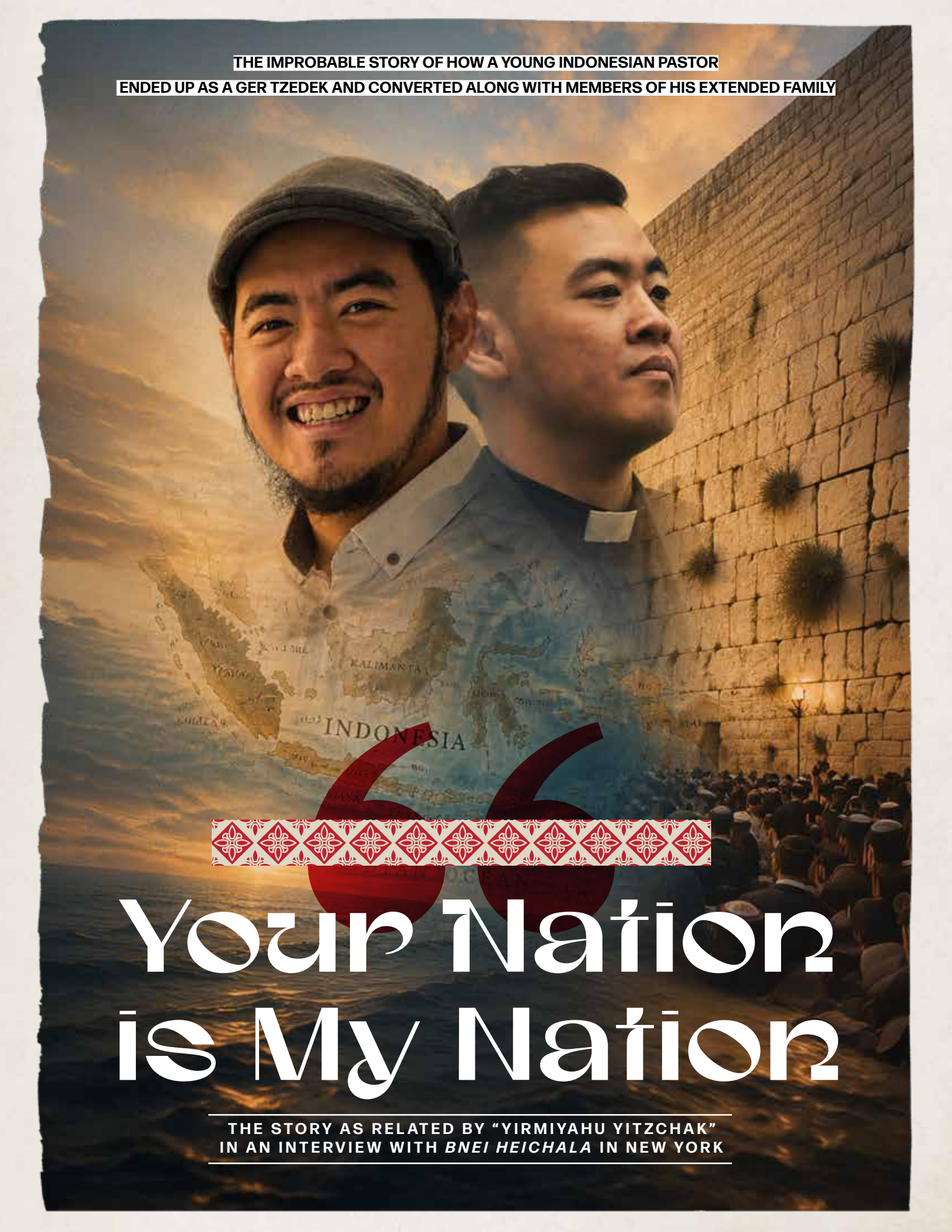


THE IMPROBABLE STORY OF HOW A YOUNG INDONESIAN PASTOR
ENDED UP AS A GER TZEDEK AND CONVERTED ALONG WITH MEMBERS OF HIS EXTENDED FAMILY

The background of the entire page is a composite image. In the foreground, two men are shown from the chest up. The man on the left is smiling, has a beard, and wears a grey cap and a light-colored button-down shirt. The man on the right is looking off to the side with a serious expression, wearing a dark blue clerical shirt with a white collar. Behind them, a map of Indonesia is visible, with labels for 'INDONESIA', 'KALIMANTA', and 'SULAWA'. To the right, a large, ancient stone wall is visible, with a crowd of people gathered at its base. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. A large, stylized red number '6' is overlaid on the center of the image, partially obscured by a decorative horizontal band with a repeating red and white geometric pattern.

Your Nation is My Nation

THE STORY AS RELATED BY "YIRMIYAHU YITZCHAK"
IN AN INTERVIEW WITH *BNEI HEICHALA* IN NEW YORK

I was born 33 years ago in the city of BANDUNG.

A CITY OF ABOUT TWO MILLION PEOPLE ON THE INDONESIAN ISLAND OF JAVA. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, but I was a member of the Christian minority, with our ancestors having arrived from China. My birth name, Jeremy Owen, is an English-European name, as is common among Chinese-Indonesians.

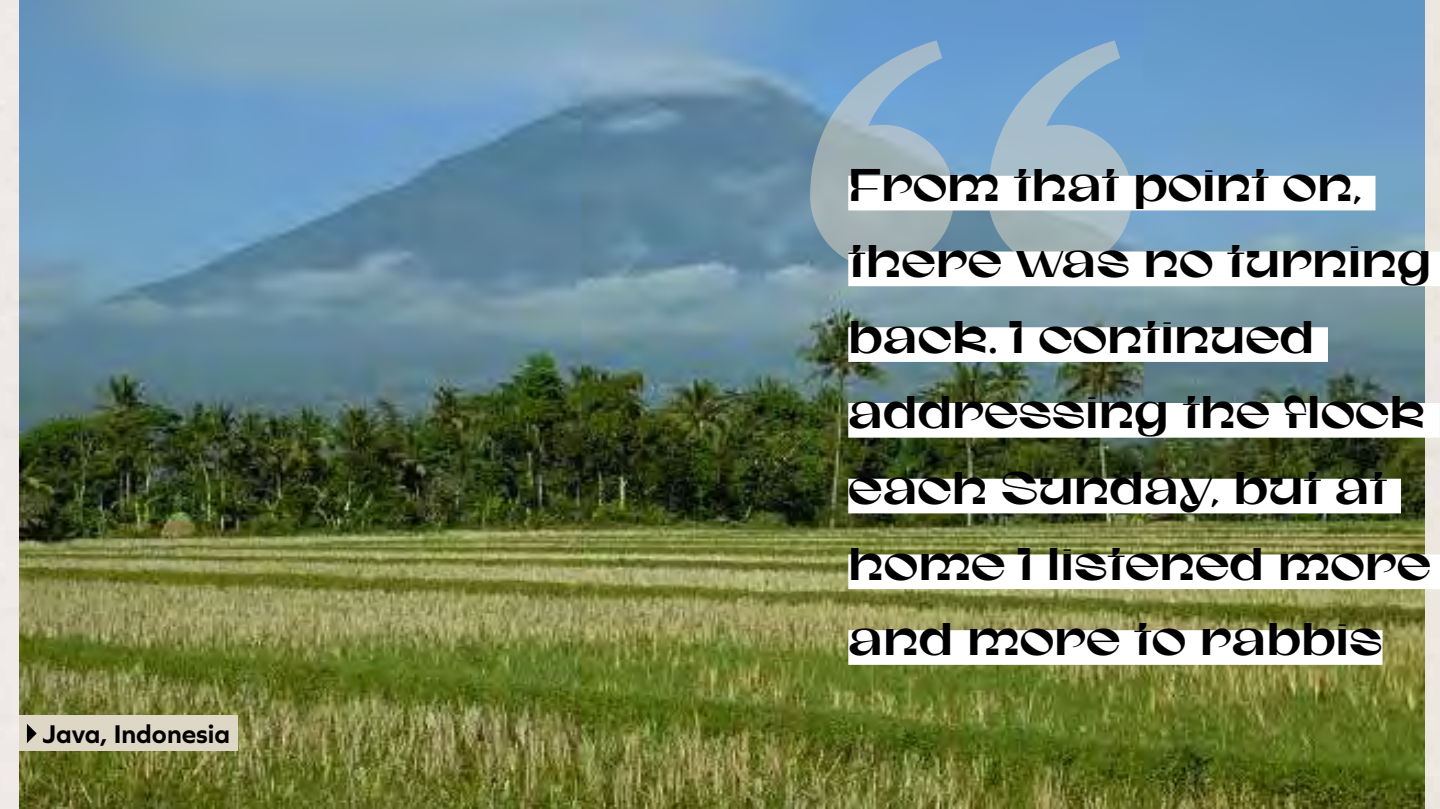
I grew up in a very devout Christian home. My mother served as a pastor for the local congregation while my father was a missionary, recruiting new members to the faith. Religion wasn't just part of our life — it *was* our life.

With both my parents in the business of the church it should come as no surprise that by age 14 I, too, began preaching. I would gather my classmates and deliver a weekly sermon to them. When I was 19, I abandoned my academic pursuit and entered the clergy.

Before my official ordination as a pastor, my mother, sister and I undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was a completely Christian tour and was designed to expose us to the religion's holy sites and make the Bible come alive for us.

For me, it had the opposite effect. This was the first time in my life that I encountered Judaism — not as an ancient tale from the Bible but as a living nation. For the first time in my life, I found out that “Jews” were real people walking the streets of Yerushalayim, studying Torah and keeping its mitzvot.

I did not understand Judaism, but I felt a raw, aching longing, a twang of jealousy. And this feeling accompanied me during the entire journey. I even bought a kippah serugah and asked my mother if I would look Jewish wearing it. I planned to wear it back home — but I was



► Java, Indonesia

From that point on, there was no turning back. I continued addressing the flock each Sunday, but at home I listened more and more to rabbis

too afraid. Surprisingly, my older sister felt the same longing as I did. She cried incessantly when we left Eretz Yisrael. We both felt that one day we would return.

Seven Years of Pain, Until the Eye-opening Moment

We returned to Indonesia, my doubts barely quelled. To alleviate the pain I felt in my soul, I threw myself into my work as a pastor. For the next seven years I would stand at the pulpit and addressed an ever-growing number of parishioners who came to hear the gospel. By the time I was 25, my flock numbered between 100 and 200 steady worshippers, with some 300

people overall who were members of the community. It was led by my mother, my maternal uncle and myself. While not from the largest parishes, it existed and was a lively operation.

Outwardly, everything appeared to be fine with me. But deep in my heart, the pain that entered my heart in Yerushalayim never left for a moment.

At about this time, in 2020, my inner searching led me to the conclusion that I would rebuild my church upon the very earliest foundations of Christianity. I began to research, and I realized that there were many variations in translations of the Bible.

I wanted to find the original Bible. I remembered that the Bible had originally been written in Hebrew so I began researching Hebrew books,

which eventually led me to online classes by Jewish rabbis in the English language. I suddenly felt the truth. Most importantly, they mentioned the concept of “conversion,” and for the first time I understood that there was a possibility of joining the Jewish people.

From that point on, there was no turning back. I continued addressing the flock each Sunday, but at home I listened more and more to rabbis.

In their classes, the rabbis spoke often about Jewish laws, and suddenly the pain burst out of me with great force: Jews have halacha — from the moment they rise in the morning until they go to sleep, their lives are enveloped in holiness — and I did not have that. It was something I had been sorely missing.

Slowly, the change began to seep outward. In my sermons, when

speaking about the scriptures I began using the word “Torah,” just as I heard the rabbis pronounce it, instead of how it is referred to in Indonesia, as “Taurat.” I found myself speaking more about the “Old Testament,” the Christian term for Tanach. I told people not to work on Shabbos because it is G-d’s day. (Of course, I did not yet know the halachos of Shabbos, nor that Shabbos is only for Jews.) I began throwing into my sermons the prohibition of eating pork.

People sensed something was off with me and began asking questions. Everyone saw that I was no longer heading in the “right” direction. And this showed in our enrollment numbers — the congregation swiftly shrank from 200 members to about fifty, but those fifty were influenced by me and wanted to continue on my new path.

The Family Journey and the Double Loss

Shortly after the Covid pandemic began in 2020, I received a private message from Rabbi Eliyahu Silfen, a Chabad shaliach in Detroit: “Do you have questions? We can talk.” Rabbi Silfen had founded an amazing project called “Chabad Academy,” where he teaches Torah remotely to students around the world. We spoke, and he brought me into an interactive halachah class.

I shared my revelations with my mother and my uncle, and they both grew afraid at the direction. I told them, “Let’s learn.” We opened up a Bible and, over the next period of time, read from Bereishis through the end of Tanach, along with the fifty parishioners who remained. We studied Hebrew from siddurim and we learned the Torah. I showed them that nowhere in all the prophecies

of Tanach does Christianity appear. Slowly, they were convinced.

It was not an easy journey that we had embarked on. Our former Christian friends began calling us degrading names and mocking us. We started to feel socially isolated.

And then, in the depths of the journey, my mother became ill. Before her passing in 2020, she told me, “I have come to the conclusion — I believe only in the Gd of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.” My mother, the former pastor who had spent her life teaching of the “truths” of Christianity, had come around to Yiddishkeit.

About eight months later, our family finally accepted upon ourselves to begin keeping mitzvos. My father translated a Chabad siddur into Indonesian and davened three times a day. Then he too became ill. They discovered a malignant tumor, and within two months he also passed away.

It was a crushing blow. Besides the pain of losing both parents, part of me wondered whether this was a punishment. Christianity teaches that those who leave the faith are cursed. I had just begun leaving, and already I buried both my parents.

But deep inside, I knew this was not a mistake. I knew this was the truth.

It was then that I decided to completely sever ties with my past. One Sunday I stood before the church and declared, “I no longer believe in Christianity. I will try to find a way to leave and convert according to Jewish law.”

The Great Crisis of Wandering and Poverty

At this point, my uncle and I decided that we are liquidating all our assets and moving to Australia. Melbourne



► Yirmiyahu previously played the role of ‘Priest Jeremy’



► Rabbi Mordechai Avtsen, Chabad emissary in Hong Kong



► Rabbi Yehoram Ullman Shalit"a, Av Beis Din Sydney

CREDIT MARK BAKER - POOL VIA REUTERS



► With Rabbi Mandy Axelrod at the Chabad House in Cebu - Philippines



► Blessings after the Bris in Chabad - Singapore



► After the bris of the child Yeshaya, who is happy with the gifts he received

I stood before the church and declared, “I no longer believe in Christianity. I will try to find a way to leave and convert according to Jewish law”

had a sizable Jewish community and Sydney had the most respected beis din for conversion in Asia, led by Rav Yehoram Ulman, to which people came from the entire region. That way, we could complete our journey to Judaism.

It was not simple. To enter Australia, you needed a visa. And Australia, in order to prevent illegal immigration or unauthorized laborers, is one of the strictest countries in the world in securing a visa if you are not from a developed nation. In order to receive the coveted entry pass, you must show a stable income, a substantial savings account in a bank, along with a degree and a profession.

In order to show financial stability, my uncle and I sold our homes and cars. However, while my uncle, a talented man who had a master’s degree in business management, received a visa, I, who had abandoned my studies to become a pastor, was rejected. My uncle moved to Melbourne two years ago and is currently on the verge of completing

his conversion in the beis din of Sydney.

For me, a physical trek from place to place began, which mirrored the spiritual journey I was embarking upon.

My wife, our young son, my older sister and I flew to Hong Kong, a giant Chinese city that was relatively close to my homeland. There, I met the Chabad shliach, Rabbi Mordechai Avtzon, and Rabbi Gershon Menachem Baraza, who is now a rabbi in Melbourne. But Hong Kong proved to be a very expensive place to live so as Rosh Hashanah of 2023 was ushered in, we found ourselves back in Indonesia.

I began feeling despair. I so much wanted to complete my journey but it was not moving. “I do not know why I want to become a Jew,” I told Rabbi Silfen, “but if I cannot become a Jew then my life is over.”

Eventually, I began thinking that perhaps I was too “crazy” over Hashem. I decided to focus on being a good father and husband and to stop thinking about Hashem. I found a job with an American company in Bali

and prepared to begin work the next day, permanently giving up on the conversion process. The night before I was to start my job, I wearily stood and prayed, “Hashem, please help me.” I indeed had been too caught up, but my heart did not allow me to relinquish my dream.

The next morning, an email arrived which rekindled the flame.

Cebu, Philippines

We had previously heard that conversion processes were taking place in Cebu, a city in the Philippines, under the auspices of the Sydney beis din. The rabbanim there would periodically dispatch a dayan

to Cebu who would conduct the giyur alongside local rabbanim.

The Philippines, despite its reputation as a modern, Westernized country, has a lax immigration policy for Indonesian citizens. We had sent a request to the beis din there for conversion consideration but in the interim had forgotten about it.

On that fateful morning, minutes before I was about to give up on my dream, I received a reply. Rabbi Mendy Axelrod, the local Chabad shaliach in Cebu, wrote back: we could come and he would assist us. Within two weeks we flew out. Rabbi Axelrod welcomed us warmly and we learned much Torah from him.

By this point we had no money left. In order to finance our flights we had sold all our jewelry — even my wife’s wedding ring. We lived in utter

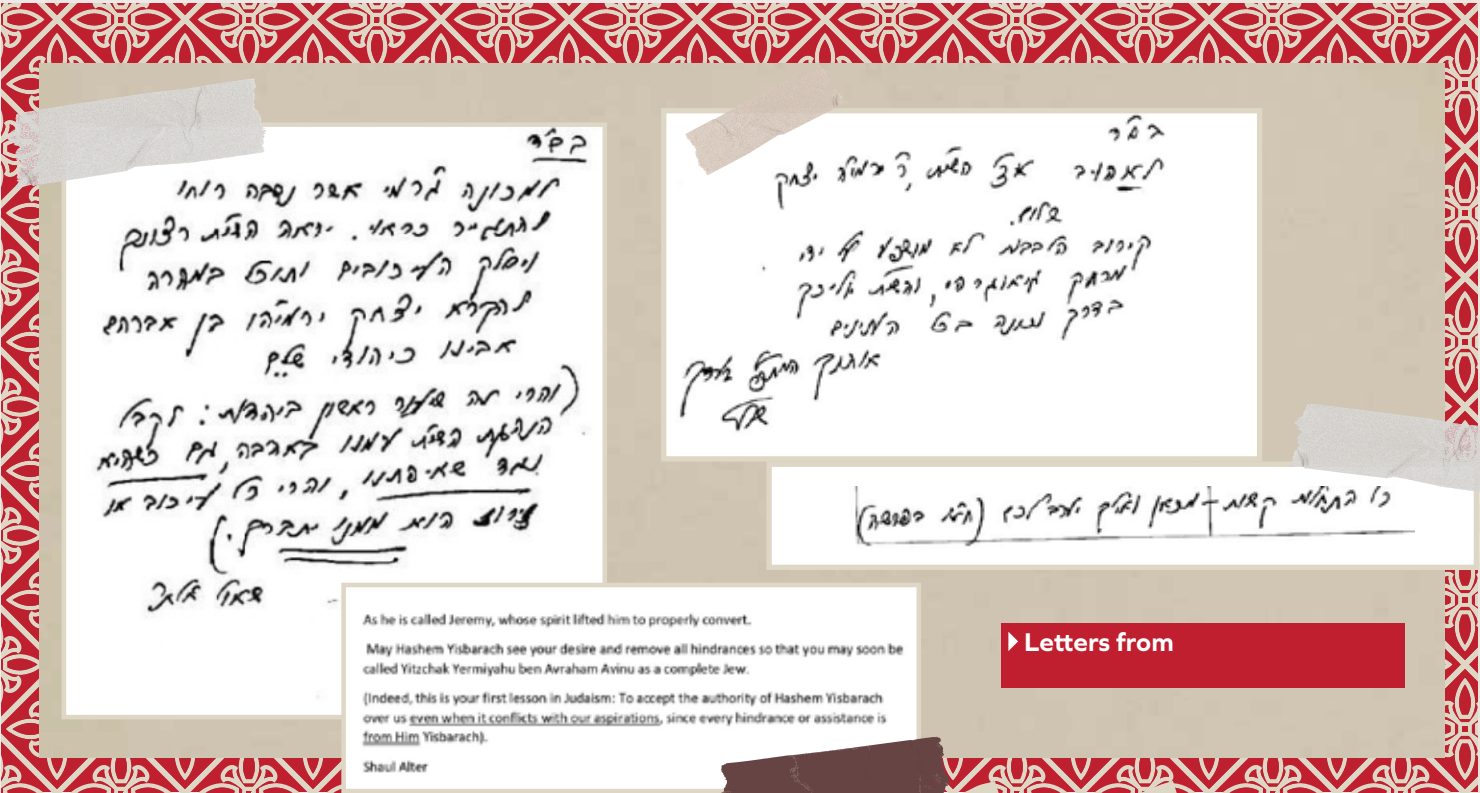
poverty, eating only rice and eggs, except for Shabbos when we had one normal meal at Rabbi Axelrod’s house. My lowest point came when my young son was crying for chicken cutlets and I could not afford it.

The rabbis from Hong Kong attempted to assist us. Rabbi Gershom sent some money and Rabbi Avtzon found me a remote-work job at his son’s company. I also borrowed money, ending up in a never-ending cycle of debts that just kept on accumulating.

After nine difficult months in the Philippines, we completed all requirements and had learned the necessary halachos. However, with no money and no ability to extend our visas, we had no choice but to return to Indonesia. I did not even have 100 rupiah, the smallest denomination in Indonesia, in my pocket.



► Bandung, Indonesia CREDIT: F1FANS - OWN WORK, CCO



The Attack in Australia, and its Unexpected Outcome

Despite everything, the visas to Australia continued to be rejected. Eventually, it was arranged that for the giyur to happen, the dayan from Sydney would fly to Singapore in Kislev 5786, and we would meet him there.

But then a terrible tragedy occurred. Rabbi Eliyahu Schlanger Hy”d, one of the Chabad shluchim in Sydney, was murdered by terrorists in a horrific attack on the first day of Chanukah, along with fourteen others.

The shock in Sydney was enormous. For me, it was devastating for an additional reason. Rabbi Schlanger was the son-in-law of the rav of Sydney and head of the conversion court, Rabbi Yehoram Ulman, who had been scheduled to conduct my giyur. I understood

instinctively that everything would now come to a halt.

“Again everything stops,” I told myself. “What does Hashem want from me?”

And then — from the tragedy came sweetness. It was precisely a result of the horrific attack that unexpectedly accelerated the process of giyur far beyond anything that had been possible before.

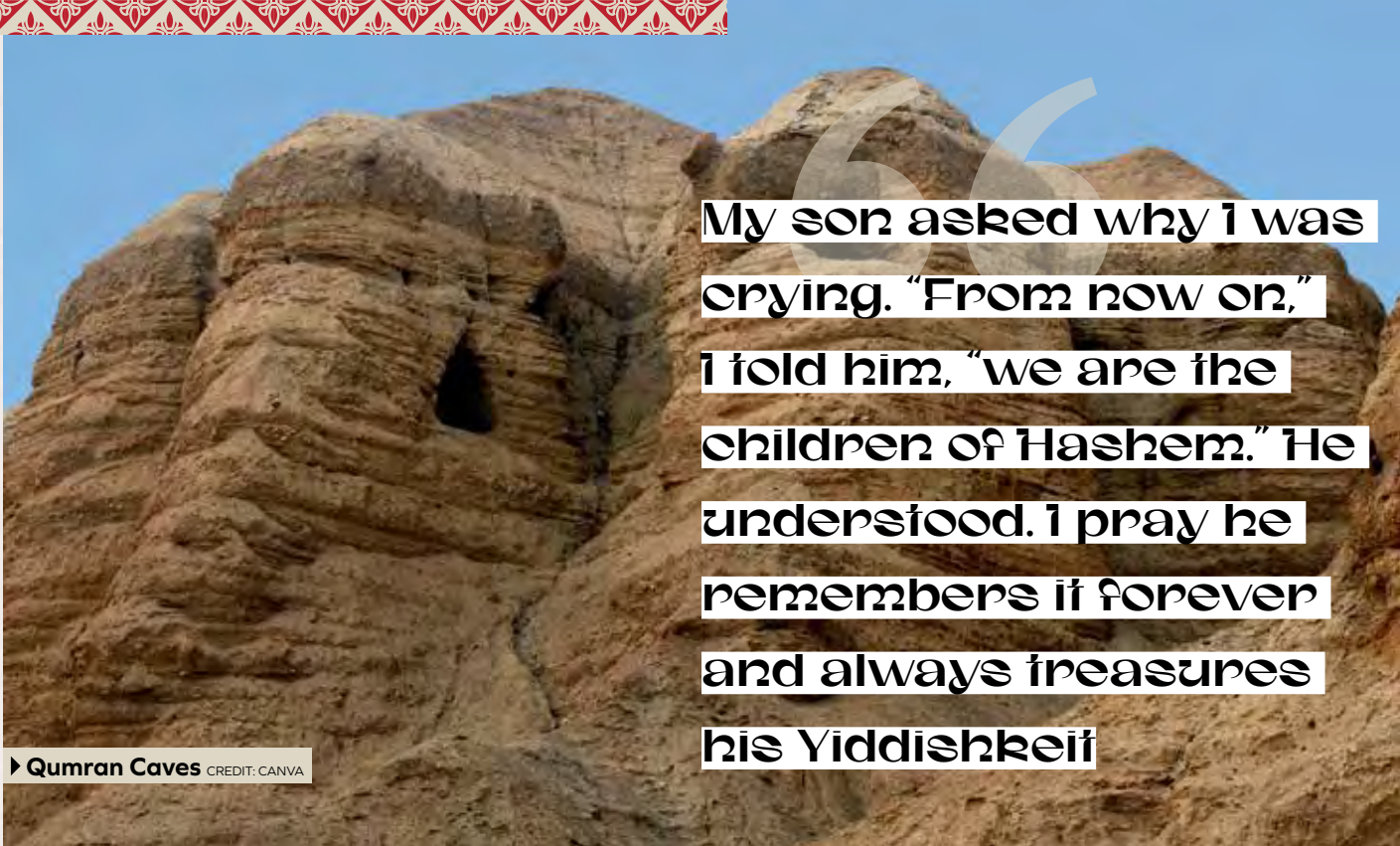
Two weeks after the attack, the prime minister of Australia — who had previously been viewed as sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and accused of downplaying antisemitism — wanted to win the hearts of the Jewish community. He therefore granted Rabbi Ulman a unique privilege — the authority to issue visas directly, especially for those connected to the tragedy or coming to strengthen the community.

Rabbi Ulman decided to try to use this privilege for us as well. He met with the prime minister, told him of our intricate story, and the prime

After nine difficult months in the Philippines, we completed all requirements and had learned the necessary halachos

minister agreed to help. We received visas to Australia immediately — without any documents and without any proof of a savings account.

My family and I were overwhelmed with emotion. When the time comes, nothing stands in the way and the salvation arrives instantly.



My son asked why I was crying. "From now on," I told him, "we are the children of Hashem." He understood. I pray he remembers it forever and always treasures his Yiddishkeit

► Qumran Caves CREDIT: CANVA

A Conversion, a Chuppah, a First Shabbos

On Friday, Erev Shabbos Kodesh Parshas Terumah, the 3rd of Adar 5786, our journey to Judaism reached its end. After years of searching, of trials and doubts, of mental and physical deprivations, we were under the wings of the Shechinah.

We arrived in Sydney, where the conversion was carried out under the supervision of Rabbi Ulman. I immersed in the mikveh, and I then stood there with my son to recite the brachah. I could not finish the words from the intensity of emotion. All the events of the past years rose before my eyes, telling me it was all worth it.

My son asked why I was crying. "From now on," I told him, "we are the children of Hashem." He understood. I pray he remembers it forever and

always treasures his Yiddishkeit.

Two hours later, my wife and I stood under the chuppah, with Rabbi Ulman serving as mesader kiddushin.

As the day faded and the sun set, our first Shabbos spread its wings over us. We welcomed it with overwhelming emotion. From now on, we would keep Shabbos fully. As Jews. We had joined the nation that keeps the Shabbos, for which Shabbos is the sign between them and Hashem.

Returning to Bali: A New Jewish Life Begins

We have a oneyear visa for Australia. But we temporarily returned to Bali in order to save money — we must still pay off the debts from our time in

the Philippines, have enough money to fund our flight to Australia and to have something to live on when we move there.

There is a real Jewish community in Melbourne, a yeshiva for my son, and a full Jewish life for my wife and I. We plan to move soon, im yirtzeh Hashem.

However, we have not abandoned the dream of living in Eretz Yisrael. To be eligible for Israeli citizenship as Jews, we must first live at least one year in a recognized Jewish community. But that is the goal. It has always been the direction, ever since my first visit to Yerushalayim at the age of 19, when I stood in the street and saw Jews with kippahs and peyos, and my heart broke that I had not been born a Jew.

One day, with Hashem's help, I will close the circle and return there as a proud Jew. ♦