



I Will Bless Those Who Bless You!

The story of Hanukkah and a real *“Love for Israel”*

by Tim Kelley

Making the statement “I love Israel”, or saying that you have a “love for Israel” has become very popular in the past 20 or so years. Many Christian organizations have taken the lead in promoting this love by establishing special funds to help Israel’s poor, providing help and supplies for the Israeli Defense Force, promoting agriculture in the Holy Land, and supporting numerous archeological projects throughout the nation of Israel. Other Christian based organizations, such as the Battalion of Deborah, strive to bring awareness to the American people about the political plight of the Jewish people in Israel and their struggle with the Palestinians.

Then there are Jewish-Christian groups such as the MJAA (Messianic Jewish Alliance of America) and the UMJC (Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations) that support a myriad of projects such as MJAA’s “The Joseph Project” which was started to help fund the expenses of Jews from various parts of the world – especially the former Soviet Union – as they make “*aliah*” back to the land of Israel.

A somewhat recent phenomenon is that of certain celebrities such as Madonna who have suddenly “found religion” (mostly New Age Kabbalistic ideas) and have taken a liking to the Jewish people and promote projects aimed at helping the poor in “the land”.

This whole phenomenon is part of what is being called “Christian Zionism” – a seemingly un-natural attraction to the Jewish people. But what is causing this “Christian Zionist Movement”? Part of the answer can be found in the definition of the movement. In an article by David Krusch found on the web site Jewish Virtual Library.org¹, he states that the definition of Christian Zionism is . . .

“ . . . Support for the Zionist cause – the return of the Jewish people to its biblical homeland in Israel. It is a belief among some Christians that the return of Jews to Israel is in line with a biblical prophecy, and is necessary for Jesus to return to Earth as its king . . . ”

But is that all there is to it? Why is it that thousands of Christians – people who, for the most part, have no regard for the Jewish way of life – pass by a homeless person on Main Street USA without giving him a second thought, but would then make out a check for \$1000 and send it to a Jewish-Christian organization to help the needy in Israel? Any why is it that these groups would want to bring Jews to the land so that Jesus will return when at the same time, they’re taught in their church that the Jews will suffer the Tribulation while they are dancing on the clouds in Heaven?

Is that the only motivation for this presumed “love for Israel”? I submit that it’s not. I think there’s another reason, and I think it’s based on this verse from the Old Testament . . .

^{NKJ} **Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Though it’s sad, I think there are some who believe they can buy blessings from God by being kind to the Jewish people.

But is giving money to Israel the way our Abba wants His people to bless Israel? Is this the way we are to show love to that part of Israel, the Jewish people that now live in the Land? I don’t think so. I believe there is more to this verse than simply giving money away, and that the intent of the verse can only be understood through a better understanding of the Hebrew word for “bless”.

According to Strong’s, the English word “bless” comes from the Hebrew word “*barak*” (*בָּרַךְ* - Strong’s 1288), and the Gesenius’ Hebrew Lexicon states that the proper understanding is that of breaking down – literally to ‘bend the knee’. This form of the verb ‘*barak*’ is only used in Gen 12:3, 18:18, and 28:14, and it implies ‘blessing oneself’. Thus, blessing Abraham (or his descendants - Israel) would cause one to ‘bless himself’. It does not necessarily imply that God would bless that person who blesses Israel.

¹ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/christianzionism.html>

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This verb form (Niphal) of 'barak' is closely related to the another verb form (Hithpael) of the 'barak' found in Jeremiah 4:2

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 4:1-2** "If you will return, O Israel," says the LORD, "Return to Me; And if you will put away your abominations out of My sight, Then you shall not be moved. ² And you shall swear, 'The LORD lives,' In truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; The nations shall bless themselves in Him, And in Him they shall glory."

So – those who bless Israel are those who are also blessing themselves; and the blessing they receive comes as a result of turning (shuv) back to God. I believe that the blessing itself is the recognition that The Father lives in truth, judgment, and righteousness.

Now – what does that mean? It means that you've come to realize that The Father is true to His word, that He changes not, and that in Him you shall (halal) praise and boast. The blessing then comes after a person begins to turn, or in some cases – return, to the God of Israel – the one in whom they praise.

So how do we turn back to Israel's god? First, you must come to the understanding that the Bible is a book about Israel and Israel's god. So, when you speak of the only true God, you are speaking of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And when you speak of Israel, what would normally come to mind is Israel's God. You can't separate the two – Israel and Israel's God. After all, they are betrothed to one another.

So – If I were to say "I love God", that would imply that I also love Israel; and – If I love Israel, that would imply that I also love Israel's God. So – to love Israel should and would imply a love for God – would it not?

And how do we show love to god? By keeping his commandments.

^{ESV} ¹ John 5:2-3 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

And what are the commandments?

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 6:1** "Now this *is* the commandment, *and these are* the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe *them* in the land which you are crossing over to possess, ² "that you may fear the LORD your God, to keep (Hebrew "shamar" – literally "protect") all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged.

This verse continues in what is known as the Shema, the centerpiece of the traditional morning and evening prayers . . .

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 6:4-6** " Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one! (*Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever!*)⁵ "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶ " And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart . . .

So to love God is to love and instill God's Torah, law, ways in your heart

Another aspect of loving God, and by extension – loving Israel – is to love the land God gave to Israel. Why? Because we should love what He loves!

^{NKJ} **Zechariah 8:2** "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'I am zealous for Zion with great zeal; with great fervor I am zealous for her.'

So let's recap what we've learned . . .

- To love Israel is to love Israel's God
- To love Israel's God is to love

² In Jewish liturgical prayer, this phrase is added as a response by the congregation.

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- The law God gave Israel
- The land God gave Israel
- As a result of the above - **We bless ourselves!**

So, we can see that what a lot of people call “Love for Israel” is not really a love for Israel. In fact, I don’t know what you would call it . . . Jewish infatuation? Whatever you call it – it’s not love – at least not by God’s definition.

But there are examples of true “love for Israel” scattered throughout world history.

- Jacob loved the birthright so much that he wrestled all night with an angel for the affirmation that the blessing of Israel would be his
- King David fought many battles in order to unite the splintered peoples of Israel and Judah into one united kingdom
- The disciples of Yeshua preached themselves literally to death to proclaim to the tribes that their redeemer had come and that they would return and become a part of Greater Israel
- And of course – Yeshua, our Messiah, died on a stake in order to provide the atonement blood that would reconcile Israel to her God.

There’s another event in history where men displayed a true “love for Israel”. This is in the story of Hanukkah – a time when men and women displayed great courage and valor in their fight to preserve God’s way and to preserve the Jewish culture. I believe it’s important that we reflect on some of these stories during this time of the year.

But before we go on, I want us to ask ourselves “Why would I – a non Jew – want to observe Hanukkah?”

- Is it because I want to identify with the Jewish people?
- Is it the ‘Hebrew Roots’ thing to do?
- Is it a replacement for Christmas?

I hope that none of those reason's apply to you.

But there are a number of valid reasons why non-Jews would want to observe this special time –

- Hanukkah gives insight into end-time prophecy, especially the prophecies of Daniel
- Hanukkah and the resulting history helps us to better understand first century Jewish culture
- WWJD? – Yeshua observed Hanukkah as shown in John 10:22

And then there’s another reason . . . and this is the reason I observe Hanukkah, and that reason is that Hanukkah commemorates the preservation of the Hebrew culture.

It commemorates the actions of people who put their love for Israel and Israel’s god before their own lives during a time when the knowledge of the true God was being overshadowed by that of false Gods.

It commemorates the desire of a people who were quickly becoming the minority, to bring their children up in a world that is more dedicated to God than the world they currently lived in.

It depicts a time and a culture much like we find ourselves In today. For if the culture of the Jewish people had been lost, the story and message of Yeshua, our Messiah would have been reduced to being just another legend of one the many Greek or Roman gods, or a silly fable about a mis-guided Jewish boy who wanted to change the world.

So let’s discuss some of these Hanukkah stories, but we’re not going to concentrate on the miracles that happened, but on the underlying dedication of the men and women who stood up to the forces of evil in order to preserve God’s way of life. If it were not for these peoples dedication, there would have been no revolt, and without the revolt, no Hannukah.

In order to better understand what happened, let’s review some of the underlying causes of the revolt.

- It was not the intent of Antiochus to destroy the Jewish people themselves
- He wanted to spread the Greek culture into the territories under his control

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- Mix the Jewish culture with the Greek – and He was quite successful!

When Alexander the Great had conquered much of the area on the east of the Mediterranean Sea, he had been respectful of the Jews' monotheistic religion, but Antiochus was determined to impose Hellenism throughout his domain, along with its pagan gods and its love of the body and self. When he met resistance in Judea, he made Judaism illegal.

Sabbath observance, new moons, circumcision, and the study of Torah were banned in order to move the people away from their God. To aid in the mixing of the two cultures, the priesthood was preserved, but a statue of Zeus was installed in the Temple in Jerusalem, and the sacrifices were changed to include unclean animals such as swine.

Outright expression of faith and obedience to the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was forbidden, and the people were required to bow down to the images of the various greek gods, and to the image of Antiochus himself. Many of the Jews embraced the new order, some willing to acknowledge the Greek gods as well as Israel's god, while some others outright abandoned the God and faith of their ancestors, desiring to be a part of the 'hip' Hellenistic culture.

But others refused to go along. They refused to mix the Hebrew way of life with that of the Greeks. Hanna and her sons were some who refused³.

Hanna was a Jewish woman who had seven sons whom she had reared in the ways of God. One day, Antiochus made it a point to go into one of the cities of the Jews and compel the people to eat swine's flesh. Many of the people refused and were beaten and whipped, and it is assumed they succumbed and ate according to the king's edict. When he came upon the family of of Hanna, her oldest son refused to eat stating:

“What are you trying to find out about us? Yes, we are ready to die, rather than to transgress the laws of our fathers.”

And die they did. Each son refused to eat as the Antiochus commanded and was systematically tortured and killed before their mother's and his remaining brother's eyes, yet none gave in. When it came time for the youngest to eat, he refused as did his brothers before him, stating to the kings;

“Why are you waiting? I will not obey the king's commandment: but I will obey the commandment of the law that was given unto our fathers by Moses . . . But I, as my brothers, offer up my body and life for the laws of our fathers, beseeching God that he would speedily be merciful unto our nation; and that you by torments and plagues may confess, that he alone is God . . . “

Thus all of Hanna's family died upholding God's way, and it's assumed that Hanna was killed as well.

Mattathias was an elderly priest. In 167 BC he was ordered by the king's soldiers to sacrifice to an idol. He refused, saying with a loud voice;

“Though all the nations that are under the king's dominion obey him, and fall away every one from the religion of their fathers, and give consent to his commandments: Yet will I and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers. God forbid that we should forsake the law and the ordinances. We will not hearken to the king's words, to go from our religion, either on the right hand, or the left.”

As he was speaking, another priest came forward to sacrifice in Mattathias' stead. Mattathias struck and killed the priest as well as the Syrian soldier and fled for the mountains. 1 Maccabees 2:26 says;

“Thus dealt he zealously for the law of God like as Phinees did unto Zambri the son of Salom. And Mattathias cried throughout the city with a loud voice, saying, Whosoever is zealous of the law, and maintains the covenant, let him follow me.”

³ Story found in 2 Maccabees 7.

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Like Hanna and her sons, they were zealous for the law, unwilling to compromise. They could have simply fled Israel, or they could have given in. But they stood up against the king, eventually overwhelming the forces of evil, and thus preserved the Jewish culture and the law of God in Israel.

As history points out, Mattathias soon died, and his son Judah took charge of the army that rose up as a result of Mattathias' actions. Eventually the Greeks were driven out of Jerusalem and the Temple and the Altar were repaired.

On Kislev 25, 164 BC, three years to the day after it had been defiled, it was rededicated in much the same way as the first Temple had been in the days of Solomon. An 8-day festival was held, patterned after the Feast of Tabernacles, and that festival was called Hannukkah – a Hebrew word that means Dedication.

These were some who had a true 'Love for Israel'. Of people like this the prophet Isaiah spoke:

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 54:17** No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And every tongue *which* rises against you in judgment You shall condemn. This *is* the heritage of the servants of the LORD, And their righteousness *is* from Me," Says the LORD.

David also speaks of what we should do when faced by the enemy:

^{LXE} **Psalms 55:22** Cast thy care upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee; he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.

But that's not the end of the story -

According to the statements of many who were tortured and put to death in their refusal to follow the king, it is evident that they believed the trials they were enduring were God's way of punishing them and their nation for sins that they, as a nation, had and were committing. Apparently, there had been this movement toward the Greek culture even before Antiochus came on the scene.

Could it be that assimilation had been taking place for 50 or more years in advance of Antiochus. Could there have been a turning away from the love of and recognition that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the one who brings true freedom, wealth, and security. Had the people fallen into the cultural trap that THEY were the ones who had secured their own peace and prosperity. Had they begun to believe, as had the Greeks, that it was their superior knowledge that sustained their lifestyle? Had they not already begun to forget God in their lives and turn to the worship of the earth?

We don't know for sure, but history points out that that may have been the case.

It took 20 more years for the Maccabees to finally push the Greeks out of Judea, but the Greek Hellenist culture had already become deeply entrenched. In fact, Simon Maccabee, one of Mattathias' sons, eventually became High Priest as a result of Greek style election. Thus began the Hasmonean dynasty that lasted for the next 100 or so years.

As a result of the Jewish people being drawn into the Greek culture, a sect of Judaism rose to the forefront. This sect was called the Pharisees. They were opposed to the Hasmonean priesthood and became strong defenders of the Torah in the face of assimilation. In order to prevent the people from succumbing to the Greek culture, they created fences around the law in an attempt to keep the people from even coming close to breaking it.

Thus the culture of First Century Judaism came into being, the culture into which The Father sent His Son, Messiah Yeshua. And you know the rest of the story.

To love Israel is more than sending money, going to rallies, or sporting bumper stickers on our cars. Loving Israel is to live our lives like Hanna, her sons, and Mattathias Hasmone - great examples of righteousness and commitment to God's way- the Torah. We, Israel, need people today who are willing to defy the Greek influence that has permeated our society. The question for us is . . . are we going to be warriors in the army of God when He sends Messiah Yeshua back to shake the earth?

Shalom Alecheim