

WHY STILL CARE ABOUT ISRAEL?

*The Sanctity of Covenant, Moral Justice
and Prophetic Blessing*

SANDRA TEPLINSKY



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Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra Teplinsky, Why Still Care About Israel?
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*This book is offered to the Lord and His people,
with gratitude beyond words for His mercy and grace,
the loving support and invaluable help
of my husband, Kerry, and daughter, Tasha,
the scholarly input of Dr. William J. BJORAKER
and editing expertise of Natasha Sperling.*

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Foreword

Sandy Teplinsky has navigated her way through a biblical and theological and political field of land mines, and she has done it with grace, with sensitivity, with compassion, with courage and with exegetical acumen, thereby helping to navigate the way for all of us. And it was not an easy task.

How can you call the Church to care for Israel without being accused of neglecting the Palestinians? How can you claim a special calling on the Jewish people without being accused of favoritism and even advocating ethnic/racial superiority? How can you have a deeply spiritual approach to the Scriptures while still maintaining the importance of a physical plot of land? How can you develop a Jesus-centered theology while claiming that the Church cannot be whole without a restored Israel?

I believe that Sandy is uniquely qualified for the task at hand. First, more than anything, she is a lover of God, desiring to please Him more than side with a people or a cause. Second, she is a woman of prayer and compassion, and she is just as moved by the plight of a suffering Muslim child in Gaza as she is by the plight of a suffering Jewish child in Jerusalem. Third, as a trained attorney, she is meticulous in her research and understands proper legal (and logical) argumentation. Fourth, as

a careful student of the Scriptures and history, she knows how to avoid common interpretive errors by using reliable scholarly sources. Fifth, as a Messianic Jewish woman who lives part time in Israel with her Jewish husband, Kerry, she loves and supports the Jewish state without idealizing it (or demonizing Palestinians), as some sincere Christian Zionists have sometimes done.

I have watched Sandy work on this book for many years—burdened to be fair to all, burdened to keep pointing readers to Yeshua (Jesus), burdened to be meticulously accurate in all she writes, burdened to convey God’s heart for Israel—and I wholeheartedly commend this book to you.

If you will read it with a prayerful, open mind—and a healthy dose of courage!—it might just change your life.

Michael L. Brown, Ph.D., president,
FIRE School of Ministry, Concord, North Carolina;
author, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*

Why Still Care about Israel?

A vast army descends upon a desert wilderness in the ancient Middle East, signaling that life is about to change forever. Outside the camp a stalwart, lone warrior paces in resolute silence. Normally the man is seen presiding over a feisty multitude. But today his eyes lock on to the horizon ahead.

Suddenly, an imposing figure with sword in hand materializes before him. Startled, the seasoned leader demands to know: “Are you for us or against us?”

None other than the voice of God replies. “No! But as Commander of the Lord’s army I come!” The figure in human form is a manifestation of Yahweh Himself.

Despite Joshua’s personal history with the Almighty, his heart skips a beat. The man falls to the ground on his face, humbled. The right question is not whether God is for the Israelites or their adversaries. The right question—the one he did not ask—is, “Who are You?”

It is much the same for us today. Discussion about Israel in the 21st century often starts by asking, not unlike Joshua, if God is for or against the Jewish state—or the Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims. But He is not for or against nations or people groups as we tend to think. His heart, His character and His ways are different from ours. The first question must be, “Who is our God, this sovereign and supreme Creator of the universe?” From there we discover that Israel—and often the ongoing contention against her—is ultimately about *Him*.

And so, bowed low, Joshua inquires, “What does my Lord say to His servant?”

May I ask, do you want to know what the Lord is saying to you, His servant, in today’s fast-changing world? Do you pray that His will be done, and His Kingdom come? Do you want to know Him better in the process? If so, then a Bible-based and factually honest understanding of Israel is essential.

Through Israel the Creator is revealing the passions of His heart for all humankind—including you—personally and intimately. In the process, He is testing Jews and Gentiles alike. He is refining the Church, shaking civilizations and establishing His Kingdom on earth. He is doing it with extravagant love—and He invites you to come, see and take part.

Who Will Benefit from This Book?

This book was written mainly for three types of readers:

- Bible believers who are interested in Israel and want to learn more, from a Messianic Jewish (Jewish Christian) Israeli perspective;
- Christians who already care much for Israel but want to stay current on issues or gain deeper insight; and

- Christians who question or doubt that God still has prophetic plans for Israel.

If you consider yourself in this last group, may I encourage you in a spirit of Messiah-like love to open your heart and mind to a new perspective? If you have never seriously studied the presuppositions of your beliefs, if you have not carefully listened to an Israeli point of view or if you've formed an opinion mostly from hearsay, could it be time to ask God if He has something fresh to say to you?

In addition to the three groups of readers described above, I have written to a fourth: *non-Christians* who are puzzled or troubled by the controversy and quandary of Israel—and are willing to view the matter through the lens of Scripture.

The book in your hands is a significantly revised update of *Why Care about Israel?* written in 2003. At that time, Israel found herself in the throes of a deadly Palestinian *intifada* (“uprising”). Practically weekly, mass suicide bombings besieged the country. Jewish blood splattered in streets, schools, shops, buses—even religious gatherings—while the world paid little heed. *Why Care about Israel?* aimed to raise consciousness about the Jewish state, opening up the Scriptures and God’s heart for Israel and the Arab Middle East.

Revised for New Realities

As the book itself predicted, much has changed since then. New questions and issues have risen to the fore. Israel is no longer an obscurity to most believers. Many churches, institutions and governments have intentionally postured themselves for or against the Jewish state.

On a personal level, much has changed in my life as an author. A Messianic Jewish believer in Jesus (Yeshua), I now reside part-time in Israel. There I have been blessed with friendships not only with Messianic Jews but with Muslim-background believers, Christian Zionists, a wide spectrum of believers from the nations and Israelis who do not believe in Jesus. I have ministered, among other places, in Islamic regions of the Middle East. By God's grace, these new relationships and experiences have enabled me to gain a fuller perspective on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, *Why Still Care about Israel?* offers more of an inside, nuanced view than did its predecessor.

This book is intended to inspire Christlike love for the Jewish people—but not at the expense of any other people group. I certainly do not believe Israel does everything right. But neither do I point a finger at all her wrongdoings; too many others vociferously do so. My goal is to give you, as best as God has enabled me, revelation of His heart through biblical and factual truth, from a Messianic Israeli perspective.

In addition to summarizing topics addressed in the original *Why Care about Israel?*, this updated version unpacks—and suggests a response to—realities such as these:

- *New spiritual breakthroughs:* As the world is shaken, the Kingdom of God is taken (see Matthew 11:12). Judgment and mercy are released in tandem. Jesus wants to empower His Church at new levels of love and righteousness for the sake of the Gospel, even as darkness seems to increase on the earth.
- *New Christian anti-Israel theologies:* Growing numbers of believers wonder if Israel's existence as a state is biblically or morally justified. Some are aligning with new theologies

that teach God no longer has a unique or covenant-based purpose for the Jews.

- *New levels of warfare:* Israel may be forced into major military warfare in the near future. Geopolitical and spiritual shifts related to such a war will impact every nation on earth.
- *Social justice:* Social justice compels us to assess Israel's situation, as well as that of Palestinians and others in the Middle East, with biblical integrity and moral truth.
- *Palestinian statehood:* The goal to create a sovereign Palestinian state is gaining momentum worldwide and will have worldwide repercussions.
- *Israel's delegitimization and the new anti-Semitism:* A global movement to delegitimize Israel's existence overlaps with anti-Semitism and must be addressed.
- *Islamist awakening:* The Middle East is undergoing an Islamist awakening that must be reckoned with.
- *Western ideological revolution:* Increasing globalization, secularism and socioeconomic shakings are fueling a worldwide revolution in ideology. New challenges requiring new strategies face traditional Judeo-Christianity.
- *Bible prophecy:* Many Christians want to know what lies ahead and how to navigate changing realities during this epic season.

Despite the gravity of these issues, the ultimate focus of this book is on Jesus. When everything is changing around us, we must cling to the One who is the same today as He was yesterday, and will be tomorrow. No amount of information, no plethora of prophetic insight, can substitute for a heart humbly fixed on Him, a life surrendered to the Savior. *I believe we should be quite optimistic about the future, so long as we wholeheartedly follow Him into it.* The biblical truths and factual issues unpacked in

this book are intended to help you do precisely that. They are meant to serve as guiding principles for many years to come, however matters unfold in Israel, the Middle East and the rest of the world.

Pressing the Reset Button

Before we start, I would ask that you please set aside certain preconceptions, if you have them. Suspend the echo of endless indictments against an allegedly belligerent or oppressive Jewish state. Subdue the extreme opposite cries of others who might deify the Jewish people or their ancestral homeland. In fact, why not ask the Holy Spirit to gently press your “reset button” on the subject? Then, look with me at the inspired and authoritative^a Word of God. In it we see the Creator King picked an otherwise sorry little strain of humanity called Israel for the sake of His own glory. To them He lovingly assigned irrevocable responsibility for service, *not superiority*. We will see that His concept of a chosen people differs radically from what may be portrayed by some church sermons, mainstream media, Internet posts and Facebook friends.

Do not be surprised that Israel stirs controversy no matter what she does. Not only in the Old Covenant, but also in the New, Israel has always been about something and Someone much bigger than herself. As we head into what the Bible calls the last days of this present age, the controversy of Zion will intensify. God is using the tiny Jewish state, roughly 1/500th the size of the US or China, as a microcosm of what He is doing with us all. Indeed, what He is saying through Israel He is not quite saying—or doing—any other way. He is using her to reveal and refine the hearts of humanity. About that, I would like to tell you a story.

Gazing into God's Heart

Jesus shares a striking parable in Matthew 25 about sheep and goats. The tale, as you probably know, is about more than farm animals and good deeds. What you may not know is that it concerns Israel.

When we gather before Him in judgment, the Lord says He will separate the righteous—those who feed, clothe, nurse and care for His needs—from those who do not. The righteous (sheep) receive their inheritance in the Kingdom of God; the unrighteous (goats) are cast from His presence. At that time, you and I will ask when it was that we saw and cared for Him—or did not. He will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

I was taught, probably like you, that this passage refers to the poor and needy, the oppressed and maligned. Indeed, that is a good and proper interpretation of the parable. But it has a more fundamental meaning we often overlook.

One day, in a devotional study, I sensed the Spirit speak, *Look carefully, Sandy. These “brothers and sisters of Mine” are the Jewish people.*

Startled, I pored over Scriptures and plowed through commentaries. There I discovered the Lord was speaking to His disciples explicitly about the end times. They had asked what would be the sign of His return and end of the age. In response, Jesus described several events, indicating that Israel would endure much hardship (see Matthew 24:3–25:30). He explained how to prepare for that trying time and stand firm in faith until the end of it. He cautioned that our actions toward His “brothers and sisters” in that day would affect our eternal destiny. In this context, it is clear that Jesus’ brothers and sisters refer

fundamentally to the Jews.¹ Commenting on the parable, a team of Bible scholars writes, “Ultimately, how a person treats the Jews will reveal whether or not he is saved.”²

Please do not misunderstand: Salvation is solely by grace through faith. But true salvation is evidenced by love and fruits of righteousness—which are reflected in our attitude and actions toward Israel. Why? As we will see in this book, how we treat Israel reflects to a real extent how we would treat the Lord Jesus Himself.

I realize that is a bold statement. As I have said, Israel is not perfect. I am not suggesting we approve of everything she does or disregard her sin. Nor do I say we should not care about, bless and lovingly reach out to Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims. In fact, if our love for Israel means we have no love for these others, then I daresay something is not right about our love for Israel.

The Creator does not play favorites with Israel. He chose her so that people like you and me in every nation and period of history would know—through her Scriptures, her Savior and her soul—His loving mercy and grace. Perhaps to the surprise of some, He is not finished with the Jewish nation—or with how He wants to bless us through her. Will we honor His choice to do so?

Do you desire to lay hold of all God has for you and stand firm to the end? (see Matthew 24:13). Then, my friend, He beckons you into His heart for His ancient covenant people. There you will discover a jealous and zealous love for the Jews, pulsating with passion. As a result, you will learn more of His love for *you* and lay hold of blessing for you personally that cannot be accessed, I am convinced, any other way.

Be forewarned: Others may not go with you. God is allowing Israel to serve as a strategic point of division. Some in the Body of Christ will stand with the sons and daughters of Jacob;

some will turn away. As conflict escalates between Israel and her enemies, your stand in the end will be less about the Jewish state and more about *Him*.

Testing and Threshing in Justice

God uniquely connects Himself to the people and land of Israel. Long ago, He picked a spot on earth to put His Name forever (see 2 Chronicles 33:7; 1 Kings 9:3). The area served for centuries as a threshing floor, where wheat was sifted from chaff. God also chose a people—the Jews—to inherit and inhabit the land of that place. At His instruction, King David purchased the site and built an altar on it (see 2 Samuel 24:15–25). On this precise plot of real estate, David’s son Solomon constructed God’s Holy Temple. There His glory came down, dwelling in unequaled grandeur on earth. Located in Jerusalem, the place is now known as the Temple Mount.

Today the Temple Mount serves as a threshing floor no less than it did when David bought it three thousand years ago. This dry and dusty hilltop sifts nations’ souls through their contest for its control. And little wonder, for there Yeshua will rule and reign in Kingdom splendor—something His enemies are scrambling to prevent (see Isaiah 2:2–3; Psalm 132:13–14; Acts 3:21). The Temple Mount will prove the consummate testing ground, the place where Messiah and anti-Messiah, and the followers of both, will someday be exposed. It is a test God wants you to pass—because it is a test of love. And by design, it will involve the Jews.

The test would prove less genuine if issues involving Israel were simple, or the Jewish people never sinned. But sometimes Israel acts unjustly. Sometimes her government or military or

citizens make mistakes. Yet, as we will see, *true* justice is often perverted by the world's collective understanding and response to Israel as nowhere else.

What does God say about the nations' unjust response to the error of Israel's ways?

"I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry [at Israel], but they [the nations] went too far with the punishment. . . . Whoever touches [Israel] touches the apple of [my] eye—I will surely raise my hand against them."

Zechariah 1:14–15; 2:8–9

Those who treat Israel unjustly raise their hand, so to speak, as if to brazenly poke the Almighty in His eye. In response, God raises His hand against *them*; they suffer loss of spiritual vision. In this word picture, I see an expression of God's fiery love for both Israel and the nations. Certainly He is not telling us to give Israel "blind support." To the contrary, He wants us to make choices that enable our vision to be preserved. In a fast-changing world, He wants us to see where we are going, our steps aligned with His. If that is your desire too, this book will help you walk in His ways, discerning truth in love.

In New Words of Old

The Bible's most concise yet comprehensive teaching on the relationship between Israel and the Church—which includes you if you are a Christian—is found in Romans 9–11. This book follows the general flow of those pivotal chapters. In so doing, much time and space is devoted to the Islamist/Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In that context, any denunciation

of terror, fundamentalist Islam or enmity against Israel is not intended to reflect anything less than Messiah-like love toward those set against her. Recall the opening story of Joshua and his encounter with the Most High. God's perspective is Kingdom-oriented; ours must be, too.

Though not a scholarly treatise, *Why Still Care about Israel?* digs deep in the pursuit of truth. As a former attorney with a political science degree and seminary background, I have researched the theological, historical and journalistic works of others, distilling them into a format lay readers can understand. The information I share has been not only intensively investigated but drenched in years of intercessory prayer. In this book you will not encounter dry facts or superficial arguments, but reality replete with heaven's heartbeat.

A companion website, www.whystillcareaboutisrael.com, supplements this book. Helpful study aids, including notes documenting or expounding on topics mentioned in the book, may be found there. Notes available online are designated by letters (a, b, c, etc.), while notes in the back of this book are designated by numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.). Some notes contain a dual designation. In that case, a portion of the note appears in the book, but expository matter is accessible online. This book can be easily read, however, without referring to any of the notes at all. They exist solely for more serious readers as a complementary tool.

Why Still Care about Israel? employs terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Where Hebrew or Arabic words are used, translations are provided. Jesus' name is substituted many times with the Hebrew *Yeshua*. In some instances I refer to God as *Yahweh*, using the standard English Tetragrammaton. The words *Old Covenant* and *Hebrew Scriptures* are employed synonymously with *Old Testament*. Bear in mind, however, that the Old Covenant contains within it several different covenants.

I use *Israel* interchangeably with *Jewish state*, *Jewish nation*, *national Israel*, *ethnic Israel* and occasionally *Zion*, referring either to the geographic territory or the Jewish people or both. This parallels the biblical usage, which reflects a dynamic unity between the people and the land.^b The intended referent (land, people or both) should be clear from the context. Solely for the sake of convenience, the Jews are sometimes described as God's Old Covenant people, and the Church, His New Covenant people.

During the writing of this book, the United Nations upgraded its status of the Palestinian Authority to that of nonmember observer state. Presently there is no universal agreement on the name of the resulting geopolitical entity. Therefore, at different times I use *Palestinian Authority (PA)*, *Gaza*, *West Bank*, *Judea and Samaria* or *Palestine*. I trust that any offense taken at any of these terms will be minimal. For linguistic integrity, I have tried to use the most accurate name in each instance, given the particular context.

Where it is necessary to talk of anti-Semitism, the word refers to prejudicial hostility toward Jews, not other Semitic peoples. In discussions on Islam, the term *Islamism* or *Islamist* is used interchangeably with *fundamentalist*, *militant* or *extremist Islam*. The phrase *the West* or *Western world, civilization, culture* or *society* refer to all nations, wherever located, that identify with and embrace traditional Western values and freedoms.

Enmity against Israel in the Middle East can be difficult to succinctly describe. It is probably best characterized as the Islamist/Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For the sake of brevity, however, I usually use a condensed term, depending on context: *Islamist-Israeli*, *Arab-Israeli*, *Palestinian-Israeli* or a variation thereof.

As you read this book, you may feel angry or pained at times. I do not apologize for disclosing information that may provoke

your emotions. Truth must be told so that we can align with righteousness and respond accordingly. I do grieve along with you, however, for the fallen nature of humankind giving rise to those disturbing facts God wants us to face. My hope is that as *Why Still Care about Israel?* brings to light compelling realities and scriptural truths, you will experience His heart of love and grace—for all parties involved—as never before. I pray that when you turn the final page of this book, you will also know God as never before. Because in the end, Israel is all about *Him*.

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God's Inseparable Love

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38–39

Like me, you have probably been personally encouraged more than once by the cherished verses above. This power-packed passage has strengthened the Church for over two thousand years. Despite life's difficulties, we can cling to the truth of God's unwavering love. Nothing, *but nothing*, can separate us from it. Why? Mercy and grace. Divine mercy and grace, described in Romans 1–8, crescendo in God's unfaltering love.¹ It is in

this context of His love that we begin reading, in the very next sentence, about Israel:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Romans 9:1–4

The flow of Scriptures is strategic by the Spirit. Just as we are assured of Yahweh’s love for the Church in Romans 8:38–39, we are reminded of the unquenchable flame in His heart for the Jews in Romans 9:1. As you may know, the original letter to the Roman church contained no chapter breaks; they were added later for our convenience. *The New Covenant’s keynote message on Israel is rooted in the revelation of God’s merciful, gracious love.* Believers who do not comprehend the magnificent height, depth and breadth of that love will not fully comprehend why God wants them caring about Israel.

Why God Loves Israel

The first time Yahweh speaks of His love is not at Creation, but many years later—to the children of Israel. Try to picture the scene: A throng gathers expectantly before Moses, honored leader of more than forty years. The great lawgiver, prophet and friend of God is saying good-bye to the Israelites as they stand at the precipice of the Promised Land. Moses is about to die, and so (I imagine) the hushed crowd clings to his every word. Nobody pays heed to the punishing desert sun, crying babies or unending demands of life-on-the-go. Here and

now, for the first time, Moses tells the Israelites that God loves them:

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers.

Deuteronomy 7:6–8 NASB

Why does God love Israel? He says that He loves Israel simply because He loved Israel. He does not say Israel is lovable; He does not even say her forefathers with whom He covenanted were lovable. Yahweh offers no explanation conforming to human logic for His love for the Jewish people. This does not mean His love for them is irrational or misplaced. It is according to divine reasoning, sovereign purpose—and most of all, mercy and grace.

The Creator's love for His people exists ultimately for His own sake. Peer into the chambers of His heart; He loves because He *is* love (see 1 John 4:8, 16). He loves *you* because love is His nature and character.^a He cannot *not* love you. “Thou art Thyself the reason for the love wherewith we are loved,” said the twentieth-century theologian A. W. Tozer.²

God ties His love for the Jewish people to the oath He swore to them. He unconditionally binds Himself by His word to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It has been said that love is spelled c-o-m-m-i-t-m-e-n-t. Sovereign God loves Israel because of His covenant commitment to her. At the same time, His commitment flows from His love. In other words, God loves Israel because He loved Israel, because He committed to love Israel. Therefore, if you are a New Covenant son or daughter, He also loves *you*, unshakeably.

To be sure, love is not the same as approval. God does not advocate “sloppy agape.” He does not approve of sin on the part of His covenant children, Jewish or Christian, and neither should we. But at the same time, sin does not extinguish unconditional love.

A renowned Bible scholar shares how he came to this realization. He once firmly believed God had ceased loving Israel and replaced her with the Church. But in studying Romans 9–11, he was given a revelation of mercy and grace that radically changed his view. He writes:

It is only where the Church . . . secretly—perhaps quite unconsciously!—believes that its own existence is based on human achievement, and so fails to understand God’s mercy to itself, that it is unable to believe in God’s mercy for still unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church.³

Loving in Hebrew: *Ahav*

If you go to church, you have probably heard more than one sermon about the different Greek words used in the New Covenant for *love*. But have you ever studied the fascinating Hebrew concept? It is in Hebrew that God gives us the foundational knowledge of His love, and solid foundations are key to good constructs of any kind. So let us revisit Deuteronomy 7:7–8 (NASB), where we first hear, straight-out and plain, about God’s love for His people: “The LORD . . . set His love [in Hebrew, *khashaq*] on you . . . because the LORD loved [*ahav*] you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers.”

The Hebrew Scriptures use three different words to convey love. *Ahav*, a primary root, appears most frequently. *Ahav* means “to love, have affection, be attached to, delight in.” *Ahav* also connotes “to lust” and “to breathe” or “pant after.”⁴ *Ahav* is used where Moses explains that the Lord set His love on Israel “because the Lord loved” them. The second word for love, *kha-shaq*, appears where Moses says the Lord “set His love on you.” *Khashaq* means “to love, long for, desire and delight in.” It also implies “clinging.”⁵ (A third word for love, *keenah*, is not found in this passage but is used elsewhere to denote Yahweh’s ardor, zeal or jealousy.^{6 b)}

Based on the Hebrew, Deuteronomy 7:7–8 can be accurately paraphrased: “The Lord set His longing, clinging desire, delight and love on you because of His affectionate attachment, desirous delight and love for you.”

Why take so much time with definitions? The point is the passion! God is absolutely amorous toward Israel. She is the object of a divine love affair, the longest romance on record. Do I suggest His heart for her excludes Gentiles from the totality of His blessing? Absolutely not. Much to the contrary, His heart for Israel is related to His ineffable desire to bless *all* peoples on earth.

Hear God’s heartbeat for His people, not only in the words of Scripture but in the very letters that comprise them. According to some Jewish schools of allegorical thought, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet carries with it a deposit of the divine. Since God is the Author of language and Hebrew is the original tongue in which He communicates to His people, it is said that not only every word, but every letter of every word bespeaks something of His nature.⁷

In the word *ahav*, the first letter is *aleph*, said to designate sacrifice, strength and servant leadership. *Hey*, the second letter, connotes an opening or open window. It is also used as a

substitute for writing God's name. The third letter is a modification of *bet*, meaning "house" or "family." *Bet* implies covenantal, affectionate relationship.⁸

By its three component letters, *ahav* communicates sacrifice, strength, communion with God and familial relationship. In *ahav* we catch nuances of the all-powerful One sacrificing so His people can relate freely to Him as family. J. I. Packer, in his classic *Knowing God*, describes the intimacy implicit in the word *ahav*: God's "love reaches its highest form in personal fellowship in which each lives in the life of the other, imparting to the other, and receiving back the outflow of that other's affection."⁹ What exquisite communion!

Love Synergized: The Church and Israel

As Paul trumpets the triumph of God's love, it is not surprising the Spirit turns his thoughts to Israel. Birthed from Yahweh's love for all humanity, Israel was created for His personal affections and ardor. She was to love Him back and mediate His love to others. But Israel is lost in her sin apart from her Savior. So the anointed apostle spills before us his unshakeable grief. The same Paul who exhorts us to rejoice always (see Philippians 4:4) says that he carries "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" over Israel. Why does his pain never end? Paul is gripped by the Spirit's unending burden of love for the Jews. Not once, but three times, he affirms the veracity of his passion:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart . . . for the sake of . . . those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Romans 9:1–4

Paul's petitioning heart echoes that of Moses, who pleaded with God on Israel's behalf: "Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Exodus 32:32). Paul, like Moses, carries the unchanging heart cry of God. Do you want to know the burden of the Lord—His Kingdom purposes—for today? Think *Israel*. Does this mean others are excluded from a special place in our Father's heart? To the contrary, God's burden for Israel is central to His redemptive plans for all peoples. Not for her sake but His, the destiny He designed for Israel will someday be fulfilled.

To be sure, some believers with little grasp of God's heart for the Jews undeniably love Him deeply. For over two thousand years, countless numbers of such saints have even laid down their lives for Jesus. In no way do I impugn their integrity or spirituality. But in these last days, the world is different. In it Israel has been placed center stage before a global audience. God's love story is on divine display as the nations lock in on the tiny Jewish state. And He is noting our response. Will it be one of love, "the most excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31)?

According to 1 Corinthians 13, without love we are nothing. Without love, even the priceless gifts of the Spirit and His mantles for ministry add zero to our worth. If we speak in tongues or prophesy without love, we make only noise. Lacking love, our faith may move mountains but fail to bless. If we give all we possess to the poor or become martyrs for Messiah, we gain nothing without love. Love is the greatest gift and most excellent way. It never fails; it lasts forever. Love is the most valued substance of the universe.

Jesus cautioned that in the last days, Kingdom conflict between good and evil would greatly increase. Natural human sensibilities would be offended, embittered or hardened by the onslaught of iniquity. As a result, the love of most would grow

cold (see Matthew 24:12–13). Messiah’s true followers, however, will stand firm to the end. They will not just endure the times but engage with His sacrificial strength in the intimate communion of His *ahav*.

Refining Love

Pure, Messiah-like love is given without condition, solely to bless the beloved. Free of ulterior motive, such love is the ultimate substance and test of our faith. It is that which the Lord has always radically required of those who dare follow Him fully. And today, He is using Israel to help us attain to it. Take, for example, the story of one Arab believer I know, a former Muslim whom we will call “S.”

“S” used to train young children to kill Israelis and took pride in personally snuffing out more than one Jewish life. But then he had a dramatic encounter with God. Now he loves and serves Jesus, the Arabs—and Jews. How was “S’s” heart transformed from one of hate to love? Someone told him that to know God he would have to love a Jew (namely, Jesus). When that person set a Bible before him, “S” began to shake violently. He did not know if he was shaking from rage, fear, the presence of God or all three. But he did know the book was about Israel, his sworn enemy. “S” says that when he eventually read the Bible, and through it came to know God’s love for Israel, he felt love for the first time in his life. “I grew up hating—and especially hating Jews. When I was willing to love them, God filled me with His love for *me*.” Today when “S” ministers the Gospel to Jews, supernatural love softens their hearts toward the Savior.

Not unlike He did with “S,” God used Israel to demonstrate His love in the life of my young friend Emily. For years Emily

was fascinated with end times prophecy. Ever since she learned that Israel serves as God's prophetic "timepiece," she told me, she claimed to love the Jewish state. But whenever I saw Emily, she was intrigued with just one thing. The woman had question upon question about how the latest news events from the Holy Land could signal the Second Coming of Christ. Finally, I shared with Emily that God had another way for her to relate to the Jewish people she said she loved. As you will see momentarily, her life was subsequently transformed.

Since Israel's modern-day restoration, many believers have, like Emily, viewed the Jewish state as an exciting prophetic time-piece. Indeed, that is an aspect—albeit a secondary one—of her existence. As a prophetic people through whom God speaks, Israel uniquely reflects the hour of world history. But Jesus did not die for prophetic timepieces. Neither is the Father's heart ravished over some cosmic hourglass. Israel is His nation of treasured souls, most of whom desperately need salvation.

Certainly, God wants us cooperating with His prophetic Word and plans. But genuine love does not depend on a prophetic agenda. If our primary concern with Israel is prophecy, God wants to take our love to higher levels by taking us deeper into His heart. This He tenderly did with Emily, who began visiting Israel to minister in compassion to Holocaust survivors and terror victims. Instead of living for the news, she *is* good news to Israel.

Will you, like "S" or Emily, choose the most excellent way in loving God's ancient covenant people—not because her land is holy, not because prophecy gets fulfilled there, not because you seek to convert Jews and not because you want to get blessed? He is asking you to love Israel because He loves Israel, unconditionally, uncompromisingly. The prophet Ezekiel shows us how.

Mercy and Grace^c

Ezekiel tells a rapturous tale of love, inviting us to explore the recesses of God's heart. The story starts in chapter 16 with Yahweh recounting His adoring, doting care for Israel. On the day she was born, He says, she was despised. She was thrown into a field, unbathed, unwanted, naked and alone. Not a soul had pity or compassion on her. But He passed by and saw her kicking in her blood. As she lay there helpless, He said, "Live!"

God grew her like "a plant of the field." Years later, He saw that she was "old enough for love." So He spread the corner of His garment over her, covering her nakedness. He gave her His "solemn oath" and she became His. He dressed her in fine linen and costly embroidery, fitting leather sandals onto her feet. He adorned her with jewels, silver and gold. He placed a crown on her head. He nourished her with fine flour, honey and olive oil. "You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen," God said. "And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect" (Ezekiel 16:13–14).

In return, Israel took her beauty and fame and ran off to become a whore:

You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. . . . You also took the fine jewelry I gave you . . . and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them. Also the food I provided for you—the flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat—you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Ezekiel 16:15–19

How does God respond to Israel now that she has spurned His attention and affection only to disgrace herself? He declares: “Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you” (Ezekiel 16:60).

Do you hear the long-suffering ache despite the anger in His voice? The Father’s heart is ravaged yet forever faithful. In spite of her sin—for which severe chastening follows—He loves Israel unconditionally. He will not quit or give up on her. God will save Israel by mercy and grace, and she will love Him back. The same message is repeated over and again by the prophets, apostles and Yeshua Himself.

One biblical portrayal—Yahweh as Israel’s husband—seems downright scandalous: the story of Hosea and Gomer.

Tough Love

In extraordinary fashion, the prophet Hosea dramatically plays out God’s covenant love for all to see. Here it is more than mere story; it is flesh-and-blood reality. God startles us, and no doubt Hosea, by telling him to marry a harlot, a sex addict who will repeatedly prove unfaithful. Despite his wife’s rebellion, Hosea must love and keep covenant with her. So the prophet finds and marries a prostitute named Gomer, and their marriage depicts Israel’s adulterous relationship with God (see Hosea 3:1).

From this reality show of infidelity comes the word of the Lord to His people. Israel, like Gomer, has deplorably prostituted herself to sin. Her jealous God, however, will not stand for it. He will do whatever it takes to win her back—if not the easy way, then the hard. Therefore, Yahweh “will be like a lion” to the Jewish nation. He will “tear her to pieces,” then hide

Himself and make sure nobody comes to her rescue. Meanwhile, He will wait patiently for her to admit her guilt, turn back and earnestly seek Him (see Hosea 5:14–15).

The story bespeaks the tough love of an incomparably gracious God. In wrath, He remembers mercy; His own love constrains Him. Hear His heart pounding with anticipation for the hour of His beloved's return:

“In that day,” declares the LORD, “you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.”

Hosea 2:16, 19–20

The book of Hosea closes with some of the most beautiful, romantic poetry in the Bible. On Israel our long-suffering Creator, knowing the end from the beginning, stoutly refuses to give up. Rest assured, says Hosea, the Jewish nation will be transformed by mercy and grace:

“I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. . . . His splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. People will dwell again in his shade; they will flourish like the grain, they will blossom like the vine—Israel’s fame will be like the wine from Lebanon.”

Hosea 14:4–7

A New Covenant

Not only in Hosea, but throughout the Old Covenant, it is in the context of Israel’s failure and sin—and God’s judgment—that

He shockingly interjects, “I love you.” Just when it seems He is about to disown His people (and rightly so), He declares instead His undying love, affirming His covenant still stands. When it appears all fair and legal grounds for dissolution of the relationship exist, He renews His vows instead. Amid deserved chastisement, God dispenses compassion. Israel spurns the Creator—again and with impunity—and receives an engraved invitation to repent. His mercy and grace are appalling; His kisses, outrageous. Discipline Israel He must, but destroy or disown her completely? Never!

Eventually there came a time when sin so screamed for justice that God exiled the Jews from their land. Captive Israelites lay broken and bleeding, defeated and displaced on foreign soil. Surely they wondered if Yahweh would ever favor them again.

In this unlikely context of misery and despair came a dizzying word from the Lord. Like a windfall, hope from heaven descended on the Jews. Never before had He spoken explicitly of it—this future “new covenant”:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. . . . I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Jeremiah 31:31, 33–34 NKJV

Notice that the New Covenant was not made here with the Church; it was originally made with Israel. Holy God is wholly in love with Israel; therefore, she must and will be made holy. By mercy and grace, the New Covenant guarantees it. That same mercy and grace extends to all nations—but keeps His covenant with Israel intact.

Next, as if this all-surpassing promise were not enough, God reaffirms His commitment to sustain Israel as a nation forever:

This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD Almighty is his name: “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” declares the LORD, “will Israel ever cease being a nation before me.” This is what the LORD says: “Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 31:35–37

Have the sun, moon and stars stopped shining? Have the waves of the sea stopped roaring? If not, then the descendants of Jacob have not ceased being a nation before God. Have men measured the heavens or plumbed the deepest bowels of the earth? Then neither has God rejected Israel because of her sin! Assured He will never reject His Old Covenant people, we can trust He will never reject His New Covenant people, either.

If you are a Christian, God’s love, mercy and grace for you are no less than they are for Israel. Her story is very much yours. In the next chapter, you’ll discover how to read that story anew.