



From the time humans evolved socially enough to be fashion-conscious, men and women have been battling hair loss. Treatments for hair loss are as old as civilization itself. An early formula in China was made from safflower oil, herbs such as rosemary, and mashed animal testes that was rubbed into the scalp. In India yogis recommended standing on your head, believing the additional blood flow would stimulate hair growth. And according to a medical text dating back to 1550 BC, the ancient Egyptians used a variety of treatments, including ointments made from porcupine hair and hippopotamus fat.

The Romans were particularly follicle-conscious. According to historic lore Julius Caesar revived the Greek tradition of wearing laurel leaf crowns to conceal his male pattern baldness. He also wore toupees, which by then had already been around for three thousand years. Romans were also known to paint their bald heads to look like they had locks of hair. A couple of millennia later, options for those suffering hair loss weren't all that much better. The 1800s saw a parade of snake oil salesmen peddling magic tonics to cure hair loss. The mid-1900s introduced technological "breakthroughs" such as a head cap that used heat and light to supposedly revive hair follicles or the suction cup that promised to stimulate hair growth. Late-night commercials of the '70s and '80s touted aerosol dye sprays to cover bald spots.

The hair restoration industry needed fewer hucksters and more real innovators. Enter Amnon Zakay, who founded Raz International and has

operated it since 1982. While he performs all methods of non-surgical, non-invasive hair restoration and hair loss treatments, it's Amnon's flagship restoration method—integrated thread hairlines (ITHL)—that attracts clients from all over the country. The procedure sews hair into the client's existing tresses, very close to the scalp, using a special thread instead of uncomfortable glues, chemicals, or painful surgery. Rather than shaving or trimming, he blends in more hair to enhance what's there. And there is no damage to the natural hair.

In 2016 Amnon received his accreditation as a master hair replacement specialist from the American Hair Loss Council, a nonprofit organization. A licensed California barber, Amnon is now a sought after guest speaker at industry conferences, where he also demonstrates his groundbreaking ITHL method and shares his expertise on other hair loss topics. But most of the time you will find him at the Raz Hair studio in San Diego working with clients, and business has never been more brisk.

According to a 2019 report, North America is currently the largest hair restoration market, with more than 130,000 individuals undergoing treatment annually and an anticipated CAGR of 20 percent by 2024. The report notes: "Growing celebrity and media influences, increasing awareness regarding one's appearance, peer pressure, societal pressure, growing urbanization, high income, and growing word of mouth are the potential drivers for the North American hair restoration services market growth." The industry is also seeing worldwide growth, especially in Asia.

While an expanding market is good news, it's not top of mind for Amnon. "Our goal is not to conduct massive sales," he says. "We are looking to build a lasting relationship with our clients."

To that end Amnon still conducts every consultation personally so he can assess the client's unique hair situation and provide them with a highly personalized treatment recommendation. That one-on-one, consumer-



Amnon Zakay

centric philosophy, commitment to quality, and the proprietary ITHL method, are the foundation of Raz Hair and Amnon's niche market success. But his foray into the hair restoration industry was less a calling in the beginning and much more a serendipitous—an unexpected—opportunity.

Amnon grew up in Israel, where military service is compulsory for all eighteen-year-olds. In the 1970s that basic enlistment lasted three years for men, two years for women. So after high

school

he joined the Israeli Army where he became a professional officer. Eight years into his service, when he was twenty-five, Amnon started losing hair on the crown of his head, and his older brother referred him to a hair replacement specialist in Tel Aviv who Amnon says was known as a magician when it came to hair loss solutions.

“His method was very revolutionary back then,” Amnon says. “But I did it to fix my hair, and I became a client. Nine months later when I came for another treatment, the older gentleman who owned the company told me he was going to retire and that he wanted me to take over his business. Even though I was doing something completely different in my life, he said: *I love my clients; I've know them for years, and I want somebody like you to take of them and this business. I think you're the right one who will do a great job.*”

The offer came out of left field, and Amnon was taken aback almost to the point of insult. He said he would think about it, but the proprietor kept the pressure on, saying he needed an answer within two days.

“He told me he had another candidate, but since he'd rather sell his business to me, he agreed to first give me the opportunity to make a

decision yes or no. I thought about his offer the entire drive back to the base, which was about five hours. It was unbelievable timing.”

The truth was, Amnon had already been thinking of leaving the Army. After eight years of service, he realized he didn’t want to keep pursuing a military career and was ready to change direction in life. His plan was to go back to school and eventually own his own business although he hadn’t decided exactly what kind of business or precisely when he would leave the military.

“Being an entrepreneur was my goal, but my plan was not to immediately jump into a business but to move forward with my studies and eventually get into some kind of business. I was drawn to the idea of owning a business and creating something, improving something, building something. I knew that would be a good thing for me.”

Even though hair restoration had not remotely been on his list—or radar—here was an opportunity being handed him as if by fate, but he only had forty-eight hours to decide. He couldn’t even discuss the offer with his parents, who were traveling at the time in the United States. And being before the days of cell phones, they were unreachable.

Amnon admits he was skeptical at first about the business because it was so different from his current profession of soldier. “If someone had told me the day before this was going to happen, I would have laughed. This was not something on my list at all. I thought: *What do I have to do with hair?* But then I thought I shouldn’t reject it straight out because I was planning to leave the army anyway. I should think about it. So I spent the following two days collecting information about what exactly it would mean to own a hair restoration business, what I would have to do.”

“In the end, I decided to give it a chance. After hours of debating with myself, I said: *You know what? This has happened for a reason, so I’m going to use this as an excuse to quit the army right away, and I will take*

over this business. His offer just meant I became an entrepreneur faster than planned, but it was where I had already decided I wanted to be.”

Amnon accepted the proprietor’s offer. Six months later he quit the Army and took over the business, which he knew was healthy and sustainable. “He was considered a big shot who did great things and people used to come visit him from all over the country. I was sure I could make a living off the business; whether I’d like the work or not, I didn’t know. I’d have to wait and see. But I figured the worst-case scenario was I could always sell it and change directions again. So for the next year and a half, I worked with the previous owner at the salon, took all the required classes, and got the training I needed. Then my mentor left, and I was on my own.”

Over time Amnon was surprised that the more he did it, the more he loved what he was doing. It was more than his occupation; it became his vocation, feeding his artisanal soul.

“First of all I am an artist,” he says. “I sculpt and paint and back then was doing music as a hobby. And I consider myself a compassionate people-person. You need both in hair restoration. In this business my work is always related to art and creativity. And every individual who comes here, men and women alike, I can make them laugh and comfortable. And when I bring them back to look as they did five, ten, or sometimes even twenty years earlier, it makes them so happy.”

Just as often, Amnon says he helps someone with hair loss simply look their actual age rather than fifteen years older. He not only helped their physical appearance, but the treatments also improved their self-confidence and emotional outlook.

“Hair loss is a sensitive issue,” Amnon says. “It’s an honor to serve my clients and to be compassionate with them. Because of those things I found myself really happy with what I was doing. It was fun for me and also a bit like therapy. So all those earlier thoughts, of how this would be a

temporary business and how I would just sell it and move on, faded away. The work I was doing gave me such a great feeling in so many ways; I soon knew I was going to keep doing it, and ever since then I have been in the hair restoration business.”

His commitment to the business long-term gave him an entrepreneurial shot in the arm, and he instinctively knew he could not simply rely on the status quo. He traveled the world searching for the best sources of human hair and continuously looked for ways to advance his procedure.

“Moving forward meant I always had to be creative,” he says, “improving existing methods while trying to come up with new ones.”

Because he had started as a client, Amnon viewed the business from a different perspective than his predecessor. He made a point of talking to clients and getting their feedback, making constant adjustments and improvements. He still does.

“I’m thirty-six years in this business, and I’m still working on improving things all the time,” he says with a quiet laugh. “It’s an unending story because the more technology is advancing around us, the more things you can improve.”

That constant drive to get better is what eventually led to ITHL, which Amnon describes as complex and unique. “Even though there are people using a similar system to ITHL, every individual has different ways of doing it. I developed my method over many years. I’m not saying mine is necessarily better than others, but it’s for sure different. For me, whether or not it’s good depends on the feedback I’m getting from my clients, and the most of it has been very positive.”

While he was successful and professionally secure, after twenty years into it, Amnon got personally restless. By then he was in his mid-forties and married with three sons. He seemed to have it all but needed

something new.

“I was looking for a big change in my life,” he says of his mid-life crisis.

Amnon and his wife had visited the United States several times to visit relatives he had in California and other places. He had never considered moving there full-time because he loves Israel—until it was time for a reboot.

“In August 2001 after two years of thought and discussions with myself, I decided to move to San Diego and open a branch of my business there. It wasn’t the best location to open such a business,” he says. “I can tell you had I if moved to Miami Beach, New York, or Los Angeles, business-wise I would have done much better, much quicker. But I was okay with it because I was looking for a place that I was comfortable to live in and raise my kids, who were sixteen, fourteen, and seven back then.”

Amnon moved his family to California in June 2002 but kept the Tel Aviv salon open. He still owns the business—which is managed by his sister, nephew, niece, and several employees—and says, “We continue to serve people from all over, including some who have been our clients for decades.”

While his business in Israel continued without a hitch after he moved, setting up a salon in San Diego would prove more challenging than he anticipated although initially, Amnon was more interested in acclimating to his new surroundings than worried about building a start-up.

“The first year I had no rush to open the business,” he explains. “I wanted to enjoy time with my kids. So we traveled and visited many places exploring and learning our new country.”



When Amnon ultimately turned his attention to Raz 2.0, the challenges were considerable. He spoke English but nowhere near fluently. Technology was more advanced. The San Diego market was a mystery to him and happened to be competitive. Also American culture in general—and Southern California culture specifically—was so different from the culture he came from.

“I had to learn the mentality of the people, their body language because you need to read clients. When you’re consulting with or treating people, they don’t always say what they feel. In this business you really have to be kind of a shrink. You have to talk to them and make them comfortable. It’s a mutual process—a collaboration—about what exactly their expectations are. How they want to see themselves after the treatment to make sure you’re on the same page with the client’s desires.”

The culture disparity worked both ways. “This type of business is mainly about trust,” Amnon notes and says being an immigrant put some potential clients off. “People needing hair restoration are searching for a very personal connection, and some are not always comfortable when your accent is not American.” On a more practical level, being a start-up also worked against Amnon, even though he had twenty years’ experience. “Especially in this field, which is very personal and sensitive, many people want to work with companies that are existing, that have a local track record, that are stable. They want to have confidence in the company and be sure the hair restorationist can provide them with service whenever they need it. And at first many didn’t see that in our company because it was new, at least in San Diego.”

But his biggest challenge occurred in 2004. While traveling in Israel, Amnon suffered paralysis from the waist down. The symptoms started abruptly, while he was driving. Within minutes he couldn’t move his foot from the gas pedal to the brake; he had to manually lift his leg. He was



Before
treatment

After
treatment

rushed to the hospital where doctors eventually discovered some swollen blood vessels had caused edema that had impacted the spinal cord and corrected the problem.

Noting that his job requires standing for much of the day, Amnon says, “I very grateful God wanted me to stay here not in

a wheelchair but on my legs.”

Although the paralysis was temporary, doctors told him it would take a year to fully recover from the nerve damage and get back to normal. “I am a very strong, but it was a big struggle,” Amnon admits.

If that wasn’t enough of a challenge, a couple of months later when some acquaintances offered him the chance to jump into a new business opportunity that marketed medical devices, Amnon accepted. “My hair restoration business requires lots of standing, so I couldn’t fully promote Raz for a year. At that point my clientele was still very small, and I decided it was a good time to take their offer.”

Amnon ended up working for the medical device business for four years, letting Raz go into a holding pattern. He stopped promoting his hair business during that time although he continued getting some clients by word of mouth and referrals. In the end, the medical devices opportunity turned into a bust and yet another challenge to overcome.

“I ended up losing the acquaintances and money with that adventure,” Amnon says. “I think at that point most people would give up and return to their home country. Just like I could have gone back to my own business in Israel, which I fortunately kept.”

But giving up is not in Amnon’s nature. Although his right foot never returned to 100 percent, physically he was healthy and strong, so in

January 2009 he fully devoted himself to methodically building his client base in San Diego. Today business is strong and growing, and Amnon has earned a great reputation in Southern California as a premier hair restorationist. He says he has clients all over Southern California, many who drive up to four hours one-way to see him.

“I also have clients who fly in from Vegas, Arizona, and even Mexico City. And once you start the treatment, have to maintain it every six weeks on average. It’s a big commitment. And they keep coming back, some for more than fifteen years.”

Amnon credits much of his success and repeat business on two key factors, both of which he believes are unique in his industry. The first is his integrated thread hairline method. One of ITHL’s biggest selling points is that it doesn’t require any chemicals or glues, which many clients, especially women, don’t like the idea of.

“It melts down underneath and blends with the sweat and the oils that the skull produces,” he explains. “Glue’s not a nice thing, but many women use that method because they don’t know there’s an alternative until they hear about ITHL. People love the idea of not using any chemicals, which is why they come from all over the place coming to see me. With our method, we blend and mix real human hair that matches their own hair. They’re freely able to wash it, brush it, swim with it, blow dry it, color it—all the things they can do with their own hair.”

The second key is his personalized approach. “Most, if not all, of the other companies are owned by men and women who are not hair professionals. They own the company but hire others to do the actual restorations. I approach every client as a new artistic creation. When I have a woman sitting in front of me, I approach her treatment the same way I do a sculpture or a painting. I am focused on bringing her the best natural appearance.”

Amnon has three stylists that assist him, but he performs the most important stage of the process. “The fact that I both own the company and am also an expert who does the treatment makes a huge difference for clients. If there is any concern, it’s resolved right away because I’m the owner and the expert in one. If a longtime client falls on some hard times financially, I’ll do my best to help. If I have a client who is sick, we go to their home for a treatment. These things can happen, so you need to be sensitive and compassionate because clients become a kind of family. Honestly, it’s not just words; that’s how my wife, who works with me, and I really feel.”

There might have been a time when most of that clientele family were men, but over the years Amnon says that’s changing. “When I started the business thirty-six years ago, I had 98 percent men and 2 percent women. Years later I realized so many more women than I thought suffer from hair loss and thinning hair.”

According to the American Hair Loss Association, there are up to thirty million women in the United States who suffer from thinning hair, mostly women over forty or fifty years old. Unlike men who get pattern baldness, women’s hair thins out, so they are looking to add to and enhance the hair to fill it out.

“So I started promoting the business to women and aiming my services at women. Today at my San Diego salon, our clientele is about 80 percent women and 20 percent men.”

Because of his one-on-one approach, Amnon has judiciously controlled Raz Hair’s growth, opting to focus on one salon rather than seeking to open additional locations. “It’s not a franchise business, and it’s not a chain. I’m not going to train another assistant in two days just so they can start producing money. The standard of treatment I’m using is so high that it usually takes months before I get comfortable with employees to do

certain things. So I'm not out to grow as big as we can because I want to keep the quality consistent."

Which means remaining as hands-on as he's always been. "Back when I made the decision to jump into hair restoration, I could not have predicted how much I would enjoy what I'm doing. It was really an accident, but a very happy accident."

And he has no plans on leaving the profession or Raz Hair anytime soon. "I have no thoughts of retiring," Amnon says. "That's my therapy place. As long as there are people willing to pay me, I'm happy to keep serving them. If I didn't have them, I'd have to find people and pay them to be able to keep doing what I'm doing."

