

## Nikia Brown proceeds in Kochav Nolad

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African-American convert is winning over the TV judges, but needs to lose that 'terrible accent.'

Any English-speaking immigrant who's faced the tongue-twisting challenge of learning Hebrew can empathize with Nikia Brown's plight.

No matter how long most of us have worked at wrapping our mouths around those "reshes" and "hets," and perfecting that Sabra pronunciation, it still comes out sounding like we just got off the boat.

The only difference between us and the 34-year-old African-American convert to Judaism is that while the neighborhood makolet man is the one snickering at us, Brown is getting critiqued on national television.

One of the 18 finalists in the eighth season of the popular Channel 2 singing competition series Kochav Nolad (A Star is Born), Brown, who lives in Holon, barely knew a word of Hebrew two months ago when she decided on a whim to try out for the show.

"When I first auditioned, I didn't realize that I would have to sing in Hebrew every week. I could have fainted when they told me," Brown said on Wednesday, during a short break in between rehearsals for that night's show in which she was tackling Gali Atari's "Stronger than Wind."

It was Brown's bluesy, gospel voice – despite its prominent accent and pronunciation problems – that in May carried her into the competition that has made stars out of the likes of Shiri Maimon, Harel Skaat and Ninet Tayeb.

That and her intriguing back-end story. Brown and her husband, Terry, converted to Judaism after getting married and making their home in Kansas City, Missouri.

"We were searching for something, and we ended up going to synagogue services once," said Brown. "Then the more we learned about Judaism, the more we fell in love with it. It comes from someplace deep in our hearts."

### **Nikia falls in love with Israel, plans to make Aliyah**

Almost three years ago, Terry surprised Brown with a vacation to Israel – and they and their newborn daughter Tziporah never left.

"We loved it here, and have started the aliya process, which is still in

process,” said Brown, likely referring to frequent problems that black American convert immigrants encounter from the Interior Ministry before they receive citizenship.

Brown wasn’t aware that an Israeli version of the hit US series American Idol existed until a friend mentioned it and suggested that she audition.

“I didn’t even decide to go to the audition until the night before. I waited 12 hours, and sang a verse of [hip hot hit] “Ein Gvulot” by Sivan that I had memorized – I didn’t know any songs in Hebrew,” said Brown.

For her final audition, she used English phonetics to learn the lyrics to Arik Einstein’s classic “Uf Gozal” (Fly, Little Nestling), and her performance resulted in Brown becoming the first finalist in Kochav Nolad’s history who didn’t know Hebrew.

Her selection was tempered by the trepidation of the judges, including Dana International and Tsedi Tzarfaty, who warned Brown that her Hebrew deficiencies were likely to be a formidable obstacle in the competition, a high-level field filled with seasoned singers whose main advantage over Brown was their fluency in the language they were singing in.

### **Ulpan Or director: We never watched Kochav Nolad before Nikia**

Enter Yoel and Orly Ganor, the directors of Ulpan Or – with its logo, “Learning Hebrew at the speed of light.”

“My wife and I don’t really watch TV much, and we had never watched Kochav Nolad. But we had a family gathering with our children and one of the grandchildren asked to watch it, and there was Nikia,” said Yoel Ganor, who with his wife, founded the Hebrew teaching center in 1997.

“At first, we were surprised to see a black woman singing “Uf Gozal” in a pretty terrible accent. We heard about her converting and wanting to become Israeli and we thought that maybe we could help her, to take on a mission to help her make her way in Israel. We contacted the producers of the show and offered our services free of charge, and they accepted.”

Thus between the end of the auditions and the beginning of the finalists competition in early June, Brown began Ulpan Or’s Hebrew boot camp, sneaking lessons in at both their Jerusalem and Tel Aviv branches whenever her schedule would allow.

Employing unorthodox methods not found in the usual multi-month ulpan classes in the country, the Ganors brought Brown to the Carmel Shuk market in Tel Aviv, where she browsed, shopped and spoke to the vendors in Hebrew only. The next lesson found her at a coffee shop for a lesson in reading a Hebrew menu and to order coffee and cake.

“We started asking ourselves years ago why olim go to ulpan for six months and come out with so little Hebrew. People are frustrated that they still can’t communicate after such a long time,” Yoel Ganor said, explaining Ulpan Or’s philosophy.

“We present the language in its simplest form. A person can go through ulpan and conjugate verbs and work with tables, but they can’t order water in a restaurant.”

Using one-on-one instruction and intense use of audio – all of Ulpan Or’s lessons are downloadable and students are encouraged to walk around with their iPods listening to them – the Ganors claim that students begin speaking Hebrew almost immediately.

“We looked at the way a child learns his mother tongue and an emphasis on the audio component of the language. A child listens to something and then is able to repeat it correctly,” said Ganor. “The transformation is amazing. People who come to us for a one-week course deliver a speech in Hebrew at their graduation.”

### **Brown: I can converse with the other singers now**

While Brown’s study schedule was broken up due to her Kochav Nolad commitments, she confirmed that the crash course produced positive results.

“In everyday life, I’m able to understand a lot more of what I hear, and I can communicate in normal situations like at the bank or a restaurant,” she said.

“Nikia told us today that now when she’s around the other singers on the show, she has an idea what they’re talking about and she can converse with them in Hebrew,” added Ganor.

And those pesky “reshes” and “hets”? The jury is still out. While she’s survived the audience voting each week so far, the judges have been full of praise for her voice, but less enamored with her pronunciation.

When she sang Ivri Lider’s “Zachiti Le’ehov” (I Was Blessed To Have Loved), judge Margalit Tzan’ani enthusiastically responded, “I’ve found a soul sister.”

And the following week after singing “So Far,” – the bilingual hit by Habanot Nechama – Tzan’ani’s reaction was: “Black groove! Black is beautiful.”

### **Dana International to Nikia: You possess an 'international voice'**

Last week, Brown took on a subdued version of “Song for Shira,” written by Yonatan Gefen and popularized by Miri Mesika. The heartfelt rendition included screen cuts to Brown’s daughter Tziporah, with the singer interjecting “my baby girl” in English, adding to the emotional effect.

Judge Dana International summed up the judges’ feelings, saying that Brown possessed “an international voice” but that “you still need to work on your accent.”

Her performance on Wednesday of Atari’s ‘Stronger than the Wind,’ with verses in English and chorus in Hebrew, was her most flawed performance, a problem hinted at earlier in the day by Yoel Ganor, who was with Brown and his wife at the show’s Herzliya studios to provide language assistance.

“We’re about to go into a rehearsal, and there’s a lot of ‘reshes’ in the song – Nikia’s having some problems,” he said, promising to call back later. An hour later, things were much calmer.

“She’s singing the song half in Hebrew and half in English, and she’s having a hard time with the accent and the understanding of the lyrics – nobody’s explained to her the meaning of the song,” Ganor said. “We wrote it out for her in Hebrew and went over each line with her. Now, she’s really connecting with the meaning of the song.”

### **Yoel: 'We're crossing our fingers that she moves ahead'**

Despite the coaching, her performance was ranked seventh out of 10 by the judges, with Gal Uchovsky ranking it the worst performance of the night. Still, the viewers voted her on to the next round and another week of learning a Hebrew song in record time.

There’s probably nobody rooting harder for Brown to succeed than the Ganors, who have become devoted viewers of the show.

“Of course, we now watch every week. We’re crossing our fingers that she moves ahead,” Yoel said.

The ongoing comments and jokes among the judges at Brown’s expense over her accent and pronunciation lapses in Hebrew haven’t bothered the singer, but instead, have strengthened her resolve to make up for her language handicap in the competition.

“It’s inspired me to work harder. I appreciate the responses of Dana and Tzedi, because otherwise I wouldn’t know there’s a problem. If I’m going to live here and learn the language, I want to be able to speak it correctly,” said Brown.

And does the gifted singer with her limited abilities in Hebrew think she can become this year’s kochav nolad?

“Well, you know, it’s up to the people of Israel,” she said. “But if they’re willing to accept me, then I think I have a chance.”