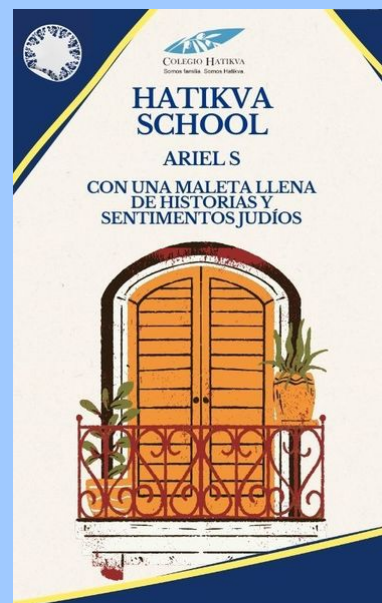




A Suitcase Full of Stories and Jewish Sentiment



Name: **Ariel S**

Country of residence: **Spain**

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Hello, my name is Ariel Shahaar. I am 16 years old and currently live in Barcelona. Although I am still young, I feel that I have already had the opportunity to go through many important experiences that have helped me understand who I am, where I come from, and who I want to become in the future. My story is deeply connected to Judaism, Israel, and the different Jewish communities that have been part of my life since I was born. Through all of these places, people, and experiences, I have built a strong identity that I carry with great pride today.

I am part of a family of five: my parents, my older sister Maya, my younger brother Jonatan, and me. Maya is 17 years old and, besides being my sister, she is also one of my best friends. We have always been very close, sharing trips, schools, experiences, and many important moments together. Jonatan, on the other hand, is 7 years old and brings an incredible amount of joy and energy to our family. Even though we are all very different from one another, we have always been very close as a family.

My family has very diverse and meaningful roots. On my mother's side, my great-grandmother was Russian and my great-grandfather was Romanian. He survived the Holocaust and, after the Second World War, decided to make aliyah and begin a new life in Israel. Stories like his taught me from a very young age how important the existence of the State of Israel is, and why the Jewish people need a safe place where they can live. My mother, Meirav, was born and raised in Israel, and she has always passed on to me important values connected to family, hard work, education, and Jewish identity.

On my father's side, my family comes from Morocco. They also made aliyah to Israel many years ago, becoming part of the unique cultural mix that defines the country. My father, Yaron, has always been a great inspiration to me. Through him, I learned to be proud of my roots and to deeply value community life, unity among Jews, and the importance of helping other members of the Jewish community around the world.

I was born in Istanbul, Turkey, a city full of history, cultures, and traditions. I also had my Brit Milah there. However, we lived in Turkey for only a short time because, at the time, there were tensions and concerns about possible attacks against the Israeli embassy, and my parents decided that moving would be the best choice for our family.



We first moved to Germany, where we lived from when I was about one year old until I was three. Although I was very young, I remember that my family did not particularly enjoy living there. Even so, it was the first place where I began to have contact with Jewish community life, and where my parents started teaching me the importance of keeping our traditions alive even while living far from Israel.

Later, we moved to Israel, where I lived from the age of three until I was eight. That period was one of the most important stages of my life because I grew up surrounded by my closest family. I started school, made friends, and learned a great deal about Israeli culture, traditions, and Judaism. In Israel, everything felt natural: being Jewish was simply part of everyday life, and there was never a need to explain who you were or why you celebrated certain holidays. I also grew very close to my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, many of whom still live there today. I continue to feel a very strong connection to Israel, and every time I return, I feel as though I am coming home.

Finally, when I was eight years old, we moved to Barcelona because of my father's work. At first, the change was significant: a new language, a new city, and a completely different environment. Over time, however, Barcelona became a city that I truly love. I grew up here, made some of my closest friends, and learned much of what I know today about myself and the world.

Since arriving in Barcelona, I have studied at Hatikva, the Jewish school of Barcelona, a place that means much more to me than simply being a school. There, I learned how to express myself, stand up for my beliefs, and feel proud of my Jewish identity. I also learned how to deal with situations involving antisemitism and how to explain the importance of Israel and the Jewish people through respect and dialogue. Many of my closest friendships began at this school, and I feel that we have grown together not only academically, but also as people.

Through the school, I have also had the opportunity to take part in very special trips and experiences. One of the most meaningful was the First Young Zionist Congress in Budapest, where I met Jewish teenagers from different countries and felt a strong connection with Jewish communities from around the world. We also went on a trip to Mallorca, where we learned about the history of the Chuetas and how, for centuries, many Jews had to hide their identity in order to survive. That experience made me reflect deeply on how important it is that today we are able to live openly and freely as Jews.



In Barcelona, I am also involved in different Jewish communities and youth movements. I sometimes attend the Jewish Community of Barcelona, especially during important holidays such as Yom Kippur or for special celebrations. However, the place I go to most regularly is Chabad, particularly for Shabbat. There, I found a warm, welcoming, and family-like environment where I always feel comfortable.

I am also a madrich at Yajad, where I organize activities and spend time with young children between the ages of six and seven. It is something I enjoy very much because I feel that I am able to pass on joy, values, and experiences to them, in the same way that other madrichim did for me when I was younger. Being able to have a positive influence on younger children is a responsibility that I really enjoy taking on.

Another movement that is very important to me is BBYO. Through this organization, I had the opportunity to travel to Philadelphia and meet Jewish teenagers from many parts of the world. That experience broadened my perspective and helped me understand just how connected Jewish communities around the world truly are. I am currently the shaliach of the Barcelona chapter, something that excites me greatly because I feel that I can help strengthen the Jewish youth community in my city and create new opportunities for other young people.

I also took part in CTeen, through which I travelled to New York together with the Chabad rabbi. That trip was an incredible experience because I learned so much, met very interesting people, and shared moments that I will never forget. Beyond simply having fun, I felt a very strong connection to Judaism and to young people who shared values and experiences similar to my own.

All of these experiences have taught me something very important: being Jewish does not only mean practising a religion or following family traditions. For me, it means being part of a history that goes back thousands of years, belonging to a united people, and being part of a global community that remains connected regardless of the country in which we live. It means feeling a sense of responsibility toward other Jews, keeping our traditions alive, and understanding the importance of identity and memory.



I am now entering a new stage of my life. Next year, I will begin the IB programme at a non-Jewish school, which will be a completely new experience for me. I know it will be an important challenge because I will be leaving an environment that I have been used to for many years, but I also believe it will be a great opportunity to continue growing, meet new people, and learn more about the world around me.

Even though I am still young, there is one thing I already feel quite certain about: once I finish my studies, I want to return to Israel. A large part of my family lives there and, like many members of my family before me, I would like to serve in the Israeli army. For me, it would be a way of contributing, helping protect the country, and giving back something to a place that represents so much to me and my family.

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