

A full-page photograph of Omri Casspi in a purple Sacramento Kings jersey, jumping high to dunk a basketball. He is in the center of the frame, with his arms extended upwards. To his right, a player in a white Golden State Warriors jersey is also jumping, with his arms raised. The background shows a basketball arena with spectators in the stands and various advertisements on the walls, including 'State Farm' and 'KYOCERA'. The title 'Omri Casspi' is overlaid in large white serif font across the top half of the image.

Omri Casspi

By Hillel Kuttler

Thirty seconds into a mid-January game in Washington, D.C., a man shouts out from an aisle seat 10 rows behind the visiting Sacramento Kings' bench.

"Omri!"

Without averting his eyes from the action on the court, second-year forward Omri Casspi waves his raised left hand in response. Casspi's teammate and friend, Jason Thompson, rebounds the ball and lays it in for the game's first points.

Since entering the National Basketball Association in 2009 as the first Israeli in the world's premier basketball league, the 6-foot-9-inch Casspi has been the darling of Jewish fans. Wherever the Kings play, spectators sport oversized blue-and-white Israeli flags, placards, purple-and-white Casspi jerseys—and bellow their full-throated support. Sometimes, after changing into street clothes, he returns to the court to sign autographs and shmooze with fans after the game.

Our Man in Sacramento

In Atlanta, adults competed with kids to reach him. In Oakland, security guards extricated Casspi from the post-game fans crowding around him so the team bus could depart for the airport.

Casspi embraces his role and understands the hopes invested in him as an athlete, Jew and Israeli.

“It’s unbelievable,” Casspi says in barely accented English. “It’s the greatest feeling in the world [to] see such great support of fans who come to watch me and the team, to be invited for Shabbat dinner, for Kiddush, for [synagogue services] wherever we go—L.A., New York, Atlanta. I’ve been in Indiana, I’ve been in Minnesota. I’m not alone. It gives me a warm feeling being so far away from home and family.”

“Everywhere he goes, he’s like a rock star,” opines Kings owner Gavin Maloof. The Kings’ director of player development, Lafayette Lever, likens Casspi mania to the excitement that greeted Yao Ming’s Houston arrival from China in 2002.

NBA teams drafted Israelis Doron Sheffer (1996) and Lior Eliyahu and Yotam Halperin (both in 2006). Nadav Henefeld, Oded Katash and Mickey Berkovitch got nibbles earlier. None of the six landed a contract to play.

Casspi, like Nobel Laureates S.Y. Agnon, astronaut Ilan Ramon and Olympic gold medalist Gal Friedman, is the first Israeli in his field. “Omri Casspi was the right person chosen to be this pioneer,” Lever says. “He’s been receptive to all those [public] demands and requests, and still lives the life of a normal person.”

The first Israeli NBA player has made statements along the way. On draft day in June 2009, Casspi asked for, and received, uniform No. 18, the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word *chai*, or life. He later bought 18 Kings season-ticket packages to distribute to Jewish and non-Jewish children. Wearing “18 is who I am, who I am representing, being a Jew and Israeli in the NBA,” he says.



Photo by Nathaniel S. Erdner/ABC via Getty Images



Above: Israeli flag-sporting fans show their support for Omri Casspi as he plays for the Rookie Team against the Sophomore Team during the Feb. 12, 2010, T-Mobile Rookie Challenge and Youth Jam—part of NBA All-Star Friday at Dallas' American Airlines Center.

Below: The Sacramento Kings website featuring a Hebrew version of Casspi's jersey.

Right: Sacramento Kings Omri Casspi displays his competitive face as he runs upcourt against the Oklahoma City Thunder at Sacramento's ARCO Arena on Nov. 10, 2009.

Previous page: Sacramento Kings forward Omri Casspi shoots the ball against Golden State Warriors forward Dorell Wright on Jan. 21, 2011, at Oracle Arena in Oakland, Calif.

At home in Sacramento's ARCO Arena, inklings of Israel can be found,

like jerseys with Casspi's name stitched in Hebrew for sale and large placards hanging from the rafters proclaiming "Casspi's House" (also in Hebrew).

During his rookie season, he shook hands on the court with the Memphis Grizzlies' Iranian center, Hamed Haddadi. "Even though he's from a country" whose foreign policy is anti-Israel, Casspi says, "we compete on the court and appreciate each other. For me, it meant a lot."

Last Chanukah, Casspi participated in an on-court ceremony before the game in Los Angeles and joined rabbis and Jewish fans in the stands after the game in Sacramento. The Kings value Casspi most for his work ethic, toughness on defense and commitment to improve. Lever noticed those qualities when they met in Las Vegas before Casspi signed his Kings' contract. Casspi and Lever, a former all-star guard, shot hoops together for two hours.

"Most guys have a passion for the game, but Omri goes a step further because he'll do it the way you want him to. He's never learned to say, 'no.' He's very, very

humble," Lever says.

"Usually, you have guys coming in from overseas perceived as not tough. He came in, and he was tough. He was always in attack mode when it came to going to the basket and defending the basket," Lever says.

Omri's father, Shimon Casspi, traces the turning point to a Mac-cabi youth league game. He called his son, then 13, "a waiter," delivering rebounds for teammates to score.

"He got mad at me, so I took him to a sign in the arena that said, 'He Who Dares, Succeeds,'" Shimon says. "Omri knew how to accept these

comments, fix what he needed to and be ready for the next game."

Casspi's had heroic NBA moments.

On Dec. 6, in Los Angeles, on the annual Jewish Heritage Night: Casspi scored a team-high 21 points and nabbed 10 rebounds in a loss to the Clippers.

And on Jan. 2, at home, in a tie game, with half a minute left against the Phoenix Suns, Eugene "Pooh" Jeter, the stocky Kings point guard, whipped a bounce pass to his right. Casspi swished a three-pointer, putting Sacramento ahead to stay and sending him running into teammates' arms.

"Omri has the guts to take that shot," Jeter recalls. "I looked to get it to him, and I knew he could make it."

Casspi often invites him and forwards Francisco Garcia and Thompson to shoot around at the team's practice facility late at night on non-game days, Jeter explains.

The tall Israeli, who'll turn 23 in June, averages 9.4 points and 25.4 minutes per game this season (as of February 23), compared to 10.3 and 25.1, respectively, his rookie year. The

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Kings won only 25 of 82 games last season and are headed for fewer wins in 2010–11. The team is rebuilding around its three recent first-round draft picks: guard Tyreke Evans, center DeMarcus Cousins and Casspi.

After racing to three wins in its first four games this season, Sacramento plummeted, losing 27 of 32 games heading into Washington, D.C. Casspi started eight games early on, but has since been a key reserve.

“We love having Omri on the team. He charges into every day,” says head coach Paul Westphal during a

Washington arena workout, as Casspi drains three pointers behind him. “He’s anxious to be great. He plays with passion in games and in practice. His level of intensity is very high. It’s one of the reasons he’s so good coming off the bench. He brings a shot of adrenaline to the team.”

Casspi bonded quickly with teammates Garcia and Thompson, and with Daniel Shapiro, their strength and conditioning coach. Thompson and Shapiro visited Israel last summer to attend Casspi’s brother Eitan’s

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The International Kings

OMRI CASSPI is not the Sacramento Kings’ only Israeli connection.

Beno Udrih, Sacramento’s left-handed point guard, played for the Jewish state’s dynastic club, Maccabi Tel Aviv, during the 2002–03 season. Eugene “Pooh” Jeter earned the Israeli League’s Sixth Man of the Year Award last season with the Hapoel Jerusalem team. Tyreke Evans, the NBA’s 2009–10 Rookie of the Year, conducted a basketball clinic at a Maine camp for Israeli and Arab children.

Much of the team is foreign-born: Udrih (Slovenia); Francisco Garcia (Dominican Republic); Samuel Dalembert (Haiti). Serbia’s Vlade Divac and Peja Stojakovic, Turkey’s Hedo Turkoglu and Argentina’s Andres Nocioni were once Kings.

Udrih learned under Maccabi’s American coach, David Blatt, and says that “the hard work” he invested playing for Israeli, Italian and Russian teams is “what got me here” to the NBA.

While playing in Jerusalem, Jeter followed Casspi because most Kings games are televised on Israel’s Channel 5. Just before signing with Sacramento, Jeter says, he met Casspi at the Las Vegas Summer League.

Kings head coach Paul Westphal visited Israel in the mid-1990s to handle color commentary for an NBA Finals telecast. Casspi hosted forward Jason Thompson and strength and conditioning coach Daniel Shapiro last summer in Israel, and Thompson, Jeter, Garcia and Dalembert plan to go this summer. Garcia can’t wait to float in the Dead Sea. Dalembert wants to see Jesus’ baptism site.

Owner Gavin Maloof, three of whose grandparents were born in Lebanon, is thinking bigger. In 2004, Sacramento played the Houston Rockets in China, Rockets center Yao Ming’s homeland, “and it was incredible,” Maloof says. With Casspi on the Kings, Maloof has lobbied NBA commissioner David Stern to send the team to Israel for preseason or regular season games.

The NBA considered sending the Kings to play in Israel last summer, but the league’s tight overseas game schedule prevented it, Stern says. The NBA, he adds, “will likely consider it again, no earlier than the 2012–13 season.” The last NBA team to play in Israel was the Miami Heat, for a 1999 preseason game.

Basketball is “truly an international sport, so I think there’s a big upside” to going, Maloof says by phone from his home in Las Vegas. “My mother [Colleen] has been to Israel, and really loved the country. I’ve never been there. I’m dying to go.”

—Hillel Kuttler



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wedding. Casspi brought them to Yavne to meet his folks, and to the beach, Jerusalem and up north. They also watched Casspi play for Israel's national team against Italy.

The three supported him later that summer back home when two downtown billboards featuring Casspi were painted with swastikas. They drove to Casspi's house and offered to stay with him.

"He was heartbroken. He came to Sacramento to play, and it happened in Sacramento," says Garcia, toweling

off after a Kings' pregame practice.

"I told him he's got to stop worrying about it and just keep doing his job."

Says Thompson: "It was a tough situation. You know, Omri has a lot on his shoulders—not just that he represents his country, but the whole Jewish community, for the most part." He said that while Casspi has this passionate group of supporters, he still faces some people who are anti-Semitic.

Garcia and Thompson already had taken Casspi under their wing. "He's like a brother to me," Garcia says. Offers Thompson: "I'm a guy who gives him advice and just makes sure his head is right."

Casspi is grateful to have them there, especially following the swastika incident. "I appreciated that my friends, teammates and organization supported me," he says. "It showed good friendship. There's no place for racism in the world."

He's heartened, too, when Sacramento's Muslims approach him on the street, offering encouragement. "They'll say, 'I'm from Lebanon, I'm from Iraq, I'm from Iran. We appreciate what you're doing for the Kings, we appreciate the hard work, and you give a good name to Israel,'" Casspi says.



The Israeli flag stands directly behind the front door of the Sacramento house Casspi shares with his older brother, Eitan, who serves as his manager, gofer and gatekeeper. When the Casspis, and Kings, are in town, a Tiberias-born chef, Yair Luria, drops off the comfort foods he prepares to evoke the player's Moroccan-Tunisian-Spanish-Polish-Israeli roots: Mediterranean meatballs seasoned with cumin and oregano, pasta, borekas, schnitzel, shawarma, hummus and salads. Casspi and his parents speak daily. His father, Shimon, comes from the family's home in Yavne, south of Tel Aviv, twice a season. His mother, Ilana, who played forward on the women's professional team Hapoel Holon, and 17-year-old sister, Aviv, playing for Israeli team Elizur Holon, visit, too.

"He's the one common denominator all Jews in Sacramento have," says Elad Lerech, who runs Israel-oriented programs through the city's Jewish Federation. "If he can get people interested in Israel even a little, that'll be great."

Sacramento seventh-grader Adam Friedman, whose family has Kings season tickets, marvels at Casspi's "incredibly athletic plays" and hustle. His favorite image? Casspi's drive downcourt on Dec. 11 against the Miami Heat, straight at LeBron James, then dropping a behind-the-back pass to Samuel Dalembert for a dunk.

"I believe that if I want to be a good role model, it's the way I behave, the way I talk, the way I interview, the way I get dressed. You're not going to see me drunk at night and out at the clubs," Casspi says. "By being a good role model for young kids in Israel in particular, and in the United States in general, it gives some idea about our... hard work [as Israelis]. Nothing came easy to me, and I worked hard to get where I am. Being a professional basketball player, I worry about... being the best role model I can be for young kids."

From BBYO to the NBA

When he heard that SuperSonics player Michael Cage lived down the street from his Seattle home, 11-year-old Daniel Shapiro knocked on Cage's door.

The two soon became "like brothers," Shapiro says: shooting baskets, playing video games and going to movies. As a teenager, Shapiro introduced Cage to the NBA player's future wife, Jodi. Cage got Shapiro a job as the team's ball boy.

Thus began Shapiro's basketball career. In college, he volunteered as Seattle's assistant strength coach, then after graduation got on staff. Now in his sixth season as the Sacramento Kings' strength and conditioning coach, Shapiro, 33, helps players recover from injuries, designs workout and stretching regimens and advises them on nutrition.

Shapiro and younger brother Elan were the only Jews in their public schools but attended Hebrew school and went to a Conservative synagogue. Shapiro speaks fondly of "the best summers of my life" at Olympia's Camp Solomon Schechter, where he met Jewish kids from the Pacific Northwest, Canada and Israel.

As a member of B'nai B'rith Youth Organization's East Side chapter and then its Rainier chapter, Shapiro attended meetings and played on BBYO basketball teams in a Seattle league. He also served as president of his United Synagogue Youth chapter.

"I want my children to have a very similar upbringing. It's where [my] values and morals were developed as a young Jewish man," Shapiro says. "My friends from that camp and synagogue are still some of my closest." In Sacramento, Shapiro attends a Conservative congregation. Last fall, he brought Omri Casspi to Yom Kippur services. The two are close friends. At home and on the road, they often eat out together.

"When you're Jewish and in an area with not a lot of Jews, you find each other," Shapiro says. Casspi adds: "Both of us being Jewish, both of us being away from home, we hang out together."

During Chanukah in 2009, Shapiro, Casspi and their visiting relatives gathered in the ARCO Arena players' family lounge after a game. They lit candles, sang traditional songs and munched sufganiyot, Israel's holiday donuts. Then Shapiro's mother Raquel asked Ilana Casspi, the basketball player's mom, to enlist Omri's help in finding Daniel a nice Jewish girl.

— Hillel Kuttler



Tal Doctorvitch (left), a schoolboy from Kiryat Gat in southern Israel, and Palestinian Qusai Ermeli (second from right), from the West Bank town of Jericho, present Israeli player Omri Casspi with a T-shirt sporting his name above the word “peace” in multiple languages during a basketball workshop organized by the Peres Center for Peace in Jaffa on Sept. 1, 2010.

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Casspi had already succeeded with 14-year-old Guy Heifetz. The Tel Aviv-born Maryland resident sits with his parents at the January Kings-Wizards game in the lower-level seats in Section 108 of Washington, D.C.’s Verizon Center. He is wearing a Casspi jersey the player autographed last season.

Heifetz plays high school basketball, and his approach resembles Casspi’s: hit three-pointers and play tough defense. When he met Casspi, Heifetz asked him for some tips on how to improve.

“He told me, ‘Be physical, shoot the ball, be a team player and work out,’” Heifetz says.

In Section 116, high up behind the basket, sits a cluster of Jewish fans from synagogue, school and community groups. Two Israeli embassy interns display their flag when Casspi enters late in the first quarter. “Omri Casspi” chants echo from the stands. Casspi drills an outside shot, and the rhythmic clapping intensifies. Casspi drains a three-pointer. After feeding Cousins for a reverse jam, Casspi pumps his right fist.

A family of six unfurls its own 4-by-5-foot Israeli flag. The Nabatkhorian, of northern Virginia by way of Morocco, France, Iran and Israel, came just to watch Casspi play. The tickets were expensive, “but he deserves it,” says the mom, Nathalie. “I felt that you have to

support an Israeli,” she continues. “I’m proud. How often do we get to see an Israeli player? It’s wonderful!”

The Kings claw back from deep holes—deficits of 19 points after one quarter and eight points with two minutes remaining in regulation—but their hustle and clutch shooting force overtime. The Casspi fans filling Sec-

tion 116 jump up and down during every timeout. In overtime, Casspi’s turnaround jumper misses. Washington races downcourt and scores. With three seconds remaining and the Kings down by three, Casspi inbounds the ball. Cousins clanks a three-point shot. Wizards: 136, Kings: 133. A “heart-breaker,” Westphal says later.

“It was just a tough game. It’s like any sport—you have to keep trying,” Casspi, who scored 15 points, says in the locker room, giving his take on losses. “We just have to learn from [the losses]. We were behind, but we made big plays to come back.”

The first Israeli NBA player rises, buttons his long, black overcoat and pats the white scarf bulging from his collarbone. He grabs his stereo headphones from the shelf, stretching them around his neck, takes a water bottle from the refrigerator and ambles down the hall to the team bus. Next year in Jerusalem, yes, but next game in Boston. 🍌

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