

## MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Before my first political thriller was released, I had never in my life been on national television. Nor had I been on but a few small radio shows. But when *The Last Jihad* was published in November of 2002, I suddenly found myself interviewed on more than 160 radio and TV programs.

Sean Hannity. Rush Limbaugh. Michael Reagan. Fox News. MSNBC. I had the opportunity to talk to more than twenty million people in less than sixty days.

The media was intrigued that anyone could have written a novel that opened with a plane hijacked by radical Islamic terrorists flying a kamikaze attack into an American city and then led to a war between the United States and Iraq over terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. They were even more intrigued that I'd begun writing nine months before 9/11 and had finished the book before any of it had ever happened for real.

How was this possible? Did I work for the CIA? Did I have some sort of inside information?

To each host I would explain how after more than a decade in Washington as a senior advisor to a number of U.S. and Israeli leaders including Steve Forbes, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Natan Sharansky, I had decided to write a political thriller about a War on Terror I was convinced was coming and how such a war might be triggered. I explained the research I had done, and the process I'd gone through of writing a first novel.

Then time after time, something curious would happen. On show after show, the host would say something along the lines of:

"Now, your name is Rosenberg, right?"

"Right."

"That's Jewish, right?"

"Right."

"But at the end of your novel the characters start talking about Jesus, right?"

"Right."

"Why? Are you some kind of Christian?"

"Right."

"Well what's the deal with that? How can you be Jewish and believe in Jesus?"

I would laugh and say, "Actually, it is a pretty interesting story, but I'm sure you don't have time for me to talk about on the air right now."

"Oh no—we'll keep you on another segment," the host would say. "This I've got to hear."

Such questions only intensified after my second thriller, *The Last Days*, was published in October 2003. It opened with the death of Yasser Arafat and an American president pushing hard for peace and democracy in the Middle East. Thirteen months after it was published, Arafat died, and two months later President Bush decided to make democracy in the Middle East the centerpiece of his second term agenda.

What was particularly odd was that the first few pages of *Days* put readers inside a

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U.S. diplomatic convoy heading into Gaza as part of the peace process that would involve an Israeli pullout from Gaza and the West Bank when that convoy was attacked by a massive explosion. Just two weeks before *Days* hit bookstores, something terrible happened. A U.S. diplomatic convoy heading into Gaza as part of the peace process was suddenly attacked by a massive explosion.

That's when *U.S. News & World Report* did a story dubbing me a "modern Nostradamus."

So as that book tour began I found myself being interviewed on more than 150 radio and TV shows. "Look," I'd say, "I concede it's uncanny that my novels have a way of seeming to come true in some way, shape, or form. But I'm not a psychic. I'm not a clairvoyant. I don't call Miss Cleo in the middle of the night to get my plot ideas. I'm an evangelical Christian from an Orthodox Jewish heritage and I'm basing my novels on Biblical prophecy."

And once again we would be back to that central question: "How can you be Jewish and believe in Jesus?"

I've been asked that question by the *Jerusalem Post*. I've been asked by the *Washington Times* and by Ted Koppel on ABC's *Nightline* during the controversy over Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*. It is a question I appreciate being asked, and enjoy answering, because it is so central to who I am.

First a quick bit of background: My grandparents and great-grandparents were Orthodox Jews who had to escape out of Russia in the early years of the twentieth century because the czar was killing thousands upon thousands of Jews. As they hid in a hay wagon that was crossing a border into an Eastern European country, czarist soldiers drew their swords and plunged them into the hay to see if anyone was trying to escape. By God's grace, no one was injured. None of the children coughed, or sneezed, or said, "Are we there yet?". And by God's grace, after successfully getting out of the vicious anti-Semitism of Russia they didn't say, "Phew, let's settle in Poland. Or Germany. Or Austria." They made their way across the continent of Europe, got on a ship to the New World, landed at Ellis Island, and like any good Jewish family they set up shop in Brooklyn.

That's where my father was raised, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section, in a devoutly religious home—religious, but sadly, almost devoid of love. Every meal was kosher, but often burnt (my grandmother was a horrible cook) and without the kind of warm and engaging family conversations children should grow up enjoying. Every day my father attended Hebrew school and every Sabbath he and his family went to synagogue, but he was never taught the meaning of the words he was reading, or why they mattered. His family celebrated every Jewish holiday, from Passover to Hanukah, but such times were often spent with arguing relatives and their significance was lost.

My father's father was angry and abusive. His mother was vindictive toward his relatives and distant toward him. The public schools he attended were scarred by violence, gangs, and drugs. His was nothing close to the healthy, inviting Orthodox families I have come to know here in the U.S. and in Israel. In fact, for years my father refused to talk much about the days of his youth because there was so much hurt and pain and alienation wrapped up in those memories.

And so my father left home when he was eighteen to become an architect. He moved as far away as he could, studying architecture in California under John Lloyd Wright (son of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright) before eventually finding a job in Syracuse, New York, where he met and fell in love with my Gentile mother, further deepening the ever-growing rift with his parents.

How could he even consider marrying a non-Jew? It was unthinkable to his parents. And an agnostic Methodist at that! But for my father the religious trappings of his childhood held nothing but bad memories. It's not that he was convinced Judaism was untrue. But he did not feel compelled to marry someone of a faith he did not share.

My mother wasn't just a Gentile. She was of English descent—a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, for crying out loud. A Methodist of all things.

My Jewish grandmother couldn't bear the thought. She actually offered to buy back the engagement ring my father had given to my mother—at a profit to him—if my father would agree to call the wedding off. He refused. The wedding took place in August 1965.

Two years later, in April 1967, I was born into a largely agnostic home. My parents were intrigued with the idea of finding God, but they had not found him yet. They would take long walks through the streets of suburban Syracuse, and later a little town called Fairport, New York, where they moved in 1969. They would talk about whether there really was a God and, if there was, how one could know Him.

They read the Koran, and the Baghavad Gita, and the Bible, and talked to neighbors and friends about their spiritual journeys. Then one Sunday they happened to visit a church where a group of visiting laypeople explained how they had found a personal

other sites.

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relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and how becoming followers of Jesus had totally transformed their lives.

For the first time, someone simply and clearly explained that God loved them and had a wonderful plan for their lives. They learned the New Testament verse, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son (Jesus) and whoever believes in Him shall not perish (die eternally, separated from God) but have everlasting life.” They learned that a person must make a conscious, willful choice to individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and then, and only then, can that person know and experience God’s love and plan for his or her life. And they learned Revelation 3:20, where Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him.”

It was all new to my parents, but it resonated instantly with my mother. It rang true with her and she knew instantly that a personal relationship with God through Jesus—not through some sort of devotion to a religious code—was exactly what she was looking for. When one of the speakers invited people who wanted to ask Jesus to become their Savior to come forward and be led through a short prayer, my mother went immediately, just assuming my father was right behind her. But he wasn’t.

This was too big a leap, even for an admittedly lapsed Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn. My father wasn’t sure how one got to God, but he couldn’t believe that the path led through Jesus. That was one thing that had been drilled into his head as a kid, and it had stuck.

He agreed, however, to begin attending a Bible study with my mother because he was curious and wanted to support her newfound faith. The weekly study took a small group of young married couples like themselves through the Gospel According to Luke, and there, week after week, my father began to read and increasingly understand the life and work and person of Jesus of Nazareth.

He began to learn that according to the Hebrew prophet Micah the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. He learned that the Hebrew prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would be born of a virgin, and live and minister in the region of the Sea of Galilee, and that he would suffer and die to pay the penalty for our sins. “We considered Him [the Messiah] stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted,” Isaiah wrote. “But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.” And over time, my father saw each of these Messianic prophecies fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

Jesus, who was Jewish.

Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem and preached in Galilee and lived in Israel.

Jesus, whose disciples were all Jewish.

One day while riding home from work on a bus, my father read two little booklets published by an organization known as Campus Crusade for Christ. One was called, “The Four Spiritual Laws.” It explained the Bible’s plan of salvation just as simply and clearly as the laypeople at the church my parents had visited. The second was a little blue pamphlet that explained that when a person chooses to turn away from his own way of living and prays to receive Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord, he or she can experience a new life through the transformational power of God’s Holy Spirit.

Suddenly, it all seemed to make sense. It all rang true. My father walked into our kitchen and announced to my mother that he believed Jesus was in fact the Messiah and that he had prayed to become a follower of this Son of the living God.

Well that was all fine and good for my parents. But then they started dragging my sister and me off to church every Sunday morning. They made us go to Sunday school. Worse, they sent us to something called Vacation Bible School. Ugh. I can’t stand to sing. I hate crafts. And that’s all you do in VBS. That and listen to stories about Jesus. It was horrible.

But I listened. I was curious about this person named Jesus. I wanted to know why He seemed so loving, so kind, and why He could do so many miracles. Over time it began to sink in that He was more than a man; He was and is the Messiah. What’s more, I saw the lives of my parents changing before my very eyes. My mother was no longer wracked with anxiety and fear and stricken with constant migraine headaches. She had a peace that surpassed all of my understanding. My father was no longer the bitter man with a violent temper that I had long feared. He was becoming gentle and kind, a man who loved both to study and to teach the Bible, especially to kids.

Who were these people? They were followers of Jesus. That was the only explanation I could come up with. God was real to them. They knew Him, and He was changing their lives. Perhaps He could change mine. Perhaps Jesus could give me the purpose and direction I so desperately wanted and needed in my life. It was not until January of 1984, the winter of my junior year of high school, that I became a deeply convinced and fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. But when I did my life began to

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change in ways I never dreamt possible, and I began to see my place in God's plan and purpose for His chosen people.

One of the most welcome but least expected changes God made in me as I began following Jesus was a sudden and growing interest in all things Jewish. With a name as distinct as "Joel Rosenberg" everybody in my little town knew that I was Jewish. But I had little idea what that really meant. I hadn't been raised going to Hebrew school or celebrating the Jewish holidays. I had never had a bar mitzvah or been to synagogue. But the more I read the Bible, the more intrigued I became by the fact that Jesus and His disciples were Jewish, and I started asking my father a thousand questions. To my surprise, he answered them. We began celebrating Passover as a family. We began studying the Jewish Scriptures together, especially the Hebrew prophets, with whom I became intrigued. In 1987, I had the opportunity to study for six months in Israel at Tel Aviv University, and I leapt at the chance to see the Holy Land for myself.

It is hard to describe the deep sense of connection I felt when I arrived in the land of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. It was as if I were home, where I belonged. For the first time in my life I was studying Hebrew (six hours a day!), eating falafel, and visiting ancient sites where the Bible was written and passed down through the ages.

I had a powerful sense that Israel was the epicenter of human history, a land chosen by God for the most important event of human history—the death and resurrection of the Messiah—and a land reborn in modern times as foretold by the prophets; a stage upon which the cataclysmic final events of history would be acted out. I knew right then and there I wanted to write about Israel and her enemies, about the forces of freedom and tyranny in the Middle East, about the clues the prophets told us to watch for so that we would know beyond the shadow of a doubt when the final chapter of history was about to unveiled.

To my knowledge, though, I was the only Jewish believer in Jesus on campus, and it was interesting to see people's reactions when they learned what I believed. My roommates insisted I was no longer Jewish because I had "converted" to Christianity. "Nonsense," I said. "I didn't convert to anything. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. He's the One we've been waiting for. I've simply believed in the Anointed One God sent to us." It didn't matter. They still insisted I wasn't Jewish. "What are you talking about?" I'd shoot back. "You guys barely even believe there is a God, much less follow the Jewish Scriptures." It was true. They were good guys but they didn't read the Bible and certainly weren't trying to live a life of faith. When we took weekend tours of various Biblical sites, I knew more of the history of the Jewish people than they did. Yet they were adamant that they were Jewish and I was not.

It has been more than twenty years since my first visit to Israel, and I still remember that semester so vividly. When I go back these days I am amazed that the number one question people ask me is the same one that my roommates posed: "How can you be Jewish and believe in Jesus?" People ask because it's a theme woven through my novels. They also ask, I think, because they sense I am willing to answer. And I am. It's an important question, and one that deserves a thoughtful, honest answer.

When my father became a follower of Jesus in 1973, he thought he was the only Jewish person on the planet since the Apostle Paul to believe Jesus is the Messiah. Besides my father, I certainly don't remember knowing any other Jewish believers in Jesus in my childhood. But in the past few decades, the number of Jewish believers has spiked dramatically, as Jesus said it would.

Just before His crucifixion, Jesus said this to His Jewish neighbors. "For I tell you, you will not see Me again until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:39). In other words, until lots of Jewish people become followers of Jesus and get excited about His return to earth, He said He isn't coming back.

Not long ago I was in Israel doing research for my fourth novel, *The Copper Scroll*. I was having coffee at the King David Hotel with the head of a Messianic Jewish congregation. As we looked out over the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives, I asked him, "In 1967, when I was born, how many *sabras*—native Israeli Jews—believed in Jesus?"

"Maybe five, maybe six," he said.

"How many Israeli Jews overall in 1967 believed Jesus was the Messiah?" I asked.

"Based on my research, less than two hundred," he said.

Worldwide, there were only a couple of thousand Jewish believers in Jesus.

How much the world has changed since then. Today, there are an estimated 15,000 Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel alone. Worldwide, I believe the number is north of 250,000. What a startling increase, and my father and I and three of my four sons are part of those numbers, part of that dramatic trend. Jews are turning to Jesus in record numbers, and they are getting excited about His Second Coming.

Which leads us back to the question I am asked so often, "How can a Jewish person

believe in Jesus?"

It is simple, really. By coming to the realization that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies set forth in the Jewish Scriptures. By realizing that Daniel 9:27 says that the Messiah had to come before the Second Temple would be destroyed, and Jesus did just that (and predicted the Temple's destruction as well). By believing in your heart and confessing with your mouth that that Jesus' death on the cross served as a once-for-all-time sacrifice to wash away your sins, and that His resurrection from the dead is proof of His divinity, proof that He is who He says He is: the only way to heaven. And by accepting that Jesus really is the Anointed One we Jewish people were waiting for—come to love us, come to save us, come to give us hope and purpose and a new, abundant, transformed life, better than we could have ever hoped for, dreamt of, or imagined.

He is coming back soon. Maybe sooner than you think.