



**Bridges for Peace
Your Israel Connection ®**

■ International Headquarters

P.O. Box 1093
Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004
intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

■ Australia

P.O. Box 1785, Buderim
Queensland 4556
Tel: 07-5453-7988
adminaust@bridgesforpeace.com.au

■ Canada

P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood
Winnipeg, MB R3R 3R2
Tel: 204-489-3697, bfp@mts.net

■ Japan

Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F
4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku
Tokyo 130 0012
Tel: 03-5637-5333, bfp@bfpj.net

■ New Zealand

P.O. Box 10142,
Te Mai, Whangarei
Tel/FAX: 09-434-6527
bfpnz@paradise.net.nz

■ South Africa

P.O. Box 1848
Durbanville 7551
Tel: 021-975-1941
info@bridgesforpeace.co.za

■ United Kingdom

11 Bethania Street, Maesteg
Bridgend, Wales CF34 9DJ
Tel: 01656-739494
bfpuk@btconnect.com



■ United States

P.O. Box 410037
Melbourne, FL 32941-0037
Tel: 800-566-1998
Product orders: 888-669-8800
postmaster@bfpusa.org

www.bridgesforpeace.com

BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

Vol. # 771208

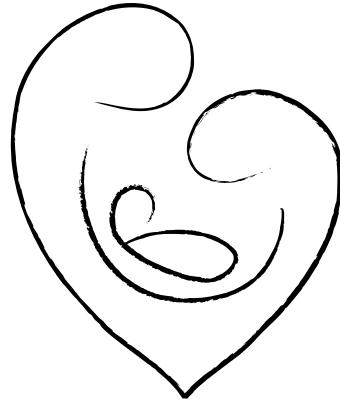
December 2008

JOSEPH



A First-century Jewish Man

PART 2



JOSEPH *the Father*

JOSEPH *the Example*

As Christians, we believe the Bible has every answer for every situation we might encounter in our lives. It is a comprehensive handbook for living in relationship with God. But the writers of the Bible, Jewish men who lived millennia ago, often wrote in what we might call biblical shorthand. Much is left unsaid because it was common knowledge in the day in which the writers lived.

Our International President and CEO Rebecca Brimmer likens it to Christians sending Christmas cards. We don't have to explain in each card what Christmas is, because the recipient already knows. We send greetings and use catch phrases or mention Bible stories, all with the understanding that the reader will know what we are talking about. For many Christians, a picture of a small building with a star above it being approached by three men on camels tells the story; words aren't even necessary.

In the New Testament, this same type of implicit understanding impacted how information was conveyed. For instance, the feasts of the Lord from the book of Leviticus are mentioned often. The *Shabbat* (Sabbath) is spoken of more than a dozen times, yet its foundations are never explained. *Pesach* (Passover), *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles) and *Hanukkah* (Feast of Dedication, John 10:22) are all mentioned but never defined because it was understood that the reader needed no explanation. After the birth of Yeshua (Jesus), we are told that the days of purification for Miriam (Mary) were completed, but we aren't told what that means. Again, the writer was not compelled to explain something that was an integral part of the culture of his readers.

This phenomenon does not diminish the value of the Scriptures in the lives of 21st-century Christians. But it does mean that we often miss much of the rich religious and cultural underpinning of the New Testament. And because we are thousands of miles and thousands of years removed from the Land and the culture that gave us the Bible, we can sometimes draw incorrect conclusions as we read.

One such erroneous assumption that has influenced Christian thought for generations is that Joseph, the step-father of Yeshua, was a peripheral character in that very important story. We aren't told much about him in the biblical narrative, so we assume that means his contribution, if any, to the life of Yeshua was of little value. Nothing could be further from the truth. The role of father in the first-century Jewish home was clearly defined and critically important. Early New Testament readers would have needed no explanation. In part one of this two-part series on the life of Joseph, we allowed Jewish history and culture to help us understand him as a man, and biblical and religious tradition to define him as a husband. In part two, we will piece together his role as Yeshua's earthly father.

A Father's Primary Responsibility

In the world in which Joseph and his family lived, home and community were two of the most important venues through which the love of God was expressed. People most commonly lived among extended family with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins very nearby, if not in the same house. Most of the villages in Israel were small, and the community was much like a further expansion of that family. The home, which was called *beit av* (father's house), was the primary unit for tending to the needs of family members, including the nurturing and education of children.

Although we know that Joseph was a craftsman, the primary responsibility of parents in his day was to train their children in the fundamentals of practical life and covenant relationship with God. The goal of the average Hebrew family man in the first century was not the acquisition of great wealth or the achievement of power. It was to live a life of covenant faithfulness to the Lord and teach his family to do the same.

A Link in the Generational Chain

The Hebrew Bible is replete with references to fathers and children. God refers to Himself as the Father of Israel and fills His word with instructions on how to be a father, how to be a son, how children should treat their fathers, and how the community should care for those who are fatherless. God entered into covenant with Abraham and made him the father of the Jewish people. Throughout the history of the interaction of that people with their God, fathers would occupy a key role.



The Scriptures tell us that God kept His Word and even bestowed blessing on the children of Israel *because* of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Every generation of Jewish men was taught to remember, revere, and emulate those that had come before. Each one was an additional link in a massive generational chain, pieced together by God Himself, acting in the name of the father before him. Throughout his life, a son was to represent his father well and make sure that his sons understood their connection and obligation to their father's fathers.

In today's Judaism, this concept is as important as it was in the first century and is called *dor l'dor*, generation to generation. God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans with a promise to make him the father of a mighty nation for one reason: that this people would be a light unto all nations, carrying the mantle of monotheism from one generation to the next. If they were to accomplish this enormous task, it would be critical for each generation to effectively pass on to the next all they would need to know to fulfill that purpose. The teaching of *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.), the wisdom of the sages, and the input of fathers and grandfathers would combine to make each son of Israel a reflection of those that came before.

In 1 Samuel 17, Saul's question upon watching the youthful David bravely confront Goliath was not, "Who is this courageous young man?" Rather, it was a simple, "Who is this youth's father?" (v. 57). In Deuteronomy 6, God even connected the giving of the *Sh'ma* (v. 4), the most basic yet profound tenant of Judaism, with the instruction of children. The purpose of the Passover *seder* (ritual meal) is to answer the questions of the children, telling and retelling the story of God's covenant faithfulness, so that each generation feels as if they had personally crossed the Red Sea and stood in wonder at Mount Sinai. In Joshua 3, when the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River into the land of Canaan, God instructed them to build a monument that would engender curiosity in their children, so that the connection would remain between that miraculous moment and succeeding generations.

Two of the most fundamental principles of Judaism, reverence for the elderly and love for children, are born of the concept of *dor l'dor*. The *Talmud* (rabbinic commentary on Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures) says as broken tablets in the ark, so are the elderly who are broken in mind or memory. Just as those tablets are to be venerated and cherished, the elderly are to be revered and cared for. Further, Psalm 127 encourages us that sons are a heritage from the Lord and children a reward from Him. In that same vein, the *Talmud* says he who has no child is as a dead man. *Dor l'dor* has required that the elderly guard tenderly over the young with all of the wisdom of their years, while pouring into them the knowledge they have gained through experience. At the same time, it demands that the young reach out with great love and respect to their elders, caring for their needs, while receiving joyfully the instruction that will seal the connection between their generations.

The sages tell a story of two rabbis who were traveling together in a foreign country. They came upon many deep ravines in the landscape, and one of the rabbis remarked that the craters must have been vestiges of the great flood during the days of Noah. But why, the other rabbi wondered, would God have left them there for people generations later to see? Obviously, the first rabbi responded, it was so that God could make sure that the memories of those who had done His will would endure, a remembering from generation to generation. But what about the memory of the not-so-good, like the generation of the flood? Wouldn't it be better to forget them, the second rabbi wondered. After all, they *didn't* do God's will. But these too, the first rabbi remarked, must be remembered from generation to generation. The Jewish people exemplify the





ability to walk in covenant relationship with God, drawing strength from His blessings and healing in adversity. In order for a son to walk in true compassion in a callous world, he must remember the victories won and injustices suffered by his father. For Joseph to fulfill the role God had for him, he would have clearly understood his place as a link in that eternal chain.

Raising Children, Communicating God's Love

As we mentioned in Part 1 of this article, Judaism teaches that marriage is designed to be a reflection of the character of God and families a reflection of His covenant relationship with His people. Therefore, the relationship between parents and children, particularly fathers and sons, is critical. Jacob, Joseph's father, would have understood his responsibility to love his son with the same generous love that God showered on His children. From the moment of infancy and beyond, the way he acted toward Joseph would influence his son's consciousness of how God relates to those He calls His own.

From his father, Joseph would have learned the importance of communicating to his own children that they were loved and cherished, unique, and special. Never were they to doubt that they were valued and protected, building trust that would transfer easily from earthly father to heavenly Father. As a matter of fact, historians from the first century have said, "From swaddling clothes, a Jewish child learned that God was his father and the maker of everything." A Talmudic proverb says it this way: "True knowledge of God is found with those who have suckled at their mother's breast." In other words, from the moment of birth, a Jewish child was being shaped into a loving, faithful, and committed disciple of the Most High God. Joseph would have learned from Jacob that the process of shaping a life for God began with the first breath.

Joseph, the Child

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, the parent-child relationship has been marked by tenderness and dedication. Peculiar strength and sacredness has been given to this bond because, as we mentioned earlier, God presented Himself to His people as their Father. Most likely, Joseph would have experienced this kind of warm and affectionate relationship with Jacob as he grew up. There is much in rabbinic literature that gives us a window into the life he would have lived, not just as a man and father, but as a boy as well.

תְּהִלָּה
בְּגִנְעָרִים
סָאַתְּ דָבָר



As a child, Joseph would more than likely have gone to school. A public education system was well established in the Land of Israel by the time Yeshua was born and would probably have been in existence early enough to have benefited Joseph in his youth as well. Nearly every town and

village in Israel would have had at least one synagogue, and a school for the children would have been established there. Although it provided for group instruction of children, it bore little resemblance to modern, Western public education where the teaching profession is not very highly regarded, and teachers are some of the lowest paid of all professionals. On the contrary, the community of Nazareth would have held the local teacher in the highest esteem, believing that there was no person of greater importance than the teacher of their children. Joseph's experiences in the classroom, as well as his relationship with his teachers, would have helped to shape him into a godly man.

The *Talmud* states that the teacher is like a messenger of the Lord, an angel delivering God's instruction to the hearts of His children. In later years, that Jewish education imparted by a godly teacher would be so valued that, on the first day

of a child's school career, his father would tenderly wrap him in a prayer shawl and reverently place him in the arms of the teacher, much as a *Torah* scroll is adorned and presented before the Lord. Those chosen to be teachers were known as men of kindness, patience, and love, men who were thoroughly versed in *Torah* and in whom its light was clearly visible. The sages taught that a hasty tempered man could not be a teacher at all. Learning, they said, is dependent on trust. If a pupil cannot trust his teacher, he is not likely to learn from him. If a teacher is short-tempered or unpredictable in his reactions, his students will be unable to form the bond of trust needed for true learning.

The *Talmud* speaks of an incident in ancient Israel when the Jews of Babylon wanted to verify that the education of children was continuing in Jerusalem as they believed it should. They sent three very famous rabbis to conduct an investigation. When the rabbis arrived at the city gates, the elders of the town were amazed that three such dignitaries had come to visit and were eager to cooperate with them. "Bring us the protectors of your city," the rabbis demanded, and the elders quickly assembled all the military units and watchmen who stood guard over the Jerusalem. They proudly presented them with all of their weapons to the rabbis who responded in horror, "These are not your protectors! These are your destroyers! Bring us your teachers," they cried, "the ones who instruct your children. Those to whom the teaching of the children has fallen hold the future of the entire community of Israel in their hands."

Joseph would have begun school at the age of six. But by that time, his father would have already immersed him in religious education. Beginning in Leviticus, he would have started memorizing verses as young as three years old, and by the time he reached school age, he would have had large portions of *Torah* committed to memory. He knew the *aleph bet* and had learned to write. He understood his community; he knew his history and his God and how the two were inextricably linked. Instruction from *Torah*, after all, was, at the same time, the history of the nation and spiritual direction for life.

*The Talmud
states that the
teacher is like
a messenger
of the Lord.*

Joseph, the Father

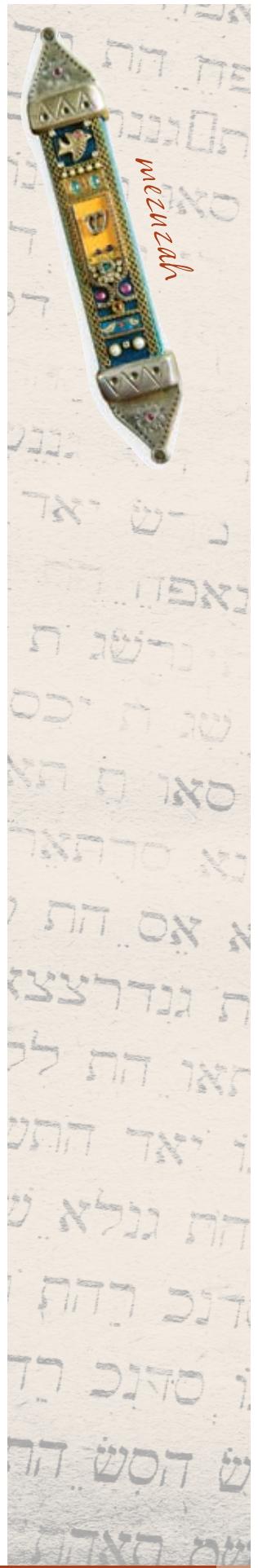
As a first-century Jewish father, Joseph would have filled this same role in the life of his step-son Yeshua. He would have loved Yeshua in the same affectionate way that he had experienced from his father and his teachers. He would have taken responsibility for Yeshua's spiritual education, holding his young son on his knee, teaching him *Torah* and language. As a teacher, guide, and example in Yeshua's life, every word Joseph spoke, every action he took, every thought he harbored was governed by and interwoven with *Torah*. Teaching his son to have the same all-encompassing covenant relationship with God and love for His Word was a task Joseph would have embraced with joy.

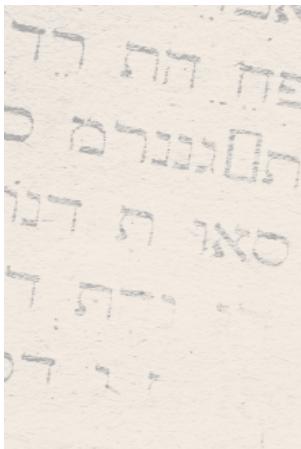
Joseph and Miriam lead a life together that was typical of first-century Judaism, with clearly defined roles that were designed to bring honor to the Lord of Hosts. Much in their ancient home helped them in that task. There, Yeshua was introduced to the basics of *Torah*. There, he watched His father touch the *mezuzah* (Scripture box affixed to a doorway) each time he passed through the door. He watched as Joseph went faithfully for prayer each morning and evening. With their community, the family danced and sang, married and buried, planted and harvested. Annual trips to the Temple in Jerusalem as part of their celebration of the festival cycle outlined in Leviticus were awaited with great anticipation by the whole family, an opportunity to worship that was the highlight of the year. In their home, they celebrated the *Shabbat* each week, with Miriam carefully preparing their home and the festival meal. Every Friday evening, she lit the candles and Joseph said the blessings. Yeshua listened with glee as His father told and retold the stories from the *Torah*, their history, and the sages. One of those stories might have been this one from the *Talmud*:

Two boys grew up together in Jerusalem but were forced by persecution to flee, one family to Rome and the other to Syria. When the Roman Jew reached adulthood, he left home to visit his friend in Syria. However, when he arrived, the Roman was arrested as a spy. He was taken before the king who refused to listen to proclamations of his innocence and sentenced him to death. Tearfully, the man asked to be allowed to go home and settle his affairs, promising to return for his own execution.

The king laughed, insisting that the Roman would never return if he was allowed to leave. The Syrian friend spoke up, however, and offered to guarantee the Roman's reappearance: "You may imprison me until he comes back and execute me if he is not here by the agreed-upon time," the Syrian declared. The king was so amazed that anyone would offer to die for a friend that he agreed. The Roman went home, settled his affairs and boarded a boat to return to Syria. Unfortunately, he was the victim of a terrible storm at sea, which delayed him past the agreed upon time for his return.

The Syrian executioner gleefully removed the Syrian from his cell, mocking his naïve trust in friendship and brought him to the gallows where he would be hung in place of the Roman. Just as the noose was slipped around his neck, the Roman ran through the crowd and shouted, "Take my friend





off the gallows. It is time for my execution!" The friends embraced and began to argue over which one should be executed. "I was convicted of the crime and I am here. I should be executed," said the Roman. "But you are late and I promised to die in your place if you were not here on time. I should be executed," argued his Syrian friend.

The executioner was so confused, he called for the king. The king was so amazed by such an inconceivable display of commitment and love, he declared, "I will free you both on one condition. From this day forth, make me a partner in your relationship."

Joseph would have told this story, or others like it, to Yeshua with great passion, teaching his young son the beauty and importance of covenant love and faithfulness, helping him to see in the nuances of the story not just the relationship of friends, but the bonds between husband, wife, and God Himself.

Joseph, the Example

What have we learned about Joseph in this two-part article, as we have allowed the Bible, history, and Jewish tradition to fill in the blanks for us? Clearly, he was a man who loved his God and heard and obeyed His voice. He was a man with a vibrant relationship with his wife, loving and honoring her, and caring diligently for his family. He was a passionate man who laughed often and loved life, reveling in God's creation and embracing his circumstances with gratitude, a man who was devoted to *Torah*, faithfully observed Jewish tradition, and taught his son to do the same. As the man chosen by God to be a father to Yeshua, Joseph understood his position as a link in that eternal chain, a son of Abraham whose mission it was to exemplify covenant love and relationship. His contributions to the life of his son should never be underestimated; rather, his example as husband, father, and man of God should serve as a constant example to all who would follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer
International Development Director

Bibliography

- Abrams, Rabbi Judith. *The Talmud for Beginners*. Vol. 1. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993.
Abrams, Rabbi Judith and Dr. Steven. *Jewish Parenting, Rabbinic Insights*. Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994.
Aiken, Lisa. *Beyond Bashert*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996.
Bialik, Hayim Mahman, ed. *The Book of Legends, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Trans. William G. Braude. USA: Shocken Books, 1992.
Brimmer, Rebecca J. and Bridges for Peace Leaders. *Israel and the Church God's Road Map*. Jerusalem, Israel: Bridges for Peace International, 2006.
Donin, Hayim Halevy. *To Raise a Jewish Child*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.
Donin, Hayim Halevy. *To Pray as a Jew*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.
Edersheim, Alfred. *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.
Flusser, David. *Jesus*. Jerusalem, Israel: The Magnes Press, 1998.
Greisman, Nechoma. *Through the Eyes of a Woman*. Brooklyn, NY: Machon Chaya Mushka, 2001.
Lieber, Rabbi Moshe. *The Pierkei Avos, Ethics of the Fathers*. Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2000.
Neusner, Jacob. *The Blackwell Reader in Judaism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
Packer, J. I. *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Bible Facts*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995.
Ward, Kaari, ed. *Reader's Digest: Jesus and His Times*. Pleasantville, NY, Reader's Digest Association, Inc, 1987
Wilson, Marvin R. *Our Father Abraham*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989.

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

Many 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).

