



Caspari Center NEWS

March 2014



The Hidden God?

Colorful costumes, joyful people, a carnival atmosphere. The whole Jewish nation, religious and secular alike, is celebrating Purim. This is a joyful feast: the God of Israel saved his people from destruction. The evil Haman had a plan to destroy the whole Jewish nation but the brave Jewish queen Esther and her wise uncle Mordecai saved their people. Esther used her beauty and finesse to make the king favor her and agree to her plea. If Esther is the heroine of the story then Mordecai is the hero, giving Esther good advice and prompting her to action. But is the story of Purim and Esther just about humans acting wisely and heroically? Where is God in all this?

"Equipping His people
for works of service,
so that the body of
Messiah may be built up"
Ephesians 4:12



**God had given
his promise that
he would protect
his people**

The book of Esther is the only book of the Bible that doesn't mention God even once. But God is there, present and active. According to Jewish tradition, God has hidden himself in the story of Esther. That is also the traditional explanation for the costumes people wear on Purim: just as God hid his identity in the book of Esther, people celebrating Purim are hiding their identities. But is God really hidden or even absent in the story of Esther? His name may not be mentioned but he is clearly there, working behind the scenes to prepare the stage for the heroine and to save his people.

God had given his promise that he would protect his people. To ensure this, he placed Esther and Mordecai in positions in which they could act to save the Jewish people. Mordecai explained this to Esther when he asked her to go before the king (Esther 4:13–14).

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Then it was Esther's time to act. In Persia, anyone approaching the king without being called by him could be put to death. Esther had no way of knowing how the king would react when she approached him. Would he choose to spare her life or not? And how would he react to her request to save the Jews? Esther didn't approach the king trusting only in her own beauty and charm. She put her trust in God. She and her maids fasted and prayed for three days. Then she laid her life in the hands of God, saying: ". . . I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

The king received Esther and granted her request. The Jews of Persia were saved and the evil Haman destroyed. And to remember this happy turn of events, Jews around the world still celebrate Purim. God kept his promise—he saved his people by using individuals who were willing to ask his help and guidance and to act when action was needed. He used the brave and beautiful Esther, who was willing to put her life in the hands of God and take a risk to save her people.

So, you came back alive!

My first encounter with Caspari Center was ten years ago, when I spent part of my summer vacation volunteering there. I wouldn't necessarily call it "a match made in heaven," but the Caspari vision resonated strongly in me. I had experienced different aspects of Israel: spending time on a kibbutz, touring the country, and participating in archaeological excavations. I wanted to prioritize my support especially to the body of Christ in Israel, and Caspari seemed to be an excellent channel for that.

As a teacher by training, I strongly believe in the importance of education, so Caspari Center's ministry was something I could easily agree with and support. My practical and administrative skills and experience have been helpful in keeping the office running and coordinating our volunteers. Looking back I can proudly say that the staff, partners, and supporters of the ministry have fruitfully served the body of Messiah in Israel and abroad. I'm very grateful for the professional experience and enrichment I've gained during these years. It's been amazing to be part of a ministry where people from different nations and walks of life join together to bring back to God's chosen people the spiritual blessings they have received.

After my first six weeks of volunteering I was asked to write about my experiences in Israel for the Caspari Center newsletter. That article was titled "So, you came back alive!", referring to the most common response I received after returning to Finland from the "dangerous war zone," as many consider Israel. I chose the same title here as a summary and insight for the time I spent in Israel. I'm still alive after all these years, and in many ways I feel even more alive than before! During these years in Israel, God shook my world in many ways. I lost my father, had my heart broken, and was forced to face the reality of my incompleteness as a person. I also had wonderful moments and met wonderful people in Israel, but I underwent the most meaningful and profound experiences in the midst of the darkest moments and deepest sorrows. During those moments, God revealed his face and grace to me in a new and very personal way. While he was tearing apart my fears and assumptions, he lovingly taught me to comprehend and to trust that "the one who is in me is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

In addition, the Bible has become more alive to me and I read it differently now. I haven't changed my theological standpoint or core values, but now it's impossible to take the Word in any way other than more or less literally, especially when it speaks about Israel and her future. I grew up in church circles where I was taught to trust the Bible and take it seriously. This includes the fact that God's chosen people are still the chosen ones, and that the promises to Israel and the Jewish people are not symbolic but historical. I am not at all eager to invest time in eschatological predictions, but am full of joyful curiosity to see what the future holds for Israel and how God will fulfill his promises of salvation for his people. Taking part in any ministry working among Jewish people gives us a box seat to closely follow God's faithfulness to his people and to all the nations—not just to observe or monitor but to be partakers in his plan. What a privilege and grace!

Hanna Lindberg

After working as a project coordinator at Caspari Center for several years, Hanna is continuing her service in FLOM, one of Caspari Center's partner organizations.



If you would like to know more about the Caspari Center and its activities, write to caspari@caspari.com or visit our website, www.caspari.com.

You can support our work by prayer, volunteering, or financial gifts to help with individual projects or the general work of the center.

Arab Believing Community

Haaretz, February 9, 2014

Jacky Khoury writes this article in response to the growing number of Christian Arabs joining the army. Currently, there are over 300 Christian Arabs serving in the army. In the latter half of 2013, 84 new recruits joined the IDF—a staggering number, considering that in years past that many Christian Arabs joined over the course of 18 months. In addition, there are about 400 Christian Arab women volunteering in the national civilian service—the army’s alternative to full military service.

Those who support this growing trend, spearheaded by Father Gabriel Nadaf of the Greek Orthodox Church, often cite events happening in the Middle East at large, such as the “attacks on churches in Egypt and the beheading of priests in Syria” as strengthening the view that “the Arab world cannot be relied on, and therefore integration into Israel is the best protection for [Christian Arabs].”

Those in opposition to Father Nadaf’s initiative “say this viewpoint mainly serves the Zionist interests of the right, in a form of ‘divide and conquer’ of Arab Palestinian society in Israel—Druze, Muslims, and Christians.” Opponents also raise the question of Israel’s conduct towards the Christian minority in 1948, asking: “Has the state and successive Israeli governments seen to the rehabilitation of relations with the Christian community and the Arabs in general? What will they say to the displaced residents of Iqrit and Biram, who since 1948 have been waiting for the government to fulfill its promise to allow them back to their villages?”

The Catholic Church in Israel released a statement recently in which it condemned the initiative. Joining the army only encourages Christian Arab youngsters to fall into the “Zionist melting pot of Israeli society,” the aim of which is to “create a unified national Zionist narrative,” which, in turn, “will lead to a loss of their Arab-Palestinian identity.”

Khoury ends his article by quoting Cap. Shadi Halul, a Christian Arab who served in the Paratroops Brigade “and is a descendant of displaced residents of Biram.” Says Halul: “I go on the assumption that I have no other country and so I must act to receive my full rights. . . . If we continue to shout about Arab and Palestinian nationalism, nothing will move ahead.”

JESUS THE JEW

– A Light to the Nations

Missiology Course ■ November 3 -14, 2014 ■ Israel

The Caspari Center invites you to take part in our 10-day missiology course, in which we will explore how this Jew, Jesus, became a light to the nations, and we will do so through the concept of context.

Some of the themes:

- The Galilee of Jesus the Jew ■ The Jerusalem of Jesus ■ A Different Judaism – Qumran ■
- Mission in the Earliest Centuries ■ The Jerusalem of the Early Church ■ Mission as Reconciliation ■
- Jesus as a Contextual Theologian ■ Introduction to Contemporary Missiology ■
- Messianic Judaism – A Contextual Expression of Faith in Jesus? ■ Evangelizing in Israel ■ etc...

Cost

The cost of the course, which includes accommodation, teaching, transportation, and entry to sites, is NIS 8,000 for single occupancy and NIS 6,500 for double occupancy. The cost of the course does not include airfare (participants are responsible for booking flights and arriving in Jerusalem before the course begins), insurance, or meals (except breakfast).

Registration

Final registration, including payment in full, must be received by the Caspari Center office before August 1, 2014. Cancellation is possible until one month prior to the beginning of the course, whereupon 90% of the course fee will be refunded. Further information and registration forms can be acquired by contacting the Caspari Center office at +972 2 6233926; email: caspari@caspari.com.

Limping on Level Paths

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.” (Hebrews 12:12–13)

A few years ago, my husband and I were in Jerusalem for a Caspari Center board meeting. We were walking through the Old City when I took a single misstep on the ancient stone street and my ankle pivoted at a horrifying angle. Within moments, my joint swelled to the size of a small melon.

Though I was in a great deal of discomfort from the severe sprain, the most challenging part of the experience was to concentrate on the ground in front of me as I hobbled around Jerusalem. I didn't want to miss a thing going on around me, but I was forced to keep my head down so I could watch every single step I took because I was so unsteady on my feet. By concentrating on the ground, I was learning how to pick out a level path so that my ankle would not suffer further injury.

Isaiah 40:3 is cited in the opening words of the Gospel of Mark in order to describe the forerunner ministry of John the Baptist: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Mark 1:2–3). One commentator suggested that the idea of making a straight path meant that an individual cultivated an environment in his life that welcomed God to do what he willed in, through, and with that person.

John the Baptist was used by God to initiate this path-straightening work in the lives of those who flocked out to the Judean desert to hear him preach. He called his predominately Jewish audience to turn from their sins and commit personally to living the covenant relationship to which God had called his people hundreds and hundreds of years earlier. He invited them to signify their commitment to making their paths straight by baptism in the Jordan River.

Author Lois Tverberg says this about John's trailblazing ministry:

Because of John's work, when Jesus arrived, people were prepared for his ministry of the “kingdom of God,” in which he also called them to enter under God's reign. Jesus explained that it also was his own kingdom, because he was the royal King, the Messiah that God sent.

Jesus talked about seed falling on good soils or bad soils, on rocks or thorns, as a picture of the hearts of people and how they receive God's word. John had been preparing the way by plowing the “rough ground” and making “rugged places a plain,” making people ready to repent, turn their lives around, and accept the atonement of Jesus for their sins.

John's hearers had been hobbled by sin and compromise. Each limping step of the rugged journey out to the desert to hear John was the way in which John's hearers were choosing to make level paths for their “feeble arms and weak knees.” Their repentance, marked by baptism, prepared the way for God to work in, through, and with them through his Son, Jesus.

I experienced the good news in a new way during that trip to Jerusalem. Not only does our Messiah call us to make level paths for our feet, he walks with us. Even when we limp.

Michelle Van Loon

Prayer Requests

Please pray:

- For the upcoming national Shabbat school seminar in May.
- For the safety of the Arab Christian soldiers serving in the IDF.
- Against anti-Semitism in the world-wide church, wherever it exists.
- To break the power of Islam in the Middle East.

