people kept asking: “Why?” Then, after a while, they came to the conclusion that the Lord had secretly prepared Hallel for the event. Yeshua had told Hallel she would have a new home but, of course, no one expected that home would be in heaven, not on earth. Michael, too, will have to wait for a happy reunion one day in heaven. The sad event left Michael with a longing, as the family had been very dear to him and had even lived in the same settlement, Alfei Menashe, for a year. Thanks be to God, who has taken good care of the other two daughters.

Fred, the elder at the congregation, and his wife Eva who had likewise been very close to Michael, also moved away, first to another town and then back to their home country, the United States. This marked the end of one and the beginning of a new phase in Michael’s life and relationships.

7.

LOVE AND ROMANCE

Michael faced pressure from many quarters to finally find a spouse. Even when Michael was still very young, his grandfather had tried to acquaint him with young lady doctors and some wealthy girls. Grandfather had plans of his own and he tried to bring them to pass. People in the congregation encouraged Michael to look for a wife and gave suggestions of suitable candidates, but Michael believed God would bring the right one in his timing. Some candidates were foreigners.

Michael prayed: “Let me be the first to fall in love with the right lady, not her being the first to fall for me. I would want to court her, not the other way around. To begin with, she could even be a little uninterested.” Since his return to Israel, Michael had not had feelings for any girl in particular.

– I believed that God was able to give me full assurance as to the woman I should start going out with.

At some point, the congregation started organising singles’ nights once a month, including teaching on courtship and marriage. One night a student group from Tel Aviv joined the

meeting. One of the group was Marianne – Michael only learned her name later.

– I noticed her “for a second” but we did not speak to each other, Michael recalls.

Fred, the elder, started talking to him about a girl he had met and thought suitable for Michael, Marianne, whose “eyes shine with the love of God”. Around the same time, Michael’s friend Juventus started talking about a beautiful girl that would just suit Michael.

A long time had passed since the singles’ night, when a young lady believer, who wanted to get to know Michael better, asked him to a student gathering on the beach in Tel Aviv. Michael heard that also Swiss Marianne, whom Fred and Juventus had “recommended” was going to be there. Therefore, he made his way to the student gathering.

There were many people there that Michael knew — and Marianne. At the time she was part of a congregation in Tel Aviv, while Michael was in the congregation meeting in Kfar Saba. In her congregation, Marianne was part of the worship group.

– As soon as I saw Marianne there, I approached her, and we started talking. After a while, it was just the two of us walking and I shared a little about my life story. Because she was very open and friendly towards everyone, she listened eagerly and talked a lot, but I noticed no special signs of her being interested in me, Michael recalls.

– Just as I was waiting for an opportunity to invite her to some event or get-together, she said: “Now I have to run, so I won’t be late for the worship practice,” and off she went. “Doesn’t look like anything’s going to happen, but maybe God will do something...” I thought. After that I didn’t see Marianne for two years.

Then Pastor Tony invited Michael to a leaders’ conference. Unfortunately, Michael’s car broke down and going anywhere seemed very unlikely. Tony insisted: “But you have to come!”

– At the last minute, God worked things out so that I was able to go along, Michael says.

The big hall was full of people. Michael's friend Juventus and Tony noticed: "Hey, there's that girl, Marianne. Go now and invite her for a coffee!" During the break, Michael followed their suggestion and took Marianne for a coffee. The friends gestured approval from another table.

Michael remembers some of the things they talked about. Marianne said that she reads and loves the Bible. She also told him that she worked in the congregation as an interpreter and translator: she was fluent in German, English and Hebrew. That gave Michael an excuse to meet up with her later. He said he knew some of the volunteers from the Home of Bible Translators near Jerusalem, run by Halvor Ronning and his wife Mirja, daughter of the Finnish Kaarlo Syväntö. Marianne would surely be interested in getting to know this type of translation work! Besides, they gathered for a Sabbath meal on Friday evenings.

This was not the only invitation to meet up. Marianne lived at the student dormitory and was a student at the university. Michael came up with: "As a doctor, I need to go to the university library to read medical books and stuff like that. Could we sometimes go for a coffee when I'm there?"

Marianne was willing, and so they met at the university a few times. One Sabbath eve they made their way to the Home of Bible Translators. As they were walking in the nature near the house, Michael told Marianne that he used to think that his future wife should be Jewish. That was because in the religious system, children are considered Jewish only if the mother is Jewish. Then he added: "Lately God has shown me quite clearly that it's not very important whether my wife is Jewish or not. Quite the opposite: it would be fine, if things went a bit like in Ruth's case: she was not Jewish, but became part of the Jewish people after marrying Boaz."

So far, Michael was speaking generally, not about Marianne and himself. If a non-Jewish woman marries a Jewish man, often

the man expects the woman to convert to Judaism.

“I don’t believe that a non-Jew should convert to Judaism. Even Paul tells people to remain in the state they are when they become believers,” Michael cleared things up for her.

Later Marianne said that she felt the words to be an encouragement. Michael thought that the most important thing for the couple was to share their faith in Yeshua. It is also a good testimony for the unity possible between Jew and non-Jew.

The evening at the Home was a good one. While in previous years Michael had no special feelings for anyone, he was in love now.

Marianne was confused about Michael’s intentions. She was just a student, whereas Michael was a prospective pastor. “Wonder what Michael wants with me?” she thought. Just around that time, he sent her a text message: “I want you to know that I don’t play with people’s feelings. If I’m serious, I’m serious.”

Marianne was about to go back to Switzerland for a while. She realised Michael must have something in mind with regard to her because he invited her to dine at an Italian restaurant near the Tel Aviv beach.

Beforehand, he told his friends about the date and was bombarded with advice as to what he should say. Some friends thought Michael should reveal his age straightaway; others suggested he do it later. Some even suggested he should keep it a secret all the way to the altar. The truth — Michael is sixteen years older than Marianne.

Before Michael and Marianne went to the restaurant, they were on the beach, while Michael was telling Marianne about his life. Michael was near the shoreline when he told Marianne: “Many girls have wanted to go out with me and they have been convinced that I’m the one for them. But I’ve known that there is the one that God has meant for me. I believe you are that one! I want to give you my whole heart.”

There was a silence. Then Marianne replied: “And I want to receive it!” When Marianne looked at Michael and said ‘yes’,

Michael was literally overcome with faintness from all the nervousness beforehand. He stumbled on a big rock and fell into the water. His trouser leg was torn, his leg was cut and started bleeding. Marianne was horrified. Wet and bleeding, Michael remembered that he had not told her his age yet. So he went on: "And I've got to say one more serious thing to you: I'm forty-five."

Marianne was not flustered in the least, but remarked: "My father was fifteen years older than my mother." Marianne was twenty-nine. Then they had a practical problem: how could Michael appear in the restaurant looking the way he did, but in they went. Someone came to sell flowers; Marianne got some in honour of the occasion.-

In Switzerland, Marianne told her family about Michael. Mother, who loved Israel, was thrilled, though it would mean that Marianne wouldn't be near her in Switzerland, but live in Israel. The others asked about his age, his profession, and maybe they couldn't fully understand why someone would learn the profession of a doctor and not work as a doctor, but as a pastor instead. Marianne knew that as soon as they would meet Michael, all doubts about the relationship would vanish.

On Marianne's return to Israel she and Michael started dating regularly. Sometimes, Marianne felt stressed. Then, Michael would reply: "If this is God's plan for us, it will all be clear in time. Don't stress yourself over this. Let's just spend time, get to know each other, think and pray!" In those moments, Marianne felt very comfortable and free. Michael gave her space and that drew her close to him.

In his own heart Michael believed that the Lord had led them together, but he did not put any pressure on Marianne. At some point, Marianne and Michael talked again about converting to Judaism. Marianne asked Michael whether he would want her to convert to Judaism. The reason was that she knew of a number of Israeli pastor's wives who formerly had not been Jewish and had converted to Judaism. She knew that was something she could never do and wanted to make sure Michael would not

put pressure on her somewhere down the line. Michael answered by saying: "I would try to stop you from converting, if ever you had plans like that!"

Michael often visited Marianne at the university. In Israeli congregations, it is customary to do a course for engaged couples. The course was called *Before I Say 'I do'*. Besides meetings with Pastor Tony, the course included an exercise booklet. Michael and Marianne would have weekly sessions in a coffee shop answering the questions.

It was also the time for Michael's pastoral training to end. Officially, Michael was asked to become an elder. For this position, the senior pastor would lay hands on him. Michael, however, felt that it would not be good to be an elder while still unmarried. He also decided to turn it down, so that he and Marianne would have time for courting and getting to know each other.

One day, Michael asked Marianne to spend the next whole day with him. When morning came, he took her to a pool for a swim. They both enjoyed swimming a lot. Then Michael took her to lunch at a kibbutz where the dining room was furnished with antique furniture. They enjoyed themselves and the day continued with a visit to the beautiful beach below Zichron Yaakov.

The next destination was in and around Haifa. Two horses were waiting at the foot of a hill on Mount Carmel. Led by a guide, they rode to the top of the hill. There the guide left them. The sun was about to set. At the top, there was a table with dinner laid out: different cheeses and other foods. In the middle of the table was a small box with a ring. Michael asked Marianne to become engaged to marry him, and she said yes. As an engaged couple, they returned from Carmel on horseback.

They planned to make the engagement public at the congregation's Shavuot celebration (see appendix 1). Michael gave the sermon on the book of Ruth, according to the tradition of that feast. He described how the Jewish Boaz took the Moabite Ruth as his wife. In the middle of the sermon, he stood on the central aisle with the microphone and said: "I want to introduce to you

my own Ruth, who has accepted the ring yesterday.” Marianne got up from the audience. The congregation went wild with joy. People jumped, hopped and clapped. Then all the people close to Michael blessed the engaged couple. This happened on 7 June 2003.

Marianne was still part of the Tel Aviv congregation. Being part of a fellowship is considered very important in Israel. Michael asked Marianne’s pastor whether she could join the Kfar Saba fellowship. The pastor said he was sorry to see Marianne leave, but he agreed, of course, and gave his blessing, and Marianne joined the Kfar Saba congregation, where Michael was serving.

The engaged couple decided that they would marry in a year’s time. They continued attending the *Before I Say ‘I do’* course.

– The engagement period means getting to know each other in a deeper way. It also means that there is no more looking at anyone else. Both of us had some very close friends, but we understood that from that day on, we needed to be the most intimate friends to each other.

Grandfather liked Marianne very much and was happy to meet her.

Then the wedding drew close, and the couple decided to celebrate it in the desert. Miki — the nickname by which Michael is known — has always loved the desert. Yet this was not the only reason for choosing the location:

– The desert is also a symbolic surrounding. It was as if I had lived in a desert without a wife, but now things had changed.

The wedding venue was a huge Bedouin tent. The team from the congregation came to prepare for the occasion. It was hot, maybe about 40°C. The person responsible for the preparations fainted in the heat. Inside the tent, people sat on low backless seats. Outside was the huppah, the wedding canopy.

On 6 May 2004 the time came for the wedding celebration. Around two hundred guests arrived, including Michael’s brother and his family. Grandfather was too ill to attend. The so-called

seven blessings are an integral part of the ceremony: seven witnesses or friends, the closest ones, each say their own blessing.

One of them was Finnish Lyyli, then a lady of about eighty, whom Michael felt to be a sort of Finnish grandmother to him. Despite her many ailments Lyyli was able to be part of the wedding celebration. There were wedding guests from Italy and England. Only three close friends of Marianne's came from Switzerland; there would be another wedding soon, in Switzerland.

Michael was supposed to ride to his wedding on a camel. But at the agreed time and at the agreed place there was no camel. "What to do now?" Michael wondered. He saw a house nearby and went to ask a Bedouin if they could lend him a camel. The answer was yes, and so everything went according to plan. When Michael rode up on the camel, people did not recognise him, as he was dressed in complete Bedouin gear. As he took it off, a dark suit appeared underneath. Marianne was ready with her bridesmaids. With music playing and the bridesmaids following, she stepped under the canopy. The words of the song were from the biblical text in Song of Songs 2:10–13: "My beloved spoke and said to me, 'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come...'"

Under the canopy, Marianne said the same words to Michael that Ruth had said to her mother-in-law Naomi on the way to Israel, when Naomi told Ruth to go back to her own country Moab: "Where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16–17).

Among other things, Pastor Tony said the following words to Michael: "He who can wait, gets the best. Miki, you had the patience to wait, and now you have the best possible wife."

After the wedding ceremony, there was a meal in the Bedouin tent. There was a small problem with the drinks. At an Israeli wedding, wine is served. The Bedouins who owned the venue

were Muslims, so they did not allow their glasses to be used for wine. They replaced the glasses with disposable ones, and the problem was quickly solved.

The members of the congregation had come up with several pieces of entertainment, like a song about the love story between Michael and Marianne. For “a wedding waltz” Michael and Marianne had practised a dance performance. The wedding celebration lasted until late into the night and a full moon was shining as the couple danced. Together, they all danced to Israeli music.

The wedding guests stayed until it was quite late then began leaving, some in a hired coach and some in their own cars. The following day, Michael and Marianne left for Switzerland with a few friends. On 8 May, in a solemn ceremony, they were officially married in a local registry office. They had their wedding reception in an old castle and the newlyweds travelled there in a fine horse carriage, just like king and queen. A programme was put on for the bride’s family and for their friends, especially for those who could not make it to the wedding in Israel: Jürgen from Germany was a special guest. The celebration was on a smaller scale than the Israeli wedding.

For their honeymoon, Marianne and Michael travelled to a holiday house in the mountains, owned by Marianne’s sister. Before returning to Israel, they went to spend some more time with Marianne’s mother.

Marianne and Michael have been married for eleven years and describing the years spent together, Michael says:

– First of all, during the honeymoon, it is all love and happiness. The other person appears as perfect. Everything is new, “strewn with flowers”. To begin with, both want to please the other, but then slowly they begin to notice that they are two very different people. Gradually it started to dawn on me that for forty-six years I had lived as a bachelor, always being able to do what I want. Now there was another person by my side, whose thoughts, needs and desires were different from my own.

– If God is in this union, he will help the spouses at this stage to see the other through his eyes. It takes forgiveness and learning to love the other person in the way he teaches. It is especially important not to try to change the other person, but to accept them as they are. If the relationship is free to grow like this, real love deepens over the years.

This is what, by the grace of God, has happened to Michael and Marianne. Love has increased. Thank God, the most difficult times are passed. It does not mean that there are no more ups and downs, but now they each view the other as the most important person in their life.

Michael analyses his spiritual stages:

– When I was a believing bachelor, I considered myself very spiritual, at least a man of God. After I got married, I began to see how unspiritual I was. Marriage means dying to self: one really has to give way to the other. But that is not the end. When I thought that now, as a couple, we had reached spiritual maturity, along came the children. Again I saw how much I still lacked. Now I understand better, when Paul writes: “Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife ... he must manage his own family well” (1 Timothy 3:2, 4).

On the good side of things, Michael saw Marianne as a fountain of living water from the beginning.

– Marianne is a true and good wife, Michael gratefully notes. God has been faithful: everything I could hope for in a wife, I have found in her. God gave me the grace to wait for “the right one”. It was a time of testing, for I could have settled with another believing woman earlier!

8.

PASTORING A GROWING CONGREGATION

A couple of years into their marriage, Michael left for the United States for a month-long training course on church planting. According to Michael, that period was a real time of prayer and learning.

During the course an African co-student saw the map of Israel in a dream. In the dream he put his finger on a certain spot on the map, and he was told: “A church will be founded here.” When the man told Michael about the dream, Michael brought him a map of Israel. The African man indicated the spot he had pointed to in the dream. It was Rishon LeZion near Tel Aviv.

Michael recalls the following Jewish New Year, almost a year after he had returned from the course. The eldership of the congregation, of which Michael was now a part, and Pastor Tony got together to celebrate the feast day. They shared with each other the dreams and goals they had set for the following year (see appendix 1). Michael told the others that he was expecting something new from God for him in the year to come.

He fasted and prayed and went to Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. There he was asking God the what, where and

when. He had talked over different possibilities with Marianne. She had talked about moving to the countryside, maybe the Galilean hills. Now the name of the town came to Michael's mind: Rishon LeZion.

- It was surprising. I had never seriously thought about going there, Michael recalls. But at that moment, I knew God had spoken to me.

Rishon LeZion means 'first to Zion'. The name is borrowed from the book of Isaiah (41:27): "I was the first to tell Zion, 'Look, here they are!' I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good news." The Israeli flag and the national anthem were born there.

Rishon LeZion was one of the first Jewish settlements in the Holy Land at the end of the 19th century. Now it is the fourth biggest city in Israel. Russian immigrants make up a great part of its population, so much so that it is often called 'Russian LeZion', the Russian city.

- I felt God had impressed on me the name of Rishon LeZion, but I still hoped that Marianne would want to follow me with all her heart. I prayed: "Lord, if this word is from you, speak the same to Marianne that you spoke to me," Michael relates.

After a while, at the morning meeting, a believer who lived in Rishon LeZion, said to Marianne: "Michael and you must come to Rishon LeZion!"

All of a sudden, Marianne felt that this man was calling out like the man in Paul's night vision in the book of Acts: "Paul received a vision in his sleep of the Macedonian man saying to him: 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" (Acts 16:9). At that moment, Marianne was convinced that their place was in Rishon LeZion.

It was a time when Michael, as the assistant pastor, received a salary from the congregation and Marianne did occasional translation work. Their income was modest, but it was enough.

A believers' home group met in Rishon LeZion. The members of the group belonged to the congregation in Kfar Saba and to get there on a Sabbath they had to travel about thirty

kilometres. Because the distance was long and out of town, they had hoped for a long time that a congregation would be born in Rishon LeZion.

These believers felt that Michael would be a suitable pastor to start a congregation. Michael wanted to submit to the eldership in the matter, and with the consent of the small group leader and Pastor Tony, he started visiting the Rishon LeZion group. Still, Tony asked Michael to wait for a year before moving tents to Rishon LeZion, because Michael had many responsibilities at the Kfar Saba congregation.

The Rishon LeZion group started to grow. The meetings moved to the spacious home of Korean Edi Kim, and Michael started conducting services every other Sabbath. There were about twenty people. The group had no worship leader, but unexpectedly God sent a believer from Haifa to lead the music, a young man who wanted to come despite the long and inconvenient journey.

They started asking God's will for the future of the group: should they plant a congregation? They sought the Lord, prayed and fasted. God gave them the understanding that a new congregation should be formed.

They also got the name for it, Tehilat Yah, meaning God's Praise. A while later a Russian-speaking home group of a congregation in Tel Aviv wanted to join Michael's group. They all lived in Rishon LeZion. They spoke with their pastor and he blessed them to part with his congregation and to join the Rishon LeZion fellowship.

By now, the number of people had grown to about thirty-five in Michael's group. With the blessing of the pastor and eldership of the Kfar Saba congregation, the new congregation was started in Rishon LeZion. Michael would act as pastor. They needed bigger premises to meet in and were able to rent them from another congregation. To this day, Tehilat Yah still meets at the same venue.

The dedication service of Tehilat Yah congregation on 12

January 2008 was a day of rejoicing. Pastors from different parts of Israel and from abroad came and gave their blessing. It was clear now that when Michael prayed at the Sea of Galilee a few years earlier that it was God who revealed the name Rishon LeZion to him. Now that message had come true.

– I learned again that if we’re faithful and willing to wait, we will get the best. I had already learned this lesson with regard to marriage, Michael is pleased to note.

When the congregation was still in the early stages, Michael received a vision of unity between people that are different, the reality being that it is not easy to accept others as they are.

– We have the tendency to compare and evaluate others according to their culture, age, background and religious views, Michael ponders. Still, I strongly believe that Yeshua wants us to walk together and that oneness in him is one of the most important issues in our walk of faith. In John 17, Yeshua told his disciples what burned on his heart the most, unity, just before he took the path of suffering that led to his death on the cross. At that moment, he did not exhort them to pray or to preach the gospel, but to be one: “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21).

Michael continues explaining that this oneness is impossible without love. When God gave the vision of unity in diversity to Tehilat Yah congregation, he showed Michael a wall made of stones differing in size, shape and makeup. In the same way, he would be shepherding a group made up of very different living stones. Love is like the mortar between the stones, joining and keeping them together.

– Only the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit makes unity work, Michael remarks. In Romans 5:5 it is written: “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” In other words, God’s love is already in us, we only need to get the blockages out of the way.

Part of the congregational vision is the fact that Yeshua has broken down the wall between Jews and non-Jews: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household” (Ephesians 2:13–19). Discipleship is also an important part of the congregational vision (Matthew 28:18–20).

– I heard this definition of a disciple from an Italian pastor: not every believer is a disciple, but every disciple is a believer, Michael shares. I would say that every believer believes in Yeshua’s sacrifice on the cross, but the difference is that a disciple offers his or her own life as a living sacrifice to Yeshua.

Making disciples is consequently an important issue. The same Italian pastor shows and explains four characteristics that define a disciple. A disciple abides in Yeshua’s Word. He himself said in John 8:31: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” It is important not only to read and know the Word, but also to apply it to our own life. Michael quotes Yeshua’s words in John 15:8: “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” The fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22–23 describes the nine characteristics of Yeshua. God’s Spirit endeavours to bring them forth in the life of the believer: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The fruit and the gifts of the Spirit are two different things

and we need both. According to Derek Prince, we can compare the two to a bird's feathering. Let us imagine that a bird has nine feathers on each wing. We can think of one wing to be composed of the different parts of fruit that the Spirit works in us, and the other wing of the gifts. There are nine gifts mentioned in I Corinthians 12:8–10, and they are freely given by God: sharing of wisdom, sharing of knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. There are also other gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the Bible. A bird has five tail feathers. We can think of them as the ministry gifts needed to equip the congregation. They are listed in Ephesians 4:11 and they provide the balance between the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit: the calling of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. With all these feathers being in harmony and balance, a bird can fly.

To explain how important the fruit of the Spirit is for using the gifts, Michael uses this illustration: if he were to give his four-year old son Matan the gift of a car and let him drive it, it would result in a catastrophe. To use a gift rightly requires maturity and humility. At the same time, the fruit of the Spirit on its own is not enough, either.

– If your friend has a headache, no amount of sympathy and moaning helps. Instead, you can lay your hand on him and pray for healing, applying God's gift of healing, Michael says.

Loving one another is also part of discipleship. In John 13:35 Yeshua says: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

– God's nature is love, and according to Yeshua's model we need to learn to love each other. Our inability to love others is often rooted in our inability to love ourselves. That is why the love of God alone poured forth into our hearts can change us.

Carrying one's cross is also part of discipleship. Yeshua says: "And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). In Israel, believers do not live in the hard circumstances common to life in Communist or

Muslim countries, but we do experience persecution here, too. Ultra-orthodox organisations persecute believers by portraying their lives and activities in the wrong light in public. At school, children often suffer for their faith in Yeshua.

To round off the life of a disciple, I like the recommendation John Maxwell teaches in his Leadership course *Equip*: It is good for a believer to have three persons in his or her life. One of them is a Paul, a spiritual guide, who teaches us and whom we can follow. A believer also needs a trustworthy friend — someone like Barnabas — who acts as a confidant: someone to whom we can confess our sins and with whom we can be honestly open. Thirdly, it is good to form a connection with a spiritually younger believer, who can learn from us and be a follower like Timothy was to Paul.

One focus of Yeshua's ministry was to heal and bind up the broken-hearted (Isaiah 61:1–3; Ezekiel 34:16). I believe with my whole heart that Yeshua continues to do the same and, therefore, healing is part of our vision. Our city is filled with new immigrants and Holocaust survivors who have experienced some kind of trauma. We want to be a tool of healing for these people. That's why I train a team of believers to pray for people with emotional and physical needs.

Unity in diversity, discipleship, and healing/restoration is the threefold vision Tehilat Yah congregation has had from the beginning. After forming the congregation, Michael wrote down a theological basis in the first year. Michael and the group members also spent much time getting acquainted, listening to each other and sharing life experiences.

– Every now and then I taught on the theme of love and oneness in my sermon, and we found out about people's particular gifting. The fellowship was successful from the start: people had a sense of family and felt that Michael was their spiritual father.

The vision of unity between people from different backgrounds was spot-on; by 2012 Tehilat-Yah congregation had home groups for Hebrew, Russian, Finnish and Spanish speak-

ers, and a group of Ethiopian Jews that joined the congregation. People are from different backgrounds and a wide range of ages, babies and elderly people included.

The congregation is actively involved in children's and youth ministry. At the Sabbath meetings, children go to age-appropriate Sabbath school classes. One time Michael had prepared a message for the congregation that he thought was important. He was anxious to get the children out of the hall so that they would not create a disturbance. He therefore invited them to the front, prayed a very short prayer for them and sent them to their own classrooms. Then he had a vision: as the children left, he saw Yeshua going out with them.

– I said to Yeshua: “Please stay, I need you for my preaching!” He answered: “No, I’m going with the children!” Then I understood afresh how important children are to Yeshua. Psalm 127:4 says: “Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth.” We have about twenty children that come to the meetings, Michael explains.

In their own meetings, the children learn to live and grow in their faith. They study the Bible and can start exercising their gifts.

– The fact that children connect and adapt easily helps bridge the different cultural gaps between us, Michael remarks.

The congregation's teenagers are a fruit of the children's ministry. They have stayed on after growing up. We also have a number of young adults. Some of them are in the military; others have moved to different parts of Israel. Occasionally, they have young adult meetings and they frequently attend national meetings for young people in different parts of the country. The young people, young adults included, number between fifteen and twenty. All ages together, the congregation has about 120 members.

– The young have many gifts, Michael shares. They put on plays, sing, make music and write in Messianic youth maga-

zines. They also participate in different conferences. Some of the young people have visited Finland twice. The youth meet in homes twice a month, sometimes at our place. A Finnish-born lady, who works as a travel guide in Israel, has done much with the youth. She also organized the visits to Finland and acted as their tour leader.

The congregation offers regular women and men's groups. The aim of the men's meetings is to help the men grow as fathers, husbands and spiritual leaders of their families. We also have yearly family retreats. Singles have their own activities.

– As part of our vision, we are still waiting for the right time and project for seniors and other age groups to serve together, between the generations.

The worship team is responsible for the praise and worship in the congregation. The gifted Finnish pianist Hannu Ala has had a big influence in its formation. With all his heart, he makes music to the Lord. Michael says that giftedness is not the most important aspect of worship, but rather the right heart attitude and the readiness to work as part of a team. Marianne has led the worship group for many years. Today, the team is united and praises God with one heart.

– After all, the name of our congregation means 'God's praise'. In the book of Psalms, it says: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise" (Psalm 100:4). Praise is also important because a person can experience God's healing during worship. The main emphasis is not the laying on of hands and praying, but praise, Michael explains. The Bible reminds us that: "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). The youth also has a worship time once a month.

The worship group had a mountaintop moment in Yad Hashmona, the moshav founded by Finns. A kibbutz type community, nowadays it functions as a Messianic holiday village. The team participated in a concert where teams from many Messianic congregations performed new songs; the Tehilat Yah worship team played two songs by Marianne. Michael took part in the

performance playing the harp, which he had taken up about a year earlier, when visiting Hebron with the famous well-known Tom Hess and his group. A Finnish man called Harri brought along a harp.

– I just wanted to have a picture of myself with the harp. As I held it in my hands, I felt God saying to me that that was the instrument for me. From that moment, I wanted to learn to play it and went about it. After some time of learning, I attended a course in harp playing facilitated by Tom and Kate Hess in Jerusalem. I was able to play the harp at Tom Hess's New Year conference in Ramat Rachel, alongside twenty other musicians. I believe we need to have more and more musicians who use the harp as a tool of worship, healing and comfort, as David did. Nowadays the picture of me holding the harp is the opening image on the website of Tehilat Yah congregation.

The congregation is involved in many different activities, including outreach. Right at the beginning, for instance, a door opened to help Holocaust survivors. We met an American lady who for several years had been visiting Russian-speaking Holocaust survivors at their homes with the help of an interpreter. Her purpose was to show these people love and to listen to them. She believed that practical action in particular would open the love of God to them.

After the Second World War the majority of the Russian-speaking Holocaust survivors were forced to live in poverty. In many instances, their sufferings had continued as they were moved from the Nazi concentration camps to the Communist labour camps. Sadly, even in Israel, many face shortage with little or no government help.

– Together with interpreters, we started visiting the homes of Holocaust victims. Many of them said they could not cry any more, because their heart had hardened. We wanted to hear their stories and bless them with food and other supplies. Some of them had never shared their story with anyone. A special wonder and joy for us is Silvia, a Holocaust survivor who came

to believe in Yeshua and was baptised in the name of Yeshua in our congregation.

About seven years ago, we formed a non-profit organisation called *Maim Haim Hinam* (Living Water for Free), almost immediately after founding the congregation. *Maim Haim Hinam* has three main aims: teaching God's Word in a Messianic congregation, assisting the poor, both believers and non-believers — including members of the congregation — and offering aid to Holocaust survivors. Besides handing out food parcels, we often give shop vouchers and, in some cases, pay for medicine and municipal bills.

We formed the organisation because from the start the congregation received donations. Michael knew that everything had to be done by the book, so they would be able to present a good witness to the authorities. He himself is the director while Marianne takes care of the administration. They have passed every audit with flying colours. The organisation is much engaged in helping Holocaust survivors.

– Sometimes, with the help of the worship team, we organise a concert for them or take them to a restaurant, which means that we help them celebrate. They run a club that, amongst other things, organises birthday celebrations. We act as sponsors for occasions like that. We've received an honorary certificate for valuable work on behalf of the survivors from a national organisation that deals with the affairs of Holocaust and ghetto survivors, Michael explains.

Several foreign groups and organisations team up with us in the aid for Holocaust victims. One of them is the organisation *Yad Esra* (Hand of Help), operating in Uusikaupunki, Finland. They give financial aid and regularly send volunteers to Israel who particularly help with repainting the walls and doing simple repairs in their homes.

The present rented premises have become too small for the Tehilat Yah congregation. People constantly pray about the issue and they are actively looking for larger premises. The vision

is that an outreach centre could not only serve the needs of the congregation, but also be a base for the activities of *Maim Haim Hinam* and enable food distribution.

Michael's trip to Germany and Poland in 2008 was in remembrance of the Holocaust. Michael tells us about it:

– During these journeys, called *Yad Beyad* (Hand in Hand), German and Jewish students together visit places that are connected to the Holocaust. The German and the Jewish delegation met in Germany, where we stayed the night at the castle-like home of a Christian noblewoman. We spent a week getting to know each other and the idea was to form a unified group through trust-building games and plays. We concentrated on finding forgiveness and reconciliation in our lives. The lady organized a special Sabbath meal for us. Dinner guests covered a wide range of people, including the town mayor, the leader of the Catholic community and a German member of parliament.

– I was asked to tell my story and to preach at the town's Catholic church building on the following Sunday. The whole group attended the service with me. Something very special happened in that small, traditional church: they asked me to also teach about Israel after the service. The town mayor felt a particular connection with us and marvelled at the purpose of our trip.

– The following week, our group set out on a sixteen-hour train ride to Kraków in Poland. We stayed in the area which, during World War II, was part of the Jewish ghetto near Oskar Schindler's house and factory. Oskar Schindler was a German businessman and industrialist, who is known for his outstanding endeavours to protect his Jewish workers from the Holocaust. He saved over 1 100 Jews by keeping them working in his weapons and ammunitions factory.⁷¹

– During two days we also visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, the infamous concentration camp. It was very important for me to see the places about which my grandfather had often spoken. He

had experienced the horrors of war and had decided to dedicate the remainder of his life to remembering the things that had happened to his people. He also wanted to find those non-Jews who had risked their own lives to help the Jews.

– The death camps can only be described as hell on earth. As I walked in those places, I could not but imagine myself as a prisoner, passing through all the dehumanising routines the Jews had to go through: arriving at the camps on the trains and facing all the different stages on their way to death in the gas chambers.

– While there, the Israelis in the group struggled with hatred and bitterness. The Germans, on the other hand, faced shame and guilt. Through its work, Yad Beyad aims at creating forgiveness, reconciliation and unity with God's help. This is why Jews and Germans walk together, hand in hand along that path of destruction and mayhem. The experience was truly intense and we sensed that at times we had to give each other space when we experienced difficult emotions.

– We shared the Lord's Supper in the hall where the Jewish inmates of the death camp had to undress and give up all their possessions. In the gas chamber, we read the Jewish *kaddish* prayer in memory of the dead. It was very difficult but, at the same time, we were able to experience how the oneness between Jew and Gentile described in Ephesians 2 can become real in a place like that.

– For me, that journey was a profound and significant experience. A large number of my relatives lost their lives in the Holocaust and yet, of all places, I encountered God in Germany through Jürgen, a German believer. I saw Jürgen on this trip, and it was great to meet him after many years. We were both witnesses to what God can do in our hearts.

– Our group returned from Poland to Germany united and sharing a profound experience. It was a fine micro-level example of the reconciliation and peace possible in Yeshua. We walked hand in hand and Yeshua walked with us.

– My experience in Germany and Poland strengthened our

desire to help the Holocaust victims among us in Israel.

Tehilat Yah congregation has experienced many highlights. Baptism, for instance, is a significant, joyous event for both the individual and the congregation. In Michael's opinion baptism is always a special moment for the congregation: a source of encouragement and unity.

Michael continues and explains baptism: the total immersion into the water of a person who accepted Yeshua in his heart. The believer's baptism symbolises this: Identifying with the death and resurrection of Yeshua, the believer leaves behind the old life and enters new life with God. Baptism is the outward sign of an inner change of heart. Yeshua spent three days in the grave and then rose again. For many Israelis baptism is a difficult step because it means confessing their faith in Yeshua in public.

There have been many baptismal celebrations over the years. When the fellowship was still young, a memorable baptismal celebration was organised on a trip to northern Israel, with about fifty members of the congregation taking part. The weather was glorious, the people were in a mood to celebrate and the sharing together was wonderful. The event culminated in many being baptised in the Jordan River. After the baptism, friends of Michael and Marianne invited the whole group to Beit Bracha (House of Blessing), a Messianic guesthouse overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Their friends, Ted and Linda who run the guesthouse, were a great blessing to the fellowship by serving lunch and spontaneously paying for the coach rented for the group on that day.

A couple of years later, a second-generation believer was baptised: she is the daughter of the Hebrew-speaking home group leader. For the event, the family had invited friends from many congregations around Israel.

– It was very encouraging to watch a second-generation believer committing herself to Yeshua in a deeper way, in obedience to God, Michael rejoices.

– Most of our congregational baptisms take place on the Mediterranean shore. Spontaneous music is part of the celebration. People on the beach will stop, watch and ask what we're doing, which gives us opportunities to witness, Michael shares.

Besides baptism, the Lord's Supper is another deeply touching occasion for the congregation. Tehilat Yah fellowship celebrates the Lord's Supper once a month. Michael talks us through his perceptions of the Lord's Supper:

– The breaking of Yeshua's body and the shedding of his blood for our sins become real in the Lord's Supper. At the occasion, we remember what the Lord has done for us. Taking the wine and the bread together as born-again believers and as a fellowship brings unity. Last, but not least, it is a tool of grace to bring reconciliation on two levels, with God and with our brothers.

– I emphasise the fact that no one should keep away from the Lord's Supper because of sins they committed. More than anything, the Lord's Supper is an additional tool to remind us that we have to repent if there is sin. A person can confess and repent before taking it. Then he or she is free to go ahead and take the Lord's Supper joyfully. The goal is that we be transformed more and more into the likeness of Yeshua! Besides, when leaders advise someone not to take the Lord's Supper, they usually focus on visible sins. However, a person can have invisible sin in his or her heart, like unforgiveness, bitterness, greed, etc. Therefore, we allow time so a person can reflect or make things up with God and with brothers and sisters, before taking the Lord's Supper.

– I always urge couples to come together for the Lord's Supper and to make things right before coming, if anything has come between the spouses, Michael explains.

Each member of the fellowship has his or her own history, and everyone's story is important. One young woman who came to the congregation suffered from bad nightmares. She was very afraid and had been having nightmares ever since childhood. Even as a child, she had encountered occultism and the entailing

fear. Satan appeared in her dreams and she suffered from insomnia, because she was afraid to go to sleep. People had shared the gospel with her, and her faith in Yeshua as a Saviour was born. In the fellowship, her faith grew gradually, and there was a lot of intercessory prayer on her behalf.

After seeking for God for a few months, one evening she received a revelation from God: she saw Yeshua. God wanted to touch and encourage her and give her hope. After the revelation, she was baptised. About a year after having come to the congregation for the first time, the young woman was completely set free from her nightmares.

Vera, who is a real prayer warrior in the congregation, had an accident at her workplace, a big cafeteria. She slipped and, while trying to keep her balance, grabbed the handle of a boiling pot of oil, which caused the pot to tilt towards her. At the last moment, a workmate pulled Vera away, so that the oil did not splash into her face, but first hit a wall. From there, it sprayed back at Vera, burning the lower part of her back and part of her right hand and leg.

On her way to the hospital, Vera called Michael.

– She sounded so calm that it took me a while to take in what had happened, Michael recalls.

At the hospital, the doctors got worried, because Vera did not feel any pain. They assumed that the oil had destroyed her nerves. The whole congregation interceded for her, and she had a stream of visitors at the hospital. Michael also visited and anointed Vera with oil.

After about ten days and various tests, the doctors came to the conclusion that Vera's nerves had not been damaged and that the only skin graft she would need would be for a small area on her leg. The doctors considered it a miracle.

Foreign speakers have occasionally visited Tehilat Yah. In the spring of 2012, the congregation was able to host a Ugandan pastor. He was a young man and father of six children. Muslims

attacked him in his home country and threw acid on his head and face. He was seriously injured. The attack was a revenge for his apostasy: born a Muslim, he had abandoned Islam when he became a Christian. Following the injury, the nation of Israel invited him to receive treatment. He underwent many operations and had therapy as well.

This pastor reminded the congregation of the persecution that a believer can encounter, and encouraged them with Paul's words: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35–39).

9.

FELLOWSHIPING AT TEHILAT YAH

It is Sabbath afternoon, about four o'clock. Marianne Yaron, my interpreter Anja and myself arrive in a car in the yard of a rundown warehouse building in Rishon LeZion. Inside there is an ordinary meeting hall with orange plastic chairs. Michael and the children came beforehand, though the meeting only starts at five.

The children play in the sun in the yard. It is a spring day, maybe 25°C. Inside, an elderly person sits on a chair, wearing a cardigan with a gleaming Star of David on the front. The mixing board is being adjusted. There are big loudspeakers, promising loud volume. More people begin to arrive. The hall fills with sounds of happy chatting. Everyone carries along a bottle of water.

Some introduce themselves to us — the interpreter and myself. People come from different backgrounds: one family has moved from Ukraine to Canada, then back to Ukraine and finally to Israel. One is from a Korean background, another from elsewhere in Asia.

A number of Finns attend the meeting. Iris has lived in

Israel for thirty-two years. She is a travel guide. Birgitta designs wedding dresses, also for the export market. Hannu has come to accompany singing on the keyboard; he is a professional musician and lives in Israel.

Michael walks around shaking hands and greeting people. Marianne also plays an important role: a lively person, she manages to talk to many members of the congregation. The people range from small children to the elderly. The majority are people over thirty-five.

The atmosphere is relaxed. At about five o'clock, the noise level is such as I've never heard before in a Christian meeting in Finland. People flock in. At the end of the hall, some have to stand. Over seventy people are present. Michael starts the meeting with a prayer, and even a stranger can pick up the hallelujahs.

Michael takes the lead. He speaks briefly from Luke 5:12–14 about Yeshua and the man with leprosy: "The leper approached Yeshua and asked for mercy, for healing. The man's need was not only physical healing, because lepers were outcasts from the community. If you've seen the movie *Ben Hur*, you get some idea about the treatment of lepers. Normally no one was allowed to touch a leper, except the priests, when they were checking for signs of healing. Yeshua touched the leper. He is our high priest."

Michael speaks from the front, but at times also walks along the central aisle. He does not speak by himself only, but interacts with the audience, asking relevant questions. Michael comes across as a father or a brother and inspires a sense of security.

The electric piano and an electric guitar play quietly in the background. A small child raises its voice.

At this point, Michael prays for the sick in general and announces that there will be more prayer ministry in a side room after the benediction for anyone sick. The members of congregation have prayer requests: for friends in an Arab village to encounter Yeshua, and for a female soldier who is ill.

The worship team starts to play and sing. The group consists of Hannu, the pianist, someone on the electric guitar, and Mari-

anne and three others as singers. The lyrics appear on screen, in Hebrew and with Russian and English transliteration, as well as Russian and English translation for those who do not understand or cannot read Hebrew.

The musical performance of the worship team is of high quality and volume. The people sing along eagerly. Some stand, some sit while worshipping. Some clap their hands, others move to the music. Some sing with their eyes closed. The music is rhythmic and catchy, and there are some quiet songs. An Israeli mountain scene appears at the background of the screen. At the end of the songs people applaud. One can only sit back and enjoy. Some of the songs have a symbolic connection to the land of Israel:

*Let us rise up and move out,
For the Lord promised us a land
That runs with milk and honey.
If God be for us,
Who can be against us?*

A little black-haired girl crawls at her daddy's feet. Another father stands with his three-year old asleep against his shoulder. Matan, the youngest of the Yaron family, is sleeping on the lap of a young woman.

A collection is taken up during one of the songs. A small chest and a basket pass from hand to hand. One is for tithes and the other for gifts towards a new building. The worship goes on for forty-five minutes. The words 'hallelujah' and 'Adonai' (Lord) are heard frequently.

Michael begins his sermon on temptations. He is a lively speaker, but not a showman: "The fish sees the bait, the worm, but not the hook that it's grabbing. People who are involved in New Age beliefs say that everything is permissible, but we don't think like that. It's not enough to ward off one temptation, because the enemy constantly tries to make us fall and just waits for an opportunity. In the desert, the Israelites lusted after evil. Their

negative example is to warn us. ‘So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!’ (1 Corinthians 10:12).

“I’ve seen many fall, but it’s also been a lesson for me. The enemy always gilds everything that he offers. For instance, what is only meant to alleviate our pain, a little alcohol or drugs, can quickly lead to an addiction.

“Temptation is not the same as sin. Luther said: ‘We cannot stop the birds from flying over our heads, but we can stop them from making a nest on our heads.’ Yeshua was also tempted by Satan in the desert, for forty days. He used the Word of God to ward off the temptations. The enemy knows when we’re at our weakest, defenceless and alone. That is why I urge you to come and fellowship with believers. In the congregation we receive strength and help.

“The world seduces us, the enemy who knows our weakness seduces us, and our own flesh seduces us. ‘No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).”

Even though the topic is serious, there is some humour in the sermon. Michael asks a lady to bring her scarf. He takes one end and asks a hefty man to take hold of the other. Then the two men pull on the scarf. This provides a visual aid: the enemy pulls us towards himself, but we do not need to let him pull us over the edge. Instead, we can let go and flee.

Michael goes on: “Job made a covenant with his eyes. It is best not to place ourselves in situations where we know we’ll be tempted. A wise person doesn’t go to places he can’t get out of. In Ephesians 6, we are told to put on the full armour of God. Use the helmet of salvation on your head, because the enemy wants to bring wrong and harmful thoughts into your head. 2 Timothy 2:22 admonishes us to flee from youthful lusts.

“The sword of the Spirit is God’s Word. It’s good to use it against the enemy. Even when doctors see no more hope, every-

thing is possible with God. A person facing illness can declare God's Word to himself, for instance, where it is written: 'I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done' (Psalm 118:17). If I'm weak I can say: 'We're more than conquerors through Yeshua.' When tempted we can meditate on the verse in James 4:7, 'Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.'"

At the end of the sermon, Michael prays that we would learn to use God's Word as our sword. He also asks that the Holy Spirit would show us the sins and weaknesses from which He wants to set us free.

Michael suggests that those who want to be set free from something would stay on to talk. "Don't go home, if there's something on your mind that the Lord's reminding you of," Michael exhorts at the end of his speech. Some want prayer. Michael places a brotherly arm around the shoulders of a man coming forward to request prayer.

Many young people come to fellowship at Tehilat Yah. Aviva and Nikol are two young girls who attend regularly.

The family of eighteen-year old Aviva consists of dad, mum and eight children: six girls and two boys. All the children were born in Israel, while their mum and dad were born in Ethiopia. When Jews started to come from Ethiopia to Israel, Aviva's mum was among the first. She was fourteen at the time.

Aviva is doing her last year at high school. Next December she will enter her two-year military service. Aviva heard about Yeshua already as a child.

- I felt that as a child my mum almost forced me to believe in God. She used to read the Bible to us and pray with us. When I became a teenager, I felt that I'd been forced into something and I wanted to distance myself from Yeshua. I even said to him: "Yeshua, stay here and wait. I want to go my own way." I walked on two paths, which was not very successful, Aviva says, wiser from the experience.

– At some point, my eyes were opened. I saw what the world was. I had seen enough of what there is on the other side, the enemy’s side. Satan tries to get us away from the Lord’s way. With all my heart, I wanted to return to Yeshua, and I did.

– Sometimes it’s a bit lonely at school, Aviva feels. Some friends say to her: “Why’ve you become such a geek!” When I was sad about it, I thought: “So I really have changed, since my friends can see it, too. I really am a follower of Yeshua, then.”

– There is no other way besides Yeshua’s way, Aviva affirms. He is the way, the truth and the life. What would become of my life without Yeshua? The presence of the Holy Spirit is so important to me. If the Lord is not with me, I only end up suffering.

Aviva does not speak much about her faith, except to her closest friends. Still, together with her sister who is a believer, she wants to witness to others. Once, while walking along the street they felt they would like to talk to someone about Yeshua.

Suddenly, an Ethiopian young man came towards them and asked where he could buy some alcohol. The girls started to tell him about Yeshua, and the conversation went on for half an hour. Someone else had witnessed to the man earlier. His attitude to spiritual matters was quite negative.

– Nevertheless, we had prayed for guidance and were convinced of the Lord’s leading. It just wasn’t God’s time yet in that young man’s life.

Nikol’s parents and big sister moved to Israel from Ukraine in 1995. Nikol was born in Israel a few years later. She also has a little six-year old brother.

Nikol is in high school. In the evenings, she works at a local snack bar, as both waitress and cashier. When she was younger, she played tennis for four or five years. Now she would like to start playing the piano and the guitar, but there is not much time for hobbies. She also heard about Yeshua at home.

– That doesn’t mean faith becomes personal, though, she remarks. She gradually grew into it.

The families of both the girls live in Rishon LeZion. The

believers in both families used to go to a congregation in a neighbouring town, but became tired of travelling. Then they found Tehilat Yah fellowship.

– When Yeshua is with us, we never have to be alone. When difficulties and trials come, the Lord takes you in his arms, lifts you up and carries you. Nikol talks about a recent chance of witnessing:

– Pastor Michael went to Ukraine. He was visiting at a congregation there when a lady came to him and explained that her daughter had recently moved to Israel. The mother had a package for her daughter. She asked Michael to bring it back to Israel. He did so and then passed it on to my mum to deliver. When the daughter came for her package, I shared the gospel with her and asked her to come to our fellowship.

Aviva and Nikol got to know each other at Tehilat Yah congregation. They also see each other at the youth nights at the Yarons' place once a fortnight, and there are weekend retreats for young believers and occasional camps during the feast breaks and the summer holiday. There, they meet members from congregations across the land. The girls think the camps have been very blessed. Good teaching is available, as well as different daytrips. And, of course, it is a great opportunity to get to know other young believers.

In August 2014, a group of Tehilat Yah youth visited Finland. Aviva and Nikol were part of the group. It happened to be raining a lot, but Aviva and Nikol still think the time in Finland was really good and blessed. While in Finland, the group as a whole and they personally experienced renewal in the Holy Spirit, which brought the people closer to each other.

– We were able to share about Yeshua and grow in knowing him, Aviva and Nikol happily share. We also visited schools and made new friends during our visit to Finland.

10.

TO FINLAND AND THE WIDER WORLD

Michael's first contact with a foreign organisation occurred before he encountered Marianne. The organisation in question was *Messianic Testimony* (MT) in England, a faith-based group that works in many European countries, including Eastern European countries, as well as Russia. To this day, Michael cooperates with them. He got to know many of the workers and feels they are a real blessing.

– We had some of their representatives at our wedding in Israel, some in Switzerland. This goes to show how closely we are connected with them, Michael emphasises.

In the course of his work with MT, Michael has been able to visit Northern Ireland a few times. At a meeting there, a pastor handed him a songbook, so he could follow the words. A certain song had a line saying: “He is our light and our beacon.” Michael did not recognise the word and got it mixed up with ‘bacon’.

– I spoke to the pastor and wondered how it was possible that the song spoke of bacon, which, to make matters worse, is made of pork. The pastor burst out laughing and explained the

matter. After that he has used the story at opportune moments, Michael chuckles.

Michael got to know some Finns in the Baptist Village and Kfar Saba congregations in which he was involved.

There, one day he met Anja, and they stopped to talk.

– Without me knowing about it, Anja had interceded for me for many years in Italy and Finland. She had recently moved to Israel. We became close friends and co-workers. We did house visits to reach both believers and non-believers and were a prayer couple at the congregation's prayer nights and at other occasions, Michael relates, appreciative of this friendship.

How had Anja heard about Michael? Anja had lived in Italy for a long time. As part of a team she had tried to introduce a love for Israel into Italian congregations. Yet the team's dearest wish was to be able to talk about Yeshua to Israeli students living in Italy. Many Israelis came to study in Italy, especially in the fields of medicine and veterinary science, also in northern Italy where Anja lived. The team members shared about Yeshua and gave New Testaments to the Israelis. Out of the many Israelis they encountered, not one came to personally know the Messiah.

Then someone sent a message to the team about a medical student in Rome by the name of Michael who had become a believer in Yeshua. The news caused great joy and gratitude among the team. They thought it was probably for the best the man had not become a believer through them. They might have taken the credit for themselves, and God does not share His glory with anyone.

Anja desired to travel to Rome straightaway to meet Michael, but before she could carry out her plan, new information arrived from Rome: Michael had returned to Israel. Anja was upset, but then she started praying regularly for Michael. She continued her intercession even after moving back to Finland.

A year later, Anja was able to move to Israel herself. God led her to the congregation that met at the Baptist Village. When she went there for the first time, she introduced herself to many

people and told them she had lived in Italy. They asked if she possibly knew Michael, who had studied in Italy. “There’s Michael now,” someone said.

Anja has often said since, that when she met Michael for the first time, it was like meeting a family member. Her prayers had united them.

Finnish Maija attended the same congregation as Michael and Anja. Through Maija and Anja, Michael met a Finnish couple, Päivi and Ilpo, who lived in Jerusalem for a while. When they met Michael, Päivi received a prophecy concerning him, saying: “You will have many assignments in Finland and in other places outside of Israel.”

– I had never been to Finland. Because I was not dating anyone, I thought that maybe I will have a Finnish wife. I had a sense that my future wife would be from a foreign country. I thought, if this prophecy is of God, it will be fulfilled, and didn’t think about it any further, Michael describes his feelings.

Once, he wanted to go abroad for Christmas. Maija asked her parents whether Michael could be their Christmas guest, and they extended an invitation to him. Maija and Anja introduced Finland to him, and together they visited many localities.

– For me, it was the first time to experience such cold and see so much snow, Michael says. They celebrated Christmas with Maija’s parents and family at their summer cottage in Kuorevesi.

Michael noticed that the cottage did not have a fridge, but instead a hatch opened into the floor for food to be stored in the cold place underneath. On Christmas Eve, everyone sat around a big table for the Christmas dinner. In the middle of the meal, the Finnish friends got up and said: “Excuse us, Miki!” and the whole family rushed into the other room to watch something on TV.

– As an Israeli I thought there must have been a serious terrorist attack. When they got back after five or ten minutes, I asked them: “What on earth has happened? Has there been a bomb?”

“It was the weather forecast,” someone replied. “We need to

know what to wear tomorrow,” they continued. Israelis are not that interested in weather forecasts, Michael chuckles.

He describes the morning ritual. The father begins with the words: “Let’s see what the weather is like today.” Then he checks the outside thermometer and announces the degrees. Next, he solemnly notes: “Now let’s see what we need to put on.” – I always forgot something as we went out: mittens, hat or scarf. It amused me, Michael recalls.

At the Kuorevesi cottage, Michael also had his first sauna. He watched as half a day was spent fetching wood and heating the sauna only to spend a short time in it. Michael’s short time was five minutes. He also wondered that people went in completely naked.

– I heard that even in the middle of winter people would go from the sauna and roll in the snow or have a dip in the river.

Michael wanted to go and walk in the snowy forest. Maija said: “But don’t go too far, there may be bears out there!” A while later, as he was walking in the snow and praising God, he suddenly saw two big dark shapes a couple of hundred metres away. He thought this must be the bears that Maija had just warned him about.

– I didn’t know what to do, he remembers. The shapes got closer. I was afraid to run, because I thought they would chase me. As they got closer, they got bigger and bigger. In the end, I thought the only thing to do was to pray. I knelt in the snow, and when I opened my eyes, they were very close. They turned out to be two big black dogs. The owner lived close by and let them roam about freely, as they didn’t do any harm.

At some stage in Israel, Anja took Michael to Jerusalem to meet Raimo Suominen, the regional worker for Southern Ostrobothnia of the Finnish Lutheran Mission, who has since passed away. Together with his tourist group, Raimo listened to Michael’s testimony and invited him on the spot to come to Finland on a speaking tour. Michael promised to come. While he was on that tour, he met Imad, a believing Israeli Arab who

loves Israel. Michael and Imad became good friends.

Throughout the speaking tour, Michael encountered the same strange phenomenon: all the people crowded into the back rows near the door, as if they were afraid of something. Michael began to form binoculars with his fingers and call out: “Hello, where are you? I can’t see you!”

Michael says about himself that he often gets carried away with the message he brings to the audience. At the same time, he watches and observes how the hearers respond. When he was on his first speaking tour in Finland, he saw that the people were like mummies while he spoke: nobody turned a hair. When the meeting was over, people got up and walked out. Usually no one came even to say hello. Michael was surprised and disappointed.

Anja introduced Michael to a woman who worked for Friends of Israel in Tampere. Through her Michael met Ilkka Vakkuri, the executive director of the association. Ilkka, too, invited Michael to speak in Finland and there have been many speaking trips since. Ilkka and Michael have become good friends. Following invitations by Friends of Israel and by the Evangelical Free Church, Michael has been in Finland some twenty times altogether.

– I once asked Ilkka, what on earth I am doing wrong, as there was no response to what I preached from the people. Ilkka replied: “There’s nothing wrong with what you say. When Finns are satisfied, they say nothing!” One time, Michael heard a joke about the difference between an introvert and an extrovert Finn: while talking to you, the introvert Finn will look at his own shoes, while the extrovert will look at your shoes.

Michael says that over the years he has come to understand Finnish culture. He understands Finns and can relate to them. In the context of Friends of Israel he also got to know people from different denominational backgrounds — Pentecostal, Lutheran and Free Church — united by their love for Israel.

– Finns deeply impress me in their seriousness of faith: they have a strong love for God and for Israel. During the second

Palestinian intifada (from September 2000 to February 2005)⁸¹ many countries didn't recommend tourists to visit Israel, but Finns were in our streets praying and singing. It was a great comfort to us in Israel!

People began to recognise Michael in towns and villages across Finland. While Michael was buying shoes at a supermarket, for instance, someone came up and said: "Hey, I know you! You're Miki!" Michael is proud to say that he has probably visited more locations in Finland than most Finns have, all the way up to Lapland.

Michael wants to share one more sauna experience. On one of his first speaking tours, he was staying the night at a pastor's house. He did not know the pastor beforehand. In the evening, as he was changing into something more casual in his room, there was a knock on the door. When he opened, he saw the pastor at the door in his birth suit, with a towel under his arm. "Come on, sauna is ready," was the pastor's invitation. The pastor's wife was busy in the kitchen, and they had to pass her on their way to the sauna.

Michael entered the sauna half-dressed and tried to explain: "I'm sorry; I have to come like this!" The sauna was so incredibly hot that it felt like the steam was coming out of their ears. Michael made an escape after a very short time.

He has since got used to it and today he is proud to claim real Finnishness; one time after the sauna he even had a dip in the icy water, in a hole cut out of the ice, and stayed in for a while. There is a photograph to prove it!

One time, Maija and Michael were on a speaking tour in Ostrobothnia. At one speaking occasion they could not go to the previously arranged place for the night, so they were taken to a new place in Alavus and left in front of a big gate. It was late and already dark. After opening the gate, they came to what looked like a storage building. Michael thought: "I expect they'll bring me a mattress to put down in that shed. I hope there'll be a place for Maija, too."

As Michael and Maija were circling to the front of the storage building, bright lights came on, and Michael thought he was in fairyland. In front of them, there was an enormous, glowing, palatial building. A finely dressed man appeared at the door, inviting them in: “Come on in, come on in!”

In the house, there was an array of wedding dresses hung up, and fancy shoes on the floor underneath them. There were large, beautiful rooms and a sauna so big that Michael had never seen anything like it. The host led them to the grandest room in the house, a suite, and said: “This one will be your room!”

That was when Maija burst out laughing, and Michael joined in. They realised they were being treated as newly-weds. The whole house catered for couples on their honeymoon. They explained the situation to the host and he, of course, found it quite funny, too. A different room was then prepared for Michael.

Maija and Michael found out that the place was called Morsiuskartano (Wedding Manor), hosted by Mikko and Mirja Knuuti. The manor house was so large that it was suitable to be used for weddings and other celebrations. The host said: “We still want to give you the best the house can offer, like we do for newly-weds.”

In the morning, Michael and Maija were served a royal breakfast. The host couple were dressed to perfection as they waited on their guests. Michael and Maija felt a bit embarrassed, but it was a fun experience in Finland! About ten years later, Michael visited the place with a group from Israel, and the host invited him to come with Marianne and the children.

Once, while he was in Finland, Michael felt God speaking to him from the Song of Solomon 3:5, “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” It was a confirmation for him to stay calm: God himself would show the right spouse.

Years ago in Finland, Michael got to know Lyyli and this was an important event for him. Lyyli almost fainted when she learned that Michael was from Israel, so important were the land and the nation of Israel to her. Nowadays Lyyli is well

into her eighties. She became a kind of a Finnish grandmother to Michael. Even before he started dating, Lyyli had a vision of his future wife, and it proved to be just right. At about age eighty Lyyli travelled to Israel to attend Michael and Marianne's wedding. She played an honorary role as one of the witnesses. Lyyli lives in Mikkeli, and Michael tries to visit her whenever he travels to Finland.

For many years, as a representative of the Finnish Free Church, Jaakko Pihlajamäki acted as vice-chairperson on the Board of the Friends of Israel. Previously, Jaakko was also the leader of the Israel working committee of the Free Church. He asked Ilkka Vakkuri who would be the most suitable Messianic Jew to come as a guest of the Free Church and to receive support as well. Ilkka introduced all of the twenty or so support candidates Friends of Israel had in mind. Out of those, Jaakko chose Michael Yaron.

One day, Jaakko came and said to Michael: "The Free Church has a vision to encourage and aid new congregations abroad. We could offer support to the congregation that is about to be born." Michael was still part of the Kfar Saba fellowship, but the one in Rishon LeZion was in planning, and he had talked about it in Finland. They made an agreement and the Free Church supports the Tehilat Yah congregation to this day. Michael has been invited as main speaker at several occasions, for instance, at the annual summer festival. Richard Brewis, the former Director of Foreign Missions, has become a special friend within the Free Church.

Dear friends in Finland are also heart surgeon Kari Teittinen and his wife Stina, together with their family.

The American, Edgar (Ed for short) Marvin, who founded the inter-denominational *Shorashim Fellowship* in Finland, has also been a significant acquaintance. The purpose of Shorashim is to provide teaching on the Hebrew roots of our Christian faith. At some point, the Marvin's went back to America. Later, he and Michael agreed that Michael would start to give teachings at the Tehilat Yah meetings from Israel through Skype.

The plan worked out. Michael has felt it to be a fulfilment of part of the earlier prophecy through Finnish Päävi, according to which he would have much to do in Finland.

Michael has been on speaking tours in many European countries, but also in Asia. As this is being written, he received an invitation to work alongside a colleague from Messianic Testimony in South Africa. He is looking forward to a visit there, as it has been his wish for a long time.

Visits to Italy have naturally been frequent. There he is on home ground, as it were, being familiar with the mentality and fluent in the language. Knowing Italian was also a necessary requirement for gaining citizenship in Switzerland, Marianne's native country. To gain citizenship, one must be fluent in one of the official languages, and Italian is one of them. This has opened up the opportunity to visit many of the Italian-speaking churches in Switzerland.

Bulgaria is one of the countries that Michael has been able to visit several times. He has formed good connections with several pastors there and Bulgarian believers have been on short-term visits to Rishon LeZion. One worker stayed for a whole year.

Ukraine is an important country for Michael. Many Jewish immigrants in Israel are from the Ukraine. Also at Tehilat Yah congregation there is a great number of Ukrainians, most of them from Kiev and from a Messianic congregation that numbers over two thousand members. Michael is a frequent visitor to pastors' and prayer conferences organised in the Ukraine. He has been invited to preach there, too.

Korean Christians love Israel. Many Korean Christian students and volunteers come to Israel. In the past, Marianne taught Hebrew to Koreans at Tel Aviv University. Through her contacts Michael got in touch with a Korean pastor many years ago, who invited him on a visit to Korea.

– I had heard about Yonggi Cho's church that had grown

from one member to a million. A friend said that fifty years ago there were ten thousand believers in Korea, and now there are ten million in a country that used to be predominantly Buddhist and multi-religious. On my first visit there, I noticed the countless crosses on the rooftops. A house church met in each one of those houses, Michael marvels.

– As I tend to wake up early, I left at five in the morning to walk in the streets of Seoul. When I stepped out of the building, I imagined it must be twelve noon, not morning, as there were so many people on the streets. Then I saw that many of them had Bibles under their arms. They were on their way to the morning prayer meetings organised in all of the churches. I heard that in the Seoul theological faculty they use clock-cards. If students don't attend the morning prayer meetings, they can't get their degree.

Michael was impressed by the prayer mountain where Yonggi Cho arranged for the prayer grottoes to be so small that you can only fit in kneeling down. There, people can spend time alone with God. In Korea, many pastors spend a whole night in prayer on the mountain to prepare for the next day's sermon.

– What was confusing to me was the fact that in Korea pastors are held in high esteem, almost like kings. In Israel, a pastor is nothing special. It feels almost awkward to say that one is a pastor. Besides, nobody in Korea calls a pastor by their first name: I wasn't Michael or Miki, but always Pastor Michael Yaron.

– Eating in Korea was quite an achievement for me. After the morning prayer, a pastor would invite me to eat. I thought I would be offered coffee and bread like in Finland, but no: at six in the morning rice and meat was put before me! Later in the day, before preaching, they would take me to a restaurant for a meal. This was their way of showing respect. I was dressed right and proper for the meeting, in either a blazer or a suit and tie. Then we would sit down eating for two hours on cushions on the floor, and I had to be careful not to make a mess of my tie or other clothing. To begin with, I would always be given a

sort of cape, so I wouldn't make a mess of myself. One had to eat with chopsticks, which made it all the more difficult. Only once did I ask for a fork. They looked for one for fifteen minutes and then they brought me a tiny fork, Michael relates.

Trips to China and Vietnam, among other places, are in the pipeline.

– I enjoy trips abroad! Maybe one of the reasons is my time of studying in Italy. I've come to understand the problems of Christians in different countries and through that also the problems of foreigners who have moved to Israel. This is why the members of our congregation feel at home in our fellowship. The pastor can relate to them! Michael explains.

On his trips, Michael teaches on ordinary biblical topics on the one hand, but also on Israel. While, at times, he speaks about his congregation's vision, he considers it very important to teach about so-called replacement theology which, in his opinion, is a wrong doctrine. He wants to give a balanced teaching about Israel. According to replacement theology, Israel was completely removed from God's plans, because it was disobedient to God and, at a point of climax, it rejected the Messiah. Instead of the rejected Israel, God chose the Gentile church to replace Israel.

– Yet, Romans 11:1 assures us that God has not rejected his people, Michael emphasises. God has only allowed the eyes of Israel to be veiled for a time, in order that the Gentiles could find Messiah. God has also done this in order that the Jews would find him, provoked to jealousy by the Gentiles and envious that non-Jews know the Jewish Messiah. That's what happened to me and it has happened to many Jews! Many Gentile believers have led Jews to Yeshua. In this way, the Gentiles need the Jews and the Jews need the Gentiles. With the Old Testament story of Ruth, the Moabite woman, at the time of the judges, we have a shadow of God's plan of salvation and the story shows the co-dependency between Jews and Gentiles.

Israel faced a famine and Elimelech and his wife Naomi went

down to Moab with their two sons, in the hope of a better life. There, however, Naomi lost her husband and both her sons. A widow, she returned to Israel with her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth. In Israel, Ruth eventually married Naomi's kinsman and redeemer Boaz. Naomi represents the Jews. She taught Ruth who represents the Gentiles, and Ruth got to know the God of Israel. Through Ruth, on the other side, Naomi got to know her redeemer Boaz, who is a type of the Messiah.

Michael mentions that when the New Testament speaks about the remnant of Israel that will come to Yeshua, it is referring to Messianic Jews. In Zechariah 12:10, it is written: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced." When the state of Israel was born in 1948 there were only a handful of Messianic Jews, but today in Israel alone there are 15,000. In other countries, there are a great many more.

When Michael teaches, both in Israel and abroad, he addresses the subject of our identity. Paul defines a Jew in spiritual terms, in Romans 2:28–29: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." Yeshua, when he saw Nathanael sitting under a tree, said: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit" (John 2:47). Yeshua knew Nathanael had faith and Nathanael's answer proves this, when he exclaims: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 2:49).

– When I teach, I attempt to expose a certain fanaticism about Israel, the kind that puts the Jewish people and Messianic believers on a pedestal, which is a tendency that runs opposite to replacement theology. Jews are neither better nor worse than Gentiles. They have been set apart by God for a specific task, that is to reflect the light of God to the nations. To be holy means to be set apart, sanctified for God's purposes.

All of us, Jews and Gentiles, can be close to God. That's why we don't need to change the state we are in when God first called

us. A Gentile believer does not have to convert to Judaism and a Jewish believer does not have to be like a Gentile believer. The important thing is for all of us to live close to God.

Michael shares an example to show the frequent conflict of identity for Jews and Gentiles: a non-Jewish girl who believed in Yeshua wanted to marry a Jew and went on an eight-month conversion course taught by a rabbi. When the time for the final exam came, the rabbi said to the girl: “You have studied well. You know more about the issues than many Jews, but now I will ask you a final question: Do you believe in Yeshua?” The girl was silent for a while and then said: “I cannot deny him!” This girl was not accepted for conversion. Unfortunately, many at this point have denied Yeshua.

– Even though I am a Jew born in Israel, my primary identity is to be a disciple of Yeshua. This has priority over my Jewish identity, is how Michael sums it up.

11.

BEIT MARGOA AND ITS RESIDENTS

After Michael and Marianne got married, they lived on a *moshav*, an agricultural community, in Gan Haim. Then they moved to an ordinary flat in Kfar Saba, where the former congregation met. The flat had four rooms and a kitchen. After the start of the Rishon LeZion congregation they moved there into a rental flat near the centre of town, with five rooms and a kitchen. It was on the top floor of a block of flats, and there was a roof garden where they held prayer meetings and celebrations.

But, Michael and Marianne had a vision of a house of rest, *Beit Margoa* in Hebrew, where people could come and replenish their energy. Therefore, the name of the house was already clear. Rest is much needed, because many people in ministry face the danger of burnout. Mental and spiritual batteries need recharging every now and then. Michael and Marianne prayed and waited for the right house.

They wanted confirmation from God for their Beit Margoa project and they got it. In the Bible, in Isaiah 40:30–31, it is written: “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew

their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.” The image is that of an eagle: it first beats its wings a few times; then, the eagle soars with the currents for a long time. Often, people are like birds that constantly beat their wings, trying to stay in control, and they grow exhausted. Instead, we should learn to be like the soaring eagle, trustingly resting and delighting in the Lord (Psalm 37:4). Michael and Marianne wanted to have a place for soaring, where people could rest in the nurture of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 11:28, Yeshua invites us: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Soon God led them to view a house that was just ideal for the purpose they had in mind. The house had two floors. In addition, it had a basement floor and an undeveloped attic. In his mind, Michael could see how the roof space could be turned into living quarters. Michael and Marianne got the house and soon after they had moved in they hosted a group of men from Finland, led by Kari Teittinen, to do the renovation work. They called the project Operation Nehemiah.

The Finnish team built a room with a bathroom and toilet into the attic. There was one especially industrious man in the group. He started banging away with his hammer at four in the morning, waking up not only the family, but most probably also the neighbours. He just went on saying: “Work is what life’s about, and we need to work!” On the first floor, the Finns also built a sauna. One of the men painted a soaring eagle on to one of the walls on the top floor.

The renovation also included the basement. Albert from Holland, who is clever with his hands, did the work there. After the renovation, the basement was dedicated as a praise, prayer and healing room for people from the congregation, from the land of Israel, and for guests from around the globe. People are invited to pray on a fitted carpet. A separate, small closet serves for private prayer and was inspired by the prayer grottoes on Yonggi Cho’s mountain.

The kitchen, the dining room area and the living room are on the ground floor. Even a large group can gather there. This floor also houses a small bomb shelter that doubles as the congregation's office and provides privacy for counselling sessions.

On the first floor there is a beautiful room with an en-suite bathroom and a balcony. When they saw it for the first time, Michael and Marianne felt that it was just like a high-class hotel room, a suite almost. They decided to reserve it for guests and chose a more modest room on the same floor as their bedroom.

When they have guests for the night, Michael may pull their leg a little and say: "I'm really sorry. We have a full house and we can only give you a very small room, a mattress and a sleeping bag." Everyone usually says: "Oh, that's okay, I'll be fine!" As Michael then takes them upstairs and opens the door, the beautiful guestroom opens up in front of them. People tend to be quite overwhelmed.

– I hope God forgives my little teasing, Michael grins.

Only a few days after moving to the new place, Michael was at the gym and watched a documentary on dogs on television. Amongst other breeds, it dealt with huskies and malamutes, big, northern dogs. Michael marvelled: "Those are really fine dogs, and so faithful to man as well!" The phone rang, and it was Marianne, who said that she and the children had found a big, grey stray dog in the street. No owner was in sight. Someone had probably stolen or abandoned it on the streets. Michael connected the programme and Marianne's call and left quickly to see this dog. It was thin, miserable, infested with fleas and ticks and had been bitten and scratched in fights with other dogs.

Michael took it to the vet. They cleaned it and the Yarons started to look after it. The vet told them the dog's name was Rocco and it was a pedigree Alaskan malamute. Through the chip under the skin on the dog's neck the Yarons found the owner. He told them they no longer had room for the dog, so they could keep it. The neighbourhood barber and others who

had been feeding it from time to time were happy that Rocco had found a new home.

When Michael and Marianne revisited the vet with Rocco after a while, he said: “The dog was in a miserable state to begin with, but now he prances like a prince!”

– It was as if God had said to me: “In the same way you found this dog, homeless, lonely and abandoned, took it in and cared for it, you will be able to serve people. The dog was your first client.” Many times we have had people come to our house, who have many emotional wounds, who are tired and have lost their hope, Michael relates.

When one walks a dog in Israel, one must carry a bag and pick up the dog’s poo. One time, Michael did not have a bag on him and he got a fine. Another time, when he was out with Rocco, he realised that again he did not have a bag. When Rocco had done his business, a police car started following them. “Oh bother, that’s probably another 200 shekel fine,” Michael thought to himself.

The police car stopped. A tall, muscular man stepped out. Then, lo and behold, he stopped a metre away from the dog and knelt down in front of it. “Hey, where did you find such a fine dog? I’ve been looking for one just like it! If ever you want to give it away, get in touch with me. Here’s my number and address; I’d so like to have this dog!” The policeman forgot all about the fine!

Beit Margoa is near a railway station and within easy reach of the airport. The Mediterranean beach is also close by. Often, Michael and Marianne give their guests a key and a mobile phone and then they can relax and go for a walk or see the beach. At the front and back of the house, there is a garden for people to rest, and the kitchen is freely available.

They usually know the people who come to their home beforehand from some connection like Michael’s trips abroad. Of course, the Yarons have to consider when the time is ap-

propriate for a visit. The family also needs private time.

– Usually, we only take guests for three or four days, unless the Lord shows something else. We have also had long-term guests, like members of the congregation who were exhausted from difficult family situations at their home.

There have been visitors from Finland, England, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Australia, America, China, Korea and India. Sometimes, larger groups come just to see the place, not to stay the night.

– I wonder what the neighbours thought when a coach parked in the street and forty Koreans came to visit us? I expect they looked at the stream of visitors with their mouths open, Michael surmises.

Last year one of the guests was Ulf Oldenberg, who led Michael in prayer to receive Yeshua in his heart, many years ago in Germany. Ulf is Danish, but has lived in Germany for many years. He emphasises that his first impression of Michael was that of a very sincere young man. He also said it to Michael in person at the time.

– To this day my impression of Michael has stayed the same, he is happy to say. He has continued walking in the footsteps of Yeshua, his great Messiah. I'm happy that I was able to meet Michael and his family in their life today and spend a good time with them. I'm also happy that even though Michael is a doctor by profession, he followed God's call: he became a little apostle and servant of the Messiah for our times in Israel.

Ulf himself became a believer during the Second World War through Christians who were saving Jews from persecution. They risked their own lives by taking Jewish people on boats to safety in Sweden.

Many different groups meet at Beit Margoa: occasionally a youth group, the leadership team, various prayer groups, the worship team and a Finnish ladies' group. Michael remarks that it is not their goal to drag all the groups to their house; rather, they often lack other meeting places.

Michael introduces the regular residents of Beit Margoa, his children, that is: Roi, the firstborn son (born in 2006), who is very energetic. The rest of the family call him 'Pepper'. He is clever, too: at school, he's already ahead of his age. Everybody says that he isn't afraid of anything. He is good at sports and plays football. The neighbourhood talks of him as a future goalie.

Daughter Lia (born in 2008) is in the difficult position of being the sandwich filling, as it were. She watches carefully to see what Roi and the youngest Matan are allowed to do and can be a bit jealous. She is artistically gifted and does rhythmic dance. She has also started to play the harp and the tambourine. She is very strong-willed.

The youngest son, Matan (born in 2010), is the calmest in character of the three. His name means 'gift'. He is already on the junior football team where Roi also started to play. He seems intelligent, but it's too early to say much about the future.

All kinds of incidents make up the Beit Margoa history. During the first summer in their new home they had burglars. It seems that someone forgot to lock the back door properly. When Michael came downstairs early in the morning, the burglars were just on their way out and had left the door open. They had stolen a laptop, but then threw it in the yard. They had also taken the keys to the minivan, and Michael heard them starting the car and driving off. He prayed: "Lord, please stop the car!" Some hours later, while a young woman was on her way to Beit Margoa for counselling that morning, she called and asked: "Why's your car parked near the big road?" God heard the prayer, and the car stopped working. The burglars were so angry at the stalling car that they threw the keys on to the ground near the car and kicked the door in. The insurance company paid for a new door!

The family faced a difficult time with the Gaza war (8 July to 26 August 2014).⁹¹ When it started, they were all visiting Switzerland, Marianne's native country. Michael felt that somehow it would have been easier to be in Israel, along with

all their Israeli friends. The Yarons returned home soon.

Once in Israel they had to start using the office room that also serves as a bomb shelter. Built with concrete walls, it is sturdy enough for that purpose. The alarm sounded several times a day but also at night. When the alarm sounds in Israel, one has less than a minute to reach the bomb shelter and is to stay there for ten minutes. If the alarm sounds while driving, one is to leave the car immediately, lie down and cover one's head.

– At least I had some experience of earlier wars, but the other family members didn't. Although Israel managed to destroy almost all rockets from Gaza, there was always some debris that fell on the ground.

Because of the threatening situation, many believers in Tel Aviv went to pray at the premises of one particular congregation. Among those who came were members as well as outsiders. When two Israelis, who were not part of the congregation, came there, the pastor had an opportunity to speak to them about faith in the Messiah. They wanted to accept Yeshua in their hearts. When the pastor was about to pray for them, the air raid siren went off. The pastor said to them that receiving the Messiah into your heart was more important than running for shelter from a rocket so he went ahead and prayed for them. Two explosions were heard but no harm was done; the "air defence" was definitely at work.

– The words in Isaiah 54:17 held true: "No weapon forged against you will prevail." The fact that those Israelis became believers was an indication that even in the midst of evil God can do something good, Michael concludes. At Tehilat Yah good things happened during the war, too. Our meeting hall does not provide a suitable bomb shelter so we were unable to come together for Sabbath meetings. Consequently, the members of our congregation met in house groups on Sabbath. At that time, all the small disagreements between some groups and individuals disappeared. In such a serious situation, small matters cease to have any significance.

- We had to come together before God. We also prayed for the people of Gaza, especially those who were innocent. Their suffering was terrible. We were able to take the verses in Joel 2:12–18 which call for a fast within the nation, and people are told to come together. In verse 17, it says: “Spare your people, Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Michael goes on to mention Psalm 91 where it talks about shelter and security. The Lord is a fortress and a refuge. We were able to say to the children in the bomb shelter that “a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you” (verse 7).

Like all of us, there have been times when Michael had to examine himself regarding the many roles he has, as father, spouse, neighbour and pastor amongst others. Over the years he has come to know himself better and better. When it comes to fathering, he says that especially as a new pastor he worked so hard that for a while it hindered him from forming a close relationship with his children. Building up the congregation and travelling abroad took a lot of time and energy.

- Now I see things very differently, Michael says. I understand that family has to come second immediately after God. Nowadays I give much time to my family, and we have restored a healthy balance. I take the children to school and kindergarten, to hobbies and birthday parties.

Michael looks back on the stages of deepening in his spiritual life. He shares that before he became a believer the longing for love caused a fear of man and a desire to please people, which led to lies and masks.

- I can say that the fear of man has gradually disappeared from my life, Michael explains. The need to please people manifested itself when I was a young believer, for instance, at a week’s retreat with our Italian congregation. Everyone had to take turns at do-

ing the dishes and cleaning up. Often at night, the programme went on so late that the dishes were left until morning.

– Because I wake up early, I decided to do the dishes, even though it was not my turn. As a “humble” man, I said nothing about it to anyone. On the second day I did the same. On the third day, I was wondering why no one asked who had done the work, Michael recalls.

Every day there was a meeting for the organisers. The conversation was very open as people shared their weaknesses, problems and sins. Originally, Pastor Spredos had studied to be a Catholic priest, so he knew the power and blessing that is found in confession. The pastor’s wife was responsible for the retreat’s household arrangements. She said to Michael: “Maybe you’ve been wondering why no one has said anything to you about washing the dishes on many mornings. I know that it was you, because God told me, but God also showed me that you haven’t been doing it from the right motives. You have wanted to gain acceptance. That is why I decided not to say anything about it to you.”

Another incident took place at a prayer gathering in Italy:

– I started praying beautifully. In the middle of my prayer, the pastor got up to go to the toilet. Immediately, I thought: “Hey, I don’t want to be praying here, if he’s just going to walk out like that!” Then I pondered why it was that I didn’t want to continue praying. It was because my prayer was meant for the pastor rather than for God.

Michael sees the danger of pride in his life. If, for instance, some important group or pastor from abroad is coming on an invitation to Israel, he may think: “Why was I not contacted?” There is always the temptation to envy and pride.

Michael recalls Pastor Spredos in Italy saying: “God is not looking for the perfect, but for the honest.”

One of his positive qualities, the way Michael sees it, is his constant desire to learn new things and being aware of his weakness and sinfulness. He is not afraid of admitting them.

– I constantly make mistakes, but I’m ready to learn from everything. I’m open in that sense, Michael reflects on his characteristics. That’s why he does not draw lines between Christian denominations:

– If I’m Pentecostal and I meet a Lutheran, I don’t say: “Oh, they’re completely wrong.” On the contrary: I can learn something from every believer, though I don’t have to accept everything in their doctrine.

Michael enjoys the fact that friends of Israel are usually united. Different belief systems in the churches do not disturb them. Only God knows a person’s heart.

Michael refuses to say more about his positive traits and says that other people must speak, if they see fit. One person, who knows Michael well, describes his character in the following way: he has a great sense of humour, he is humble, intelligent, understanding, a good listener, a faithful friend, quick to apologise and to forgive, patient, broad-minded and international. He strives towards unity among believers. And, yes, sometimes he is a bit like an absent-minded professor.

As a pastor, Michael has experienced that being diplomatic is part of his work: one cannot see things in black and white, as prophets tend to do.

– A pastor has to be understanding and loving. I feel that I really love people, both believers and non-believers. I once went to visit someone with a friend. The lady of the house said to my friend: “If you don’t repent, you will go straight to hell!” I’m not like that. Instead, I want to follow a different style and speak softly. We need to show mercy to give people the benefit of the doubt. I think of how Yeshua would relate to these people. He said to the woman caught in sin, after the accusers left, one after the other: “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). We need to do both: tell about God’s grace and warn people about the wages of sin.

With a bit of exaggeration, Michael calls a pastor’s vocation

“the most difficult one in the world” if it is undertaken seriously. After returning to Israel, he went through a crisis while wondering if he was supposed to work as a doctor or, indeed, become a pastor.

Some time ago Marianne asked Michael whether he was convinced that he wants to be a pastor. Michael replied: “I’m not sure that I want it, but I’m absolutely sure that God wants it.”

– It’s my calling, Michael says. And even though it is a difficult calling, I thank the Lord for choosing me for the job, a man come up from the ashes. It is a precious task in my eyes in the sense that I am an ambassador for God.

– Sometimes I ask myself why I can’t just be an ordinary believer, have a normal job and maybe live in Switzerland or have a summer cottage in Finland where I could spend my holidays. Then, as soon as I turn my eyes to Yeshua, I know he has called me and I want to be faithful and follow him, Michael stresses.

12.

MARIANNE'S STORY

Marianne, Michael's wife, was born in Switzerland on 4 August 1973 in the small village of Möriken. It is located in the canton of Aargau near the town of Zürich. There were big age gaps between the children in the family. The adopted siblings, a brother and a sister, had already left home when Marianne was born. She spent her childhood with Dad, Mum and a sister, who was six years older.

At some point between the births of big sister and of Marianne their father became mentally ill. Naturally, it was a very difficult issue for the rest of the family. While healthy, Dad had, for instance, published books and done evangelistic work and — best of all — he had been a good father. After falling ill, he would often say: “God exists, but Jesus is a lie.”

– Dad was like a shadow. I felt that I didn't really have a dad. Mum tried to protect me and my childhood faith from his influence. Mum was the centre of my life. She taught me about God and read Bible stories to us children. When I was twelve, Dad committed suicide. Naturally, that was a terrible blow to us all, especially to Mum. She couldn't go to sleep at night, and slept next to me in my bed.

When they eventually came to terms with the event, Mum

went to work as a housekeeper on a farm run by a bachelor. The man had recently lost his mother, who up to that time had looked after her son. As one might guess, there was a romance, and Mum married the farmer. Mum who had herself grown up on a farm took to it like a duck to water. She looked after the cattle and the house and so for many years Marianne grew up in rural surroundings.

At the age of 16 Marianne managed to persuade her mother to let her be an exchange student in the United States for a year. The time was wonderful for her, a very good year, and laid the foundation for her excellent knowledge of English. When she returned to her home country, she went to work as a trainee nurse in a hospital. However, her dream of working in Africa as a children's nurse one day ran aground when the use of disinfectants at the hospital caused her skin problems. She continued with her higher school education.

– While my Mum was pregnant with me she had been planning to go to work on a kibbutz in Israel, but she was advised to wait till after the birth. I could have been born there! That is why I, too, was keen to go to Israel.

While in academic high school, Marianne travelled to Israel with a friend. They went to many different places.

– Everything was very exotic to us, she describes.

After graduation, Marianne heard of a Messianic Jewish couple who needed an au pair for their two children, two and six years of age. She was very excited about going to work in the Promised Land for a year. She ended up having a lot of responsibility in the family, more than she had expected, but she stayed on for the year. The father was American, so the family spoke both English and Hebrew.

The mother had an adult daughter who was in the Israeli military at the time. She became like a sister to Marianne.

– Even to this day, we're like sisters, Marianne comments.

This new friend took Marianne to a small Messianic con-

gregation that met at the pastor's home in Jerusalem. Marianne felt that the Holy Spirit was really working at the meetings. The believers were so close that she could phone up anyone with her prayer requests.

– Up to that time, my faith had been more head knowledge, though I prayed and lived as a believer. In this lively congregation there was real love, and my faith became a matter of the heart.

Marianne's baptism was an especially moving experience. It took place in the big bathtub at the pastor's house.

– When I was immersed I had a revelation: all the water in the tub was blood, and I saw the face of Yeshua, looking at me with a love that cannot be described. Yeshua accepts me the way I am. He doesn't look at what I've done. In difficult times, I always recall that revelation and remembering it, it gives me strength.

Then, it was time to return to Switzerland. Back in her homeland, Marianne went to the University of Basel to study theology and English. She gained a bachelor's degree. In the very liberal faculty of theology, faith was often shattered. The studies raised many questions, and Marianne did not want to become a minister — instead, her love of languages grew deeper. Her mother tongue was German.

Marianne was unable to shake Israel from her thoughts, so she asked God for a sign: "If I get a grant to study in Israel, I will go there." To study in Israel, grants were necessary because a foreign student could not work there, unless it was a job at the university.

– For some reason it was clear to me that I would not live in Switzerland.

Marianne got her grant, packed up and left for Israel. There, at Tel Aviv University, she studied Hebrew and Jewish history. In the first study week, after a seminar, the professor came to ask her about her language skills. He had seen Marianne's dictionary. Upon hearing that she had a command of German, English and elementary Hebrew, he offered her work at the university.

Marianne specialised in European Jewish history. Of course,

there was a lot of material in German. In her work she read and looked for those passages in the material that were of interest to the professor who was from the United States. Then she translated them into English.

– I was seriously looking for the ‘right one’ and had a crush on some men. Then I fell passionately in love with this man, but he noticed before I did that it was not God’s will, Marianne says.

At that time, she was part of the Messianic congregation in Tel Aviv. She became a singer in the worship group.

Falling in love here and there, with no ensuing friendship, Marianne decided to make a list of the things she expected from her future husband.

– On the list, among other things, was the fact that the man should make the first move, that I wouldn’t fall in love with anyone based on my emotions alone. One point was that the man should have lived abroad for a while, especially in Europe, so that he would understand my culture and mentality and how I became who I was. I started to pray based on my list and I hoped that the Holy Spirit would show me a suitable person. My own heart had led me astray too many times.

– I read a book that introduced God as the best matchmaker. Then one day I felt that God was asking me: “Are you ready for the kind of love that is not the Hollywood type where everything starts with lovey feelings and all is just rosy and wonderful, but real love, the kind where both ups and downs are faced together?” Marianne relates.

Once the students organised a get-together on the beach. Among them was a man of whom Marianne thought: “Oh, what a nice guy! He seems to have a heart of gold!” Yet she was not interested in the man as a potential date. That man was Michael. Once they saw each other at a singles’ night, but nothing special happened.

Two years went by before Marianne met Michael again. That time they were at the same Messianic conference. The wife of the

worship leader, who did not know Marianne beforehand, said she had received a word for her. It was something like: “The Lord is going to answer your heart’s request.” Pondering, Marianne turned around and saw Michael at the back of the room. “Him?” Marianne thought, but rejected the thought immediately.

Michael got Marianne’s phone number and asked her to join him for a Shabbat meal at the Home of Bible Translators in Mevasseret Zion.

– When we drove there, Michael chose a road that runs through forests and countryside, very near the Palestinian border. It was incredibly beautiful, and he said that he wouldn’t mind building a home there. In my mind I thought: “Thanks for telling me. It’s a bit unusual that you should talk about things like that to me,” Marianne recalls.

After that Michael started sending her text messages. They would also have coffee at the University cafe. Once Marianne said to her friend: “Wonder what Michael is really after? Does he play games with people?” Soon after, there was a text message from him: “I want you to know that I don’t play games with people” as if Michael had known the thought in Marianne’s heart.

At the end of the term, Marianne was off to Switzerland. Before leaving she met Michael in what turned out to be a meaningful encounter. They walked the Tel Aviv streets for three hours, and Michael shared his life story.

– I guess it was the longest continuous line that Michael has ever delivered to me, Marianne says with a laugh.

After that they went to the beach, where they sat on a protruding rock. Michael shared what his friends had said to him: they had met Marianne and felt that she suited him well. He also told her what he had asked of God. Then he said: “My feelings are now in a little box, and I offer the box to you.”

– I felt a deep friendship, but I didn’t have feelings of love towards Michael. At the same time though I was certain that this was the right man. It was something the Holy Spirit revealed to me. So I accepted the box, Marianne says with great joy.

When they got off the rock, Michael lost his balance and received a bleeding cut in his leg. The event has been deeply imprinted on Marianne's heart. She even remembers what Michael said to her at this point: "I fell as I looked into your eyes and nearly lost my consciousness."

When Marianne fell ill before leaving for Switzerland, Michael prayed for her. She noticed then how good she felt in this man's company.

The romance was not self-evident. A week after travelling to Switzerland she started to think: "Marianne, what have you done? You're not even in love with this man."

– I panicked and I had thoughts about cancelling everything. On the phone, Michael was able to calm her down.

Marianne returned to Israel. Michael still knew how to calm her down, as she was unsure of her feelings. "Let's do things together, go on outings and do other fun stuff and we'll find out if our dating is of God. If it's not, neither of us will want to go on with it." Marianne decided that if she would not fall in love with this man within three months, it would still be fair to call it off.

– Then I got to know Michael's heart of gold. Besides, he was broad-minded and understood me, a student. Slowly, feelings of love were aroused.

They were engaged at the Shavuot celebration. The event was shared with the congregation. Marianne saw that all the people in the fellowship loved Michael and had prayed about a wife for him. The love between this young engaged couple deepened, and Marianne saw that love could start from little and only grow bigger. She also thought that the wedding, which took place about a year after the engagement, was glorious.

Now, after eleven years of marriage, she says:

– Love is such that it stays and grows stronger, even though it cannot be great feelings all the time. We're a team. Everything doesn't work all the time, but we have a common goal. One also needs to work at a relationship.

Roi was born about two years after the wedding. The problems were the same as in other young families: lack of time together. Besides, Michael has travelled much, which has posed its own challenges. From the beginning, though, he has always tried to get someone to help Marianne while he is away. Lia was born next, then Matan. When Matan was a baby, they got an English lady to help the family for six months.

When Matan was sleeping badly in 2013, and Marianne was exhausted, a twenty-one year old woman from Finland came to help.

– She never said she was tired. If we asked her for anything, she did it straightaway. She was very practical, a real treasure. She was a quiet person with a sweet character. She was also very smart, Marianne remarks with appreciation.

– Now I feel that the worst stage is over, because Matan has been admitted to a nursery, and I work two days a week in a lawyer’s office. I translate from German to Hebrew and from Hebrew to German, especially the kind of documents to do with applying for a permanent visa or citizenship.

It was Michael’s dream to move from a flat to a spacious private home, where there would be room for guests. A lot of guests come from Finland. When the parents told the children that their good friend Hannu was coming for a night, Lia chanted: “Hannu, Henna, Hanna, Hannele.” These were names of people who had visited the Yaron family. Lia thought that Finnish names were all too similar to each other.

– I realise God has given both Michael and myself the gift of hospitality. I love people. Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to deal with the whole circus of visitors we have at times. I have never felt any guest to be unpleasant or wished for them to leave soon. All guests have brought a blessing with them. We can learn something from everyone. More than once I’ve been reminded of the verse in Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” Besides, I’m not the kind to be

always watching whether everything is in order in the kitchen. Guests can be free here.

Marianne leads worship at Tehilat Yah congregation. She sings the children to sleep as well. When a friend was visiting and read stories to her child, the Yaron children, Roi, Lia and Matan found it hard to fall asleep as they were used to songs. And vice versa, the friend's child could not get to sleep for the singing, when it was Marianne's turn to put the children to bed!

All in all, Marianne is content with her life. She is a bright, energetic, open sort of person.

(Marianne and Michael's versions of the love story have some discrepancies. I have left the differences on purpose, because people do remember things differently.)

13.

GRANDFATHER'S STORY ¹⁰¹

Michael Yaron's grandfather Alexander Bronowski was born in Lublin, a significant Polish town, in 1900. There he studied law and worked as a lawyer.

According to Michael, Grandfather's meeting with his future wife Mila was straight from a Charlie Chaplin movie:

Grandfather used to go and buy bread at a bakery where a beautiful salesgirl was working. He was shy, but he wanted to buy the girl a rose. He bought one and thought: "I'll ask the first person I meet in the street to take the rose to the girl for me." The person he met was a young lady. Grandfather explained his purpose to her and it just so happened that he fell in love with this stranger he met in the street and forgot all about the salesgirl at the bakery. The young lady, Mila, was very different in character from Alexander: she was highly artistic. They got married and had one daughter, Ilana, Michael's mother.

At that time, however, dark clouds started to gather over Europe. Grandfather and Grandmother's story had started with a rose; their future, however, would not be a bed of roses.

Much before the beginning of World War II, anti-Semitism

was rife in Polish society. Alexander travelled to Palestine in 1939 to gain firsthand knowledge of the circumstances there. He felt that life there would be free for them.

In July 1939 he returned to Poland with the thought of moving to Palestine with his wife and daughter. Unfortunately, he did not have time to close down his law firm and sell his possessions before the Germans invaded Poland. On 1 September 1939 the Germans attacked Poland and took over the western part. In Lublin there were about 40,000 Jews. At the end of September, the Soviet Union took over the eastern part of Poland. Then Jews from Lublin fled east to the area governed by the Soviet Union (see map in appendix 3).

The arrests of Jews began in Lublin. Alexander made a narrow escape from being arrested himself. One day, when he was approaching his house, he saw two Germans going up the stairs to his flat, no doubt in order to arrest him. He heard their voices and hid at the neighbour's. When the Germans had left, he and his wife decided that he would leave for the Soviet controlled town of Bialystok the next day. His wife and daughter would follow later.

Crossing the border was very difficult, but Alexander succeeded in spite of an informer. After many adventures, Alexander reached Bialystok, but decided to work in a nearby small town. There he was able to get work as a lawyer in a Soviet court of law.

Life was satisfactory until war broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union in June 1941. Germany took over the Soviet controlled half of Poland. Soon the court of law was moved east. Alexander did not go along, but wanted to join his family in the Lublin ghetto instead, where the Jews were forced to live in cramped conditions.

On the Soviet side, Alexander had been speaking against the Nazi crimes. He realised as a known enemy of the Nazis they would search for him. With Lublin as his destination he made an escape. Through some people he got in contact with the manageress of an orphanage and asked to spend the night on the

premises. Without hesitation, the manageress agreed. She knew that Alexander was Jewish and on his way to his hometown. At dawn, Alexander left for Bialystok, taking some bread with him. He had only walked some thirty metres when the manageress called out for him to stop. She ran to Alexander, took a chain with a cross from her neck and hung it around Alexander's neck. He did not take it off while on the road to Bialystok, eighty kilometres away.

He decided to cover the distance in two days. Halfway to Bialystok he stopped for the night. At dawn he continued. There were other Jews walking on the same route.

As he was leaving the place where he had spent the night, a fourteen-year old Jewish boy joined him to walk along together. Some forty metres behind them there was another group of four Jews walking. Suddenly a German truck approached the walkers. Three soldiers jumped out with their rifles. Pointing them at Alexander, they asked: "Are you Jewish?" Then one of them saw the cross on his neck, and they left Alexander and the boy in peace. They probably thought it was his son. After a few minutes, they heard shots fired. The Germans had shot the Jews walking behind them.

Alexander arrived at the Bialystok ghetto. That was where he had first planned to stay when he reached the Soviet controlled part. This time he came to Bialystok shortly after the Germans had taken hundreds of Jews from there to death camps to face certain extermination. His only thought was to reach the Lublin ghetto so he could be with his family. Only, the Jews were forbidden to leave the Bialystok ghetto on the pain of death. Somehow, Alexander managed to obtain a travel pass. He got to Lublin on foot and train, all the while pretending to be Polish.

On the train he met a friendly lady and was able to spend a night at her house before continuing to the house of his father-in-law in Lublin. "It's hard to describe what happened next," Alexander recounts in his book. "Even in their wildest dreams my relatives could not imagine that I would return. So the recep-

tion was warm, to say the least. For myself, I wished never to be parted from my family again!" Next, Alexander met up with his wife and child after a long two-year separation.

The conditions in the Lublin ghetto were extremely difficult. About 35,000 Jews lived in a congested area. The hygienic conditions were appalling. Fever and smallpox were rife and often resulted in death. The condition of Alexander and his family, however, were not that bad. Six others lived with them in a three-room flat. They also got some food to supplement their rations.

Later they had to move to another place and share a flat with fourteen people. That was miserable. In October 1941 any Pole who hid or helped Jews in any way faced the death penalty.

In Spring 1942 the Germans started the transportation and extermination of the Jews in cooperation with the Ukrainian and Jewish police (*Judenpolizei*). A number of Jews were able to hide on the Aryan side. Some paid huge sums to get there, but there were also those who sympathised with the Jews and helped hide Jews for free, for humanitarian reasons.

It was then that Alexander and his wife decided they would try to get to the Aryan side of Warsaw. If they succeeded they would have a small chance of survival. Their Jewish roots were not easily recognisable from their facial features or from their accent when they spoke Polish. They had forged identity cards. From now on they would be Aryans. What frightened Alexander most was the thought that their intelligent daughter might give them away accidentally. They kept repeating to their child the lies she was to tell people.

Through connections with Polish Aryans they were able to get lodgings in Warsaw. Alexander's wife and daughter stayed in the flat of one contact person, while he himself went elsewhere. They had the promise of places to stay for two weeks. At his lodgings, Alexander was supposed to pretend to be Polish. After moving in, he collapsed. He could not rest even though he lay on a bed for a week. One horrifying question kept going round in his mind: "How do we find the next place?" Apparently, the landlady

gathered that Alexander was Jewish, because she sent him away from the house after a week. Alexander went to his family. While living with them his fortitude and optimism revived.

The family had to move from one place to another. In all this, Alexander's wife was able to get work through Jewish sympathisers. In some lodgings, Alexander pretended to be a Catholic seminary student. Even though their hiding places were excellent the family was in constant danger. At any given time someone could turn them in.

In the spring of 1943 suspicions arose that Alexander was a Jew, and the German police arrested him. Under guard, he was taken to a police station that was part of the Polish police who cooperated with the German government. The men who brought him to the police station would be coming to fetch him at seven o'clock the following morning for interrogation with the Gestapo, the secret German state police. That meant certain death.

Alexander got permission to be outside of his cell to talk to the on-duty sergeant who was on night shift. Their conversation went on for three hours. The sergeant inspired trust. "I felt that he was an honest and decent man and I sensed that he felt sympathy towards the persecuted Jews," Alexander later described the situation. At the end of the talk the on-duty sergeant promised: "I will try and save you." It was two o'clock at night.

The man asked someone else to stand in for him and left the police station. Alexander spent the night awake thinking about his wife and child. At six, when all hope had left him, the police sergeant returned with a smile on his face. "Everything's all right," he said. "They'll let you go." He handed him 5000 zloty that Alexander should use to bribe the German security service agents. That is what he did. They took the money and cancelled Alexander's name off the list of suspects. He was free! Once again, he encountered a brush with death.

Later, Alexander tried to pay back the money to the police officer who was nearly offended about the offer. At the end, half-

forced, he agreed to accept the repayment. Alexander and the sergeant became friends. This man went on to help Alexander and his family, as well as some other Jewish families.

This was not the end of their suffering. One day in March 1944 Alexander was on a tram when the Germans stopped it and told all the men to get out. They had to go to forced labour. At this time, Alexander was taken to be Polish, not Jewish. When they registered at the labour camp, Alexander stated that he was a civil servant who knew both German and Russian. The German official said: "That's just what we need." Alexander became a German and Russian interpreter.

However, the time at the labour camp was brief. One day a German official and a German driver drove a truck to Chelm-Lubelskie. A Russian man was also on board. Alexander had to come along as interpreter. The German and the Russian went into a restaurant leaving Alexander and the driver in the truck by themselves. When the driver's attention was elsewhere, Alexander slipped away. He knew the town and he had friends there. He went to them and after staying a couple of days travelled back to Warsaw. "My wife was about to lose her mind, while I was gone," Alexander related afterwards. "She was convinced that this time I had been caught by the Gestapo."

Alexander got the chance to meet a Jewish lady, who had earlier lived in Lublin and survived the ghetto inferno. She belonged to an organisation that gave financial aid to those Lublin Jews who were hiding in Warsaw. She knew the place where Alexander and his family were hiding. She came to meet them and gave them money which the family desperately needed. She displayed enormous courage because her activities exposed her to constant danger.

The German army were suffering defeats. In July 1944 the Soviet Union reached the outskirts of Warsaw, but stopped there. At this stage, Alexander tried to persuade his wife that they leave for Prague, Czechoslovakia, but she would not consent. The Soviet Red Army reached Prague, but their regrets

about having stayed in Poland came too late.

In August that same year the Polish underground movement rose to open resistance against the German occupiers. In response, German tanks rolled back into Warsaw and the city turned into a battlefield between the Germans and the rebels.

With his family, Alexander laid low in the basement of the house where they had lodgings. Water and food supplies were scarce. The water pipes had been cut and the nearest well was in an open area far away from the building, so that it was only possible to go there at night. As Alexander and his wife had not eaten for many days, they went to the fourth floor flat to see if they could find some scraps of food. At the time, Alexander was ill and feverish and he would have wanted to stay in the flat instead of returning to the cellar. Yet his wife coaxed him back to the basement as soon as they had found a little food. After leaving the flat and getting to the first floor, they heard a sound like thunder. Their flat had sustained a hit and was completely destroyed.

With his wife and daughter, Alexander fled from the building. They managed to get to their friends' place, but then the Germans ordered all the residents of the house and of other nearby houses to form a long line in the street. The guards ordered those in the line to give up all gold and valuables they still possessed, and made a thorough search. Then they were ordered to walk to a nearby hall. Along the road leading to the hall, the Germans separated some men from the line to stand on the opposite side. Alexander was carrying his daughter in his arms. The Germans gestured that he should come away from the line. Alexander, however, pretended he had not seen the sign and continued walking towards the building with the others. Later he learned that all those separated from the line had been sent to Auschwitz concentration camp.

In the hall people slept on the concrete floor and went to the toilet in open view of everybody, bereft of all human dignity. While there, Alexander got to know a Polish man who worked as

a guard. It turned out that both of them had studied in Vilnius under the same professor. Vilnius was part of Poland at that time. Twice a day the Germans would call men out of the hall, and most of them didn't return. This was why the man from Vilnius hid Alexander and his family in the engine room underneath the building whenever there was an inspection.

Later on, the family shoved into a goods train. After a day's journey the train stopped and someone gave them temporary lodgings. From there they were taken to a small village. The villagers, among them the local priest and the host family, gave Alexander and his family a hearty welcome. They did not know they were Jews. They got acquainted with the village people and together they all followed the latest news on the war developments.

One day Alexander's daughter was playing with the children of the host family. When the mother of the children asked her what they usually ate in the holidays, the girl answered: "*Matzo*" (unleavened bread). She meant the Passover bread. Immediately the villagers realised that their guests were Jewish. Their attitude became frosty, and the host family let them know that others would need the room reserved for them. The family had to leave for another village thirty kilometres away where everything went well. In January 1945 the Soviets arrived and the country was set free from German rule.

Alexander's family decided to return to their hometown of Lublin. Upon their arrival, however, they realised it was not the same town it had been before the war. It seemed as though there were hardly any Jews left. They got their flat back; the Russian general who had occupied it only kept one room for himself.

It turned out that Alexander's name had not been removed from the list of lawyers. "There had been twenty-two Jewish lawyers in Lublin. I was the only one left," Alexander recounted. Before World War II Poland had three million Jews. During the war, 90.9 per cent were murdered.

Alexander got a job, his wife regained her place as a violinist in the symphony orchestra, and their daughter went to school.

Later, they moved to Warsaw, and in the winter of 1950 Alexander left for Israel on his own, shortly after the founding of the new state of Israel in 1948.

After working in a government office and passing exams in Hebrew and law, Alexander was registered as a lawyer in 1952. Then the rest of the family also moved to Israel.

Alexander worked as a judge and lecturer. He devoted his life to finding those non-Jews who had risked their lives to help Jews during the war. For years he belonged to the directorate of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. He was one of the founders of the memorial forest for the “Righteous Gentiles” dedicated to the Righteous Among the Nations. The purpose of the trees planted there is to honour people like Corrie ten Boom and Oskar Schindler. Alexander also presented Yad Vashem with a statue that depicts a Polish lady hiding a Jewish child. In addition, he was involved in founding a home for elderly Holocaust survivors.

Alexander also worked in an international organisation that fought for human rights against racial discrimination. He travelled abroad extensively in his fight for human rights. He knew, among others, the West German chancellor Willy Brandt and was in touch with the queen of Denmark. He had many international contacts. A couple of times, Alexander received the title of honorary citizen in his hometown of Haifa. When he turned one hundred, the Israeli president at the time, Moshe Katsav, sent him personal congratulations.

– My grandfather’s typical characteristic was his desire to help people, and through it, he became a well-known person, Michael comments.

Alexander Bronowski died at age 106 in 2006. Michael reflects that we cannot know whether Grandad got to know the Messiah before he died. What the family does know is that in his last days he often listened to a worship cassette given to him by a group called Ebenezer.

14.

JÜRGEN'S STORY

Through Jürgen, a German man, Michael became more and more interested in Jesus. Naturally, it was God working all along.

Jürgen was born in 1956. While his was an ordinary German family and he spent all his childhood and teenage years with them, it was a broken home. They lived in a village near Frankfurt. Jürgen went to high school. Even before finishing school, he dreamed of becoming a carpenter. In his youth, Jürgen got attracted to a strong protest movement: its followers were against everything traditional and demanded total freedom, both sexually and otherwise. The youngsters organised demonstrations, and Jürgen was part of the inner group.

After finishing school he went to do his military service in the navy. Then he started his training as an apprentice in carpentry. At age twenty-two he stopped his training and travelled to California where he started to use marijuana and hashish. He was also in contact with occult circles: he met a woman who gave answers to his questions through spiritualism.

Upon his return to Germany, he continued his earlier training in carpentry. Yet at the same time, he increased his drug use, without stepping up to the harder drugs. Several dating relationships were painful.

– The effect of drugs on my psyche was that I fell into a very serious depression, Jürgen relates gloomily. At that point I didn't have work or friends or any hope for the future. I tried to get out of the depression through some philosophies, like those propagated by the Hare Krishna movement. This "therapy" only worsened my state. In the end I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. I went into psychotic paranoia when I was afraid of everyone and everything.

Jürgen spent his days in bed under a blanket full of anxiety and fear. Going out was really difficult. He could only sleep with the help of medication.

– I was just hoping for some way out. I hardly knew anything about Jesus, but before going into hospital, I had attended a gospel concert. It soothed my soul! I thought that getting help had something to do with Jesus and Christianity. I turned to a Catholic priest but he wouldn't see me because I wasn't Catholic.

The Catholic priest led Jürgen to an evangelical pastor but he did not speak about Jesus to Jürgen. The disappointments did not end there. Another evangelical pastor who was responsible for youth work in a large district came to the hospital to visit Jürgen.

– I knew him from my youth. He was a very sympathetic man. I thought he had come to help me. I believed that since he was a man "of the church" that he would have a solution for my huge problems. I asked him about Jesus. He answered: "You can forget about Jesus!"

Jürgen was in a critical state.

– I was prepared to jump from a moving train if only it would free me from the fears that tormented me day and night.

He told one patient that he felt like he was tormented by demons. The patient knew Hanna, a retired nurse. When Hanna heard about Jürgen she asked a friend to bring him to church. Jürgen got permission from the hospital to go out for a change of scenery. They did not know that his head was full of suicidal thoughts.

Hanna asked Jürgen to her house after the service. She was the

first person who was able to tell Jürgen about Jesus and give him hope. Then Hanna asked Jürgen to go with her to a centre called the Arc of Salvation (Rettungsarche). Jürgen agreed. They went to a Christian meeting where after the sermon it was possible to get counselling and deliverance from demonic oppression. One of the Christian men had a special gifting in helping those who had had some occult involvement. Jürgen was asked to confess every conscious sin. He did and then they prayed for him.

Jürgen stayed at the Arc of Salvation for three weeks. Afterwards he was a spiritually free man, delivered from all the chains of Satan. He had come to a Christian meeting carrying a plastic bag full of antidepressants. Now he threw them all away and did not ever have to go back to the mental hospital.

Jürgen was not yet able to do carpentry, but he got a job as a handyman at the Bad Nauheim convalescent home, where Michael's grandfather used to stay on his trips to Europe. Jürgen did renovation work and assisted disabled people. At the centre he also met Israelis who came there for their holidays.

At a very young age Jürgen had watched films on TV about the Holocaust. His heart was torn seeing what the Germans had done. Due to the salvation he had experienced he was full of joy and love towards all people. God gave him a special love for the Jews. Jürgen did not know Hebrew, but he learned some songs in Hebrew — Hava Nagila, for instance — and sang them at the home, playing along with his guitar.

When Michael came to the home, Jürgen was given a special love for this Jewish man coming from Italy. He not only wanted to assure Michael with words, he wanted to display love, the kind of love that he himself had towards the God of Israel.

Jürgen's first impression of the student was that he was very shy and quiet. Michael's grandfather had told Jürgen about his grandson who had all kinds of problems. When Michael was coming to stay at the home, his grandfather said to Jürgen: "Is there any way in which you could help my grandson, even with that Jesus of yours?" Grandfather had a good impression

of the believers, though he certainly did not wish Michael to become one.

– I knew that I couldn't help Michael, but I knew that Jesus could, Jürgen says. I don't remember that Michael was aggressive in any way, but when I said that I knew the God of Israel, he got angry.

When Michael became a believer in Germany, Jürgen was happy and a little proud, too, not about himself, but most of all about Jesus. This eternal soul will get to heaven and will not end up in hell. With Michael, Jürgen also saw that it is not so much about witnessing with our words, but rather about the witness, which our lives bear.

– Michael was the first person I was able to help on his way to become a believer. At the start of my faith journey I was so enthusiastic about Jesus that I witnessed to people even on the metro, but God taught me that he would show the people whom I should witness to. In Michael's case, it brought results. After Michael had found Jesus, I didn't feel that I was the one to do follow-up. I was just his friend. He received teaching at the congregation in Italy and studied with the help of Derek Prince's books and cassettes.

Jürgen remembers that after becoming a believer, Michael changed and became almost like another person. He started speaking and singing about Jesus a lot, and became more outgoing. In Jürgen's words, "It was as if he was set free from prison."

In Jürgen's own life the time came when God started to speak to him about a wife he had in store for him. Soon after, Jürgen left for Israel to meet a friend who was assisting a woman, a Holocaust survivor. While on that visit he met a German girl who had come to meet the same friend in Israel. Eventually, they were a couple and celebrated their wedding in 1993. They have three children, the youngest of them fourteen years old. These days, Jürgen teaches woodwork to all kinds of people: the unemployed, young and old, Germans and foreigners.

– As a young believer, I had a low self-esteem. I was troubled in various ways. Now, life is different in many respects. I do youth work in the church; earlier I was also involved with the children's ministry.

After the first stages of Michael's faith, Jürgen did not meet him for many years, but they met again at Michael and Marianne's wedding. Since then, they have kept in touch and have visited each other's families.

Jürgen is happy as he watches Michael and his family. After his visit to the Yaron family, he says:

– It felt really good to see their life together as a family in home surroundings. I'm also glad that Michael became a pastor. I was able to plant a small seed in one Jewish heart, and it has borne a hundredfold harvest.

FINALLY...

Michael Yaron has experienced tough things in life, but he has not given up. I feel especially touched by the fact that after receiving the word in Germany about becoming a pastor in Israel, he worked diligently towards that future goal. To be able to fulfil his future role as good as possible, he prepared for it by attending many courses and being faithful in the congregational responsibilities assigned to him.

He has had a firm trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit, both in his own life and that of the congregation. His attitude could be summed up with the exclamation: “God is able!”

This book has touched on many interesting stories in the lives of the people that have been a part of Michael’s life. We can learn much from them as well.

Even though seventy years have gone by since the end of World War II, the Holocaust has had a great impact on Michael’s life. Those actually involved in the Holocaust have reached old age. It is high time for us to start praying for them daily.

May the Jews in Israel and all over the world be among our regular prayer topics! The Apostle Paul tells us to bless our enemies. Should we not also pray for the enemies of Israel with all our hearts?

I hope this book has changed you in some way: maybe it contains things you never really thought about earlier. Hearing about God's great deeds always brings change and creates new hope in people's lives!

Finally, some words from Michael Yaron from the first month of 2015. He visited Auschwitz on 27 January on the 70th anniversary of its liberation.

A few days ago, I returned from a journey to Poland, where I had visited the death camp of Auschwitz. This time, in my imagination I passed the way of suffering of the Jewish inmate from the moment he descended the train, walking down the ramp, through the selection, either towards death in the gas chambers, or as an inmate of the work camp, just to die slowly.

When I got to the ash field, carrying the remains of the victims I could no longer contain my pain and broke out crying, my heart washed again with emotions of anger and hatred on behalf of the suffering of those victims, the suffering of my own family and relatives. My past swelled up, my heart broke. My physical and emotional condition of the past, it all burst up.

Then I understood that only the power of God could help me forgive, though I will never forget what happened there.

It dawned on me that as a believer and second generation Holocaust survivor I must focus on God's picture of my life. When I was without Yeshua, I felt drowned in emotions about the suffering of my people. But, I was apt to miss something of great importance. When I met the forgiveness and healing power of God, he turned my life around.

I remembered Joseph who told his brothers that God used all the evil, which happened to him to birth reconciliation within the family; to change the character of Judah, Simeon, and the other brothers; and, in his greater plan, to bring the Israelites down to Egypt. Many years later God would show his glory again, bringing his people out of Egypt.

My own suffering does not compare to the suffering of the Holocaust survivors, of course! At the same time, as the firstborn son of Holocaust survivors I was closely connected with their lives. The suffering and premature death of my parents, while I was still a child, caused much suffering in my life. My own pain caused me to cry out to God and seek him with all my heart. God revealed himself to me in order to bind up and heal my broken heart and to comfort it (Isaiah 61)!

God took me for his own, not only in order that I would receive healing and salvation, but in order that I might be a vessel of healing and comfort to others. Today I try to be a comforter with the help of God to even those, who, after going through the horrors of the Holocaust, are still alive and need our help (2 Corinthians 1:6-7).

This is what I have been striving to do for the past years, and it fills me with a God-given joy. This joy does not depend on life circumstances! It springs forth from the presence of God within me and from what he has done in my life. He has worked a powerful transformation that continues and increases every day.

During that profound journey to Auschwitz, which God had orchestrated for me, he revealed to me his “joy for ashes!”

REFERENCES

Chapter 1: In the care of loving parents

- 1 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six-Day_War
Martin Gilbert: *Israel. A History*. pp. 384–395.
Black Swan 1999.
- 2 The song is called Jerusalem of Gold, by Naomi Shemer.
There are several English translations.

Chapter 2: Business as usual until...

- 3 ¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yom_Kippur_War
Martin Gilbert: *Israel. A History*. pp. 426–461. Black Swan 1999.

Chapter 3: Off to study in Siena

- 4 ¹ Reid Bramblett: *Top 10 Toscana. Top 10 Travel Guides*.
Rebecca Ford: *Siena & The Heart of Tuscany*. pp. 170–171.
Footprint 2005.

Chapter 4: New beginnings in Rome and Germany

- 5 ¹ Tzena, Tzena was composed by Issachar Miron in 1941
to Hebrew lyrics by Yechiel Chagiz. There are several English
lyrics to the tune.

6 Chapter 5: Congregational life and studies

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derek_Prince

Chapter 8: Pastoring a growing congregation

7 ¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oskar_Schindler

Chapter 10: To Finland and the wider world

8 ¹ Information received from Elina Mielityinen, at the Israeli embassy in Finland.

Chapter 11: Beit Margoa and its occupants

9 ¹ Information received from Elina Mielityinen, at the Israeli embassy in Finland.

Chapter 13: Grandfather's story

10 ¹ Alexander Bronowski: *They Were Few. Studies on the Shoah*. Peter Lang Publishing 1991. Second source: Chr. A. R. Christensen: *World History. Part 21. World Wars*. Third source: Edward Kessler: *What do Jews Believe?* Granta Publications, 2006.

Appendix 1

JEWISH SABBATH, BIBLICAL FEASTS AND NATIONAL HOLIDAYS

SABBATH

According to the Jewish definition of a 24-hour day, it starts at sunset and ends with the following sunset. The week begins on Sunday and weekdays are named after their sequence (first day, second day and so forth). Only the seventh day, Saturday, has its own name: *Shabbat*.

Sabbath is observed as a day of rest. Exodus, chapter 20, verses 8–11 commands to celebrate the Sabbath: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

Among the best-known Sabbath traditions are the blessing of the two Sabbath candles on Friday evening. Then follows the blessing of the wine and the bread. The two loaves are a reminder of the double portion of manna that the Israelites gathered from the desert on the Sabbath eve. On Saturday night, the Jewish Sabbath ends with a prayer, *havdala* ('to separate'), marking the end of the holy day and the beginning of the week.

MICHAEL YARON'S TEACHING ABOUT THE SABBATH

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8) is the fourth of the ten commandments God gave.

The verb 'to stop' or the noun 'a strike' are derived from the same Hebrew root as the word *shabbat*. The idea of stopping describes the nature of Sabbath well: we stop the work we do during the week. Sabbath also speaks of creation. In six days God created the world, but on the seventh day it was ready and he rested from his work of creating.

The idea is that we spend Sabbath in God's presence, resting in him: we can read his word and spend the day with him. The Sabbath is also a picture of faith: for that day, we stop working and we believe God will still take care of our needs. It is a day of joy, on which we are called to worship and serve God.

Yeshua says in Matthew: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (11:28). Right after this, in chapter 12, Yeshua speaks about the Sabbath. It is meant not only for physical, but also for spiritual rest.

Yeshua is Lord of the Sabbath. We are told not do this or that on the Sabbath. Nevertheless, we are called and we really should do good deeds on the Sabbath. Yeshua gave several examples of how we can serve the Lord by doing good in his honour and thus keep the Sabbath. Yeshua healed many on a Sabbath: in the synagogue there was a man whose hand was withered. Yeshua

only said to him: “Stretch out your hand!” The man did and his hand was restored back to normal (see Matt. 12:9–13). At the pool of Bethesda he healed a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years (see John 5:2–15).

Yeshua said that the Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. Man needs a Sabbath rest. In fact, God wants us to live as if it was Sabbath every day in the sense that we should come to him for strength.

Often we spend our week like Martha, busy with all kinds of tasks, but on the Sabbath we should be like Mary, who rested at Yeshua’s feet and listened to his teaching.

Finally, the Sabbath is a picture of the eternal Sabbath, the Sabbath rest that awaits us in heaven. The last chapter of the book of Revelation speaks about it: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:1–5).

FESTIVALS

PASSOVER

The Jewish people celebrate *Pesach* or Passover for seven days, starting on the 14th of the Jewish month *Nisan*, which makes it March or April. It is also called the week of unleavened bread.

Nothing with leaven (yeast) must be found in the home during Passover. Children have a fun time while dad checks if mum has really cleaned the whole house of every breadcrumb. They eat unleavened bread, or *matzah*, because the Israelis did

not have time to let their sourdough rise before leaving Egypt.

The Jewish Passover is a family-centred event. The feast starts with the *Seder* meal on the evening of the 14th day. Before the beginning of the actual meal, the family enacts a ritual, with the help of a booklet, the *Haggadah* which tells the story of how God set the Israeli people free from slavery in Egypt. In an illustrative way, it describes the stages of the journey, and the story is accompanied by psalms and other songs. The *Haggadah* tells us that every individual of every generation must feel that they have personally left Egypt behind. The *Haggadah* includes much thanksgiving, and asks for God's provision.

The *Seder* meal takes place on the first night of the feast. The table is always set with a *Seder* plate, which contains several specific kinds of food: a roasted meaty lamb's bone stands for the sacrificial lamb, an egg stands for the sacrifices offered in the temple. Radishes and parsley that are dipped in salt water serve as a reminder of God creating the fruit of the land. *Charoset*, which is a mixture of ground nuts, apples, cinnamon and wine, stands for the mortar the Jewish slaves used in Egypt. Bitter herbs describe the bitterness of slavery. The meaning of the *Seder* plate is explained to everyone, and to the children with careful attention. Everyone is encouraged to taste from the plate; bitter herbs, *charoset*, radishes or parsley.

The actual meal follows the reading of the *Haggadah* and all its ritual actions, including the explanation of the *Seder* plate. In the middle of the meal, the father of the family opens the front door — even in apartment houses — so that Prophet Elijah may come in to announce the coming of the Messiah. A chair has been left free for him, as well as the cup of Elijah on the table.

The mealtime includes some play also: a piece of the *matzah* bread is hidden during the meal, and afterwards children look for it. This is called looking for the *afikomen*. Joy abounds when the children find it and receive their prize. Passover as a whole is a joyous feast.

COUNTING OF THE OMER

The counting of the *omer* is a reminder of the barley harvest. It starts on the second day of the Passover festival and lasts for seven weeks. *Omer* was a grain offering that was offered at the temple as a thanksgiving for the new harvest. Nowadays during the evening prayer at the synagogue, it is customary to speak loudly of how many days and weeks of the *omer* period has passed.

HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

On the 27th day of the month *Nisan*, which usually falls sometime in April or May, is *Yom Ha-sho'a*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. On this day, the Jewish people remember the victims of the Second World War genocide, orchestrated by the Nazis. Naturally, it is a very poignant day, explained and observed even at kindergartens and schools.

MEMORIAL AND INDEPENDENCE DAY

The Israel Memorial Day falls on the fourth day of *Iyar*, sometime in April or May time. Memorial services are held all over the country in memory of the fallen Israeli soldiers.

Sorrow turns into joy quickly at sunset. It marks the beginning of *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Independence Day. Israel became independent in 1948. Everyone rushes out into the streets, and they have all kinds of shows and fireworks. Israeli flags wave everywhere, even on cars.

FEAST OF WEEKS

Shavu'ot, the Feast of Weeks, bears its name from the fact that it had to be celebrated seven weeks after Passover, on the sixth of *Sivan*, in the time of May or June. The feast is also called Pentecost. It is the time of the wheat harvest and the first fruits

as well. People celebrating on *kibbutzim* carry out fruit and put it on display.

Shavuot bears a historical reason as well. It remembers the time when God gave the Torah, the five books of Moses, to Israel and entered into covenant with it. Giving thanks for receiving the Torah and reminding people of its implications are part of the liturgy at the synagogue. Traditionally, the book of Ruth, set at the time of the barley harvest, is the reading for that day.

An important aspect of the story of Ruth, of course, is the fact that she turned to her husband's faith and the God of Israel though she was a descendant of Moab. She became a symbol of faithfulness and received a place in King David's royal line.

Many milk products are on the menu on *Shavu'ot*. The origins of this tradition are unknown. Maybe it is to do with the description of the Promised Land in Exodus 3:8 as the "land flowing with milk and honey".

NINTH OF AV

On the ninth of the month *Av*, the Jewish people remember the destruction of the first and second temple. They were destroyed on the same date in different years: the first one in 586 BC and the second in 70 AD. Religious Jews fast on this day.

NEW YEAR

Rosh Hashanah or New Year is celebrated on the first of *Tishri*, which falls in September or October. Rosh Hashanah is not a time of wild celebrations. Rather, it is a time of stocktaking when people think about how they can change their lifestyle, so that the following year would be better. As part of that process, they seek reconciliation with the people they might have hurt.

New Year's promises are made. One tradition is dipping slices of apple in honey, along with wishes for the new year to be better and sweeter than the last.

New Year observance is based on the Bible where it says (Leviticus 23: 24–25) that in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, the Israelites must have a day of rest, and arrange a holy convocation. They were also to blow the *shofar*, a ram's horn. In the New Year service, which lasts for three to four hours, the *shofar* is blown over a hundred times. This tradition has been linked to God's kingship and the idea that man must wake up and repent.

New Year begins a ten-day period of repentance, *Yamim Nora'im*, which ends with the observing of *Yom Kippur*, the great day of repentance. *Yamim Nora'im* means days of awe or high holy days. The term 'ten days of respect' is also used. Besides repentance, this is a time of prayer and charity. People wish each other *chatimah tova*, 'a good sealing' or God's good final inscription for the year's sins. They hope that their good deeds will outweigh their bad ones. This greeting is used especially on Yom Kippur.

YOM KIPPUR

The great Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, is celebrated on the tenth of the month *Tishri*, in the time of September or October. Yom Kippur is a day of complete fasting, for a time of approximately 25-hour. On the eve of the holy day, before the fast starts, people have a festive meal. On Yom Kippur everything quietens: people don't drive their cars, traffic stops and the streets are empty.

Besides the time spent resting on Yom Kippur, the idea is to spend the day at the synagogue, where the service lasts all day.

On the Day of Atonement, all unfulfilled promises and vows are nullified in the *kol nidre* (all vows) prayer. It was born at a time when Jews were forced to convert to Christianity, for instance. Secretly, they would hold firm to their Jewishness, because *kol nidre* freed them from promises they made in order to preserve their lives.

On Yom Kippur people wear white. Among other things, white is a reminder of the words in the book of Isaiah: “Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (1:18).

Yom Kippur ends with a long blast from a ram’s horn. It is a reminder of the time when God revealed himself on Mount Sinai. Before this revelation, the Israelites were not allowed to touch or approach the mountain until they heard the sound of the shofar (see Exodus 19:9-25).

After Yom Kippur people start preparing for *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles.

FEAST OF TABERNACLES

Sukkot or the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated from the 15th to the 21st of *Tishri*, in the time of September or October.

Sukkot stands for booths or temporary dwellings. *Sukkot* is a joyous celebration that lasts a week (see Leviticus 23:34–36). The Israelites are to remember how God, on their way to the promised land, let them live in booths or shelters built with branches (see Leviticus 23:42–43). Nowadays people build booths in their yards and on their balconies, often with colourful lights in them. The idea is to go and sit in the shelter and enjoy your meals there.

Sukkot is also to do with harvest. The celebration is a reminder that we can trust in God’s care and provision; after all, God fed his people with manna in the desert and miraculously provided water as well. *Sukkot* includes much joyful celebration, song and dance.

THE EIGHTH DAY ASSEMBLY OR *SIMCHAT TORAH*

The weeklong Feast of Tabernacles is immediately followed by the *Shemini Atzeret*. The name means ‘the eighth day of assembly’. It is also called *Simchat Torah*, ‘rejoicing in the Torah’. It is said

to be the most joyful day of the year. For a year, the Torah has been read in the synagogue on every Sabbath. Now, the annual cycle has been concluded. The Torah scrolls are carried round the synagogue in a joyful procession, while people sing and dance to show that, to the Jew, the Torah means life and joy.

HANUKKAH

The celebration of *Hanukkah* begins on the 25th day of *Kislev*, around November or December. The meaning of Hanukkah is ‘dedication’: the Syrian Greek tyrant, King Antiochus Ephiphanes, planning to destroy Jewish culture, desecrated the Jewish temple, which ensued in the Maccabean revolt. When the temple was back in their hands, the Jews rededicated it in 165 BC.

Hanukkah is an eight-day “Festival of Lights”: for eight days, each evening, candles are lit on a nine-branched *hanukkiah*. Every evening they light one additional candle, so on the last night there are nine candles burning, one of them the servant candle used to light up all the other candles.

Lighting the candles is linked to the traditional story, which tells that the small amount of pure oil, which was needed for the dedication of the temple, miraculously lasted for eight days. Naturally, the amount would have been enough for one day only.

Hanukkah is a joyful celebration and a favourite with children, particularly because of the gifts they receive.

THE NEW YEAR OF THE TREES

A month after Hanukkah, on the fifth day of *Shevat* — usually in January — Jewish people celebrate *Tu Bishvat*, the new year of the trees. Traditionally, they eat dried fruit and plant trees. Children often get to go on outings from school, and they, too, plant trees.

PURIM

The feast of *Purim* is celebrated on the 14th day of *Adar*, which is around the time of February or March. Purim means 'lots'. The day is in memory of Esther, who, with the help of her uncle Mordechai, saved the Jewish community in the Persian Empire. The king's hate-filled chief minister Haman had been planning the destruction of all Jews. We find the story in the book of Esther. It is the only book in the Bible where we find no mentioning of the name of God. The whole book of Esther is recited in the synagogue on Purim.

In the course of history, Purim turned into a kind of carnival: girls often dress up as queens, boys as kings or servants. The events of the book of Esther are re-enacted in kindergartens also.

The Jewish people exchange gift plates with snacks and small presents. They particularly consider the poor. Religious Jews have the idea that one should give a gift plate to at least two poor people.

Passover, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles are the three great holidays, which in history included a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On these days, religious Jews from around the world go up to Jerusalem. All three celebrations have a strong connection to the grain and fruit harvests, but they were also linked to a historic event from early on.

SOURCES:

Interview with Anja Kolehmainen 1.8.2014.

Tapani Harviainen & Karl-Johan Illman: *Juutalainen kulttuuri* (Jewish Culture), pp. 63–74. Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava 1998.

Edward Kessler: *What do Jews Believe?* Granta Publications 2006.

Kai Kjaer-Hansen & Ole Chr. M. Kvarme: *Messiaaniset juutalaiset. Kristitty vähemmistö Israelissa* (Messianic Jews: A

Christian Minority in Israel), pp. 77-86. Translation into Finnish by Sointu Ro. A publication of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission. Kirjaneliö 1981.

THE FEASTS FROM A MESSIANIC VIEWPOINT

MICHAEL YARON'S TEACHING

Colossians 2:16–17 says: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” In Leviticus 23 it talks about all the festivals that God commanded the Israelites to observe: the feast of Unleavened Bread, Shavuot (literally, weeks) and the feast of Tabernacles. In the same context, “according to his calendar”, God ordered certain days to be observed as memorial days (Hebrew *mo'adim*): the appointed day of blowing the trumpets (Jewish New Year) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). My recommendation is for Messianic Jews to celebrate these feasts as well, but to remember that they have their ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah. God has given the feasts as pointers within his plan of salvation. They are symbols and a shadow of the Messiah. In Deuteronomy 16:16, God directs the Israelites to go up to Jerusalem three times a year: for the feasts of Unleavened Bread or *Pesach*, for Pentecost or *Shavuot* and for the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot*.

The essential element in *Pesach* is the blood of the lamb the Jews had to put on their doorframes. Only the blood protected their firstborn from death. Through that, the Israelites learned that the blood of an innocent sacrifice could save from death. Yeshua is the Passover Lamb for those who believe in him. He is the Lamb of God that gives forgiveness, which means cleansing, righteousness and sanctification.

God told them to eat unleavened bread all through the Passover week. Leaven is a picture of sin, and Yeshua talks about it in connection with the Pharisees. “Watch out!” Jesus warned them. “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:6). In Jewish homes, everything with leaven has to be removed and even burned before Passover. We need to destroy everything sour, too, all sin, and even the roots of sin. Sin must not be allowed to take root inside of us, because we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. It must be burned, so that none of it remains. We must have a deep desire to repent. Yeshua has saved those who believe in him from the power of sin and death and has given them sanctification and eternal life through his sacrifice.

Pentecost, *Shavuot*, is the festival of first fruits, first harvest. Yeshua is the first fruit in the sense that he was the first to rise from the dead. In I Corinthians 15:22–23 it says: “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruit; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” The resurrection of Yeshua is proof that God accepted his sacrifice.

During the seven weeks that lie between Passover (wheat harvest) and Pentecost (Shavuot, barley harvest), the fields pale for harvest. The firstfruit of the Shavuot harvest was a sign of God’s blessing. It was during the feast of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit descended on the first believers in Yeshua, three thousand new believers were baptised and added to the first congregation, born on that day, a tremendous blessing for the world. In the book of Jeremiah (31:33) it says that God gives his law into our hearts. A new covenant began with the people of Israel (Jeremiah 31:31–33). It was in the Holy Spirit that the law was planted into their hearts (Ezekiel 36). God did not want to give the law for the sake of the law, so it would be known, or even studied by heart, but so that it would become life through the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of God’s spirit is therefore the first evidence of this new covenant. Now we can live in his power through the Holy Spirit.

In Jewish tradition the book of Ruth belongs to Shavuot (Pentecost). It is read at the synagogue. The story of Ruth shows the unity that God meant there to be between Jews and non-Jews.

Passover and Pentecost were fulfilled in Yeshua's death on the cross and resurrection. The appointed day (Mo'ed) of blowing the trumpets (Shofar) and the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) in their messianic meaning are yet to come and find fulfillment.

Whenever the shofar was blown in Old Testament times, it called people to gather and prepare for war or another important cause. It was also used when a king or a prophet was anointed. In the New Testament it says: "For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we [other believers in Yeshua] will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:52). The appointed day of blowing the shofar, the ram's horn, calls us, therefore, to prepare ourselves for the day of the Lord, when Yeshua will return to Mount Olives, this time as victorious king.

The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is a time of reckoning before God. Once a year, the high priest would go into the temple's most holy place on behalf of the people and himself. He placed on the sacrifice the sins of the whole year — both his own and those of the people — but only for that year. In other words, this sacrifice had to be repeated every year. The Day of Atonement is a day of repentance. Yom Kippur didn't do away with the people's sins altogether. Hebrews 9:25–26 speaks about this: "Nor did he [Yeshua] enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself."

The Messiah, on the other hand, did everything necessary for the whole world. His sacrifice was the last Yom Kippur sacrifice once and for all, and it brought eternal redemption and free access directly to God. Being sinless, the Son of God was able to sacrifice himself. Yeshua is both true man and true God.

Through his death, Yeshua tore the veil that up to that moment had been separating the people from the Holy of Holies. Now we can go directly to God's mercy seat to receive mercy and forgiveness. Hebrews 4:16 says: "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." When people come to God through Yeshua, God receives them, forgives them and cleanses them.

How do Messianic Jews observe Yom Kippur? That is when people in Israel usually wish *chatimah tova* or a good sealing. Messianic Jews know that they have already been sealed with the blood of Yeshua and the Holy Spirit. On that day, all the people fast and gather at the synagogues. It offers Messianic Jews an opportunity to fast and pray, but not to receive God's forgiveness — we have it already. Rather, we can fast and pray on behalf of the people of Israel, that God would open the spiritual eyes of the nation to see Yeshua, and that the veil of unbelief would be removed from their eyes.

The day of blowing the shofar and the day of atonement are a shadow of what is written in Zechariah 12 and 14: the return of Yeshua to the Mount of Olives and the national repentance of the Jewish people (Zechariah 12:10).

The feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) is a joyful festival. It is a time of rebuilding the connection between God and his people. The booths are a reminder of the years of wandering in the desert.

In Psalm 27:5 it says: "For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock." In Hebrew, the word used for shelter is *sukka*, the meaning of which is a booth with a roof made of branches. It offers shelter. The booth is a symbol of security and God's presence. In all our needs we can go to God. *Sukkah* also means tent, as in the tent of meeting or tabernacle. In the Tabernacle, people could experience God's presence. That is where Moses went to meet with God.

Nevertheless, a booth is a temporary dwelling; it is easily built

and taken down again. The Israeli people had to keep on the move in the desert: when the cloud lifted or they saw the pillar of fire, they had to move on. It symbolizes our lives as believers. Today we are here and tomorrow somewhere else. Today we do one thing and tomorrow possibly something else, under God's guidance.

The sukkah is made of palm leaves, to leave sight of the sky, sight of the stars. The meaning it conveys to us is that we must always look up and seek God's face in everything.

Sukkot is also a festival of water. Water was drawn from the pool of Siloam and it was poured out on the altar at the Feast of Tabernacles. This is the context for Yeshua's words: "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:38).

In the book of Zechariah (12:2–3) it says: "On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves." When all nations will come against Jerusalem, Yeshua will finally reveal himself to his people, who will then turn and repent: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son" (Zechariah 12:10). Through the Messiah, there will again be unity between God and his people. "On that day, a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Zechariah 13:1).

In the last chapter of Zechariah, we actually have a description of the Feast of Tabernacles. It makes a point of saying that all God's people — both Jewish and non-Jewish — will come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Then, according to Zechariah 14:16: "Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year

to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.”

The Biblical feasts are intertwined with God’s plan of salvation, fulfilled in Yeshua. Every feast is like a station in this salvation history. The circle closes on Sukkot, when the connection between God and man and the connection between Jew and non-Jew will be restored. At the climax of God’s plan of salvation, the Jewish people will finally recognize their Messiah.

Appendix 2

THE NICENE CREED, AND TEACHING ON LAW AND GRACE

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary [in Hebrew: Miriam], and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic [=universal] and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

(Source: anglicansonline.org)

LAW AND GRACE

MICHAEL YARON'S TEACHING

When I go abroad, I take pictures of my wife and children with me. When I miss them, I take the pictures out, remember them and think about how much I love them. When I return home, however, I no longer need to look at pictures. I can hug them in person and tell them that I love them.

In roughly the same way, we have the revelation about the Messiah in pictures, as it were, in the Old Covenant. There, God gave images that refer to the Messiah, while he is not mentioned by name: the tabernacle, the temple, the Sabbath, the festivals... They point to the Messiah and his work.

Now, as they study the Old Testament, Messianic Jews who know Yeshua and have received the Holy Spirit, can look at it through the glasses of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, we can see a shadow of the Messiah. At the same time, we no longer need to look at just shadows or pictures of the Messiah, since we have the real person, Yeshua. Now the Jews who know Yeshua can guide other Jews to the understanding that the Old Testament pointed to Yeshua the whole time. Many people still cling to the pictures. It would be the same, if I took out the family photos and only admired them, when I'm at home and the family is there. If we get stuck with the pictures, we are religious, whereas God wants to give us a faith in the living Messiah.

Yeshua came to fulfil the law. God's commandments can be summarized in these ten: 1. You shall have no other gods before me. 2. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. 4. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 5. Honour your father and your mother. 6. You shall not murder. 7. You shall not commit adultery. 8. You shall not steal. 9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. 10. You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbour (Exodus 20:3–17).

Altogether, God gave 613 commandments. He did not give them for the purpose of salvation or eternal life. It says about Noah and Abraham, for instance, that they were righteous, though the law had not yet been given. People were always saved by faith. Abraham had strong faith. When by God's commandment he left to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering, he said to his servants: "Stay here — we will come back to you" (Genesis 22:5). He believed that Isaac would also be coming back, God would either bring Isaac back from the dead, or God himself would provide the sacrifice. It shows that Abraham had a revelation about Yeshua and his future sacrifice. Yeshua said in John 8:56: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

In the book of Habakkuk (2:4) it says: "But the righteous will live by his faith" (NASB). So the one who has faith is righteous. We find the same message in Numbers 21:4–9: when the people had sinned and were bitten by snakes, Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who looked at it would live. The bronze snake represented Yeshua.

Is there someone who keeps all the 613 commandments? Both Deuteronomy 27:26 and Galatians 3:10 say that everyone who does not keep to everything the law says is cursed. No one can fulfill all these commandments, not even the ten. In other words, our deeds cannot save us.

In Genesis 6:5 it says that the thoughts and inclinations of

the human heart were utterly evil. Psalm 14:3 also says that there is no one who does good. In other words, no one can be called righteous based on keeping the law. The law is morally important. In the commandments, we can see God's eternal character. For instance, he tells people to honour their parents, so they should take care of their parents. Neither does he want anyone to steal from anyone else.

Why was the law given, then? God's purpose was to show that he is holy and we men are sinners. At the same time, the law separated Israel from the gentile nations, who did not know the living God. The people of Israel recognized that it was impossible to be saved by the law. That is why there was a need for the Messiah. In Hebrews 9:22, we read that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. The Messiah gave one single sacrifice — himself — that is valid forever. The animal sacrifices were only pictures belonging to their time, and a shadow of the Son of God who came to be the eternal sacrifice by carrying our sins on the cross.

Now a new covenant is in force. The law has been written onto the hearts of those who believe in Yeshua (see Jeremiah 31:33). Yeshua came to fulfil the whole law, not to cancel it. Law means: you get what you deserve. Grace means: you get what you don't deserve. The cleansing of the leper tells us about grace (see Matthew 8:2–4). If anyone touched a leper, according to the law he became unclean. However, when Yeshua touched a leper, he did not catch the leprosy; instead, the leper was cleansed and healed. Yeshua gave him his own cleanness.

Yet, it is futile to think that it is easy to live under the New Testament grace. We must not forget the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The law says that you must not commit adultery, but Yeshua tells us that even a lustful look is sinful. He always looks into the heart. It is not just about what you do, but also about what you think in your heart. The law is important to show us that we need God's grace in order to live according to His will and purpose.