



Amir Tsarfati

Let's Connect: Pastor Shmuel and Bjørg Aweda

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FgkgY-3sq4>



AMIR: Hey, Shalom and welcome to *Let's Connect*, our program where we introduce you to people whom the Lord is using in powerful ways to make a real difference in Israel and around the world in these last days. Today, it is my joy to

welcome Pastor Shmuel Aweda and the neck that moves the head, his beautiful wife, Bjørg. Pastor Shmuel is one of the pillars of the local body of Christ in Israel, and I'm blessed to also call him my pastor. Shmuel and Bjørg's story is not one of a perfect life, but rather a testimony to the faithfulness and power of God to heal, sustain, and strengthen His children through health challenges, family trials, and the many difficulties that come with serving Him in Israel in these last days.

Their journey will help you understand what it is like to live in Israel as believers from a non-Jewish background and yet touch the lives of both Jews and Gentiles in such a remarkable way. Through their experience, we will learn what ministry in these challenging days is really all about, how it impacts their own family, and we will also get a first-hand glimpse into the truth that shatters so many misconceptions and false accusations about apartheid and the treatment of Christians in Israel. Shmuel and Bjørg are not only examples of faithful ministry leaders but also examples of a godly marriage and devoted parenthood. Their lives have been a blessing to many, and I know that their testimony will encourage and strengthen you as well. Shalom Shmuel, Shalom Bjørg. It's good to have you here with us. And a lot of people are asking themselves, first

of all, the names, they sound like they're not exactly from the same country. So, let's start with you Bjørg, because that's the name that is not exactly Hebrew-sounding.

BJORG: Yeah, I think I'm the only one that has the name Bjørg Aweda.

AMIR: There you go. So, tell us where were you born and what are you doing here in Israel?

BJORG: Good question. I was born in Norway, and I was born in a family that are believers and that had a heart to serve God. So, they started after a while in youth mission. So, I partly grew up with them. So, I was used to, you know, they were evangelizing, my father was an evangelist, and to serve in the country, in Norway. They did it only in Norway.

AMIR: Are there many believers in Norway?

BJORG: I think around it was like 12%.

AMIR: It's predominantly "Christian" by name?

BJORG: Yeah, it is.

AMIR: With a cross on their flag,

BJORG: Yes.

AMIR: But nominal Christian for the most; going to... maybe "state" church rather than—And so true born-again believers, you're...

BJORG: ...Yeah, my friends were...

AMIR: Exactly. But you're estimating about 10-12% of that.

BJORG: Yeah, something like that... what I heard many years ago.

AMIR: So, you grew up there basically.

BJORG: Yeah, I grew up there.

AMIR: And what was your connection with Israel? At what point was Israel...

BJORG: Yeah, Israel was part of the Bible.

AMIR: Yeah, obviously.

BJORG: But I never had, like, an urge to go, maybe to visit. And I didn't see myself as a missionary because that was—My friends were only in Norway. So that was my field also. But at one point, some of my friends, they started to talk about being missionaries. And I'm like, missionaries? You know, what was that? And I talked to someone, a friend of mine, an older friend. And I told her, I didn't have a call for a missionary. And we started talking, and I found out that, if I should go somewhere, then it must be something like your brother Andrew with Open Doors bringing the Bibles because that's exciting. So that was my first thing that told me, okay, maybe this is something I could do. So, I started at Open Doors for four months. And then I was in YWAM and they asked me if I wanted to go to Israel. And I was like, "Um, I don't know." But in the end, I said yes. So, I came to Israel and I came to Beit Eliyahu.

AMIR: And why Beit Eliyahu?

BJORG: Because they had an agreement with them.

AMIR: Okay. So, Beit Eliyahu, the congregation was known in Norway. There was a Norwegian connection.

BJORG: Yeah.

AMIR: So, for you coming to Israel automatically brought you there.

BJORG: Yeah, they started the congregation in '49, '50. And they had an agreement at the time with this organization that started. So that's how I ended in Beit Eliyahu.

AMIR: So, you came just to serve here?

BJORG: Yeah, to serve. We were two people and we were responsible for the youth group that they spoke English at the time. And we also shared a job in Ebenezer Home...

AMIR: ... It's a home for elderly people.

BJORG: For elderly people, yeah.

AMIR: So, you worked there a little bit?

BJORG: I worked there. We shared a job. So, we got the visas and then we served in the congregation.

AMIR: I see.

BJORG: Yeah.

AMIR: And that's where you actually met Shmuel?

BJORG: That's where I met him. But I have to tell you, I also saw a picture of him before we came. Because she had been a year before. So, she showed me a picture of him and said he's a potential leader. But he was probably going to the army. So, we didn't expect him to stay all the time. But I actually saw a picture of him before I came. [Gesture: Smiling]

AMIR: Okay. And still she came. It's encouraging, huh?

SHMUEL: Yeah.

AMIR: So, here you are. Tell us about your background a little bit. And then the moment that you guys met here in Israel.

SHMUEL: Well, as many people know, most Israelis are Jewish and there is a minority of Arabs. And among the minority of Arabs, most of them are Muslim. And there is a minority of Christians and among the minority of Christians, there is a tiny, tiny minority of believers who love the Lord and His Word. And both my parents were believers [AMIR: Wow.] and they were the first ones in their families, and the only ones actually.

AMIR: So, what were their parents?

SHMUEL: They were nominal Christians...

AMIR: Which Christians exactly?

BJORG: Anglican, somewhere there. And so, I grew up in a home, and both my parents were, at least my dad was much older than my mom. He was 55 when I was born. [AMIR: Wow!] So, he was born in 1913 and as a young person came to faith and also saw all the developments in Israel, in the land of Israel before there was a state of Israel. [AMIR: Wow.] And as a believer, he saw this as God's faithfulness and God fulfilling promises. So even he...

AMIR: So, he was an Arab Zionist. [Laughter]

SHMUEL: Yeah. Yeah, Yeah. Exactly. [AMIR: Amazing.] He even spoke Yiddish and helped new immigrants who came to Israel even before the State during the British Mandate, even when they were coming illegally. And he worked for the Haifa municipality, and he would help them out with jobs and different... You know, so it was... this is the kind of home I grew up in where loving the people of Israel, and the foundation is the Word of God, and not what you feel or think or what they tell you.

AMIR: It's actually very unusual to grow up in a home of believers in Israel in general, [SHMUEL: Yeah.] certainly in that society. And at what point was it that you decided to follow the Lord yourself? Because obviously...

SHMUEL: ... Again, I grew up with the, you know, almost breastfed with the Word of God, and the love for Israel, and believing in Jesus. I honestly can't think of the moment where I didn't know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, really. But of course, I remember this special moment when I was about 14, 14 or something like that when I was playing the piano in our tiny worship team at Beit Eliyahu, our congregation, where I grew up...

AMIR: ... So, you grew up in that congregation?

SHMUEL: Yeah, from the age of seven I grew up. Yeah.

AMIR: And at that time, it was Romanian? What was it exactly?

SHMUEL: You know, it was founded by this Norwegian organization that was serving the Jewish population in Eastern Europe, mainly Romania and Hungary. So, when the state of Israel was established, the ministry kind of moved to Israel. And one of the first things that happened was the establishment of Beit Eliyahu, which means “House of Elijah.” You know, we’re on Mount Carmel and everything.

AMIR: Exactly.

SHMUEL: So that’s the Norwegian connection. And most of them then were Yiddish-Romanian speakers to begin with, and then it turned more and more into Hebrew-speaking and the congregation, of course, as it is today. But I remember when I was 14, 14 and a half playing the piano, having the sense of God’s holiness and how tiny I am, and **that** I can call Him Father and knowing He’s the God of Israel, the Lord of hosts and He’s my Father, and what Jesus did for me, kind of it was a very special, also emotional moment while playing. You know, tears and worship became really much more than just singing.

AMIR: And so, you grew up in Haifa, in a house that loves Israel, loves the Word of God, and sees the return of the Jewish people into the land, the establishment of the state of Israel as a fulfillment of God’s Word and His prophecy. And then this beautiful Norwegian woman that most likely has no good taste in men. [SHMUEL: Obviously] [All laughing] No... So, she came to volunteer...

SHMUEL: Yeah, she came to do youth work. And youth work [Gesture: Pointing to himself].

AMIR: [ALL: Laughter] There you go.

SHMUEL: There you go. We got to become very good friends and nothing more than that for... She came for two years; almost all those two years we were just friends. We did worship together. We did evangelism together. We spent a lot of time together.

BJORG: We were part of the leadership also.

SHMUEL: We were part of the leadership of the youth group, of course. And then just one month before she left, that's when it clicked, kind of became more than just...

BJORG: ...And then I left!

AMIR: And then she left! [ALL: Laughter]

BJORG: Yeah.

AMIR: So, you will miss her?

SHMUEL: So, we spent a year apart, actually, and then we got engaged and then I moved to Norway.

AMIR: So, you were so in love with her that you moved to Norway?

SHMUEL: Yeah I was planning to—I had my own plans, of course, to study medicine and different things. I was even accepted to Technion here in Haifa. But there was also this urge to... Because at the young age I started teaching the Scriptures in the youth group, first in Shabbat school, and then the children, and then the youth group, and then I realized how much I don't know. And the desire to study the Scriptures more thoroughly and getting more better tools...

AMIR: I understand.

SHMUEL: ...to be able, no matter what I'm going to do as a profession, I knew this was a calling to teach the Word. Because of her, I would go to England or the States, wherever they speak English, of course, but it ended up being Norway because of this lady.

AMIR: So, there was a Bible school in Norway that you would attend?

SHMUEL: And attended the Bible school did a master's in theology and counseling, different things while we were there. And then even served as a pastor in a Norwegian congregation for five years. So, we are in total of eight years in Norway. Our three children were born there.

AMIR: And so, you have three children. You have a son and two daughters.

SHMUEL: Yes.

AMIR: And they were all born in Norway.

SHMUEL: All born in Norway.

AMIR: And then one day, what happened? Life is great in Norway. It's beautiful... Fjords, the weather.

SHMUEL: Yeah, well...

AMIR: Who has bewitched you? [ALL: Laughter]

BJORG: I can say that when we married, I knew for sure that we would live in Israel.

AMIR: You knew?

BJORG: Yeah.

SHMUEL: Me too. I mean this was—We knew that's where the Lord really wants us. [BJORG: Yeah.] And He has His own timing and...

AMIR: And it was okay with you, huh?

BJORG: Yeah, I knew. If I marry him, that was...

SHMUEL: ...This was the part of the deal.

AMIR: You counted the cost. [ALL: Laughter]

BJORG: Yeah, without knowing the cost.

AMIR: Yeah.

SHMUEL: So, yeah. And we ended up coming back to Israel, straight to Beit Eliyahu. There was called to be the pastor by people who knew me as a kid and as a teenager so I can't figure this out how they knew me and still wanted me as a pastor. [Laughter] Yeah, and we've been there now for 29 years. Next May, we're going to have 30-year anniversary.

AMIR: Wow.

SHMUEL: 30 years.

AMIR: Unbelievable.

SHMUEL: Yeah.

SHMUEL: Time is flying so fast.

AMIR: And time is flying.

SHMUEL: A lot of stuff is flying in Israel. [Laughter]

AMIR: I know. Exactly. Even right as we speak, stuff is flying. It's called F-16. So... okay, so now that we know you a little better, let's move to the chapter in your life where you serve as believers in, obviously, leadership position here at the congregation in Haifa in Israel. What type of challenges did you have as local believers in Israel, a country that is afflicted with quite a few challenges and its own problems? Give me an example. I'm not even talking yet about October 7th and everything after. I'm talking about life in general before.

SHMUEL: Yeah. I mean, Israel is a very diverse country, which also makes the congregation very diverse. I mean, last time we counted in our congregation, we had like 32 mother tongues. So, you can imagine how challenging it is in a country where there are many more conflicts and tensions than just, Jewish, Arab, or Iran, Israel. There're so many tensions and that's where God is doing what only He can do in His congregation, not ours. So, we've had a lot of challenges when you deal with people.

AMIR: But do you have any specific challenges unique to Israel?

SHMUEL: ... And that's the thing. I mean, this you would say that's anywhere in Israel, maybe especially because it is such a diverse country. But of course, I don't think there are many countries where you get a phone call that "Shmuel, I think our daughter was on the bus that exploded a few

minutes ago in Haifa.” That’s not something you are prepared for and it’s still hard to think about it even. But...

AMIR: ... And what do you do when you get stuff like that?

SHMUEL: What do you do? You just so, of course, that became a very special and painful day realized that one of our young girls and especially the daughter of our best friends and a friend of our daughters also was killed in a terror attack in Haifa.

AMIR: Bus explosion in Haifa. I remember that day, actually. I know exactly I was leading a tour as a tour guide and I heard about it. And she was the best friend of my sister-in-law’s, and I know that she was the best friend of your daughter as well and it affected everyone.

SHMUEL: So, you’re never prepared for anything like that. And unfortunately, we experienced these kind of things where you feel very small, facing the reality of evil in a more condensed way. And this is something that’s hard to even to explain to many people abroad. Our daughter took the same bus the day after. And this is... how do you explain to people that we’re okay, everything is good, but we also know deep inside that any minute, any second, anything can happen? But you still...

AMIR: ... Exactly. But you have to live your life because there’s no other option, obviously.
[SHMUEL: Exactly] The other option is to stop your life.

SHMUEL: But when it hits you that close, life is not the same anymore, [AMIR: ... I know] not for the family, of course, first and foremost, and not for us as friends, and as a congregation.

AMIR: When was it, by the way, do you remember?

SHMUEL: It was 2003.

AMIR: In 2003. So, a couple of years earlier, I was in New York when 9/11 took place. The point is... I saw first-hand evil also cross the ocean and evil is evil. And life is not sacred to those who

want to do those things. And we get to, unfortunately, to experience that probably a little more than other places. And so, challenges like that are unique to Israel and then... So how was it for someone who comes from Norway? Such a peaceful, beautiful place where honestly, I mean, we've been there. We've been to the congregations there, but we also went to tour a little bit—the fjords and other things and it's like God's paintings. And how is it for you to leave all that beauty and serenity behind and live here? Was there a point in your life where you said, "That's it, I'm going back"?

BJORG: Not I'm going back, but in the beginning, there was time they had like every week it was a bump here or there. And then it started to be more frequent. And at one point, it was so frequent...

SHMUEL: Frequently.

BJORG: Frequently?

SHMUEL: Frequently.

BJORG: Frequent? That I was like, it's enough! I can't take anymore. I didn't intend to go back, but it was like, how much can we take?

SHMUEL: Yeah.

AMIR: And I think even the Israelis felt the same. [BJORG: Yea. Yea.] During the Intifada, where we had it almost on a daily basis. Literally.

SHMUEL: Yeah, yeah. And I think it was in 2006 when we had the Lebanon War, our area in Haifa was the place with most casualties for the whole war. I mean, back then we didn't have Iron Dome or anything, so everything they shot fell.

AMIR: Correct.

SHMUEL: And that's when I also realized what a hero I married to when we had up to 40 people sleeping in our bomb shelter, mothers with small children while their husbands were in the army and all this pressure. And still she—I mean, she was amazing. Being a stable and...

AMIR: So, these are the challenges that are unique to Israel. And obviously because God had called you to be here, He also gave you the strength to go through all of this. And then came COVID. Although it was a pandemic, which means all over the world, still it was challenging for us as a congregation.

SHMUEL: Yes.

AMIR: And what was the challenge here?

SHMUEL: Well, again, with all the restrictions and different things, one thing is people's opinions about the restrictions. You have to deal with a lot of stuff. And a lot of... everybody became an expert on virology and different things. But we decided that—I mean, we pray for our leaders to make right decisions, right? So, we want to be, as it says in Romans, to obey the authorities. And on the other hand, we said we're going to do anything we can to meet together.

AMIR: Exactly.

SHMUEL: So, when we were restricted to 20, it was open for 20. And then 50, it was open for 50. And then it was open for more people outside and not indoors.

AMIR: So, we moved outside.

SHMUEL: So, we moved outside. So, we did up to four services, consecutive services. We'll do whatever we can to be together and not allow vaccines/not vaccines to be the issue. And I think God really also blessed us wisdom to deal with the things and there were no tensions in the congregation in the way that were disruptive or destructive by God's grace.

AMIR: I think COVID was a point where a lot of congregations either grew or ceased to exist almost.

SHMUEL: Yeah, some of them.

AMIR: I mean, if you went one way, it destroyed you. If you went another way, it actually brought you to levels you haven't seen before. And our congregation exploded basically.

SHMUEL: Yeah, exactly. Exploded in a good way.

AMIR: In a good way.

SHMUEL: Yeah, we're in Israel. [Laughter]

AMIR: Exactly. Yeah. Still standing, by the way. Still standing. Yeah.

SHMUEL: No, but because we had no media ministry actually. So, we had to, we used my iPhone to do the first services to record them so we could upload them. I mean, everything was done as we were moving ahead and so more people were exposed to our services and teaching and different things. And then when we opened up, they started coming physically. So, we've seen a whole bunch of people, young people especially, even some who drifted away or were nonbelievers returned to the Lord. So, it has been a time of growth actually to all this.

AMIR: And I think that during that time, you forged a very, very close kinship and friendship and camaraderie with my father-in-law years before, but during COVID it was even more so. And I remember I was watching from the side and seeing it; you were one of his best friends during that time.

SHMUEL: Yeah, age-wise he could be my father, but we were very, very close. We met at least once a week.

AMIR: Yeah, you met for prayer.

SHMUEL: For prayer.

AMIR: And then you ended up talking about everything.

SHMUEL: Everything.

AMIR: And he would open up to you and confide in you.

SHMUEL: We really miss him, by the way.

AMIR: Yeah, yeah. And then of course, you were the one that helped us going through the whole process of what to do and how to move forward after we lost him while I was with him in Sicily, in Italy. But a lot of people think that “Hey, people of God, they love God, they serve God, they have the perfect life. Everything is great. God is blessing them so much. So, nothing happens neither to them nor to their family members. Everything is great.” And is everything perfect?

SHMUEL: No of course, come on! [Laughter] No, life is not perfect.

AMIR: You have such challenges. And that’s another thing that I think causes a lot of people to look up to you and the way you handle yourself throughout. So, share with us because a lot of people go through stuff and they’re afraid that if I go through stuff, maybe I’m not okay with God or something.

SHMUEL: Listen, I’ve experienced both illness and different things on my own body that I was accused of not having enough faith.

AMIR: There you go. See, that’s the thing. And I’m like, okay, well...

SHMUEL: “Did you fast?” “Were you...” I mean, “you need to be anointed again and not by this person, by that person.” And all kind of—So I’ve seen a lot of harm being done by a lot of crazy stuff. But yeah, life, this fallen world, and this fallen temporary body...

AMIR: Yes, a tent. It’s not a building.

SHMUEL: It’s a tent. Exactly. I mean, I experienced both.... at least three times, healing on my body. Like miraculous healing.

AMIR: Give me an example.

SHMUEL: I mean, actually, I shared it with the congregation just last Shabbat. Most of the people, I knew, in the congregation didn't even know that. —more than 25 years ago—your father-in-law knew it and he was really persistent in prayer for me. There was some kind of a viral thing. I lost hearing in one ear and the other ear, all the other noises, all the other sounds became distorted, and it was terrible. I couldn't hang around people. I couldn't... as we're talking now, if a car would pass by here, I would go crazy in my head, for more than two weeks being hospitalized, everything and doctors saying there's nothing to do.

AMIR: They thought it's mental, huh?

SHMUEL: No, no, people who get this, they commit suicide, especially the younger people because they can't take the noise and the crazy. So actually, I was hospitalized for a week. I saw the specialist, the hearing specialist, even though I saw the specialist twice, but three times the psychiatrist came to see me because they were "Don't jump out the window!" It was so bad and I got all the papers to fill out to be for the insurance because I'm an invalid now. I can't function anymore. That's where you realize: "Where is my identity?" "Who am I?" "Am I the child of God?" or "Am I a pastor?" All the other functions we get suddenly become, "Wait a minute, who am I actually? What is my value? Is it in my teaching? Is it in my relationships, or is it just being who I am with the price tag that Jesus put on my life?"

AMIR: That has been paid in full.

SHMUEL: So, it was a very challenging time because I had to just give up everything. I mean, you could cut both of my legs off and I would still feel less paralyzed than with the ears and everything around. But the Lord healed me miraculously. I mean, I had to do the hearing test again and the doctor couldn't believe it.

AMIR: Normally these type of things don't heal.

SHMUEL: No, no, that's it. So, I've experienced God's healing. On the other hand, I have chronic headaches and allergies and people have been praying for me. And I'm still stuck with this thorn in the flesh.

AMIR: And you challenge me because in order to get rid of the ongoing pain, you actually jog. You're running. You're runner.

SHMUEL: Yeah, now I got knee problems. I can't run. We're maneuvering through this life and this imperfect body, this tent. But the point is that you realize that that's where it means God's grace. God's grace is sufficient for us in the world where everything is insufficient, including our bodies, our abilities, our whatever.

AMIR: And it's not only you also, the other family members.

SHMUEL: And what was most painful thing is some years ago, within one month, our son was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis; again, an incurable disease, terrible disease. Within that month, our daughter, Adina, was diagnosed with cancer, ovarian cancer. And again, it's nothing you can just say, "Ah, again, why God?" I mean, "Okay, give me cancer. I'll deal with this. Why her? Why him?" He's supposed to take me around with a wheelchair, not the other way around. A lot of also negative, some also destructive thoughts that you just realize again, where does our peace come from, and in whose hands are we? Which is painful. It's just you lose completely control.

AMIR: Often time, people don't know. I think God allows things, obviously. He may not cause it. I don't think He wants to cause this type of thing, but He allows it to happen. But He will also allow it to get the glory and also allow it when He knows that the person can take it. And eventually, it will also edify.

SHMUEL: Exactly. It's a very humbling experience in order to glorify the Lord.

AMIR: How did you take those?

BJORG: Wow, it was hard when we heard about that, it was like everything is black. Yeah, it was really, it was tough. He started to go, you know, to get some help. They said that the nurses that are specialists, they said that their main job today is to say that it will be okay because they have medicine that can help him in this kind of case. It can't disappear, but it can help them much more than before. So that's what you're grabbing.

SHMUEL: You're grabbing hold of.

AMIR: Oh, yeah.

SHMUEL: But he's doing well, actually.

BJORG: He is doing well. He's doing well. And he's working physically and that's also good for him.

AMIR: He's doing well and he's doing so well that on October 7th, while he's already married and he lives in Norway, he got a phone call or a text message that...

SHMUEL: ... He was called up on an urgent call.

AMIR: He was called up to return to Israel to fight. He's a combat unit soldier and a decorated one. And then—Okay, so where did October 7th catch you? Where were you at that time?

BJORG: I was actually in his home.

AMIR: At Daniel's home?

BJORG: In Daniel's home that morning...

SHMUEL: ...with Monica.

BJORG: With Monica, [SHMUEL: Our daughter] also doing reserve.

AMIR: And both of them were called up to return immediately.

BJORG: Yes, but I didn't know about Daniel. He didn't say. I just saw that something happened and I see Charlotte. She asked him, "What do you think about this, Daniel?" Because he knew.

AMIR: Yes, his wife.

BJORG: His wife. I had no idea. So, we were on the way to Oslo because we had a plane the 8th of October back to Israel, me and Monica. So, on the way, on the bus to Oslo, she was listening all the time to the news and everything, and we saw how things developed. We came to my sister that lives there. And of course, the plane was cancelled on the 8th. So, we were trying to find new planes and things like that. And I didn't know that Daniel did the same thing. So...

SHMUEL: He kept it from her.

AMIR: He was already working on his flight without telling you.

BJORG: Yeah, he was. And we actually had a good time because we went to the congregation. They had been praying for Israel at the time because of what happened. And my sister, she called a group of people on Monday to pray for Israel, pray for us also. And after this prayer meeting, we found some tickets. So, we found tickets to Athens, and from Athens to Israel. So we kind of tried to order them at the same time. So we have both. And I ordered for us to Athens and Monica for to Israel. And I got the Athens ones, but the ones were already occupied to Israel. So we didn't get those, so we were like...

SHMUEL: ...Anyway, they ended up meeting in Athens. Daniel came through London and Crete somehow ended up in Athens. And then all three of them ended up on a military plane that was put out, especially for combat soldiers.

AMIR: Military cargo plane.

SHMUEL: Military, you know, those Hercules.

AMIR: Yeah, the C-130s.

SHMUEL: Yeah. From Athens by the IDF.

AMIR: A military flight and Norwegian woman, it was her...

SHMUEL: ...and the 100 combat, they allowed only combat soldiers...

AMIR: ...and her.

SHMUEL: And her! So that's how they...

AMIR: You felt safe there on that plane, I guess.

BJORG: Yeah. [Laughter]

SHMUEL: We picked them up at 3 a.m. at Ben Gurion Airport. And then at 7 in the morning, they were already in the uniforms on the way to the base.

AMIR: Both your daughter and son.

SHMUEL: Yeah, they're both combat soldiers. Monica is also a combat soldier. So, they dropped her at her base and him at his base. And then the same evening he was at the Gazan border.

AMIR: And while all of that is happening, Beit Eliyahu congregation, our church, had a youth group in Israel's northern part, *Horshat Tal*, it's right next to the Lebanese border. They had some retreat there for the young and you told them, get back immediately.

SHMUEL: Yeah, I mean, it was the end of Sukkot. And I was sitting in my office preparing at 6 a.m. [AMIR: For your message...] teaching for that morning, Shabbat morning. And then 6:30-7, you start getting some stuff on the... and then at 7 o'clock, I called our youth leader that was with them. There were around 40 kids and leaders there together next to the Lebanese border, and we knew immediately, Hezbollah, anything can happen any minute there. So, I called them and said, "Listen..."

AMIR: Thankfully, they started the day later.

SHMUEL: "...you're not going to do the trip you planned for today. Just order the bus as soon as possible and get back to Haifa as soon as possible." While I was talking to him, he got called up, of course. [AMIR: To the army...] ... and the other two leaders were also called up to the army. And they all came with the bus. And of course, their parents started...

AMIR: ... So the youth counselors are actually combat soldiers themselves and they were called up.

SHMUEL: Yeah, exactly. ~~They were called up.~~ So they came and our services that Shabbat, of course, became mostly prayer meetings. We realized something was going on. As time was gone passing, we realized how serious it is.

AMIR: And these are the hours from 6:30 all the way to, I don't know, 3 p.m., that the massacre is taking place.

SHMUEL: Exactly.

AMIR: The massacre. I mean, those are the hours that we were surprised and Hamas cut all the routes to arrive and committed most of the murders during that time. And for the most part, most of the Israelis were not even aware of the magnitude.

SHMUEL: Some of our soldiers were there among the first troops, actually.

AMIR: I know.

SHMUEL: They were on the way to the congregation and they had to U-turn. And it was terrible stuff they saw there. I mean, it's just, besides the fighting, face-to-face with terrorists, they also saw what the terrorists did. And I was getting messages from them and that, "Please pray because this is really bad."

AMIR: Yeah. Yeah, I know a lot of testimonies of people who reached that area at the very beginning and what they saw was unimaginable. The carnage was nothing we've ever seen in any

of the wars, not even close. And then that war created challenges and opportunities. A leader for you as a couple, but also as a congregation. Tell us a little bit about, I mean, the challenge, of course, is many of our people had to go and fight.

SHMUEL: Yeah, I think at the most, we had more than 60 soldiers simultaneously serving. And some of them were on the regular army service and many reserved.

AMIR: It's like almost 20% of the congregation, no?

SHMUEL: Not 20, I mean. But of course, it affects when most of the youth leaders are away. And then we had at the point, like 70% of our worship team were and when they did come and lead worship, they did it with a gun...

AMIR: ...strapped on them.

SHMUEL: ... strapped on them. So, we had to work through stuff. I mean, it was that bad that even I had to do reserve duty and play the piano. I mean, you can imagine how tragic it can be.

AMIR: It was that bad. [Laughter]

SHMUEL: It was that bad. But of course, it affected the congregation. It affected our family, of course, having two people, two of our children in combat zones, especially Daniel, who was serving in Gaza. If you want to hear a "funny" fact, funny, because he was working security in the hospital in Haifa when he was diagnosed with MS. And the day he was diagnosed, they took away his handgun. He had to give it because he can't have the handgun. But not to fit a handgun in the hospital in the city. But to be sent into Gaza [outfitted in uniform] with grenades and a gun and...

AMIR: ... and to fight in the most hostile environment ever.

SHMUEL: Yeah. "Thank you. Thank you for serving." [Laughter] So, this is the part of...

AMIR: ... and he could have opted out and chose not to.

SHMUEL: ... Yeah, he could have. But he couldn't. Actually, when he got married to his... he also did what I did. He didn't learn. He married a Norwegian young lady. [Laughter] Yeah. And he told her, "It's just a question of time. I will be called up. And I'm a soldier." And this is even whatever people speak about peace and peace treaties in the Middle East, he knew that what we know, that it's just a question of time and it happened on October 7th.

AMIR: So, October 7th happened, the country's in a [state of] shock and then slowly, slowly we get up and obviously we fight back. But we also realize that unlike other wars, this war is different because we have far more wounded soldiers. And there is an interesting explanation to that. What is it?

SHMUEL: Yes. I mean, this war opened the opportunity to serve Israel also as a congregation and as believers helping different units in the army and also providing home cooked meals to soldiers and wherever they are. And different kind of things that just show our appreciation and our love for them besides praying for them. And one of the things that happened was this wide-open door to serve the wounded in this large hospital in Haifa, which is close to us especially now during the Lebanon, the Iran wars, Lebanon-Iran wars lately because that's where most the seriously wounded end up.

AMIR: So, you're allowed to go into the hospital?

SHMUEL: Yeah. And just we bless them with a small gift. And of course, it's very symbolic when you turn to this young soldier who lost his leg and it's very symbolic to give him a small gift compared to what he gave for our security. That's how it's a very humbling experience every time. But you also see how they really feel blessed, and this appreciation is something that touches their hearts and encourages them and kind of a small kind of comfort in the long process they have of rehab and everything. But one of the... I spoke to the chief doctor there in this hospital and he said

there was never a war, I mean, both in Gaza and Lebanon, where so many soldiers lost limbs. Never. So how come? I mean, Israel has been through so many wars, and the war is always terrible and painful. He said the thing is that they are so well equipped now with the different vests and the helmets and different things, when something happens and explosions, what happens is that they lose an arm or a leg or both legs sometimes.

AMIR: But they are still alive.

SHMUEL: But we managed to keep them alive. They get blood. There was this one guy I met at the hospital, he said he was given 17 portions of blood from the moment he was wounded till he reached the ER and the operation theater. So, he would have been—Usually those guys would be dead. So that's why the statistics...

AMIR: So, he could have easily had thousands more dead... [SHMUEL: Exactly] and yet it's actually thousands more wounded. [SHMUEL: Exactly] So, it's good news that we have that many amputated people that are still alive, and they have their future, and many of them, by the way, they do sports. They actually get married. They have careers and they use it to actually...

SHMUEL: I had this very special experience just a few days ago. I visited one of the last ones who were wounded in a tank in Lebanon by a suicide drone. And he's actually a believer from another congregation down south. So I went and visited him. And then his buddy from the same tank came into the—he was rolled into the same room after being in intensive care a couple of days. He was burnt and everything. And it was so special and touching to witness their conversation because they thought that the other one was dead.

AMIR: Wow.

SHMUEL: They didn't—You know, this guy says, “Oh, I saw those four stretchers with you on one of them and I was sure you were all dead bodies.” You know, and then they were in the same

room in the hospital. And one of the things we've also seen that, you know, those soldiers have a lot of dark humor.

AMIR: True.

SHMUEL: They make a lot of fun about, "Where is your arm?" "Oh, my arm is in Khan Yunis." "Where is your leg?" "My leg is in Nabatieh." You know, it's kind of those jokes. But those jokes don't work on their parents.

AMIR: True.

SHMUEL: Then you see the tears in their parents' eyes.

AMIR: So, you get to minister to both the soldiers and their family members as well.

SHMUEL: Yeah. I see more and more actually the family members.

AMIR: And then one thing that I noticed throughout—well, it was COVID, but mostly the wars, that the people in Israel are more willing, not just to know who we are as believers, but also to accept help from us, and also to listen to why we help and to learn to appreciate. I see this type of thing did not exist before. I mean, to say that you're a believer in Yeshua would make you something everybody wants to stay away from. And through all that suffering and pain and through all these challenges, it seems like it brought us closer. I mean, Beit Eliyahu is considered by authorities in Israel, in Haifa in the North, as a place where if we want to have blood donations, let's go to this congregation. If we want to have some help for this unit or to have people come to this hospital, a lot of what we do, we became an address.

SHMUEL: Yeah, and they know exactly who we are.

AMIR: Absolutely.

SHMUEL: We don't... We're very open about that. Even army units who ask for help, they even fill out a special form where it says that Beit Eliyahu is a messianic congregation and they have to

give us all their information. So, we're very open about that. I mean, again, it's part of this change of, in the old days, if you wanted to be in a special unit or a highly classified unit, you would hope they don't discover you're a believer, because this will be a hindrance, an obstacle to doing stuff in the army on a higher level. But nowadays, it's not just an obstacle, it's even an advantage in many ways. So, where our soldiers and the congregations are in intelligence, air force, wherever, all over the place. So, this is part of—Just to encourage our viewers, who have been praying for Israel, been praying for the messianic body in Israel, that the Lord is doing what only He can do. And this is by being openly who we are in Israel. We're not ashamed to be Israelis and to be believers in Yeshua.

AMIR: And I know quite a few people, I posted on Telegram: "A nonprofit in America that actually is the way for us in Israel to receive donations so we can direct it to the different needs." And I just want everyone to know that all of those funds went straight to those places. And because of that, more needs were known to us, and more things were able to be given. And that's the—I'm so thankful.

SHMUEL: Yeah, we're grateful.

AMIR: God gives us a platform to further His kingdom.

SHMUEL: Amen, amen.

AMIR: Some platforms are to let you know, others are to do the work, and He gets the glory from it.

SHMUEL: Amen, amen.

AMIR: Yes. And so, these are obviously are very challenging times for obviously for moms and now you're a grandma already, grandpa. Wow.

SHMUEL: Number four on the way.

AMIR: Wow, amazing. But also, it's quite remarkable that being non-Jews, you make such a great impact on the lives of so many Jews in the land of Israel. And that brings me to this whole misconception that non-Jews are mistreated in Israel and there is all this "apartheid" and Christians are second class and they're being attacked by Jews, all that garbage that obviously is... But you are an embodiment of the fact that it's just bogus and just... [SHMUEL: Yeah] Give me a vivid example of how it's...

SHMUEL: ...And it's not even just us; it's just the reality in Israel. [AMIR: Exactly] It's so crazy. I mean, I spoke about those two soldiers that they met each other at the hospital thinking that each one of them were dead. Who treated them? As I was in the room in that hospital, there was one Christian Arab nurse and a Muslim Arab nurse, and who was the chief doctor there? A Muslim Arab.

AMIR: And he is treating two IDF soldiers.

SHMUEL: Two IDF soldiers who are wounded by Muslims in Lebanon. So, this is Israel, this is reality in Israel. People can say whatever—I mean, this level of deceit is just—I'm sorry, I can't use any better word than there is something diabolic, something...

AMIR: ... Definitely spiritual.

SHMUEL: There is something that is so—I mean, even when I was in Norway, I was approached by a "pro-Palestine" activist. She was an expert on the Middle East, of course.

AMIR: Of course, they know everything.

SHMUEL: And she told me that I don't have an Israeli passport and I can't travel freely. So, you're telling me my passport is not Israeli? "I know you don't have a passport. I know this is an apartheid country." She's telling me who I am, what is my passport.

AMIR: They know better about us than we do.

SHMUEL: So, it just shows me that the level of deceit, the level of lies and people are buying this, even Christians. And that's the most saddening part. If I can share that, I mean, there was this large church in Norway that I've taught there several times, they even have our names glued on the pulpit praying for us every Sunday throughout many years. And they have this guy who's their missions, the contact person, mission's pastor. He will be in touch with us asking for prayer requests and you know, "How are you guys doing?" End of October 2023, after October 7th, [AMIR: Right after October 7th] I got an email, a copy to myself, an email that he sent to his senior pastor with a copy to me that he asked to be relieved from being in contact with Shmuel and Bjørg Aweda because they are supporting a genocide and they have blood on their hands. This guy has known me for 30 years, has been our closest contact with this congregation, completely flipped. What does it take to lose all the credit and everything, all the "Thank you for the Bible studies, and the teaching, and the Word," there must be something there that is much more than just media games, you know, and regular fake news. There was something deeper, satanic, fake.

AMIR: Strong delusion, basically. But not only you were kind of "boycotted" from some places, but tell me if you can, if it's okay, your son's experience. Because obviously being an IDF soldier, a combat soldier, he had to—whenever his reserve duty was over—he went back to Norway. Was there any challenge that he encountered over there?

SHMUEL: Yeah, when he was serving in Gaza and other places, he kept it low profile because his wife and small children are at home and you never know what happens. But when he came back and realized that it became known that he was in Gaza, and he sort of said, "Okay, I might as well tell them what's really going on." So he went even on national television there and was sharing what the IDF really is doing in Gaza, how they even sacrificed themselves not to hurt innocent people, women and children, it's not a genocide, all this stuff.

AMIR: There's no starvation, all of that is detached from reality.

SHMUEL: I mean, he risked his own life several times because they don't kill women and children. So it became known, but of course there are several organizations in Norway that... Norway has really become really anti-Semitic, like never before. I mean, this country was one of the most pro-Israel countries before; it has completely flipped. So also among believers, of course, unfortunately among Christians. I mean, there's a couple of organizations that are trying to make a case against him, accusing him of different things. Of course, they have no case against him, but still this harassment.

AMIR: So we have quite a few fronts that we fight nowadays. Some are pretty obvious, but others are stuff that we wish we didn't have to do, and we find ourselves in this. This is it; we live in the last days.

SHMUEL: Yeah, definitely.

AMIR: We live in the last days and the manifestation of it is almost in every area of our life. And last days sounds a little scary to some, but for us, the believers, it's actually, these are good news. The Lord is around the corner. And as we make our segue into the end of our program, out of curiosity, do you have any message of hope that you may want to share with maybe, I don't know, other women that live in Europe that think that everything that is going on here is so bad, and there is no hope, and this place is just forgotten?

BJORG: Well, I don't think this place is forgotten.

AMIR: You see it first-hand.

BJORG: Yeah, because I know that God is in charge. He is the One who is over it all. So even as things look dark, then God is there and He will move it how He wants it.

AMIR: And you see the good hand of God even throughout all of that.

BJORG: Absolutely, yeah, and He also gives us comfort.

AMIR: Yes, and that strength gives a lot of people hope and encouragement. And Shmuel, what about you? Is there any last thing that you want to share with people? Again, I think that people have a misconception of what life here is all about. Any last thing that you want to share?

SHMUEL: Well, again, as we've already been through, we know the feeling of not having control over stuff. And some people run to the bomb shelter, but you might be in Germany or in the US or in France or wherever and you have cancer or one of your loved ones passes away, we're in the same spiritual reality of an evil world that is going in one direction. I mean, I don't think it's by mistake, one of the greatest promises of Jesus is "My peace I give you," not the peace of the peace negotiators or whatever they think they can do. "My peace", it's not by accident that the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter because we live in the world where we're in constant need of comfort. And again, it points us to the one and only Savior who one day, one day, every knee will bow before, and every tongue will confess that He is the Lord. And just looking to Him, looking to Him to see Him again when He takes us, no matter what is the timing and making sure more and more people know about Him. That's what we do. I mean, again, the point of being a congregation in Israel always emphasizes, I mean, we don't want to be a club who meets once a week, sings and listens to a lecture and drinks coffee. Not that our coffee is amazing. It's very bad. But there is a purpose. Go and make everyone disciples, anyone: Jew, Arab. There's nothing we can wish for Iran more than that we will have more and more brothers and sisters in Iran. The same in Lebanon and the same goes for Israel. The Holy Land needs Jesus. Jewish people need Jesus. Paul's heartache was that his own people don't know their own Messiah. So I think this good burden, it's a good one. It is a burden, but it's a good one. This is...

AMIR: ... And we as a congregation have a burden, not just for the Jewish people, but a lot of activity is also to the Arab population, both by the way, in Israel and also I know that we have supported the spreading of the gospel, even in Gaza.

SHMUEL: In Gaza and other places, even Lebanon.

AMIR: Lebanon as well. And so I think that if there's something Satan hates the most is seeing exactly the three representations here in this frame because it summons basically at all that there's only one hope and that's the Messiah, whether you're a Jew or Arab or a Gentile from Norway or America, whatever it is, it doesn't matter. There's only one hope in this fallen world and that's the Messiah. And He's the one that—And by the way, we were never promised perfect life or a garden of roses.

SHMUEL: I looked for this promise. I searched it. And it wasn't there.

AMIR: Yes. And then of course, His grace is sufficient. And when we are weak, we are strong actually, because He's our strength. And that's the beauty of it all. So I want to thank you for coming all the way to CONNECT here in beautiful Jezreel Valley, which is about a 15-minute drive from Haifa.

SHMUEL: Half an hour, yeah? Yeah.

AMIR: Yes. And I guess I drive fast.

BJORG: So does he.

AMIR: And thank you for being our guest. I think what we share today here could bless so many people all over the world. Not just to understand what it means to live in a ministry in a very challenging part of the world, but also to shatter so much of the lies and the deception that the enemy is spreading all over in these last days. And also, if there is one thing that I'm sure Bjørg and Shmuel and myself would want everyone to know, is that life is not free of challenges and free

of trials and even if you're walking with the Lord and maybe even a leadership position. But it's not really if it comes, it's how you deal with it, and is it something you're trying to do yourself or is it something that you totally surrender to Him and let Him take you through that. And the way you guys handle yourselves gives us a lot of comfort and encouragement. And I'm sure it can give so many people the same feeling.

So I want to encourage all of you not only to watch, but also to comment, tell us where you're from. And also subscribe, like, and share. This video, I'm sure, can bless so many people in the Middle East, but also all over the world. We thank God for this platform. We thank God for the ability to not just hear the Word or teach the Word, but to also be able to get it to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people around the world. But thank you for watching. And thank you, Bjørg and Shmuel, for being our guest today.

SHMUEL & BJORG: Thank you for having us.

AMIR: God bless you all for watching. Share it. And thank you from Galilee from Israel. Shalom.

For all ways to connect with Behold Israel, including media, updates, videos, and teaching <https://linktr.ee/beholdisrael> or the QR code: