

## ***My Battle for the Torah***

My young adulthood, between the ages of twenty and thirty was stolen from me. When I was born on the Fourteenth of Nisan, the anniversary of our Exodus from Egypt, the last thing that my poor mother and father, of blessed memory would ever imagine was that I would repeat their life cycles. They were firebrands plucked out of the Nazi holocaust, living daily terror under the Third Reich. They travelled to Australia, as far as possible from the nightmare they had known in Europe.

“You will have sons and daughters, but they will not remain yours, since they will be taken into captivity,” says the Bible verse (Deut. 28:41).

In the Holy Land during the destruction of the Second Temple...Sure!

In Europe during the Holocaust...Sure!

But, in Australia, the ultimate refuge after the Holocaust...No! Don't tell me!

This is the story of a long and painful journey destined to cut me off from my family, work-friends—and except for a small group of people I will call exclusive brethren—virtually everybody I would theretofore encounter.

Many years later, after I had developed the maturity to appreciate the hand of God with all its infinite chesed and hidden intricacy, those lost years would be returned to me. Today I am a happily married man living in a religious community in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of my Fathers, with a four year old son of my own. Yehudah Baruch is my first child. It took a long time for me to get to this point in my life. Emotional scars don't heal as quickly as physical scars. For me, they didn't take years to heal. They took decades. Now, Hashem has given me the opportunity to give my seed something that I never knew for so many years.

I was born of two largely assimilated Jewish parents, both of whom were refugees from the European Holocaust. Mum always refused to talk about her war experiences. During the Holocaust years when Mum was 19 years old, she and her sister were hidden by Catholic farmers in the Dutch countryside. There was just one thing I was permitted to know about their wartime experiences—that the family who risked their lives for their sake were Catholics. I could never get away with saying anything against Catholics. I learned their rescuers had tried very hard to convert Mum and her sister during the war. With her sister, it seemed their efforts later would pay off, for her sister was eventually christened in the Presbyterian Church. Mum though boldly proclaimed she would never accept the Christian messiah until her dying day.

I grew up in a section of Melbourne, Australia that contained only a handful of Jews. I was the only Jew in a school of a thousand students. Growing up in a community with so little Jewish identity led me to develop a great need for relating to the immediate gentile world in which I lived. All I knew of Judaism in my youth was what I had learned in eight years of attendance at Reform Sunday School.

At my primary school (to age 11) the only choice in the religious instruction offered was between Catholic and Protestant. Not wishing to be seen as the odd man out during this

weekly session, I participated in the Protestant session. The Baptist teacher, Miss King, regularly made an appeal during the class for accepting Jesus as our personal savior. Miss King was an evangelist through and through. She told the class how her car was red and white; red being in remembrance of the "precious blood of our savior," and white, because "his blood had made us whiter than snow." I complied with the rest of the class in form, even if not in spirit, not wishing to stand out from the rest.

The next time that Miss King asked us who had got down on his knees before the Lord since her last lesson, I held up my hand too.

A verse from the Prophet Amos very accurately sums up my early life experiences: "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine in the land, not a famine for bread, nor a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the Lord: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it." (Amos 8:11-12).

During my time in High School, Harry, a middle-aged Jewish friend of my family, who my mother had known from the Holocaust, started talking to me about the Bible. He had previously belonged to a "Pentecostal Church," where the members were distinguished by the manifestation known as "speaking in other tongues" and the other "gifts of the Holy Spirit." At the time, I was an agnostic, on account of the fact that I felt the Bible could not be proven. It had always seemed logical to me though, that if there really were a God, then He would surely have left us His "handbook."

Harry could tell a story like a book, and had a special interest in Bible prophecy. He kept a notebook full of charts and pictures of strange-looking ten-headed beasts and so on depicting Bible prophecies. He gave me some glossy magazines called "The Plain Truth", which were published by an American Christian sect called "The Worldwide Church of God." The literature was filled with scintillating interpretations of current events straight out of the Bible. I was spellbound. Much to my parents' chagrin, I started spending more and more of my spare time poring over the pages of the Bible, my newfound pet-love.

With my Jewish background, it was easy for me to accept that mainstream Christianity was permeated with pagan influences, and my attitude to most of the Christian world was "me and them." It was always "them"—like the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, which didn't lift a hand during the Holocaust. I was 100% sure that "The Worldwide Church of God" would have acted differently. And besides that, my friend Harry, who had gotten me involved, was Jewish himself!

I was impressed to discover that the Old Testament contained a plethora of prophecies about the Christian Messiah, including his crucifixion and resurrection; and this of itself was to me the strongest proof that the Bible was the inspired word of God.

By the time I started regularly reading the Bible myself, I understood that there was a great irony. The Jews, in spite of giving the Bible to the world, did not, to all appearances, believe it. Certainly my experience of Reform Judaism taught me that to Jews, the veracity of the Bible was a non-issue. The only Orthodox Jews I knew were the Bergmans, a Polish

holocaust survivor couple, who were the closest Jewish friends of my parents. The impression I then had of Orthodox Judaism was that it was inflexible and extremist with its seemingly over-demanding and outdated requirements. Certainly the familiar black "Haredi" garb helped me to color the picture in my own mind's eye. Once I attended a Bar Mitzvah in Toorak synagogue, the Bergmans' shul, and I didn't understand one word. I deduced from my Reform Sunday School classes that Orthodox Jews had their own Bible, which they called the Talmud. Fundamentalist Christians stood out from the Jews and the rest of the Christians, for to them alone the Bible was "gospel truth."

I quickly learned that there was a Bible Society bookstore in the city, with apparently a Bible for every kind of consumer...except a traditional Jew! One of the best-selling Bibles was called "the Living Bible"; and "living" was certainly how I found it. Either the Bible cover-to-cover had to be the inspired Word of God, or I was simply wasting my time with it! The books which I read on the history of the Bible usually included a chapter called "Between the Testaments." It seemed strange to me that the "Bible days" stopped with Ezra and Nehemiah, and then started again some four centuries later. Only the Christian story made any sense of this anomaly of history, with their explanation of how the prophecies to the time of the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah were suspended until the the son of Joseph and Mary came into the world.

By the time I was twenty, Harry, my Jewish friend who had set me on my present path, recommended I subscribe to a fascinating monthly magazine, the "Mount Zion Reporter," printed by a Pastor Dugger of the Church of God Seventh Day in Jerusalem. From the worldwide list of congregations in the Mount Zion Reporter, I found contact details for a church in Melbourne. I called the pastor, and spent a few hours intensively questioning him about all manner of biblical doctrines. I was more than satisfied with Mr. Battye's answers. Bruce Battye was a truckie, and he proudly shared with me how before he saw the light of the Gospel, he used to cuss ("swearing" in Australian slang) more than a hundred Bloody Marys. I took the initiative, and arranged to fellowship with his congregation the next Sabbath.

While other kids my age were spending their Saturdays going to the football or the beach, I would hop in my car and drive to a little hall hidden away in the suburbs. The members were a small group of about ten young couples, mostly former Seventh Day Adventists that had become disenfranchised with a reluctance in their churches to follow the Bible all the way. None of the members of the group worked on the the Jewish Sabbath and other Jewish holidays, and they refrained from eating all the foods prohibited to Jews in the Bible, like pork and fish without scales. They were very excited to find this sincere Jewish youth starting to meet with them regularly, and regarded it as a great merit to have a pedigree Jew in their midst. I regularly monopolized the pastor's time after the prayer service with incessant questions about Bible topics, but no one seemed to mind.

During this time I was studying at university. My father of Blessed Memory somewhat nievely arranged for me to reside at Ridley College, a Church of England-affiliated university college. Many of my friends there were Christians, and some were theological students (or

“logs” as we called them). The incessant encouragement of my Christian friends eventually bore fruit, and one night before going to sleep, I asked Jesus to come into my heart. I felt this was a natural conclusion to the road I had been travelling along for so long. When I came to the dining room for breakfast the next morning, all my friends could see from my beaming face that I was a changed person. On leaving the building, the Bishop with his crimson clerical shirt and back-the-front-collar caught sight of me. I usually tried to avoid the Bishop, as I knew that the moment I opened my mouth I would start to ask him why his church was so full of paganism. This time though I was cornered. The Bishop took the opportunity to give me his blessing on my newfound commitment. I courteously asked for him to explain the Trinity to me. He replied, “We can never hope to understand sacred mysteries like the Divine Godhead through our simple mortal minds. We must rely upon our faith.”

At my Sabbath-keeping church the brethren were elated by the news, and arranged for me to be baptized by immersion in the Jewish *mikveh* (ritual bath) at the City Baths. Mr. Battye and I clad in bathing suits stood in the shoulder-deep waters of the mikveh, a kind of private bath adjacent to the public baths. He placed his two hands on my head, and called out, “I baptize you in the name of Yeshua of Nazareth.” He told me that I had received the gift of the Holy Spirit the same time I was baptized.

The next time I saw my father, I proudly told him about my baptism. He lifted his hands and cried out in shame, “I never thought that I would live to see the day when my own son was baptized.” This was a man, who during the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, received his High School education at a Catholic Priests’ seminary in Austria, that being the only school in his hometown. He never forgot the painful discrimination he suffered from some of his classmates. You might wonder therefore how the same person would close his eyes to the threats of my environment while I grew up. My father’s best friend was a Catholic. All his life, he lived side-by-side with Christians. But, he was unaccustomed to evangelical Christianity. Or at least, he would never have dreamed that a bright well-educated Jewish boy like his son would fall for that simpleton below-the-belt propaganda.

In his anxious state, Dad phoned up the local Reform rabbi, who recommended I attend a weekend camp of the Temple Youth. At the invitation of two rabbis in charge of the group, one a man and one a woman, I proudly bore witness of my new-found faith. I really and truly believed that they would not be able to deny the facts, for the Christian messiah was “all over the Old Testament”; and was none other than the Jewish messiah. I was young and naive. The great gulf I discerned between myself and the other members of the group was a big personal letdown.

After that ill-fated weekend, my father called the rabbi, and arranged for the three of us to meet at the rabbi’s office. The rabbi asked me how I could deny 2,000 years of Jewish experience since Jesus came into the world. What experience? It was quite apparent that neither the rabbi nor my peers at the camp really gave any credibility to the divine inspiration of the Bible. For me, there really was only one issue, “Do you really believe in the Divine

inspiration of the Bible, or not?" Finally the rabbi despondently told my father "I think that we have lost your son, Mr. Breier !"

Thirty years later in Israel, I would read the Bible verse, "You will have sons and daughters, but they will not remain yours, since they will be taken into captivity," and reflect on the years of my lost youth:

- My mother's years in hiding in the farmhouse of Dutch Catholics in Nazi-occupied Holland.
- My father's mourning after my baptism.

Surely history is destined to repeat itself...while the Sovereign of the Universe watches it all happen from His Heavenly throne.

Soon after my baptism, I visited Harry. My object was to debate with him about the New Testament doctrine of "speaking in tongues." At the Sabbath-keeping Church where I had been fellowshipping, they taught that the gift of "speaking in tongues" recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament was only a phenomenon of the early church. I knew that Harry didn't hold the same way as Bruce Battye's group. I felt I had made an intensive study of the subject, and I wanted to bait Harry. From my experience in the Christian world, debates about Bible topics were commonplace, and something inside of me made me look for them like a mouse looking for cheese.

Harry's friend, Eric, who he befriended during his time in the Pentecostal church, happened to be with him when I arrived. Eric, a short stout middle-aged salesman and a gentile, was a walking dynamo, a truly charismatic personality. He feared nothing but fear itself. He could attend a large meeting of people, and stand up at question time to ask questions that no one else in their right mind would have the hide to ask. Some years later, Eric would recount this true story to me. His younger daughter was married to Jeff, a former bikie. When they first started going out, Jeff rolled up at the front door together with a one of his rough diamond friends, and asked Eric to bring out his daughter. Eric refused. One of them pulled out a knife. Eric looked him square in the face, and said, "I didn't flinch when I fought the Nips hand-to-hand in New Guinea during the war, and I'm not going to flinch now. If you want my daughter, you'll have to carry me out." The two bikies turned 180 degrees and left. Eric had fought in World War II at 15 years of age. He used to boast how he was the youngest serving Australian Serviceman in the war because he lied about his age. Now, Eric and Harry, two survivors of the World War II brought together by a strange twist of Divine Providence, together sought to show me from the New Testament that speaking in tongues was the sign of receiving the Holy Spirit.

After a friendly debate, Eric asked us to pray. I was apprehensive, as I felt the answer lay in us reasoning together from the scriptures. In Eric's world though, my "logic" did not seem to hold any water. Eric said, "Let's form a prayer circle." The three of us joined together with arms locked on each fellow's shoulders. Eric and Harry, praying with intense fervor, soon started to break out with strange-sounding words, which we would usually call "gobbledygook." This was the first time that I had ever heard the phenomenon of "speaking in other

tongues." I can't explain how, but I broke out in speaking this strange language just like them, and also proclaiming praises to God in English; very much in a manner of speech characteristic of the Bible. Harry and Eric were exultant in jubilation. They told me that I had just received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that I would never be the same again. Not only that, my praises of God in English, they called "prophecy," which they seemed to intimate was at an even higher level than speaking in tongues.

For a whole year after that incident, Eric faithfully maintained a weekly correspondence to me from his home up north in Brisbane. I was studying at university at the time. After a few months of correspondence, Eric told me he had come to the conclusion that I was highly vulnerable in my present situation. He repeatedly reminded me that I was liable to "fall away" any time, unless I left Melbourne and my family to join him and another new convert up north, in the State of Queensland.

Eric was a travelling salesman. Regularly he would write how on a trip he had baptized a surfer called Kirk with a heart like gold, or this one or that one. His letters were saturated with a colorful combination of Bible verses and words of encouragement. As quickly as the mail service would permit, his reply would be forthcoming. His way was always to do things forthwith, for in his words, "A moment's hesitation could bring somebody's blood upon your head." Later I would learn that he used to proudly display each new letter from me to his wife and three kids at home. I was in a state of turmoil all that year, and my academic failures reflected my emotional instability.

It seemed to me that no one else knew the truth like Eric did. At one stage a Jewish girl moved into my student house near Melbourne University. I told her that I was moving out, to join my pastor in Queensland. Disappointed, she told me how she had planned to introduce me to her Jewish circle of friends. Much to the dismay of my parents, I finally left all my worldly effects behind to travel 2,000 miles North to the beautiful tropical seaside resort of Cairns where Eric was staying.

Eric had written to me during the year that he had baptized a young New Zealander called Roger, and Roger had started fellowshipping in Eric's home regularly. Eric had always dreamed of building a "city of refuge" (a term taken from the Bible for renegade Israelites that had accidentally committed manslaughter) for the young hippies of the pot-smoking communes in the Far North. The palm-lined beaches of the paradisaical Far North Tropical coast were literally the end of the road, and tragically sometimes became the end of the road for an unsuspecting young victim in another, more final sort of way. Many of the hippies were renegades, fleeing from distraught parents down south. Eric's aim was that these young idealistic souls would eventually accept Jesus, and give up their destructive habits. Eric's wife, Marie had given him an ultimatum: "I'll give you one month to find some new souls up in Cairns, as it's obvious there's no other way you're going to get these crazy ideas out of your mind. If after a month there's no new blood, you'll return to the family in Brisbane."

My train arrived at the platform in Cairns, I was greeted with "Welcome to the Garden of Eden." by Eric with his characteristic beaming smile. For a few unforgettable weeks, I would

learn all about “my new Christian life” from Eric and Roger. The three of us would regularly walk down the esplanade in Cairns, seeking out young “lost souls.” Roger and I watched Eric intently, appreciating the opportunity to see how a veteran bore witness to the Light of the World.

Marie though, anxious and lonely, would not be disappointed. At the end of the month, the three of us returned to Eric's family in the capital city, with me the only new member in the fellowship.

My parents were very worried about me going to Cairns to preach to the hippies. When I settled down in Brisbane and completed my university degree, they were better able to handle the idea of my newfound faith. It was never really acceptable to them, but the rest of my family would shrug it off in conversation with trite expressions like, “As long as you’re happy, we’re happy.”

From the beginning of my Bible studies, I had sought to influence my family to “see the light.” My mother was fighting cancer from the time I had gone to join Eric and his group. With phone calls to Melbourne, I tried to lead my mother to salvation practically up to her dying day. Just before she died, I remembered one night when I woke up and realized I had been praying for Mum in my sleep. For some time, I had not been praying for my mother. Her stubbornness in the face of all my efforts to stir up her faith in God had dampened my spirits. When I received the sad news, I flew down to Melbourne to attend her funeral. Mum had a close friend who was a Christian Scientist [Christian Science is a quasi-Christian faith, which is generally not accepted in the evangelical Christian world.], and I learned that she had been holding Mum in her arms while Mum’s spirit left this world. Mum had told me that Sylvia was strengthening her faith, but I never would I have dreamed that this association would lead to such a tragic conclusion. I knew that the Christian Scientists were one of those way-out Christian cults started by some self-proclaiming messianic figure, whilst I just believed in the Bible all the way. “You just let the Bible interpret itself,” I had always been taught. (It would be very interesting to make a survey, and see how many groups with conflicting doctrines, say the same thing!)

The major part of my spare time was spent in attending prayer meetings, writing Bible tracts and evangelizing. Eric was always looking for some new message or testimony of miracles to maintain the vibrancy of faith of the Brethren (as we used to call ourselves). A lot of our evangelism was to other Christians, who we felt were practicing idolatry. Bearing witness was a big part in my life, and for the best part of ten years I used to stand in the main City Square of Brisbane, the third-biggest city in Australia, handing out tracts and evangelizing to passers-by.

One time etched on my memory Eric heard about a “prayer house,” where a group of young people had gained a renown in the Brisbane Pentecostal community for their freedom of the spirit. Eric often used to bait such groups about the idolatry they practised, because they kept Christmas and Easter, celebrated the Communion or “Lord’s Supper,” and wore crosses, with the many other practices of Christendom. This time though Eric took off his

judge's hat. There was a big family in this house, parents and children, middle-aged down to bare toddlers. Also there were young people from outside the family. After a musical warm-up, one after another of the group started to "dance in the spirit." How can I describe this? Their spirits were really free, and anybody could see straight away that here there was nothing contrived. These people, from the parents to little three year olds were very very happy. I was a second generation holocaust survivor. My mother had lost all of her family but her sister and her made sure that I would never forget it. The simple existential joy I saw displayed in that prayer house was something I had never ever experienced before. Tears flowed from my eyes. It was no ordinary weeping. You would need a cup to collect my tears. The prayer leader was convinced that I was demon-possessed. Everyone from large to small gathered around me with their hands on my shoulders. "Confess your sins" the prayer leader explained, for I know you, you foul spirit." I didn't hold anything back; this was no place for modesty. I threw my modesty to the wind, and I cried out my sins. "Vow that you will never ever return to those sins again," I was sternly adjured, "You have to let the demons know which world you belong to." I knew there were intimidating scriptures in the New Testament that after a demon has left, he finds his old home "swept clean," and returns with many others to "repossess" the poor victim. After I had left the prayer house with Eric and my two brethren, Eric confided to me that the prayer leader was really misconceived. In his estimation, I was not possessed, just emotionally overwrought by the whole scene, and my copulous weeping was none other than the moving of the Spirit of God. Eric's remark hit something deep inside of me, and I felt very vulnerable. I wondered how I would ever be able to see the wood for the trees with the powerful influence wielded by pastors like the one that had claimed I was demon-possessed.

How did we used to spend our time in our little group, which we called "The Christian Community"? The young guys in the group lived close by to Eric's house, and were frequently there in the week evenings watching TV with his family. During the day, we worked in our jobs. Friday night we had a meeting, commencing with testimonies of God's miracle-working power. I was just about never without a testimony. Then came the chorus and hymn singing, followed by a stirring message Bible message from Eric. In the end, we would all get on our knees and pray. Then we would set off to the "battle-ground," as we humorously called the City Square. In the plaza we would separate, each of us with a bunch of printed Bible-based tracts on every imaginable subject, and offer our material to people. Sometimes, I would see a group of Jews with their familiar scull-caps. Never once did even one make an effort of giving me a convincing argument. If I got a chance to speak to them, I proudly told them I was a "messianic Jew." As my arsenal, I could produce one convincing argument from the proof texts of the Messiah in the Old Testament after another. It was a constant source of disappointment to me that the Jews I met invariably were not familiar with the "Law and the Prophets," as we called the Old Testament.

We didn't work on the Jewish festivals, and calculatedd their dates from a Jewish calendar. On the feast days as we called the festive days, we would enjoy a festive meal

after a special prayer service, and then often set off to the beach or the country in our cars. On the Day of Atonement, we would fast. If there were special needs, we would take a day off work and pray and fast all day. At least once, we prayed and fasted for three days continuously.

Sundays were far from idle days for us. Eric told us that we should concentrate on witnessing to other “spirit-filled” groups. This was an age when the Pentecostal movement started a kind of spiritual revolution in the Christian world. Everywhere big new spirit-filled churches were springing up, usually filled with lots of excited young people that had heard the “good news,” or Gospel. Our little group used to stand close to the exits of their churches, and hit them with our articles about very inflammatory subjects like idolatry in the church. Often our invitation was turned down with replies like, “Do you know who we are? We are spirit-filled Christians. Don’t waste your time on us. There are plenty of unsaved souls out there. They are the ones you should be targetting.”

Then we would reply with something like, “Haven’t you ever read in the New Testament that no idolator will enter the Kingdom of God”?

They would shoot back with, “We’re not idolators. Where are we committing idolatry?”

Now we had received our cue. We gave them the background of Christmas, of Easter, of the Communion Service, the great cross that decorated their church, etc. Some of the more sensitive people in the group would start crying. Others would throw out punches at us. Others would run to their “oversight” (expression for their ministers) and ask them to drive us away. Frequently the Chief Pastor would abruptly order us to get lost, and we got the message.

These newly sprung-up churches were a haven for a lot of dropouts of society, people who were unable to find acceptance anywhere else. The protective environment of the “assembly” (as these congregations called themselves) suited them. Frequently their members would start witnessing about Christ in their workplaces, trying to win over their neighbors. This kind of behavior would often lead others to hold them in derision. Eric used to tell us how successful businessmen he met on his sales calls would sometimes tell him, “You’re different from the rest of those religious nuts. I tell you, every one of them is on an escape trip. But you know what you’re talking about.”

You might wonder how we prayed. Pentecostal Christians, often known as Charismatics or “spirit-filled” Christians, generally spend more time in prayer than other Christians. When you pray in other tongues, you don’t have to find the words, and you can go on for a long time. Some rather shy people need a bit of prompting to initially get the words rolling off their lips. Eric was a master of this. He would walk around the room when everyone was on their knees, and place his hands on somebody’s head. His hands would often tremble under the “prodding of the Holy Spirit.” If nothing was coming out of their mouth, he would comfortingly whisper encouraging words in their ears, like “Just start with *ba ba ba ba*.” This type of approach would frequently work, and we would sing out *Halleluka* the moment we finally heard the strange tongues rolling off somebody’s tongue for the first time. (The reason we

called out *Halleluka* was that as far as we were concerned, they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we had gained a new brother or sister.)

When I read Jesus' polemics against the Pharisees and the Sadducees, or Paul's clever dialectics concerning the "Israel of the flesh" (Jewry) and the "Israel of the spirit" (the church), I felt I had come to a much deeper and truer understanding of "my Jewish brethren" and their characteristic lack of faith in even their own scriptures. The way they were described in the New Testament, with their dogged adherence to "pin-pricking man-made laws [such as the Sabbath prohibitions] unable to produce life" just made so much sense. With deepest shame I would contemplate the subtle innuendoes from the New Testament of how "The builders rejected their chief cornerstone and received upon themselves all the curses of their own law."

Rarely did any of my "brothers in Christ" have the chutzpah to state explicitly why the holocaust had occurred. Sometimes though their true attitudes would come out of the closet. When we were praying, Eric would often have to remonstrate with me to "Stop chanting like a Jew." I will never forget the day that Eric, Roger, and Greg (Greg being another young soul in his twenties that Eric baptized) confronted me together. Eric was a master of using words like a sword, which could cut through a person's heart. As usual, he led the conversation. "You're always different from us, aren't you. You simply don't have faith in the Messiah. You never forgot that you're a Jew. In your own eyes, you're always different from us." I just sat in dead silence with my head bowed. It was very hard medicine for me, as those three, together with Eric's blood family (his wife and four children), were my entire social network for the space of ten years. Years later, I would learn from Eric's older daughter that there was one time, before I came on the scene, that Eric was considering a Jewish conversion. I don't know what it was that had turned him from that path. One time we met an Israeli in the City Square. He told Eric about how the Sabbatical year was kept in Israel. Eric didn't try to win that man over to Christ. He questioned the man intensively, and listened with intense concentration to his every word. I had never seen Eric listen to anyone so avidly as he listened to that Jew.

During the later years, we combined our funds and bought a property in Greenslopes, a suburb of Brisbane, with lots of room for building new rooms to house the new converts we used to dream about. Brisbane, a city of a million people, had just two synagogues, and one of them was in close walking distance to where I lived. On Sabbaths, I never saw people going there; but then, I wasn't looking for them either. Very often, we would all gather around Eric and some new fellow that we found in the city square that night, and listen intently as a true pro dragged every secret from out of the heart of this trembling young man standing in the valley of decision. In the beginning there would be a lot of verbal to-and-fro about biblical doctrines, or reasons why the "prospect" put up to justify him remaining the way he was. Eric would come out with something like, "You think I'm outrageous, don't you?"

There would be no reply.

Eric stared at this young person eye-to-eye. "Well, I can tell you, I am. And I'm proud of it."

Still silence.

After the initial spate of verbal banter, often would come a silence. The silence was so deadly that you could hear a pin drop. Once in my early days with the group this happened, and the tension was too much for me. I laughed. The prospect was relieved. Eric though was anything but. Boy, did he give me a verbal lashing afterwards that I would never forget:

"Do you know how many years it took me to get to this point? If you really want to serve God, you will have to learn to control every fiber of your being."

I never made that mistake again.

Some of the young converts entered and left, as though they had gone through a revolving door. The intensity of our group was just too much to bear for most people. When you belonged to a big fellowship, you wouldn't have to feel that you were always being watched. But in our group, you were always under the spotlight. The group was never larger than nine persons. Though very small, largely due to our aggressive witnessing to churches and in the city center, our influence was felt greatly out of proportion to our numbers.

In the end though the Christian Community was only myself, a lone wolf.

When I turned thirty, Eric's wife passed away from cancer. I learned that there was one time when Eric had told her not to have a routine check that would have detected the problem. We did not believe in doctors, and had scriptures to back us up. Marie's death simply broke Eric. She had died in Townsville, just after the whole Christian Community had moved there from Brisbane. We all attended the cremation.

Eric was a great salesman, and the three guys in our group all became salesman, despite Greg and myself being qualified university graduates. My father was not impressed, as in his book, salesman were low lifes that preyed on others' vulnerability. I loved challenge though, and learned early to master objections and make a living in this field.

Eric turned sick soon after Marie's demise, and was diagnosed with cancer. He visited a naturopath, who told him that his days were numbered. During his period of illness, he had expressed a concern that none of us, himself included, were really serving God. We lived in the tropics, a very hot part of the world. These were hard days, and the heat was on us. Eric had bought an advertising publishing business, and he sold me the business. For the next six years, until I emigrated to Israel, I would make my living from that business.

There was one memorable day after Eric had taken sick when the three of us visited Eric. He was different from usual. He told us that he would be leaving us. He assured us that he had given up the "God game," as we used to call the self-deceptive self-destructive behavior we observed with many of the religious people we encountered. He warned us against justifying ourselves from consideration of the errors of other Christians; deceiving ourselves by a façade of religiousness, rather than internal integrity. Eric told us he had repented. The man had plenty of warts, but a genuine person he was. I believed in the sincerity of his

repentance then, and have never had any reason to disbelieve him since. He is not here now to ascertain the full implications of what he was saying.

Eric's condition deteriorated. He went back to Brisbane where daughter Valerie and her ex-bikie husband looked after him. Eric told me not to visit him in hospital. That was one time when I disobeyed my oversight. I got in my car and travelled the seven hundred plus miles with hardly a stop. His daughter told me a very heart-rending story. Eric had sat watching some children in the hospital ward. Then, he started to cry, "I want to live too." Eric had sometimes told us what it was like when a person died. He gave the impression of being acquainted with every life experience, and he really knew how to dangle somebody's heart on a string. I returned to Townsville with a heavy heart. A short time later, Eric died. Eric's family organized his funeral. I did not attend. He would not have wanted it.

Over the space of the next couple of years, my two remaining brethren from the Christian Community left my company. Eric used to assure us that no one else in the whole world possessed the truth like he did. If there was anyone else, God would have told him. He expected us to follow him implicitly. One night when he was "chairing" one of our frequent discussions in the lounge room, he made a very strange request of each of us: "Go and plat your dung." We didn't take him seriously, and we didn't follow through. Roger cried, "Eric, that's ridiculous. You can't really expect us to do that." Eric was very disappointed with us. He told us that he had given us a litmus test of our loyalty. Until we gave up our own judgement, we could never accept his oversight.

After Eric died, Roger, Greg, and I swore to each other that we would stick it together to the end. One day, Harry visited us in Townsville. He had divorced his wife for the last half century, who had survived the Holocaust with him, to marry a gentile woman, a Messianic Christian from New Zealand. Together they would emigrate to Israel and do the Lord's work. I got taken in by the idea of going to Israel one day. A year later, Roger went back to live near his parents in Canberra. Two years later, Greg took a job offer down south, and got married. I was left on my own for another three years, until I made Aliya. Being alone was a situation I used to fear. I learned though to cope with loneliness. Every Sabbath, I would study my Bible and pray in my motel room. Once a year I visited my father with his wife, and my sister in Melbourne.

It is impossible to explain a very strange phenomenon: From the moment I arrived in Israel, I started going out. In Australia, though my belief system permitted me to marry out, I would freeze up every time I came into a situation of starting a friendship with a non-Jewish woman. I can only attribute this situation to God Almighty, knowing my Jewish soul and all my future intimately, protecting me from marrying out. I regularly maintained a diary through those latter years, and my writing, replete with all the characteristic Christian expressions, now makes fascinating reading.

At last, I was no longer under pressure to conform to "group-think." For years I had proof-read Eric's educational articles. I found it ironic that Eric used to talk nostalgically about the years when he was alone after he had left the big Pentecostal church where he

fellowshipped. He was one of the mainstays in his church, and he left it on account of their idolatry. He told us how only when he was on his own, was he able to devote himself fruitfully to searching for the truth. When though, he started devoting time on others, his own spiritual advancement paid a price. It was so very strange that now the cycle had come full circle: Eric leaves his church; Eric on his own; Eric with his own fellowship; Eric passes away, my fellowship leave me; me on my own. Now for the first time in thirteen years, I was free to devote myself to private study and prayer. I was constantly travelling around the state, living in motel rooms for the best part of several years after the group dissolved. This suited me, as I needed a lot of healing. Often I would see a "Gideon's Bible" beside the guest compendium in my motel room.

The Gideon's Bibles were distributed free to hotels under the sponsorship of "Gideon's International," a worldwide interdenominational group Christian businessmen who devoted themselves to outreach to the traveler, often like myself lonely—and open to receiving fresh new stimuli. I was impressed at how a most comprehensive "subject key" was printed in the beginning of the Bible; as an illustration, "If you are feeling hopeless, look up Psalm 23." (The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.), and so on. It is, indeed no accident that there are countless testimonies from persons of many diverse backgrounds, who opened the Bible randomly when they were beset by a specific problem... when, lo and behold, the answer to their problem appeared miraculously before their eyes. There would be something there for every need and person of every background. Surely the most outstanding marketing coup of human history is the "World's Best Seller." With this universal message, does any more need to be said? Even if not one address or phone number was printed inside the Bible (the Gideons printed their own contact details), many a lonely soul would fall on their knees and pray, and eventually find their way to a church.

The words of Jesus and the apostles were replete with quotes from the "proof-texts" of the Old Testament, in order to lend authority to their words. During this period of my life, I threw myself out a challenge: "If the New Testament really is the word of God, then if I confine my Bible study only to the "Old Testament," it stands to reason that the Christian scriptures should rest entirely on the basis of the antecedant Jewish scriptures. For a time it seemed as though the New Testament was passing the challenge I had thrown out to it. I had learned Hebrew at Reform Sunday school, but nowhere well enough to be able to read the Bible in its own mother tongue. Since the first time I had started studying the two Testaments in a serious way, I had always depended upon the Christian translations. It had never occurred to me that a Jewish translation would be different in any way. The fact that there were scores of different translations in existence with thousands of contributing scholars all over the world only led me to close my mind to such a possibility. During my annual holiday I purchased a Jewish Publication Society translation of the "*Tanakh*" (the Hebrew scriptures). Even the name "Tanach" was new to me. I have wondered, if a survey were to be taken, would we find more Jewish homes in the world with a *Tanakh*, or would we find more with a "Holy Bible"!

At the same time as I began to pore through the "proof-texts" with my new-found "friend", the *Tanakh*, I was also beginning to investigate the genealogies of the Christian messiah recorded in the New Testament. The deeper I looked into the genealogies, which I had long-time hallowed as being the "external proofs" of the divine authority of the New Testament, the more shocking became the realization that they were based on internal contradictions.

It was my reading of the *Tanakh* which finally pulled the carpet out from under the New Testament. Only many years later would I learn that when a new Christian translation was published (called the Revised Standard Version) with the translation of "virgin" from the Hebrew word "*almanah*" (Isa. 7:14) correctly rendered as "young woman" [really a major milestone after centuries of profligate Christian publications], zealous Christian "fundamentalists" resorted to burning the new "heretical" translation. This was just an example of the many discoveries I made during this period of my life. Despite all my efforts to exert my spiritual muscles, one day I had to confront the daunting truth: ever since the day that Harry had first spoken to me, I had been continually living under none other than virtual reality. Humbly I confessed before the God of my Fathers the error of my ways, and resolved in the words of Ruth the Jewish convert ancestor of King David, that from thenceforth, "The Jewish people would be my people and the Jewish God would be my God."

The discovery that for so long I had, figuratively, been "swimming upstream taught me a lesson that stood me on solid ground ever since, the foolhardiness of depending on my own wisdom. Many was the occasion that I would err, but my Loving Father would always show me the way back. On reflection, all my years were like sand grains in one of those early sand-timer clocks held in the unshakable "hands" of the Master of the Universe.

Now more than sixteen years have passed since that fateful first Bible study with Harry. Until the unforgettable day in 1992 when a Jumbo Jet lifted me far away from the confused world of my past, on the way to my new life in the Land of my Fathers. On the way to Israel, there was a stopover in my "motherland" Holland. There my mother's cousin introduced me to the children of my mother's rescuers, eyewitnesses to awesome miracles that surrounded my mother's survival during the Holocaust. I hugged them and cried. I cried again when the jet wheels touched the earth of *Eretz Yisrael*. After six months, I started learning Torah in Yeshivat Dvar Yerushalayim in Jerusalem. Since then, I have striven to live a Jewish life according to the dictates of the Torah, written and oral.

I have though a perennial source of grieving. Every day when I recite the "*Shema*" (scripture verses designated in Jewish tradition to proclaim the unity of God's Holy Name), thanking God from my heart that He made me a Jew, I can find no peace. My soul can never find any rest until each and every one of my brothers and sisters through our father, Abraham, is able find their way back to their roots. Just like I did. On that day, God will be One, and His Name will be One.

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