



SINCE 1976

REPORT

Ari & Shira Sorko-Ram

Kobi & Shani Ferguson



Our youngest son engages an in-character guide to the Bible village at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C.

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Have You Told Your Children Yet?

By Shani Sorko-Ram Ferguson

On our trip back home to Israel this summer, our flight was canceled, and we got stranded in Washington, D.C. for two days. Looking to make the best of a lousy situation, we visited the Museum of the Bible. Just recently opened in the nation's capital, I have to say the place was nothing less than magnificent - a worthy monument to the greatest

Book ever written. The gorgeous seven-story building had an entire floor dedicated to bringing the stories of the Bible to life. There was even a village you could walk through and interact with characters from the Bible era.

A section dedicated to the Tanach (Old Testament) had a multi-sensory presentation that included a stunning audio and visual

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walk-through experience of the Bible timeline. As we walked through the rescue story from Egypt and journeyed through the desert, the sheer emotion at finally arriving in the Promised Land was electric. Right before we turned a corner, we stood by a pile of rocks and on the wall saw a Bible verse from Joshua 4 explaining:

“In the days to come, when your children ask their fathers, ‘What are these stones doing here?’ tell your children this: ‘Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry ground.’”

As we turned the corner, my excitement waned as I saw the next verse on the wall:

“Then another generation grew up that didn’t know anything of God or the work He had done for Israel.” Judges 2:10

I turned to my daughter and asked her, “What happened between that last verse and this one?” She looked at me and her eyes got wide, “Ohhh! They didn’t tell their kids!” she answered.

Moving at a Family Pace

Twenty years ago this past month, Kobi and I exchanged our vows. It took six years before we had our first child and two more years before we had our second. We had gotten used to traveling and ministering and were very involved with our congregation in Tel Aviv. Even with two little ones we were able to drag our kids with us or grab a

Kobi and Shani and their five children, Illit, Lahav, Nevaeh, Sela and Neshar travel and minister together

babysitter. By the third child we realized we had to slow down a bit. And by our fourth kid we started rethinking everything.

Four was more than a handful, but with three girls and one boy, I couldn’t help but wonder if we should try for one more boy. I was leaning in the direction of having another one but wrestled with the idea of another pregnancy. Then one night while sitting at the dinner table, our oldest daughter, who was ten at the time, said out of nowhere, “I feel like there’s someone missing in our family.”

That statement not only confirmed to me that, indeed, we were destined to have this fifth child (which did turn out to be a boy!), but also something clicked in me about families. It seemed there was actually a plan for how many children God wanted in our family. For Jacob it was 13, for Isaac it was two. Every family is different. For our journey, team Ferguson needed five new players to get us to where we were going in God’s story.

Already ministering full-time, we looked to families of successful ministries and businesses we knew and saw that more often than not, the family was in the background of the parents’ lives. No one would argue that the parents deeply loved their children, but there was an underlying feeling of guilt the parents seemed to have. It was a feeling that focusing too much on their children was somehow neglecting God’s call. Something about this seemed off. For what good is it if a man helps save a whole nation and loses his own family?

And yet somehow, our society has been set up like this.

Processing through this was like the feeling you get when you finish putting together a piece of furniture and realize there are still several unused screws laying around. It looks like you built it right, but at some point, something is going to fall apart because it isn’t put together the way it was designed. Not once in Scripture did God give someone children to punish them. Children were

always seen as a blessing, and a reward for following the ways of the Lord – a promise that one’s story would continue after them. If a person’s business or ministry was part of God’s plan, we knew children couldn’t be an obstacle in its path.



Credit: David J. Phillip/AP

Drake LaRoche, center, son of first baseman Adam LaRoche, runs with the team during a spring training baseball workout.

He had been involved in the team workouts for years before the White Sox president decided it was inappropriate for kids to come to work with their parents.

NOT Without My Son

A few years ago news outlets all over the U.S. debated this very issue. Adam LaRoche, a professional baseball player, brought his teenage son to practice every day. Adam also had an arrangement with his son’s school when they traveled for games and everyone on the team loved the kid. At some point, however, the team’s president decided that out of principle he didn’t like the arrangement. “We all think his kid is a great young man. I just felt it should not be every day, that’s all. You tell me, where in this country can you bring your child to work every day?” the team president texted. Adam, who clearly knew his priorities resigned, and walked away from the 13 million dollars he would’ve earned that year.

Why do we see people abandon high paying jobs or prominent ministry positions because of burnout or, in Adam’s case, refusing to live a life that would burn him out? I would venture that as long as society ignores the most basic of human needs – the need to grow up in a loving family and then raise your own - you will find successful people

increasingly empty. There is so much focus on how we as individuals should live our lives – with the right habits, food choices and squeezing the life out of every moment to get ahead.

Family doesn’t work on a time clock. Whether it’s a sick kid the morning of the planned trip to Disneyland or on the night before an important meeting at work - the chaos of raising kids brings even the most organized of people to their knees. My guess is, God did that on purpose (not the sickness, but the unpredictability of it all). Even the disciples didn’t get it at first – shoos kids away who interrupted Yeshua as he spoke, only to be rebuked by Yeshua for interrupting the kids. The chaos messes with us, but it doesn’t mess with Him. Like the Sabbath, raising kids puts the brakes on our ambitions and forces us to stay rooted in humanity - and dependent on God.

It’s Possible

Several years ago we visited Brazil with our whole family. We spoke at a conference with all sorts of well-known ministry and worship leaders. At one point after singing a song and speaking a bit we brought our kids up and introduced them to everyone and even



Our son, Sela, 5 years old at the time, speaking at a conference in Brazil.

let our five-year-old share. His adorable two minutes on that stage got 100,000 views on YouTube within the week.

The next day of the conference I was sitting in the green room backstage when several people started pointing at me and talking intensely in Portuguese. They looked upset so I asked my friend in a whisper – “What are they saying? Are they mad at me?” She giggled and explained, “They are saying they don’t understand how you can do all these things, sing and speak, travel the world and minister and raise five kids at the same time. People here love children but they are afraid to have many because they think they will not have time for their ministry!”

I replied, “Tell them you can do anything with five kids that you can do with no kids. You just have to do it slower at first.”

No one can claim to have all the answers to everyone’s situation because there are so many family variables. I do know that we applied Biblical principles and Jewish traditions that have proven successful

in many cultures for thousands of years and adapted it to our life circumstances – and it is working. It worked so well, in fact, that we published *Color Me Family*, a family discipleship manual/coloring book to help others who wanted practical ideas for training their family in the ways of the Lord.

In the short run, choosing family first is difficult because you will observe the “success” of people who are willing to give up their personal life in the name of the Lord’s mission or their boss’s vision. In the long run, however, walking at a pace your family can keep up with will prove far more rewarding.

Monkey See, Monkey Do

People inherently strive to become what they see. It’s the reason young children want

to be “big” like their parents and why good kids begin to behave badly when they hang around bad company.

Isn’t it interesting how many young people today who can’t sing dream of being singers? Do you think it has anything to do with the endless singing contest shows and movies that climax with a young person on stage performing a song? This point was demonstrated when scores of people began posting proud before-and-after pictures of their clean closets soon after Netflix aired shows like *Marie Kondo* and *The Minimalists* – shows on tidying up and enjoying the uncluttered life. I bet we could solve a good bit of the agriculture crisis – where the average farmer is over 60 and young people are not lining up behind them to take the reins – by making shows about the unique life of farming and the tight community that surrounds it.

But no. Gone are the days of *Leave It to Beaver* where the children create innocent mischief and are then corrected and guided by their parents on how to explore life safely.

That is deliberate.

Films that include a traditional warm family are rare these days. Instead, movies geared towards kids almost always include one parent missing and the child on a journey to reject the life their existing parent is trying to “force” on them. Mothers are often portrayed as smart and capable (though exhausted) while the fathers are portrayed as blubbery fools or, at the very least, weak men.

God provided the family structure as a safe place to develop each fledgling generation in the ways and knowledge of God. Therefore, family would be the most obvious target for those who want to see the knowledge of God removed from the earth. And who isn’t

aware of how intensely influencers in places of power like politics and the entertainment industry would like to see just that?

It is interesting that the moral lawlessness – or freedom, as a they like to spin it – applauded in pop culture, specifically targets the wellbeing of the family. No one is arguing that theft or murder is okay. The agenda is to deliberately lay an axe to the root of the human calling to be fruitful, multiply and pass on the knowledge of God.

A classic example for this is the normalizing of couples living together without first making a lifelong commitment. Though the flippancy of casual sex carries with it its own problematic consequences of disease and heartbreak, the greatest losers from this practice are the millions of children who will grow up knowing they had a father who ditched them. Thus their response to the idea of a God would be, “So, who is this Man in the sky saying He is like that guy who left my mom when she needed him most? How is He going to help me understand who I am and where I came from and why I am here?”

Your Story Matters

If I gave you a necklace and told you I got it from the store today on the way to meeting you, you would likely appreciate it and perhaps put it on. But what if I gave you a necklace and shared with you in detail how my Jewish grandmother received it on her 12th birthday, and then the next day had to flee an attack on her village? Then she took a ship across the ocean to pre-Israel British Palestine, was denied entry by the British but was granted asylum in the US. She married and had 7 children, one of which was my dad, and he passed this necklace to me that she carried with her through her harrowing experience. And now, I was giving it to you.

There is no doubt in my mind you would view and treat that necklace differently. You may even feel awe as you take in the history of all this necklace has been through and survived. That is the awe we must instill in

our kids as we tell them of where they came from – the seed of who they would become has been carried for generations.

Except for the necklace part, that is in fact my story. And having been told what my ancestors went through to get me to where I am makes me not want to be the one who drops the ball in my family’s story.

One of the coolest (and a bit embarrassing) things about being in the lineage of the Jewish people is how much of my people’s history is recorded. True, it’s awkward that everyone has to know some of the misdeeds of my ancestors – they were a family of humans after all. Still, it’s a part of who I am just like your imperfect ancestors made



Credit: Shutterstock

you who you are. We are the continuation of a long story. And knowing where we came from should give us purpose – as it would to anyone who learns of their ancestor’s journey.

What if our kids lived their lives in awe of all the things previous generations of their family went through to get them where they are now? The story isn’t limited to a blood line. When a child is brought into a family, that family’s story becomes their own. If the generation we are raising can grasp the past and dream of their future significance in this long story, maybe suddenly that pair of jeans or iPhone won’t be the most important thing in the world. Maybe doing things that will matter 100 years in the future will matter to them now.

So, if I may ask again, have you told your kids yet? ■



Above: The popular *Leave It to Beaver* TV show aired in the late 1950’s and 60’s portrayed the daily life of an ideal but not necessarily perfect family

Right: Today’s kids’ shows consistently push the storyline of a child, who leaves his family and is joined by a companion who helps him achieve his (often music related) dream.



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Until the Messiah Came

The Rise and Fall of the Word of God

By Shira Sorko-Ram

PART II

It is 597 BC – the year of the first forced march of Jews exiled to Babylon. That year the Kingdom of Judea disappeared from the map. All Israel had left was a prophecy of hope by Jeremiah, that in 70 years, God would free them from their Babylonian exile and bring them back to their homeland.

This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.” Jeremiah 29:10

Then some 68 years later, a Persian King, Cyrus, conquered Babylon. God “stirred up his spirit” to decree

that Jews could return home to Israel to rebuild their Temple.

Only 43,000 Jews were ready to leave Babylon. The tribe of Levites who were the spiritual leaders of the Jewish community had fragmented. Many Jews had assimilated and intermarried. They had traded Hebrew for Aramaic, the language of Babylon, and were doing well both in business and government. Hadn’t Jeremiah told them to settle in for the long haul, build houses and bless Babylon? Certainly, life was better in the diaspora than in desolate Judea. The Persians ruled, but overall, they were amiable towards the Jewish people who were scattered across the empire.

For those who did make the trek back to Israel, lack of strong spiritual leadership, poverty, scarcity of food and endless enemies kept them from any real economic progress. So God sent Haggai and Zachariah to encourage the rebuilding of the Temple. It would still take another 20 plus years to finish.

Ezra the Scribe

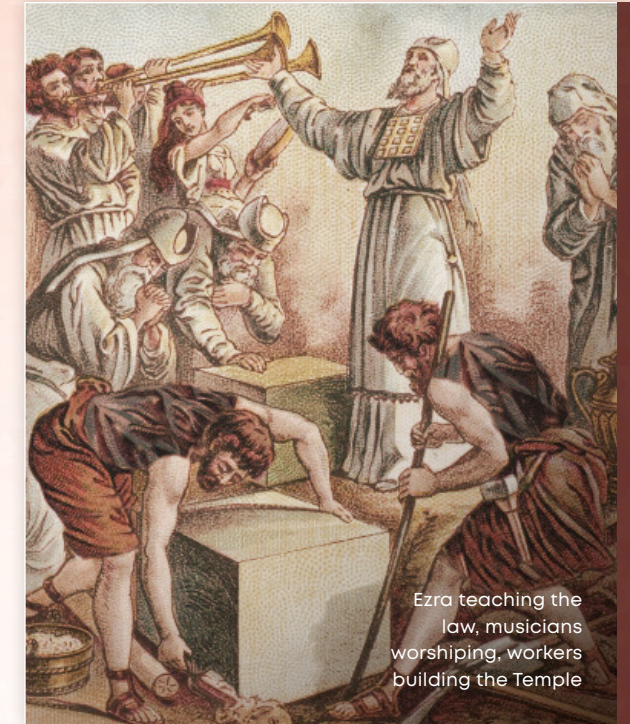
But it was Ezra who made the strongest long-term spiritual impact on the struggling returnees. He arrived some 80 years later. In 458 BC he brought with him another 1,800 priests, Levites and musicians, along with their families. Understand that when God spoke the promise of 70 years through Jeremiah, it did not at all mean that the Israelites’ return to Israel would flow smoothly without complications and obstacles.

First of all, these returnees were not particularly dedicated children of God. Many had intermarried with the heathen. The people clearly knew little of the Law of Moses and God’s commandments. The few Levites who had immigrated earlier to minister to the community’s spiritual needs had no choice but to leave the ministry and earn a living, because the people were not paying their tithes. Ezra was determined to turn things around by bringing back the Word of God to his unenlightened countrymen.

This Ezra came up from Babylon; and he was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses... “for Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.” Ezra 7:6,10

Needed: A Godly Political Leader

In the chaos, poverty and uncertainty, Ezra alone was not able to bring the people to true repentance. It was clear the Jewish people needed two essentials to create a



Ezra teaching the law, musicians worshipping, workers building the Temple

Credit: Ultimate Bible Picture Collection

godly nation: good civil government and spiritual leaders teaching the Word of God.

Heaven sent such a man. After Nehemiah arrived to become governor (without pay) and organized the people, they built a wall around the city to protect them from constant enemy attacks. It was when Israel had the combination of Nehemiah

It was clear the Jewish people needed two essentials to create a godly nation: good civil government and spiritual leaders teaching the Word of God.

governing, Ezra teaching and the Levites worshipping (with women singers!) that revival broke out!

The whole community worshiped, celebrating with joy God’s holidays and “day by day, from the first day until the last day, he [Ezra] read from the Book of the law of God.” Nehemiah 8:18



Dead Sea Scroll Facsimile of the Book of Isaiah

the Torah and the prophets needed new explanations and applications as times were changing.

Under the Greeks

And then everything changed for the Jewish people in 323 BC. Alexander the Great died after conquering a huge swath of the globe. Two of Alexander's generals divided between them their conquered territories; General Ptolemy took Egypt in the south. General Seleucus made himself master of Syria

in the north. Israel was in between. This would be the beginning of *two-and-a-half centuries* of horrific wars on Israel's soil. The atrocities between these two dynasties included annihilation of family members, intrigues, poisonings, murders, assassinations, and unimaginable massacres of huge proportions – and in between, conquering and reconquering the land of Judea over and over.

Jewish Rabbis Translate Scriptures to Greek

At times, there were short periods of peace. Ptolemy the First carried thousands of Jews off to Egypt making them slaves. His son, Ptolemy II, freed them. Large populations of Jews settled in different areas of Egypt – especially the city of Alexandria (named after Alexander the Great). The younger generation of Jews soon spoke Greek, losing their Hebrew or Aramaic languages. To make the Word of God accessible to the Greek-speaking Jewish community, seventy Rabbis are said to have translated the Hebrew Biblical text into Greek. The translation would come to be known as the Septuagint

However, when Governor Nehemiah had to leave Israel at the request of the King for a short time, he returned to Israel only to find his people had returned to their old lifestyle – intermarrying, not paying tithes to the Levites, and desecrating the Sabbath. Nehemiah again organized the people, appointed two large choirs of musicians to worship and brought in Ezra, again, to teach the Law of God. As a lover of the Word of God, Ezra created a pattern of reading the Books of the Bible for generations of Jews to come – until today.

A bust of Alexander the Great



Many of the Jewish aristocratic elitists, including Israel's high priests, were receptive to the sophisticated and glamorous Greek lifestyle.

But then the prophetic Word from the mouth of God became silent for four centuries. The Levites faded away, and different spiritual leaders rose up to reshape the Jewish religion according to their own understanding. They decided



Above: The Pharisees by William Holman Hunt

Right: Coin image of Antiochus Epiphanes who profaned the Temple of God with swine blood

(meaning 70). They started with the Torah, and over the years, the rest of the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek.

The Jewish people used this translation until the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Since the New Testament was also written in Greek, many of its authors quoted Old Testament Scriptures from the Septuagint.

However, as Christianity among the Gentiles began to grow, the Septuagint became tagged as a "Christian book," and Jewish leaders decided to revert to the Hebrew text only.

The Hellenizing of the Jews

Meanwhile, the two warring dynasties of Ptolemy and Seleucus were united in one area. These power-crazed conquering generals and their progeny were determined to impose the Greek culture upon all the races and nationalities they governed. That, of course, included their gods. Many of the Jewish aristocratic elitists, including Israel's high priests, were receptive to the sophisticated and glamorous Greek lifestyle. The common people, on the other hand, wanted to cling to the Law of Moses.

But one of the Seleucid rulers, Antiochus Epiphanes, was determined to eradicate

all signs of Judaism from the entire Jewish people. He converted the Temple into a sanctuary of Jupiter. He placed a statue of Jupiter on the altar. Heathen sacrifices were offered and swine's blood was poured upon the altar, with the broth sprinkled all around the Temple. He also decreed it unlawful to keep the Sabbath and festivals. Torah scrolls were rent in pieces and burned. Children found to be circumcised were slaughtered, along with their mothers. All told, Antiochus murdered tens of thousands of Jews.



The liberalized Jews gave in. They were too worldly to be martyrs. On the other hand, the common folk were resigned to passive resistance. They presumed (from the Book of Daniel) the end of the world was at hand, and they just had to hold on until the Messiah appeared and set up his kingdom.

An Old Priest and His Five Sons

Instead, help came in the form of Judah the Maccabee, son of a priest, who believed in active resistance. He and three of his brothers, gave their lives fighting for freedom to believe in the Most High God, the Holy One of Israel. God gave him and his warriors success and three years later they rededicated the Temple. Some of the pious common people, called Hasidim, decided to join Judah's army. This was the beginning of the Pharisees, who, at their conception, were strongly devoted to the Word of God.

The last of the living Maccabee sons, Simon, became the leader, backed by the emerging Roman Empire, and ruled a peaceful country for seven years. For a brief moment, the Jews were free to practice the laws of their faith. However,



The High Priest
by Jan Van Jagen

The High Priests became completely corrupt. They gained their positions through bribes.

when Simon received the combined titles of “prince, commander and high priest forever” in 141 BC thanks to the Romans – the Hasidim opposed him because no priest was to become also a king. The two titles were only to be given to the coming Messiah, from the tribe of Judah.

Soon things went south. Simon and his wife and family were murdered by his ambitious son-in-law, governor of Jericho. Simon’s surviving son, Johanan Hyrcanus (135-104 BC) became totally immersed in the Greek lifestyle. He also designated himself as both high priest and head of the Jewish commonwealth.

From that time on, the priesthood became completely corrupt. High Priests gained their positions with money.

Disintegration of True Worship

For the next hundred years, until the birth of Yeshua, there was continuous war, mass murders, scheming, and deception between the two Greek dynasties still fighting over the Holy

Land, only to be ultimately defeated by the rising Roman Empire. The people were truly sheep without a shepherd. The elite, wealthy liberal Jews, including the High Priests, used Machiavellian cunning to curry favor from the latest foreign conqueror. The priestly rulers became known as Sadducees – who believed neither in heaven nor hell. Yet in religious matters they were rigidly observant, accepting as obligatory the Torah commandments. Nevertheless, morally, they were corrupt and worldly, with one thing in mind – power.

The Pharisees were hardly much better off. With no more godly prophets speaking the true words of God, the faith of the Pharisees’ religion evolved into countless *outward* commandments and traditions, much of it created by themselves. They muddied the water with their feet, as Jeremiah warned. By making fear the highest motive for the service of God, they busied themselves with minutiae. And they loved the accolades of the people who were in awe of their ostentatious display of piety. Except for a remnant, these leaders had forgotten what it meant to humbly serve God and to love Him with all their heart and soul and being, and to serve their fellowman. The Apostle Paul would write later, **“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”** Romans 10:2

The Word of God Appears

By the time the Love of God appeared in the person of Yeshua, the Son of God, they had no idea who He was – the Word of God in the Flesh. But they were no longer familiar with the pure Word of God; they had strayed so far with men’s commandments, they couldn’t recognize Him.

From Israel’s example, we see that times of turmoil and war do not tend to bring spiritual blessing to a people. In fact, they often bring out deep wickedness in men’s hearts. It is active prayer and intercession that will maintain civil peace and freedom to a nation, and in this peace, allow the Kingdom of God to thrive.

Therefore, I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. I Timothy 2:1-4

Thankfully, there were not a few Jews who did recognize Yeshua when He came and took it upon themselves to share this Good News with the world. The world can be ever grateful to those Jews who followed Him and gave their lives to the Gospel.

No matter how dark the times, we have the promise from God that the Lord will bring the Jewish people back to Him through Messiah Yeshua. The New Testament says, **“All Israel shall be saved, as it is written...!”** Romans 11:26

When that day comes, God will pour out His Spirit on the whole world, giving them also the opportunity to be saved. The pure Word of God will again provide new life when the Messiah returns!

By the time the Love of God appeared in the person of Yeshua, the Son of God, they had strayed so far, they couldn’t recognize Him.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Isaiah 2:3b

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, As the waters cover the sea. Habakkuk 2:14 ■

To be continued next month:
The Word of God among the Gentiles

Yeshua’s
Triumphal
Entry to
Jerusalem



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