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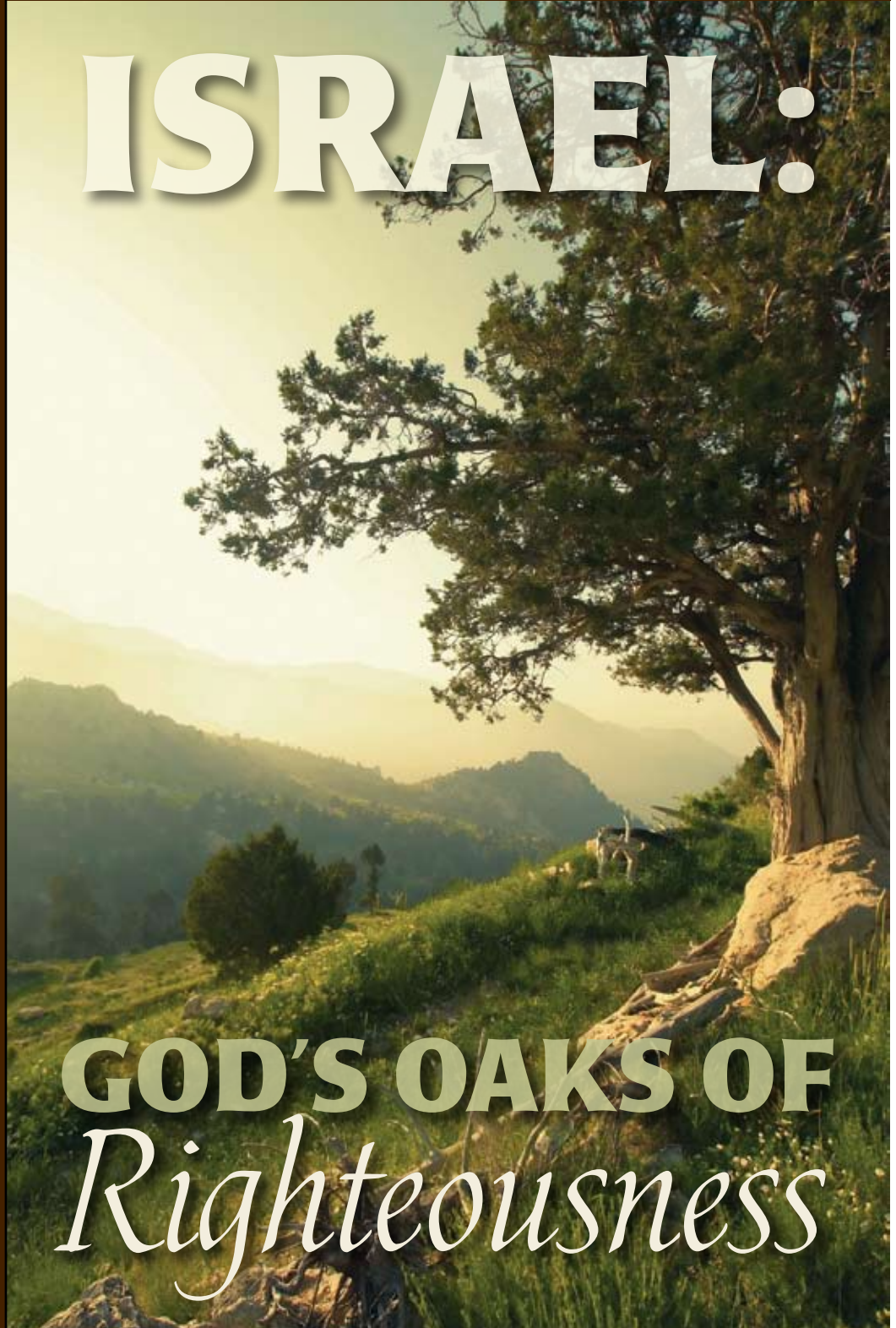
# BRIDGES FOR PEACE

## *Israel Teaching Letter*

Vol. #771107

November 2007

# ISRAEL:



# GOD'S OAKS OF

## *Righteousness*



# ISRAEL:



*"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. **So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.**"*

ISAIAH 61:1-3, NASB

## GOD'S OAKS OF Righteousness

Yeshua (Jesus) read parts of the above passage in His hometown synagogue (Luke 4:16-21). It describes His ministry to His people and, thus, ours to the Jewish people today. Every day at the Bridges for Peace food bank, we see faces once creased with anxiety transformed into smiles. We see the heaviness of their load lightened. We encourage and strengthen the resolve of those who are fainting, just by letting them know someone loves and cares for them. But the end goal of all of this is not just to give temporary help to get them through their first year in the Land or through a crisis in their lives. Ultimately, God is building them up to be oaks of righteousness. They are the "trees" God is planting in His Land.

Verse five attests to the fact that God will use Gentiles to help Him in the process: *"Strangers shall stand and feed your [Israel's] flocks, and the sons of the foreigner shall be your plowmen and your vine-dressers."* In verse six, we see how God intends to use His oaks of righteousness: *"But you shall be named the priests of the LORD, they shall call you the servants of our God..."* Zechariah saw it this way: *"Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you"'"* (8:23). Zechariah envisioned a day when the nations would want to learn about God from the Jewish people.

Anyone, other than the Jewish people, who has ever known the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would not have known Him if it had not been for the



faithfulness of the Jewish people to preserve God's Word throughout the centuries. Today, Christians worldwide are experiencing an increased interest in studying the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and learning about the Jewish roots of their faith. Yet, all this is just a part of God's ultimate goal—that the entire nation of Israel will be a nation of priests to the Lord. Every prayer we pray for Israel, every act of kindness and love we administer is actually working toward this goal. What a privilege to be a part of God's plan to see Israel raised to such a place of honor and sought after as a people—rather than being blamed for every ill in the world.

God could have used any number of symbols for Israel in Isaiah 61:3, but He chose to use a tree. Throughout Scripture, God used many trees to teach His people lessons. It's easy to do. When I see a tree bending in the wind, I'm reminded of how flexible I need to be when stormy times come. When I watch a gentle breeze moving the delicate, silver-green leaves of a Colorado aspen ever so slightly, I know I want to be that sensitive to the breath of the Holy Spirit. Before I say more about the oak, let's look at the importance of trees in the Holy Land and a few examples of how God used trees as object lessons—lessons that should help us all become oaks of righteousness.

### The Importance of Trees in the Holy Land

Trees are one of the Lord's most magnificent creations that stand as symbols of life. They are green, tall, and strong, with branches reaching to the heavens, as if pointing in silent testimony to their Creator.

God loves His trees. In the *Torah*, He even established a law to protect them. During war, Israel was not allowed to cut down fruit trees to make siege works (Deut. 20:19-20). The NIV translation asks, *"Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?"* God protects them as though they were defenseless people. What other nation has a God who is so compassionate toward trees? During the Ottoman Empire, the Turks taxed land-owners according to how many trees they had on their property, so trees were cut down and the Promised Land was denuded. Reforesting the Land has been one of the Jewish people's long-term goals, long before Israel became a state.

In 1901, the Jewish National Fund was established at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, for the purpose of buying land in Israel. In 1903, the first piece of land was purchased, but it wasn't until 1908 that the first trees were planted in the barren land—12,000 olive trees. By 1947, five million had been planted, and in its 100-year history, over 200 million trees have been planted. Yet, only 3.7% of Israel's land is forested.

God not only protected the fruit trees, but gave detailed instruction about them. He taught the Israelites principles of good horticulture. They could not eat the fruit of a newly planted tree until the fifth year. In the fourth year, it was presented only as an offering to the Lord. There was even a law concerning its harvest: *"When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow"* (Deut. 24:20).

Today, Israel celebrates *Tu B'Shvat* (literally, the "15th of Shevat"—a month on the Jewish calendar around Jan.–Feb.), similar to Arbor Day in many countries, when

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olive orchard near Mt. Tabor

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Tu B'Shvat



trees are planted and nuts and fruits are eaten. Though the day has its roots in biblical times, it wasn't until the Middle Ages that the Jewish people began to celebrate the day by eating fruits. Some say the tradition of planting trees did not start until 1890, when a school teacher took his students on a field trip to plant trees on that day. In 1908, the Israeli teachers union officially recognized it as a minor holiday. This tradition has deep meaning for some. This year, for families who were uprooted from Gush Katif, the planting was a symbol of the hope that God would again plant them in the Land with solid roots.

## Firstfruits

The *Tu B'Shvat* of ancient Israel is not mentioned in the Bible, but was instituted in connection with the tithing of the fruits of trees, or the offering of firstfruits (*bikkurim*). "And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD's. It is holy to the LORD" (Lev. 27:30). To help calculate the age of the tree, a "New Year" for trees was established, a date from which the age of the tree was officially counted because, as pointed out, a tree's fruit was not tithed until its fourth year, when it was taken to Jerusalem and given to the priests.

Alfred Edersheim, in his book *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*, describes the way the firstfruit offering was made. As soon as fruit appeared on the tree, the head of the household went out to the field and selected the best portion of the grove as the firstfruits. This act was a way of renewing his covenant with God, recognizing that God had been faithful to provide the fruit for another year. As not all families were able to make the joyous trip to Jerusalem, a representative of the community was chosen to bring up everyone's offerings.

The fruits were placed inside wicker baskets, and the travelers were called together with, "Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God" (Jer. 31:6b). As they entered Jerusalem, they sang, "Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem" (Ps. 122:2, NASB). A messenger preceded them and announced their arrival, whereupon priests came out to meet them. Inhabitants of Jerusalem greeted them with "Welcome! Peace be upon you!" They walked up to the Temple with their offerings, singing Psalm 150, and declared to the priests how God had brought them from Egypt into a land of milk and honey and acknowledged it was the Lord who had provided the produce (Deut. 26:3-11). Barley was offered during the Feast of Firstfruits right after Passover, and wheat was offered 50 days later (Lev. 23:10-16), but the fruit of trees could be offered up until *Hanukkah* (Feast of Dedication or Festival of Lights) at the beginning of winter.

The whole procedure of firstfruits magnifies how blessed the people were by God's trees and their fruit and how God was honored and praised for His

pomegranates



figs



dates



olives



provision. It is a far cry from our day when we so easily and casually purchase fruit at the grocery store.



## The Tree as a Symbol

In Scripture, the *Torah*, men, Israel, and nations are all likened to trees. Jewish commentary points out that man and *Torah* both possess all four of the major components of a tree. For man, his roots are his ancestors; his trunk is the people of Israel; the branches are the tribes; and his fruit his good deeds. *Torah's* roots are its inner secrets and mysteries; the written and oral *Torah* its trunk; its branches the disciplines and methods of interpretation; and its fruit new revelations or insights.

The Hebrew word for "tree" is *etz* (עץ). One Jewish commentator drew an interesting lesson from the two letters. The first letter, *ayin*, is also the word for "eye." The second letter, *tzadeh*, is very similar to *tzadek*, meaning "righteous one." Putting these together, the lesson is drawn that seeing the truth of the *Torah* brings forth the fruit of righteousness in our lives. Some "trees of life" mentioned in Proverbs are wisdom (3:18), "desire fulfilled" (13:12), and a soothing, healing, or wholesome tongue (15:4). Of course, the greatest tree spoken of in the Bible is the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. When the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, the Tree of Life appears again (Rev. 22:2); it bears 12 kinds of fruit every month and has leaves that heal. It represents eternal life, which has always been God's desire for His people.

The wooden posts around which a *Torah* scroll is wound are called *atzei hayyim* or "trees of life." When a *Torah* scroll is returned to the ark (cabinet), part of what is recited goes, "A tree of life it is for those who take hold of it, and blessed are the ones who support it..." It is not surprising then to find that the Tree of Life is a popular artistic motif for Jewish people. Sometimes, a *menorah* (seven-branched candelabra) is depicted as a tree, and the curtain or door that covers the ark is often decorated with a tree.

With this background, we are ready to look briefly at how God used two of His trees to teach us some important truths.



Torah

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## The Cedars of Lebanon—A Warning to the Proud

The cedar, Lebanon's national symbol, is mentioned more than any other tree in the Bible. King David's house and both Temples were made with cedar, as well as a kind of summer palace, which King Solomon called The House of the Forest of Lebanon (1 Kings 7:2-5). Nogah Hareuveni—author of *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage* and founder of Neot Kedumim, a biblical landscape reserve in Israel—asks why David and Solomon went to the expense of importing the cedar from Lebanon when Israel had an abundance of sycamore trees, from which the Egyptians built their sarcophagi because its wood doesn't rot. He believes it was the kings' way of raising the "prestige of Jerusalem above that of all other nations," because "the cedar symbolized strength, height, glory, and wealth."



cedar

The word "cedar" comes from a Semitic word meaning power. Cedars are slow-growing trees that grow best in deep soil beside water. In Lebanon, they grow at around 6,400



feet (1,950 meters) above sea level. A forest, called the Cedars of the Lord, has around 375 centuries-old trees. Four of its oldest giants reach 105 feet (32 meters) high and are an astonishing 36 to 42 feet (11 to 13 meters) in diameter. I have never seen one, but would love to someday (when Hizbullah is no longer in the neighborhood).

One of Balaam's blessings describes Israel as a cedar (Num. 24:6d-7), representing great success and abundance. Hosea also uses the cedar to describe Israel. "I [God] will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like the lily, and he will take root like the cedars of Lebanon. His shoots will sprout, and his beauty will be like the olive tree and his fragrance like the cedars of Lebanon" (14:5-6, NASB). In Ezekiel 17:22-24, the Lord speaks of a cedar sprig that He plants "on the mountain height of Israel," which becomes a majestic tree. This tree could be a picture of the restoration of Israel, the Messiah, or the millennial kingdom. However, when Yeshua teaches the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:32), He refers to this Ezekiel passage, thus possibly giving us His interpretation. If so, this cedar tree, which bears fruit, is the kingdom of heaven.

Yet, God also uses the lofty cedar to represent pride and haughtiness. In Ezekiel 31, the prophet warns Pharaoh about Egypt's pride by using Assyria as an example of a proud nation that was cut down like a mighty cedar. This cedar was so beautiful that all the trees in the Garden of Eden were jealous of it. Yet, its beauty, lofty height, and uniqueness among all the trees did not prevent it from being cut down "so that no trees by the waters may ever again exalt themselves for their height, nor set their tops among the thick boughs, that no tree which drinks water may ever be high enough to reach up to them" (v. 14).

Beware if a person, nation, kingdom, or political system ever thinks it is so great (in wealth, power, or intelligence) that it is beyond God's arm of judgment. This gives us hope that behemoths such as communism and Islam are not so big that God cannot cut them down. Iranian President Ahmadinejad should, in fact, be quaking in his boots as he boasts fearlessly of his desire to touch God's anointed and wipe Israel off the map. So, we should not fear Iran's nuclear might, for God always humbles the proud. "And all the trees of the field [the nations] shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it" (Ezek. 17:24).

## The Olive—Rooted and Grafted In

The olive tree defines the landscape of Israel. They are found in the valleys, on hillside terraces, in public parks, as well as in family gardens. When I first came to Israel as a long-term volunteer, I lived in Gilo, south of Jerusalem. Just below my apartment was a deep valley, surrounded on three sides by apartment buildings. I loved walking down the winding dirt road on *Shabbat* (Sabbath) to the grove of olive trees in the quiet, shaded valley that took me back to the days of the Bible. I've rested against the old, gnarled olive trunks, closely inspected its grey-green-silver leaves and olives, and even watched a shepherd tending his flock of sheep among the trees as the sheep grazed around me.

No matter how modern Israel is, the landscape lets you know you are in the land of the Bible. The still untouched rocky hills are most often terraced, the low stone walls separating each terrace still visible. History tells us that terracing in Israel began around the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, and that though the trees seem prominent today,



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they were much more so in ancient times. A researcher calculated that the 20,000 baths of oil (part of King Solomon's payment to the King of Tyre for the cedar wood for the Temple, 2 Chron. 2:10) would have had to be produced from no less than 4,981 acres (2,015 hectares) of olive trees!



Photo by Dianne Hudson

Olive trees have a shallow but extensive root system and grow rapidly. A five-year-old tree's roots may cover 10 x 10 feet (3 x 3 meters) and be 2 feet (0.6 meter) deep. A 10-year-old tree could cover up to 16 x 16 feet (5 x 5 meters). From these roots, shoots spring up close around the trunk of a cultivated tree, which is probably what the Psalmist was envisioning when he wrote, "your children [shall be] like olive plants all around your table" (Ps. 128:3). The Hebrew word for a shoot is *netzer*, from which "Nazareth" comes, as well as *notzri* (Christian). *Netzer* is only used four times in the Bible and is translated "branch" rather than "shoot." Isaiah 11:1 is a well-known reference to the Messiah: "The stem of Jesse, and a branch [netzer] shall grow out of his roots."

If not cultivated, these shoots produce wild olive trees, which are shrub-like and produce inedible olives that have very little oil. Normally, a branch from a cultivated tree is grafted into the wild tree to produce good olives. In Romans 11, just the opposite happens when wild branches (Gentile believers) are grafted into the cultivated or natural tree (the Jewish people). It's "contrary to nature" (v. 24), which emphasizes the miracle of it. Both kinds of branches are supported by the root. Commentators and theologians give varying views of what the root represents: believing Israel, Abraham, all of the Patriarchs, or Messiah. Whichever one it may be, it is a Jewish root. Having been grafted into this root, believers in Yeshua also qualify as priests to the Lord (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

Another interesting point to make here is that the root word for *netzer* is *natsar*, which means "to guard or watch over." Our *Netzer* guards and watches over (tends) His great olive tree, bringing Jewish and Gentile believers together into His family. David says, "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God" (Ps. 52:8). Oh, that all of Israel could say that! Their "root system" is extensive and goes back to Abraham (as it does for believers in Yeshua). One day, Israel will say like David, "One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4).



## Oaks of Righteousness

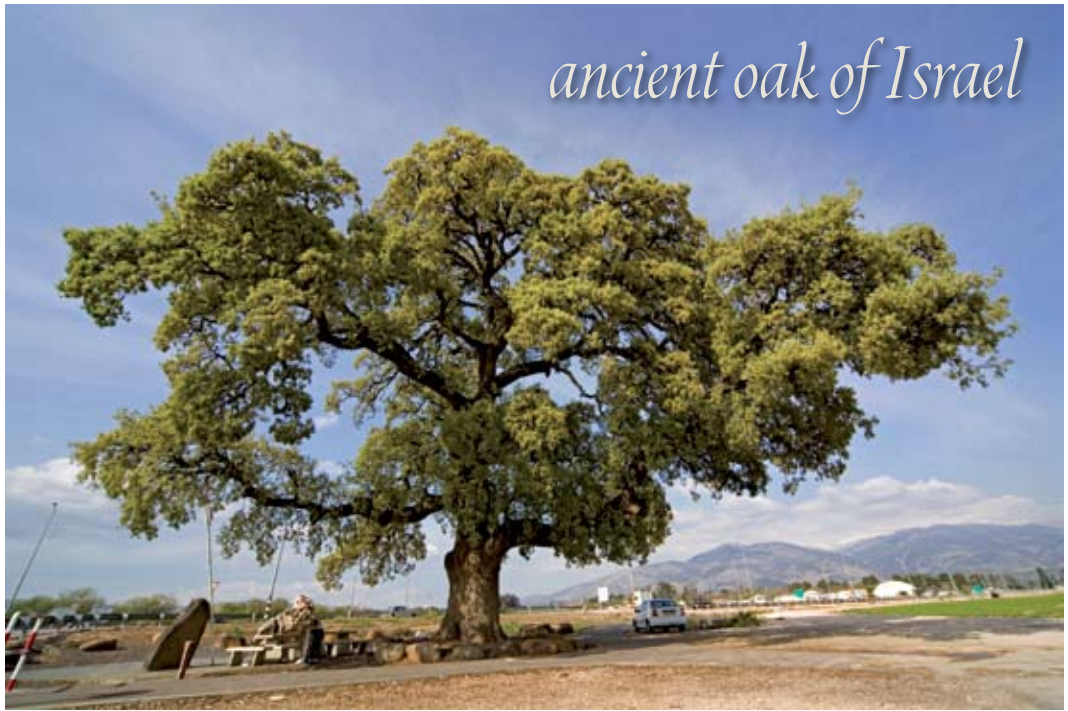
Now, back to where we began. Of all the trees God could have chosen to represent Israel in Isaiah 61:3, why did He choose the oak? Maybe the best-known oaks in the Bible are the "oaks of Mamre," where Abraham settled in Hebron (Gen. 13:18). It is believed that those original oaks disappeared around AD 330. However, today there is an oak referred to as Abram's Oak near Hebron. It is 23 feet (7 meters) around, and its foliage reaches a diameter of around 90 feet (27 meters). A few, however, have reached a girth of 70 to 90 feet (21 to 27 meters). It is said that King Arthur's Round Table was cut from a single slice of an oak tree. The slow-growing tree produces a hard, tough wood that is almost indestructible.

In checking 11 different translations of Isaiah 61:3, I found that five say simply "trees of righteousness," five say "oaks," and one says "terebinth." There are six Hebrew





## ancient oak of Israel



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words in Scripture rendered “oak.” The word used in Isaiah 61:3 is *ayil*, which is most often translated “ram.” Its root word refers to strength and power. It can also mean “pillar” and refers to a strong leader.

In recent times, the performance of the country’s leaders during the Second Lebanon War has been so criticized that Israel is no longer seen—by Israel or their enemies (i.e. Hizbullah, Syria, Iran)—as the legendary untouchable force of past wars. Instead, they are perceived as weak, and their enemies are eager to take advantage of that weakness. However, we can be encouraged that God has a different image of Israel. He sees them as they will be—mighty oaks of righteousness. Let us pray to this end and not lose heart, for what *God* plants will flourish.

By Charleeda Sprinkle  
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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

**M**any pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding “yes”! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

