

Foreword by **Gary Chapman**

TAMMY PRIEST

Jerusalem

Calls

*Three Jewish Feasts and
My Journey to Jesus*



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This work is dedicated with love and a tender heart to the memory of Sam and Olive Cornwell, who folded me into their hearts and their lives in those very first days. Their adoption of me as their “spiritual daughter” has been one of the great treasures and privileges of my life. The world’s loss of these two—during the writing of this book—is heaven’s great gain.

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Foreword

Once I read the first chapter of this book, I could not put it down. I had never seen the world through the eyes of a young woman who grew up in a Jewish family. Through her story, I was reminded that none of us choose our family of origin or their religious beliefs, yet we are deeply influenced by our childhood experiences.

It was captivating to see the author embrace the religion of her family and to develop a deep reverence for God and His relationship with her ancient ancestors. Even more amazing was to observe that same God reach out to her during her college years and open her eyes to Jesus, who was also born into a Jewish family. As she embraced the Messiah, the rituals of her childhood took on even deeper meaning.

In this book, Tammy Priest walks through the pilgrimage feasts of ancient Israel. She shares not only what God was teaching the Israelites and what it looked like for their descendants to celebrate in Jerusalem but also what Christians today can learn of God's love, faithfulness, protection, and guidance.

I predict that as you read this book, you will read the Old Testament with a much deeper appreciation of God's love for

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us revealed in Jesus. Each of the pilgrimage feasts reminds us of different aspects of God's character. The God of ancient Israel is the same God who revealed Himself by sending His Son to open the door to Jews and gentiles to a personal relationship with Himself. This book has the potential of enriching your own relationship with God.

Gary Chapman, PhD
author of *The 5 Love Languages*
and *God Speaks Your Love Language*

CHAPTER 1

Jerusalem Calling

Jerusalem built up, a city knit together, to which tribes would make pilgrimage, the tribes of the LORD . . . as was enjoined upon Israel—to praise the name of the LORD.

Psalm 122:3–4 JPS

I turned thirteen on Friday the thirteenth.

Sounds spectacularly unlucky, I know. It was, in fact, the exact opposite. On that sweltering day during the summer of 1982, I found myself in the company of eleven other awkward thirteen-year-olds and their parents—or, in my case, grandparents. We were a band of Jewish pilgrims in the middle of Jerusalem, just like our ancestors all those years ago.

Well, not *just* like them. We had flown from JFK in a jumbo jet instead of caravanning across the desert on beasts of burden. And we passed the time sipping on chilled Coca-Colas and reclining in cushioned seats. So not *just* like them. But we twelve children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were there, in the city that God had chosen for His name to dwell, that ancient place

of pilgrimage—and there’s no place I would have rather been (Deut. 16:11; Ezra 6:12).

Israel’s collision of antiquity and modernity entranced me from the instant I stepped out of the airport and into the living diorama of stone, sand, and desert blooms. I remember the bus ride to Jerusalem creating the sensation of time travel as our jetlagged eyes brimmed with wonder. We gazed and gaped as landmarks of legend greeted us. Road signs casually pointed the way to ancient places like Jericho and Bethlehem right alongside mileage markers to gas stations and shopping centers. As we drew closer to Jerusalem’s hill, the marvel of it all engulfed me. Scripture was coming to life before my eyes. Ancestors were coming to life before my eyes. Layer upon layer of biblical narratives stacked up along the roadside, surrounding us like a great cloud of witnesses, encouraging us as we embarked on this literal journey of faith.

Almost three thousand years ago, psalmists described Jerusalem as the joy of the whole earth and the perfection of beauty (Pss. 48:2; 50:2). But their words of adulation hadn’t remotely prepared me for what I would encounter there. They hadn’t prepared my heart and mind and soul for what I would discover about the Land, about my people, and about myself. Without warning, every olive tree, artifact, and arid breeze began to draw me in like an unrelenting force. For every night of that two-week pilgrimage, as my head sank heavily into crisp hotel pillows, I felt more and more like I had finally made my way home.

I realize that probably sounds melodramatic. But the truth is that much of my life to that point had already seemed like a never-ending series of pilgrimage journeys—only those regular pilgrimages always left me feeling like I was never *quite* home. These journeys began when I was three years old, after my parents divorced and my mom and I moved from outside Washington, DC, to the Midwest. Soon I began traveling back

and forth on my own, under the watchful care of flight attendants, from one blended family to the other. I jetted across the country three times each year, like the ancient pilgrims traveled three times each year to their Father's house in their nation's capital—only my journeys were not a worship experience. Instead of anchoring me like the ancient pilgrimage did for the Israelites, my journeys left me feeling unmoored most of the time. Belonging here and belonging there, I didn't feel like I fully belonged anywhere.

Except, that is, in Brooklyn. My grandparents' cozy, brick duplex is where I came home as a newborn, just after my father frantically arrived from basic training to meet his first child. It was there that I learned to say "bird" in my grandma's arms and watched nature unfold in her little garden. Brooklyn is where I witnessed my grandparents' abiding love and where I learned about God's. It was where I first began to love the Lord my God with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. And so it was there that He first began revealing Himself to me. He revealed Himself through each flickering flame and every chanted prayer. Through each morsel of broken matzah and every sip of sweet wine. I was drawn by the language of holiness and redemption whispered through fire and food. And joy. So much joy.

Whether spoken through a prayer at dinner, a verse on the wall, or a lesson about loving my neighbors, it seemed that Adonai was always present on East 29th Street. He spoke light from the menorah on the shelf and sustenance from the challah on the table. He whispered faithfulness through the tiny brass figures of Hannah and Samuel (my grandparents' biblical namesakes). He received worship through the silver-plated, turquoise-studded prayer book that rested in the dining room. And He revealed His steadfastness through the countless heirlooms and tchotchkes that lined their shelves and hung on their walls. Every square inch of their home was filled with quiet testimonies of God's love.

And now, my grandparents had brought me, their eldest grandchild, to Jerusalem to celebrate my entrance into Jewish adulthood: becoming a bat mitzvah, a daughter of the covenant. Despite the violence simmering at the Lebanese border, our eyes were set on Jerusalem. We would be in God's hands, in God's land, for this rite of passage. And I had been preparing for months for the group ceremony, learning my portion of the prayers and Scripture. I wish I could put my hands on those assignments now, to reflect on them with older and wiser eyes and with deeper and richer faith. But those papers have been lost to multiple years, multiple households, and multiple lifetimes, it seems. Whatever those prayers and verses were, I was ready to chant them with our little congregation of pilgrims in the synagogue ruins on top of Herod's mountain: Masada.

Of course, I would also have a stateside ceremony in the fall. My entire extended family—and a handful of my non-Jewish junior high friends—would pack our modest little synagogue in Ames, Iowa.* Small and utilitarian as the building was, our house of worship—built on the edge of an Iowa cornfield just three years earlier—was a treasure. No more renting rooms or bowling alleys or spaces in churches, which is how the congregation gathered and worshiped for its first seventeen years of existence.¹ The Ames Jewish Congregation would now welcome my large Northeastern family to the rich black soil of the heartland.

My October ceremony would be the very first bar or bat mitzvah on record in our college town, and I had put in a year of diligent study and preparation under the guidance of our part-time, commuting rabbi. I would wear a smart, purple velvet suit delivered from Manhattan for the momentous occasion. My loved ones and school friends would hear me chant the ancient prayers. They would listen to me read the first chapter

*I was the only Jewish kid in the whole middle school.

of Genesis in Hebrew, from a Torah scroll that had been rescued from Prague during World War II. And then they would receive my homily on the passage.

We would all celebrate together that night wearing our prettiest party dresses, our sharpest suits, and our broadest smiles. We would fill the Memorial Union at Iowa State University with singing and dancing and feasting and laughter. And my toddler sister would cap off the evening with her unforgettable belly dance in the middle of the ballroom's parquet floor—a moment that still maintains its place in family lore.

But there was none of that at the top of Masada. No big crowd. No live band. No belly dance. And I didn't long for one ounce of it on that scorching, summer morning. Instead, I relished the profound simplicity of establishing my personal covenant with God in the barren beauty of Israel. I wore a simple white cotton top, embroidered with just a handful of bright flowers around the neckline. And, together with my fellow pilgrims, I entered Jewish adulthood within the ruins of the oldest synagogue ever discovered outside of Jerusalem.² That day—and all the days and moments enveloping it—established itself as an anchor to who I was and would become.

Not that I suddenly understood everything there was to know about God in that mountaintop moment. I still don't, of course. Who of us does? But what astonished me was the profound weight of God's holy places and the way they grounded me. They grounded me not with the weight of ancient stones or weathered bronze but with the weight of impossible promises both made and kept, and through ancestral roots that pushed down deep through blowing sand into immovable bedrock. Those roots reached back not only a few generations or centuries but millennia, carved into the landscape of earth and history.

I couldn't articulate all that philosophizing in that moment. I certainly couldn't articulate it on that Friday the thirteenth, the day before our ceremony. My only concern on that very

lucky summer day was getting the Hebrew right when my turn came to chant from the Torah scroll. That was, after all, the whole reason we were there. Not for the camel rides or the Dead Sea swim. Not for our recognition at the Knesset or our visit to Galilee. Not even to stand on the Mount of Olives or pray at the Western Wall. We had come to worship and to lead worship, to become sons and daughters of the covenant, and to become adults in the eyes of our community and in the eyes of God. And so, as the sun went down on my thirteenth birthday, we all honored the Sabbath together, sharing the sacred cup and bread and candlelight, beckoning God to prepare us for the day ahead.

The next morning—groggy with fatigue and jittery with nerves—we arrived at the base of the mountain before daybreak and began the steep ascent to the ancient fortress of Herod the Great. Or what was left of it, at least. After Herod died in 4 BC, Rome took possession of the opulent compound.³ Although Jewish resisters managed to retake the fortress in AD 66, they were no match for the eight thousand Roman troops who breached the walls six years later.⁴ The nearly one thousand Jewish zealots, priests, and refugees could do nothing but watch as the soldiers constructed a ramp up the sheer cliffside.⁵ Stories of those Jews' bravery always intrigued me growing up. According to Josephus, they resisted Rome even in death, taking one another's lives through an intricate, methodical plan. It was a defiant refusal to be taken captive yet again in their own land, this time by Titus, the Roman officer and later emperor who had just burned Jerusalem to the ground.

Now, almost two thousand years later, I was making footprints in the same rocky sand and gazing on the same beautifully desolate view as those brave ancestors. I would pray the even more ancient prayers and read from the even more ancient Scriptures—the same prayers and Scriptures that those ancestors had also held dear. And I would do so within the ruins of

their synagogue. It was astounding, and my heart still swells when I think about it.

For all that momentousness, though, the service itself was a quiet affair. It was sacred yet beautifully informal. We sat shoulder to shoulder on the tiered, first-century benches. Herod's broken stone walls surrounded us, and the clearest blue sky stretched over us. Touristy sun hats covered our heads, and xeroxed programs fluttered in our hands. Then the rabbi called our Hebrew names one by one. At each of our turns, we rose to stand with him, accompanied by our father, or—in my case—grandfather. My grandma captured a photo of Grandpa, the rabbi, and me standing together in that moment, our three heads bent over the text. Her view of us that morning sits on my desk today, encased in acrylic. When the sun shines through it, the scene lights us up just like it did on that glorious August morning.

I remember reading from the Torah, confident and nervous all at once. I was reading the Scriptures just a few feet from where archaeologists had unearthed ancient scrolls of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel.⁶ I stood only steps from where a cache engraved with “Priestly Tithe” had been excavated.⁷ I was a modern girl reading from the ancient Torah, and I was overwhelmed with the understanding that I was part of something—and *becoming* part of something—beyond my comprehension. All of us were. We closed the service with the beautifully minor-key *Oseh Shalom* prayer, asking the One who causes peace to reign in the heavens to let that peace descend on us as well.

Joyful shouts of *mazel tov!* rose and mingled together as hugs and handshakes passed all around.* And then I froze, eyes wide with incredulity, transfixed by a box filled with Torah scrolls. It had been tucked safely to the side, out of the way of our dusty

*“Mazel tov” literally means “good fortune” and is said as an expression of congratulations or blessing over a special event or happy news.

feet and water canteens. Each scroll was majestically “dressed” (the traditional term) in navy velvet. Loops and braids of golden trim adorned the edges. Embroidered tablets of the covenant celebrated the treasure inside. And peeking through the top of each luxurious mantel were twin wooden finials, securing the Scriptures rolled up inside.

Each magnificent scroll bore the name of a newly minted child of the covenant embroidered in thick gold letters—including mine. I was now officially a daughter of the covenant, being gifted my very own scroll of the covenant. The photograph Grandma snapped of the twelve of us gazing down at the treasure in our hands is one of my favorites from the whole trip. You can almost see the stress and jitters of the morning melting into deep pools of gratitude and wonder.

Soon, though, the early rising and soaring temperatures caught up with us teenagers and elders alike. Wilted from the blistering heat and drained by the occasion, we allowed the gondolas to carry us down from our mountaintop experience. Our whole company trudged across the broiling parking lot, filed quietly onto the bus, and collapsed onto the sticky vinyl seats. For the next hour, we all mused privately through dusty windows. The Dead Sea sparkled on one side and the Judean hills radiated from the other. It seemed that the Promised Land was celebrating us, embracing us, and lulling us into shalom. Even as my eyelids drooped, that velvet treasure remained clutched in my arms.

Later that evening, refreshed by naps and showers, our little congregation bid adieu to the Sabbath during a celebratory banquet. The hotel ballroom startled in its contrast to the morning’s setting, greeting us with the clinking of crystal, the blaring of music, and the presentation of a sheet cake so big that it boasted each one of our names in black icing, written in both English *and* Hebrew. A giant *mazel tov* was piped in the corner.

Grandma proudly salvaged my personalized sliver of frosting, presenting the prize to me on a royal blue napkin: *Deborah*

bat Michael. Deborah (my given Hebrew name, after my great-grandmother), daughter of Michael. Ever the pack rat, I strategized throughout dinner about how to bring home my little bit of buttercream, intact on the blue damask, from Jerusalem to JFK to DC to Iowa. Unfortunately—or fortunately, for our luggage—a photo would have to suffice. That picture has survived four decades, definitely a longer shelf life than buttercream circa 1982.

It didn't really matter, though. My name stitched in gold was a much sweeter treat than the one piped with sugar. Forty years later, that Torah scroll remains one of my most prized possessions. Holding it still ignites a wave of warmth in my chest, transporting me back to the Land. It pulls me back to that ancient synagogue, where I first stepped into my place as a daughter of God's covenant, to that day I became *Deborah bat Michael, bat mitzvah*. Touching the soft velvet connects my heart to the Land where I sensed I was truly home, to the place promised to my ancestors. To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

With each day of our trip that summer, I understood more profoundly that I was not a tourist. I was a partaker. A partaker of the Land and of the promises. I could see them, touch them, and smell them. I touched the limestone of Solomon's Wall and wept with my grandmother at Rachel's tomb. I gathered shards of First Temple pottery from an excavation taking place right under a family friend's Jerusalem home. I looked out their kitchen window to trace the road our Messiah was promised to walk when He arrived to set all things right one day.

During those extraordinary days, I began to comprehend both the vastness and the intimacy of God's promises for the very first time. It was a weight that anchored and freed me all at once. I *belonged*. To this place, to my people, and to the God who spoke it all into being. I was home in a way I hadn't been before. I was beginning to find rest for my soul.

When the day of departure finally arrived, I hated leaving. I remember being gripped by an inexplicable ache as I gazed through the airplane window, watching the Land grow smaller and smaller, losing its detail in our swift ascent. During those fourteen days of my thirteenth year, I had become completely, irreversibly tethered to the Promised Land. Woven into her, and Zion woven into me. I *needed* to come back. And to *keep* coming back.

Maybe that's exactly how God wanted the Israelites to feel about Jerusalem. Maybe He wanted them to yearn for that place of wonder and worship, where His glory mysteriously dwelled. Maybe, by reuniting in Jerusalem three times each year and celebrating amid the throngs of far-flung friends and family, God's children would find their hearts and minds and souls and strength anchored. Anchored to the point that, whenever they were absent from Jerusalem, living in the distant places they officially called home, each person would sense that a foundational piece of themselves was missing. They would always feel that they were never quite settled and never quite home. Never, that is, except when they returned to the one place God had chosen as a "dwelling for his Name" (Deut. 12:11 NIV).

Three times a year—on the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the Feast of Weeks, and on the Feast of Booths—all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place that He will choose.*

(Deut. 16:16 JPS)

Looking back on that pilgrimage command, it seems so straightforward to us today. It probably sounded straightforward to the pilgrims in Jesus's day, too. But for the people who

*Despite the phrase "all your males" in this verse, other verses in the chapter specifically refer to men, women, and children coming to worship before the LORD for the feasts, as does the Talmud.

first received it in the wilderness of Sinai, God's command wasn't straightforward at all. They had to read between all the lines. And when they did, God dared them to believe more than they had ever allowed themselves to think or imagine.

You see, when God first uttered that pilgrimage command, His people were still just a band of newly freed slaves wandering around in the wilderness. They hadn't even built the tabernacle yet. And once they did, they would have to carry that magnificent house of worship through the desert for another thirty-nine years, picking up stakes every time God called them to move. It was a herculean task, and God's priestly tribe became expert movers, as well as ministers, in the wilderness. Teams of Levites labored to roll up the four layers of roofing that protected the tabernacle from sun, rain, and wildlife—and from the eyes of the people. They did the same for the walls and for every bit of rope that held it all together.

Arms that normally carried wicks and spices switched gears to carry crossbeams and frames, stacking the gilded lumber across a doublewide caravan of wagons.⁸ Hands that usually played instruments stopped to pack silver sockets and rings and stakes. God's ministers loaded the laver and the lampstand, the tables of Shewbread and incense, and the altar. The *altar*. I wonder what must have gone through the Levites' minds every time they hoisted that massive bronze structure, stained with the blood and ashes of so many sacrifices.

How unbelievably *heavy* the tabernacle must have been. Not only the structure, but the weight of the glory it contained: the ark of the covenant. Wherever they went, the people carried with them that most sacred center of the sanctuary, the earthly resting place for God's glory. That golden box with its cherubim wings on top and the second set of tablets inside must have been a constant reminder—even cloaked beneath the veil and badger skins and blue cloth—of both their desperate failure and God's abounding mercy (see Num. 4:5–6).

Because, despite the golden calf debacle, which left the first set of tablets in pieces at Moses's feet, God had not left them. Instead, He leaned in. And this reality must have made the people's rare glimpses of the cloaked ark a beautifully reassuring sermon in itself. Especially considering the name God had given for the ark's lid: the mercy seat. Even in the middle of the wilderness, God was demonstrating that His heart is bent toward mercy and grace.

The mercy seat's occupant vacated His earthly throne every time Israel packed up to move through the desert. I simply cannot begin to imagine what it was like to witness God's *Shekinah* sweep out from the Holy of Holies into that soaring pillar above all their two million heads, or to look on as the priests took hold of the golden poles and hoisted God's throne onto their shoulders (Exod. 12:37).^{*} And then, weary from bearing the burden of such majesty under the searing sun through the shifting sand, watch them set up the whole tabernacle once again. I wonder if they ever got used to the otherworldliness of it all. I hope not.

Just as difficult for me to comprehend about this process—this dismantling and transporting and rebuilding of the holy places and holy things—is the way we read about it so matter-of-factly today. With such nonchalance and detachment. *The veil, the ark, the cloud, blah, blah, blah . . .* How can we do this? How can *I* do this? Moses's description of heaven's fire and cloud should take our breath away *every single time*. Maybe it's that we've become too familiar with the Exodus account from years of Sunday school felt boards or have grown unimpressed with the supernatural after a steady diet of apocalyptic, CGI superhero movies.

^{*}*Shekinah* is from the Hebrew word for “dwelling” or “settling” and is used in both Jewish and Christian theology to refer to the glory of God's presence (Kaufmann Kohler and Ludwig Blau, “*Shekinah*,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* [Funk & Wagnalls, 1906], 258).

But whether we minimize it or romanticize it, carrying the tabernacle through the desert was, quite literally, a beautiful burden. The Israelites knew the full weight of God's presence in a way the rest of us never will. It must have been so very much to carry in their hands, their hearts, and their heads. It must have been utterly exhilarating, but also utterly exhausting. It was a regular reminder for God's people that, even though they were finally free, they didn't have a home, a place where they belonged.

Today, we have the luxuriously deceptive gift of hindsight and written Scriptures. Of course they are going to get to the Promised Land! Of course they will stop setting up a temporary worship center in the sand and have their very own building of limestone and marble and gold! Of course they will be spread throughout all of Canaan and need to take vacation time to go worship in God's presence! But for the ones who had walked through the Red Sea to freedom, the wilderness was all they knew and all they had.

And so, when I read God's pilgrimage command in the Torah, I don't see a command at all. Instead, I see an incredibly tender promise. I see a staggering pledge that one day, these weary refugees would have their very own nation. I see an assurance that, one day, their descendants would worship at a permanent sanctuary instead of a portable tent. God's people would no longer be nomads, and God's glory would no longer dwell in a tent. One day, journeying would become a joyful time of grand reunions and sacred worship. Through His words of pilgrimage, God was breathing life and hope into Israel's weary souls.

But why three pilgrimages each year? Isn't that excessive and expensive, given how long the journeys and feasts lasted? And why gather for those particular feasts? Why not for all of them, or for just one? Why not the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the whole year, when they would all be made right with God? Why did God choose to call everyone in ancient Israel out of

their personal spaces and places to worship with one another in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths?

To be perfectly honest, I never really thought about it growing up. With the ancient Temple and its sacrificial altar buried beneath two thousand years of stone and strife, there is nowhere to pilgrimage anymore. At least not for the prescribed worship. So instead, we fifteen million Jews now scattered around the globe celebrate in our own homes and local synagogues. And it is wonderful. For my entire childhood, I marveled that Jewish people all around the world were chanting the exact same prayers and performing the exact same rituals on the exact same days as me. We may not have been reuniting face-to-face in Jerusalem, but we were all woven together in worship, synchronized across multiple continents and cultures.

Years later, as I grew into my faith, I would begin noticing things about these three feasts that I had never known to look for during that first pilgrimage to the Promised Land. In 1982, though, I only knew what I knew. And so, just like my ancestors had wistfully returned to their hometowns after their Jerusalem pilgrimages, I wistfully returned to mine. But also just like them, Jerusalem had whispered my name, beckoning me to return. I heard it. I felt it. That first pilgrimage awakened in me a longing and tug for *home*. It's a tug that isn't really about a place at all, but about presence: *His* presence. It's about who I am when I am within it, and who we are when we stand within it together.

Jerusalem calls.

CHAPTER 2

Making Way

I rejoiced when they said to me, “We are going to the House of the LORD.”

Psalm 122:1 JPS85

I couldn't stop thinking about the contraband hidden inside my suitcase. I was convinced that security would find it wrapped up in my white cardigan, wedged down deep in the back corner of the suitcase under my tennis shoes. Oblivious to my panic, a multigenerational sea of Orthodox men in their long black coats and tall black hats seemed to spill into every spare inch around my family in the El Al waiting area as we waited for our plane. Each man was reverently wrapping his arm and forehead with tefillin, bowing at the waist, and chanting the ancient prayers.* They all appeared to be lost in

*Tefillin is a set of two small, black leather boxes containing four passages of Scripture. They are worn around one's arm and on the forehead, held in place with attached straps (wrapped around the arm seven times, and once around the head to fit snugly). The four passages are Exodus 13:1-10; Exodus 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; and Deuteronomy 11:13-21, all of which speak to God's command to bind His instructions “as a sign upon your hand and between your eyes.”

their own worlds of worship, even in the midst of that very public place.

I took in the scene with a mixture of admiration and trepidation, certain they could see right through me—and into my suitcase. But the men kept right on praying, unaware of my smuggling and my paranoia, and undistracted by the din and grime and sauna that was the JFK airport that summer day in 1990. The truth is, I knew they wouldn't stop to watch the commotion even if I was exposed. But my grandmother would. I feared she would be leading the charge. And that thought gripped my heart with panic and grief.

A quick glance at my Swatch watch reminded me that it had been exactly one week—almost to the hour—since I had met Jesus in a little church in rural Virginia. I hadn't wanted to be there that day. I *hated* being there, in fact. But there I had been, just seven days before departing on my second journey to Israel. A single moment inside that white cinderblock sanctuary turned my entire life upside down. God's audible voice had flooded my ears, wrecking and redeeming everything I thought I understood about Him. And now just a week later—with my heart a mess of emotion—I was setting off with my father's side of the family to the Holy Land. It was our once-in-a-lifetime family pilgrimage. The thirteen of us would celebrate my grandparents' anniversary together in the Land they loved.

Sitting there at JFK, surrounded by the Orthodox men and my non-Orthodox family, I was still trying to wrap my brain around the impossibly bizarre reality that I—*Deborah bat Michael*—was now bootlegging a tiny New Testament under the nose of my grandma and grandpa, my father and stepmom, my aunt and uncle, and my sisters and cousins. *What was I thinking?* This could get a lot messier than the buttercream I had wanted to smuggle in my bag eight years earlier. Had it really been that long since I had taken hold of the beautiful Torah scroll at the top of Masada? Had it really been eight years since I felt Jerusalem's

call and her anchoring tug? It seemed like barely a day, yet also an eternity.

Returning from that first pilgrimage during my thirteenth summer, my heart remained tethered to Jerusalem. I embraced my heritage, cherishing it just like my grandparents had always hoped. Soon after our return, I had my big stateside bat mitzvah ceremony in Iowa. My mom and stepdad crafted a celebration that was beautiful, festive, and warm.* Everyone on every side of my extended, blended family danced and sang and laughed together. My friends and I sang on the stage with the band. We all ate fruit from a watermelon basket that featured my name carved into the rind. It may not have been embroidered velvet like my Masada scroll, but it was sweet and special and filled me with joy. The whole weekend brimmed over with loved ones and love. I had completed a *second* bat mitzvah ceremony, this time in a modern sanctuary filled with well-versed family and uncertain friends. I found myself standing a little straighter, a little taller.

Unlike so many Jewish kids my age, instead of checking out after my bat mitzvah, I dove in. I started teaching Hebrew school to the young children at our synagogue. In high school, I asked permission to create a synagogue youth group, even though there were only four of us at the time. I was beginning to understand that a faith community of peers was important—*especially* because there were only four of us. So I launched our group and led it until I graduated. And secretly dated a Jewish college boy in our congregation for good measure. (Sorry, Mom.)

Setting off on my own college adventure that fall, my father made an unannounced stop on the way to the dorms. Parking outside the Hillel house, we left the old Volvo station

*My mom and stepdad married when I was five years old. So while I refer to him as “stepdad” here for the purpose of clarity, I’ve called him “dad” ever since that day, at my request. I was fortunate to grow up with two dads who love me very much, and I them.

wagon—stuffed to the gills with my clothes and Matisse posters and suitcase-sized Brother word processor—in the care of my stepmom and little sisters. A few minutes later, I emerged with a lifetime membership to the international Jewish organization for college students. I spent a good bit of time around Hillel during my years at the University of Virginia. By the end of my third year, I became the board liaison between Hillel and the Jewish Student Association (JSA). JSA was purely social, mind you—lots of nice Jewish guys meeting nice Jewish girls. And my role as liaison actually captured my identity pretty well at that point. I was a Jewish girl who loved her heritage but who also wanted to go out and have fun.

That’s not to say that I spent my time exclusively with other Jewish students. Not by a long shot. Between my involvement in sorority life and student union leadership, the majority of my friends (and boyfriends) were not Jewish—not unlike my whole Midwestern upbringing. You would think, then, that I knew a thing or two about Christianity. But I did not. I knew absolutely *nothing* about what Christians believed.

Most of my childhood friends were churchgoers. Some of my college friends were, too. But most of them attended Sunday morning services after a Saturday night of partying. Their everyday lives and habits didn’t seem any different from mine, so nothing ever led me to wonder about their faith. Plus, in all those years, no one ever talked about Jesus. No one talked with me about who Jesus was, what He did, or why. Not once, ever. Not even when I went to a friend’s church lock-in during junior high. There was just lots of music and food and playing tag in the sanctuary. To the pastor’s credit, when I politely declined Communion in the morning due to my being Jewish, he immediately exclaimed, “We love you, too!”

It’s not entirely true, though, that *no one* shared Jesus with me. A few people did share over the years. As in, “You need Jesus, or you’re going to go to hell!” These exhortations always

came from people who didn't know me—like the guy who sometimes handed out pocket Bibles near Cabell Hall. Those champions of the gospel never actually took time to explain who this Jesus was or why He died on a cross. They never talked with me about His love and grace. I only heard about my singular flaw: my Jewishness. And so, to my ears, the message was that I was a problem to be fixed; a project, not a person. I never heard that Jesus *shared* my heritage. I never heard that His Jewishness was the foundation of His identity as Savior. I never heard that my very own Scriptures foretold Him, that they had *promised* Him. So I simply assumed that Christians believed in some other god, which I knew was wrong. That was in the Ten Commandments, after all. I did feel a bit sorry for them for believing such a strange, sad story, though.

While I may have been indifferent toward my friends' nominal religion, I hated the Christian church as an institution. I had grown up learning about the Spanish Inquisition and Russian pogroms, about forced conversions and the Holocaust. I had read Hitler's quotes about Jews and learned that European churches hung swastikas from flagpoles during World War II. The Holocaust, I therefore surmised, was about Christians hating and killing Jews.

Anti-Semitism impacted my own circles, too. Grandma Arliene especially loved to tell me about her cousin Philip, who was rejected by New York University's medical school in the 1930s, to the dismay of his college advisor. Suspecting anti-Semitism, the advisor took it upon himself to resubmit Philip's application, replacing his Jewish-sounding last name with something more generic. Philip was promptly accepted, and all the cousins chipped in to pay his way.* In my own modern life, my throat tightens when I hear people tell jokes about Jewish

*Philip's branch of the family tree now bears the name his advisor used on that second application.

people or when I see anti-Semitic comments from celebrities. Fear strikes me when I see swastikas at protests and violence at synagogues. I've never understood how Americans could fight passionately against Hitler yet deny my people access to schools and jobs and organizations here in the United States. At the end of the day, I grew up thinking that religious Christians were misguided and a little strange at best. At worst, I thought, they were fanatical and genocidal. So I became defensive and hostile toward anyone who broached "Jesus talk" with me.

Until, that is, the summer of my second pilgrimage.

It was supposed to be my last summer as a carefree college student. Instead, I was participating in a mandatory student leadership program at school. Adding insult to injury, I had to live in a dorm with a bunch of students I didn't know—student government types, or "politicos," as we called them. I wasn't a politico. I was one of the three student union chairs, and my particular job was to plan parties—large-scale, university-wide parties, but parties nonetheless. University Union's student reach was significant, and we were considered student body leaders along with our elected politico peers. The administration's goal was for us to spend the summer building collaboration across our organizations. This included housing us together in unairconditioned dorm rooms and making us play softball every week. Seriously. We didn't get our (very small) paycheck if we didn't play.

In any event, one of those politicos, T. J., invited me to an InterVarsity gathering. "A *what?*" I asked. He clarified: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Music, hanging out, and a little "talk." The miracle of his invitation is not that I said yes, because I didn't. Having nominally Christian friends was one thing, but attending a Christian event was quite another. No, the miracle is that I didn't shun him like the plague. Maybe that's because my refusal simply elicited a shrug and an "Okay," as if I had simply turned down a late-night run to McDonald's. There was no judging, shunning, or warnings of brimstone.

Despite his low-key reaction, however, I soon discovered that T. J. was one of those born-again Christians. I realized this not because of anything I heard him say, but because other students made fun of him behind his back. *Jesus freak. God squad.* You've heard the labels. Maybe you've used them. I certainly did. But because he never pushed anything religious after that InterVarsity invitation, I decided to overlook this rumored character flaw. Soon, T. J. was one of five people I became especially close with that summer. That crew already knew one another from their student government roles, and it seemed that they, too, had chosen to ignore his flaw.

Except I shouldn't really call those five a "crew." Because I quickly gathered that they didn't really spend time together as a group outside of our summer program. They navigated different social circles, came from different backgrounds, and practiced different politics. I honestly couldn't see a single thing that united them. Yet they *were* united. And they welcomed me into their fold. It was the first time I had been part of genuine friendship among people who held such wildly different views and lifestyles. There was some sort of camaraderie among them that I hadn't figured out. Whatever it was, I found myself drawn in.

Halfway through the summer, the parents of another student invited our whole leadership group to their home in Richmond for the weekend. It was, in fact, the weekend before the day in question at JFK airport. These kind parents thought we could use some TLC and a few home-cooked meals. Bless them. About fifteen of us took them up on their offer, including two of my new summer friends—Donna and the "Jesus freak." The three of us hopped into my old Chrysler LeBaron convertible and headed east on Interstate 64. Our hosts greeted us with a delicious meal and air-conditioning.

In the middle of laughing and unwinding late into Saturday night, my road trip companions pulled me aside to ask about plans for the morning. *You mean where to watch the men's*

Wimbledon finals? Nope. That's not what they meant. They wanted to get up early and go to church. Still misunderstanding their intent, I began mentally calculating the risk of my father's ire if I were to let them borrow my car. But I needn't have worried—at least not about that—because these wonderful new friends weren't asking for my keys. They wanted me to take them. To go with them. To church. *Ummm, no*, said my raised eyebrow and silent stare. I had never gone to church except for a few weddings, and there was no way I was going to start just because of some sleepover.

But I had a problem. Several problems, actually. The church where Donna and T. J. wanted to worship was in Palmyra, a tiny town almost all the way back to Charlottesville. This meant we would need to stop there on our way back to school. I wanted to suggest they find another ride, maybe from someone who had an actual interest in church—or, who at least wasn't *opposed* to it. But the whole reason they wanted to go to this tiny church in rural Virginia was that another friend from our summer leadership program was its part-time pastor.

Wait, I thought. Trevon was an ordained *minister*? As a *college* student? Are you *kidding* me? I was both impressed and panicking. I had spent the entire summer telling my leadership peers they needed to appreciate the experience of Jewish students at UVA. I had talked about the need to consider our unique circumstances as well as the prejudices and exclusions we faced. Now I was being asked to attend an African American church with two of my new friends, where another of our friends served as the pastor. If I refused, I knew I would look like a complete hypocrite. I could lose all credibility among my peers and our faculty advisors. Yet I was mortified at the thought of setting foot inside a Christian worship service. My brain played out the entire dilemma in a split second. I realized that I couldn't say no. And the realization made me angry.

Early the next morning, I found myself stepping carefully over all the sleeping bodies that carpeted the den floor, quietly muttering to myself. In contrast to our boisterous drive to Richmond the day before, we three now spent the entire drive to Palmyra in silence. My born-again passenger rode shotgun, speaking up only to tell me when it was time to turn here or there. My displeasure was palpable, I'm sure. We arrived late, only adding to my aggravation. I dreaded the prospect of drawing unwanted attention. *Look at the Jewish girl walking into our Jesus-freak gathering!*

Stepping through the doors, though, my nerves eased ever so slightly as I caught sight of UVA students filling half the pews. Which, to be honest, didn't take much. The Haden Chapel sanctuary is only twenty feet across—I've looked it up. But the sight of those fellow students meant that we weren't the only ones who had come to support Trevon. I exhaled, feeling the tiniest bit of relief. Maybe my classmates would simply take note of my presence as proof that I was a supportive (which I was) and openminded (which I was not) friend.

Scanning the sanctuary, I noticed my friend Jenny sitting by herself. I made a beeline toward her, wordlessly leaving the other two behind in the wake of my discontent. I remember walking down the aisle, my heart pounding violently. The sound filled my ears like something out of "The Tell-Tale Heart." Silently I prayed, begging God to please forgive me for being in a church. *Please.*

Startled by my unexpected presence next to her, Jenny looked up and smiled widely in surprise. She handed me her hymnal, already opened to the page where they had begun singing. Again, I prayed. I promised Adonai that if the song had *that name* in it, I wouldn't sing. But if the words were simply "God" or "Lord," I would sing to *Him*. Everyone else could sing to whoever they wanted. That was on them, not me. I don't remember the name of that hymn, but I do remember that, written in small

italics underneath the title, there was a short verse from the Psalms. I quickly skimmed the lyrics and, indeed, there was no mention of *that* name. So I softly began to sing.

I had only managed to get out a few words when a voice interrupted me. I wish I could describe it. All I can say is that it was loud and soft and strong and gentle, all at once. And this is what the voice said—out loud—to me: “Jesus is the Son of God. He is the Messiah.” I stood, frozen. Everyone else continued to sing, oblivious to the voice. Could no one else hear it? Hear *Him*? In those moments, everything slowed. Sound. Thoughts. Breath. Time.

I turned slowly to Jenny, wide-eyed—maybe wild-eyed. She shot me a quick, reassuring smile and kept singing. Jenny probably figured that her Jewish friend was feeling understandably uncomfortable. But uncomfortable is not how I felt. *Stunned* is how I felt. I was stunned by the voice that filled my ears and by the message that it spoke. *That is who Jesus is?* I had never, ever heard this before. Not in my whole entire life. Yet in that moment, instead of skepticism, I felt shockingly anchored, just as I had on top of Masada eight years before. Because, even though I had never heard that voice before, I knew exactly Who it belonged to. And He was making all things new.

I remember stepping outside after the service into the mid-day sun, dazed by the light flooding my eyes and the voice still echoing in my head. I locked eyes with T. J. and paused. “I need to talk to you when we get back,” I said. I *had* to confide in someone. And I figured that—based on T. J.’s rumored and ridiculed zeal for Jesus—he was the one person who wouldn’t think I was completely out of my mind. The three of us buckled up and headed back to Charlottesville in silence, just like our trip to Palmyra had been. But this time, I was silenced by awe instead of anger.

Back at the dorm, after dropping my bag inside my door, I climbed the stairs apprehensively to T. J.’s suite. I hoped I

hadn't misjudged his faith or overestimated his belief. Would even *he* think what I had experienced was impossible? But it wasn't doubt that washed over his face as I told him about the voice; it looked like a mix of thrill and wonder. It turned out that T. J. had been praying for me all summer. And so had his friends and family back home. Had God really answered all their prayers so dramatically? Had God moved through the audacious prayers of my other four friends and their people back home, too? Because, of course, that was the invisible glue I hadn't comprehended before: their common faith in Jesus as Messiah. They had all been praying that God would lead and that God would speak. They just hadn't expected Him to answer with audible words.

The way God moved that morning in Trevon's church impacted each of us, my friends and me. Not only that summer but through the years to come. Over time, so many memories from my pre-Palmyra life began to surface. I began to see that conversations, situations, and decisions over the course of my first twenty-one years had dotted my path all the way to that moment in Haden Chapel. I recognize them as graces radiating through space and time. Seemingly disconnected points and people that God had been weaving together, drawing me toward that day, that pew, and that presence.

When I reflect on all the graces that had ushered me toward Palmyra, my thoughts often gravitate to the pilgrimage roads that led to ancient Jerusalem. I marvel at the abundance of people and effort preparing the way for my ancestors to reach the Temple. Every spring, workers set about fixing and smoothing and straightening the roads washed out by winter's rain. Others scooped the gloppy mess out of countless wells through the countryside so that pilgrims could find refreshment along the way. Teams crushed lime and mixed it with water, white-washing tombs to warn weary travelers away from uncleanness.⁹ Sentinels formed outposts for pilgrims coming from as

far as Babylon, protecting them through the desert's dangers.¹⁰ And every Jewish household in the land donated a half shekel to pay for it all.¹¹ The whole effort strikes me as a beautiful snapshot of all of God's people helping all of God's people answer Jerusalem's call.

More kindnesses awaited the pilgrims once they reached Jerusalem. Cobblers worked during non-assembly days to repair shoes tattered from the journey.¹² Priests invited visitors into the courtyard to see the Shewbread, which—even though the loaves had been removed from the Holy Place after the previous Sabbath—was now miraculously radiating heat.¹³ This was said to be evidence of God's favor upon their pilgrimage. So many locals provided lodging at no cost to the visitors, because Jerusalem was considered to be home for them all.*

Sometimes I try to visualize this entire pilgrimage process playing out from a bird's-eye view. I imagine it would be a thrill to watch a time-lapse video: so many people trickling from all directions, joining together to form streams, the streams merging to create rivers, and the rivers finally spilling into a sea of humanity around the Temple. What a wonder it would be to see upwards of three million pilgrims amassing at God's holy hill.¹⁴ I wish the Israelites who first received the pilgrimage command could see this view from above, too. Surely they would marvel at the sight of their descendants traveling toward the gleaming Temple from so many directions and distances. Maybe they would take it all in with wonder and song, like they did on freedom's side of the Red Sea. Their hearts would swell to behold their children's children worshipping at that magnificent dwelling place of God, living in the fulfillment of His bold promises made in the desert wilderness.

*Upon leaving Jerusalem, pilgrims typically gifted their hosts with the hide(s) of their sacrifices and their empty wine jug (B. Avot D'Rabbi Natan 35:2; B. Yoma 12a:6; Deutsch, Eisenstein, and Franco, "Pilgrimage," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* [Funk & Wagnalls, 1906], 36).

I wish we could watch all the pre-pilgrimage preparation, too—to see everything being readied before the travelers even hit the road. It would be inspiring and humbling to observe all those weeks of arduous effort that made the whole pilgrimage possible in the first place, undertaken by people the pilgrims didn't know and probably never saw. We would witness the very real and practical reality that—whether the journey was a half-day walk from Bethlehem or a three-week trek from Babylon—all of God's people needed help making their way to Him. Just like I needed help on *my* road to that monumental moment in Trevon's church. People had loved me well. They loved me with their friendship and prayers, with their words and their kindnesses.

Including that little New Testament I tucked into my suitcase just a week after Palmyra. Every night of our family pilgrimage, I quietly unearthed T. J.'s borrowed Bible from its hiding place and tiptoed through the darkness to the hotel bathroom, stepping over my family's clutter of shoes and backpacks. There I would sit, cross-legged on the cold tile, soaking up John's Gospel by the light of a little flashlight as I read it for the very first time. I remember the apostle's words bringing the word to life, each verse putting flesh on this Messiah that the voice had revealed to me. I may have accepted Him in Palmyra's miraculous moment, but now I was beginning to know Him.

In the stillness of those nights, huddled by myself in the dark, I first came to see Jesus. And in the light of each new morning, I walked in His steps. I took in the very places where Jesus lived and breathed, died and rose. They were the same places I had walked eight years earlier, but now I saw them with fresh eyes and a new heart. The timing of that second pilgrimage was such an incredible gift, such a lavish kindness of God. And, once again, I hated to leave.

I'm sure my ancestors were sad to leave Jerusalem, too. But they knew they would be back in just a few months for the next

feast. And even their departure was a celebration. They offered up a blessing over all the priests and Levites who had ministered to them, singing most appropriately from the concluding song of the pilgrimage psalter:¹⁵ “Look! Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, Who stand by night in the LORD’s house! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary. Praise the LORD!” (Ps. 134:1–2 HNV). In response, the priests chanted the third and final verse over their departing brethren: “May ADONAI, the maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Tziyon” (Ps. 134:3 CJB). Just as the priests had welcomed the joyful pilgrims into Jerusalem with Aaron’s blessing, they now sent them home with David’s benediction.*

But there was none of that for me when I left the Promised Land on that sweltering summer day. There was no blessing, no song. And all I felt was an ache. It was the same ache that had taken me by surprise eight years earlier. That tug—now pulling even stronger—told me that home, in its truest sense, was once again the place I was leaving. Home was still Jerusalem. Yet now it was a place I had never imagined before. I was leaving a Jerusalem that held an empty grave, a Jerusalem that I could actually carry with me and within me.

As our plane ascended and the Land disappeared, I felt that my anchor was giving way. Not in the sense of breaking loose or becoming unmoored. Instead, I felt the anchor plunging deeper, attaching me to the very foundation beneath all the magnificent layers of shadows and symbols and rituals and promises. It was pulling me into the presence of the Ancient One Himself, a place where my pilgrimaging ancestors never imagined they could step. Deep calling to deep.

Jerusalem still calls.

*Although Psalm 134 does not provide authorship within the psalm, most commentators agree that David is the likely author.