

INTRODUCTION

Chanukkah 2013

The sun sets on a cold November day. My home is dim. Five slim candles are burning in a nine-branch menorah on the fourth night of an ancient Jewish holiday. My parents raised me to celebrate what amounted to early guerilla warfare tactics used by my ancestors against an overwhelming, well-trained army. And we won.

I say “we.”

I have a right to include myself in the ancient and worldwide “we” because I was born into a Jewish family. My race is Hebrew. I always state to the curious, that “both sides of my family are Jews all the way back.” But, such heritage and the blood in my veins didn’t drive me or impassion me with a love for the foreign country of Israel. My heart did not yearn for Ha’aretz, the Land. I didn’t desire to make “aliyah,” that is, emigrate to Israel.

“We” had to leave our homeland, the Promised Land, long ago. I know that centuries later my more recent ancestors’ roots drank in what they could while scattered throughout Eastern Europe and Ukraine. But, when America became the Land of Promise, my mother’s and father’s fathers relocated.

In the early 1900s, a 12 year-old girl (who couldn’t speak English), lived in a country village, one day’s horseback ride to Kiev. She left certain family members behind. Her parents booked passage for her on a ship from Hamburg, Germany, to New York. She was one of my grandmothers; that’s why I’m an American citizen. On her arrival, she met family who’d traveled ahead of her.

I hand small holiday gifts to my children and smile recalling how they each wanted to say the candle lighting b’rachah (blessing). Tonight, my traditional candle-lighting prayer has no doubt wafted its way through the ceiling onward to heaven joining millions of other similar holiday acknowledgements. “Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melech ha’olam asher kidishanu b’mitz’votav v’tzivanu l’had’lik neir shel Chanukkah. Omein.” Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Chanukkah. Amen.

There again a “we” which doubles as an “us.”

I’d heard about Israel since childhood in synagogue and at home. When growing up in Los Angeles, my grandmother occasionally read the Jerusalem Post newspaper in our home. In adult years, I read about my people’s good, but mostly disastrous and embarrassing, biblical past.

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In 2010 at age 54, I stood in Jerusalem for the first time. I traveled there by myself. No guided tour. I gazed at the Kotel (Hebrew term for The Wall), also called the Western or Wailing Wall. I brought with me a Bar Mitzvah gift from my parents, a fine but yellowing silk prayer shawl, called a tallit. When I packed for this month-long trip, I felt God nudging me to bring it. I had had misgivings of traveling with this sentimental, 40 year-old object. First, the possibility of theft or loss of luggage. Second, I rarely wore it anyway. Third, limited room in my luggage. I had a large backpack, a day pack and a small soft bag (this way I could be mobile on my feet).

The silly thing was, where else on earth would be more appropriate and meaningful to put on my tallit, and pray, than Jerusalem? Only when I stood before the massive retaining wall, row upon row of cut stones and boulders, that I best understood my connection to the now unseen, mere dust of relatives who lived, bred and died in this foreign country. I knew, as with any ancient site, over the centuries countless people lived and walked by this very spot. Yet, this most meaningful and pivotal stretch of ground to the Jewish religion (only 187 feet wide and 62 feet high above ground) is a landmark of where my family history started. Due to the DNA of ancestors past and forefathers unknown, I had returned home. (The Kotel is very short section of the original 1,500 foot wide west-facing wall and one of four ancient, massive walls.)

I wondered how many kindred blood relatives “like me” traveled from foreign countries, through the centuries, just to stand where I stood and prayed? Who would follow?

Nestled in the special carrying bag of my tallit I packed my father’s skullcap called a kippa (Hebrew) or yarmulke (Yiddish). He had died the year before and left some money, making the financial part of my trip possible. He would not, nor would I, have called him a religious man. But there among his belongings was a fine looking blue and white kippa, which I’d never seen him wear. While in Israel, I wore this Jewish symbol only in select places. Now, in America, I wear one every day. Most people where I live have never seen or met a Jew.

On my way to Israel, I had experienced culture shock at New York’s JFK Airport, truly a crossroads of the world. And a more specific shock the moment I stood in line for El Al, the Israeli Airlines. I was committing to spend hours in a plane with people of strange dress, other languages and distinctly different behaviors.

Once I had arrived in Israel, I said to myself many times over, “I’m in Jerusalem, it really does exist!” I found the ancient and modern, mish-moshed together (both elbowing for my notice – and a shekel).

I discovered that the Arabs looked at me and knew I was Hebrew. The Jews knew, too. Something about my race had inherent trace elements I didn’t know I’d packed with the luggage – my DNA. Some might call it my spiritual DNA. They looked, reading me in an instant. Back home in America, I was just me, white-skinned, balding brown hair and a short reddish beard. Now, I knew how a black man felt in a white church. I was spooked. Sadly, I learned I shouldn’t visit Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem or Jericho without expecting danger. I didn’t need danger. And my U.S. passport wouldn’t stop a Palestinian bullet.

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The Kotel is an ancient, bleak, bare remnant of other fantastic structures of extraordinary religious meaning. I’ve heard and do believe (in a metaphysical sense) that the stones know – their molecules remember – the presence of those prominent structures and the people of those past days. Of course, varied historical accounts of Judaism lie locked into the Scriptures for all time. Certain of these accounts took place in the shadow of the massive utilitarian Wall and on the grounds of the holy Temple Mount just above it. A genuine madman of notable power and true evil, King Herod the Great, commissioned the beauty of that central site – larger than any Greek or Roman religious sites!

When I turn back time, I understand how all ethnicities have a point of geographical origin. But, who has a religion which dogs them anywhere in the world and for more than thirty five hundred years? After all, the successful revolt which spawned millions of nine-candle menorahs was about preserving the right to worship as Jews, remain as a people, commanded into existence by their God. Now, the Israeli government

pretty much only allows Jews to immigrate there. That means: Jews who can prove their Jewishness. After a rough track record throughout history, they want to provide a homeland for Jews, that's all.

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Returning to America wasn't what some Israelis and Scripture-minded tourists had assumed for my trip and my future. These interested, well-meaning people wanted me to increase the Israeli population by one. No! Not for me, at least not yet.

The trip had a trickledown effect on me. Months afterward, I felt more Jewish. I'd made friends - no - I had friends in Israel. Also, when I re-read Scripture, I found that I'd actually visited where a story took place. And I knew that a tiny sliver of desert on the other side of the world stood surrounded and outnumbered by enemies committed to its destruction. In fact, in one northern coastal town the "neighboring" country of Lebanon, only a few years earlier, had attacked by shooting 400 rockets a day.

I was there on vacation.

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So, I've been to the so-called Holy Land. Now, I've written a book that takes place in that most important of all real estate. The plot takes the reader to when that ancient Wall stood freshly built...and just a wall. But, my own personal story is of a modern American Jew who believes that an ancient Middle Eastern Jew, named Yeshua ben Yosef, was our Jewish Messiah (or in Greek, Christ). That deeper chapter of my story began in 1976 at age 20.

The motivation for my book comes from my own grievances and frustration. See if you can grasp where my literary trail goes. Right before Chanukkah, I went to WalMart to look for the right diameter candles to fit in my menorah. (WalMart was not my first stop or first choice.) Fully decorated for Christmas, the store sold mega-decorations too. A Santa and McChrist dreamland met my eyes.

Thanksgiving, the soon to be forgotten festive forerunner, had opened up the inundation of two far older holidays. Each of these revolves around the Hebrew race. A sign advertised that a "Chanukkah Section" existed. When found, the overused metaphor of a drop-in-a-bucket came to mind. Using simple physics, I could've put all the Jewish-minded merchandise into one shopping cart. Candles? They ended up kinda sorta fitting good 'nuff.

All of that to say, my guess is that average Christians, whether church-going or not, know little of Jesus, the famous Jew's Jewish way of life and of Jews today. Cookie-cutter comes to mind. And so, Christians revere and worship a diluted, Jew-less Jesus. I get sad when considering the rarity of Jesus-loving Christians which have never set foot in a synagogue (aside from a wedding). Yet, they read only of Jews by Jewish authors in their two-part Bible. Perhaps, as every century rolls on, church leaders purposely teach a condensed and limited version of the Jew they trust eternity to? If so, is this done out of bias, or maybe not being able to see the "forest" of Jews, due to one large Messianic "tree"? The de-Judaizing process of one-third of the Trinity started many centuries ago, well before Santa and his elves.

A learned teacher pointed out to me that Yeshua wasn't even called 'Jesus' until he was facing a death sentence by the Greek-speaking, Roman judge, Pontius Pilate. Yeshua was certainly never called the mish-moshed Greek name/title 'Jesus Christ' – that was never his or anyone's name. But, today he answers to it due to traditions, innocence, his mercy, and because he's very good with linguistics.

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While researching for this Introduction I had a family question, so I emailed an older cousin. In discussing our roots, he told me that our mutual grandfather's given name was Abraham. I find this twist so ironic. I had always known him to be Al, short for Albert. He lived 1893 – 1989. The biblical man, Abraham, is referred to as Avrohom Avinu (Abraham Our Father), and the first Hebrew. No doubt my grandfather changed his name in order to not be easily identified as a Jew. My father had done the same with his *last* name (before my birth). Some years into my adulthood I changed my last name back to our original.

After the trip to Israel, my identity slowly altered. So, now, if I was kneeling before a square of wet cement and was to sign my name, press my hands and feet into it as a marker, a record of my existence – I'd press down harder than I would've before.

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In my menorah, the five blackened wicks have succumbed to the tiny puddles of hot liquid wax. I turn on a light. Tomorrow, at sundown, six candles will burn, illuminating the house.

This book is an effort to entertain while educating. My hope is that God will touch your heart and where needed, align your soul closer to the Jewish soul of the Christian Christ and Jewish Messiah. Too many of us know too little about the Scriptures we hold in our hands. God chose to become a Jew. Not a Scot, nor an Australian Aborigine or an Arctic Eskimo. My endeavor is to enrich religion exempt-dreamers, Sunday pew-sitters, Shabbat-keepers and Vatican-listeners of what took place, and what could have taken place centuries ago. I hope and yes, pray that God uses this book for sprinklings and even torrents of holiness in your life. And may the torrents continue.