

The
ONE
YEAR®

*Inspiring Reflections on Scripture
from a Jewish Rabbi and a Christian Theologian*



THE ONE YEAR®
HOLY LAND
MOMENTS

DEVOTIONAL



RABBI YECHIEL ECKSTEIN &
DR. TREMPER LONGMAN III



Dialogue is never easy when there are core differences that make conversation difficult. It takes a patient and kind heart to be open and learn from others. The benefit for this labor is always a richer and more complex engagement with reality, but for most, the fear exceeds the promise of goodness. Rabbi Eckstein and Dr. Longman offer immense and practical wisdom about the holy text of Scripture and also paint a beautiful portrait of how different perspectives of Scripture can refract, inform, and bless one another. This devotional guide will intrigue and instruct—and, far more, will invigorate your engagement with God.

DAN B. ALLENDER, PH.D.

Professor of Counseling Psychology and Founding President,
Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

Rabbi Eckstein and Professor Longman have teamed up in a wonderful act of partnership that will mean rich gifts to all who become their readers. This devotional has a unique capacity to feed the mind with lessons from the roots of our faith and keep our souls rooted in spiritual nourishment.

JOHN ORTBERG

Senior Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, and author of *Who Is This Man?*

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The One Year Holy Land Moments Devotional

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Introduction

*How wonderful and pleasant it is when
brothers live together in harmony!*

❖ PSALM 133:1

Welcome to the *One Year Holy Land Moments Devotional!*

I am delighted that you have selected this devotional guide, an investment for the new year that will not only deepen your faith but also help you discover the profound Jewish roots of Christianity and the rich, shared biblical heritage of our ancient faiths. These devotions are written for anyone with a heart for God's people who is interested in the stories, teachings, and traditions that the Jewish boy Jesus grew up learning and observing—traditions that are still very much a part of Judaism today.

As an Orthodox Jew and ordained rabbi, I have devoted my life to building bridges of understanding between Christians and Jews. In 1983, I founded the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews to foster cooperation between our two great faith communities and to build support for Israel and her people in need throughout the world. With the help of our Christian friends, we have raised more than three-quarters of a billion dollars to support this critically important work.

For two thousand years, relations between Christians and Jews have been marked by distrust and animosity. This troubled history has kept us from working together and recognizing the many things we have in common. I have spent the past three decades finding places of healing, forging connections, and improving relationships between members of our faiths. The book you hold in your hands is a fruit of this calling.

These devotions are based on *Holy Land Moments*, my daily radio program now in its fourth year, which is heard, in English and Spanish, on more than one thousand radio outlets by over nine million listeners on five continents. The material I have written is

tied to my teachings on Jewish faith, observance, and tradition; the history of the Jewish people and the Jewish state; and current issues and challenges facing Israel today.

While the devotions reflect the Jewish perspective, for this book I have worked alongside Tremper Longman III, a Christian author and a scholar of the Old Testament (which Jews know as the Hebrew Bible). Professor Longman offers a Christian view on these teachings to help you clearly see what we share in common, as well as our differences. It is our hope that this collaboration will help Christian and Jewish brothers and sisters to “live together in unity,” as the psalmist puts it so beautifully in Psalm 133.

That is my heart, and I believe deeply that it is also our God’s heart. I fervently hope that, after exploring our great faith heritage through these devotions, it will be your heart as well.

With prayers for *shalom*, peace,
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein

How to Use This Devotional

This devotional is organized into fifty-two weeks, with each week centered on a theme or topic. Though the Jewish calendar varies from year to year as to when feast days and observances fall, we attempted to place devotions tied to the holy days and other events, such as Passover, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, and others, closest to the time of year they typically occur.

At the end of each week, on the Sabbath day, you will find a space for reflection and questions to prompt you to record a new truth, a new understanding, or a different perspective that you have learned from discovering the Jewish roots of your faith. Our hope is that this will help you to consider more thoroughly and thoughtfully what you have gleaned during the week's reading.

If you miss a day's reading here and there, don't become discouraged! Just pick up where you are and continue the journey. As with any discipline, persistence will be its own reward.

THE SECRET TO SUCCESS

Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. ❖ PSALM 1:1

With so many ads bombarding us daily—through TV, the radio, our smartphones, pop-ups on our computers—we can become immune to the myriad claims of prosperity, health, and success. But when it comes to God’s Word and the promises *he* makes, we need to readjust the lens of our cynicism. When God tells us what we must do in order to be successful, we need to pay attention.

Psalm 1 offers us just this type of advice. It is a beautiful contrast of two paths set before us—the life of the faithful person and the life of the unfaithful person. We can choose to obey and follow God, or we can choose a path of rebellion and disobedience.

Clearly, if we want to prosper in whatever we do, we will choose to be guided by God’s wisdom. We will avoid being with people who tear down our faith rather than encourage us. We will spend time in God’s Word and know his will for us.

In the Scriptures, God says, “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 11:26-27, NIV). The Sages teach that the word *today* is used in this passage to emphasize that God speaks to us every single day—not just when he gave us the Bible. When we attune our hearts to his voice and do his will, we will live blessed lives.

Does that mean we will never suffer disappointment, tragedy, or difficulty? No. Does it mean we are guaranteed health, wealth, and happiness? Absolutely not. But it does mean that as we live according to God’s commands, whatever “fruit” we produce will be blessed, and we will receive God’s approval. As we apply God’s Word to our lives, we will adopt actions and attitudes that honor him.

That is the secret to success in God’s eyes.

A Christian Reflection on Living Wisely

In his letter to the new Christians in Jerusalem, James offers some good advice about living wisely. First, he says, if we lack wisdom (specifically, the ability to make good decisions), we should ask God, “who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given” (James 1:5, NIV). Such wisdom begins with respect for God, leads to right living, and results in the ability to tell right from wrong. Further, James says, as we understand God’s will for our lives by spending time in his Word and through obedience, we will live lives reflected by our good deeds. This type of “wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17, NIV).

ROOTED IN LOVE

I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as the LORD. ❖ HOSEA 2:19-20

At times, it is difficult to read the words of the prophets. Repeatedly, they convey messages of warning and dire consequences if God's people do not turn from their sinful ways. Sometimes, such harsh messages obscure the very reason God sent prophets to warn his people—because of his deep love for them.

When we talk about the covenant that exists between God and his people, Israel, it is more than a formal, legal agreement between two parties. It is a pact rooted in love.

Jewish literature often portrays the covenant between God and Israel as a marriage—established through vows and built on a foundation of mutual love and commitment. Through the prophet Hosea, for example, God addresses Israel as a husband would address his intended wife: “I will make you my wife forever. . . . I will be faithful to you and make you mine” (Hosea 2:19-20).

This covenantal relationship between God and Israel is a powerful force in Jewish life. Observant Jews renew their commitment to God daily by observing his commandments and by linking themselves to the chain of Jewish tradition. They acknowledge their personal relationship with God and spend time nurturing it.

Every morning, Jewish worshipers don ritual objects called *tefillin*, which consist of black leather straps and boxes containing biblical verses. Worshipers fasten the *tefillin* to themselves as an outward expression of their being bound to God. As they wrap the *tefillin* around their fingers, they recite today's verses from Hosea. Wearing the *tefillin* is like putting on a wedding band; it daily reaffirms their love for God.

Christians and Jews differ on many points of theology, but we share this powerful bond—that we are called into an intimate, mutual, and loving relationship with God that requires us to seek his face daily in prayer, listen to his voice by studying his Word, and obey him.

A Christian Reflection on Our Intimate Relationship with God

The Hebrew Bible's teaching that our covenant relationship with God is more than a legal arrangement is continued in the New Testament's depiction of our relationship with Jesus as a marriage. In Ephesians 5:31-32, Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24—“A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one”—and then applies this verse to our relationship with Christ: “This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.” Knowing we have such an intimate relationship with God should lead us to respond with prayer, listening to his Word, and obedience.

NEVER AGAIN!

God told Noah and his sons, . . . “Yes, I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth.” ❖ GENESIS 9:8, 11

Covenants, or agreements, between two people or groups of people have a long history in the ancient world. However, the Bible radically transforms this idea by introducing the concept of God in covenant with humankind. After the great Flood, God promised never again to destroy all living creatures in that manner.

According to the *Talmud* (Judaism’s oral tradition), Noah promised in return to uphold six moral laws prescribed at the time of Adam and Eve, including prohibitions against murder, theft, cruelty to animals, idol worship, blasphemy, and illicit sexual relations, as well as a seventh—positive—command, added at the time of Noah, to set up a system of justice so that society could be ruled fairly.

This interpretation of the Noahite covenant represents one of the foundational differences between Judaism and Christianity. In the Jewish view, these laws apply to all of Noah’s descendants, not just to the Jews. This means *all* humanity. Jews believe that non-Jews who obey these laws deserve a place in the eternal world. Christians, on the other hand, believe that faith in Jesus is the only path to eternal life.

Despite this fundamental—and critical—difference between our two faiths, we can agree on God’s faithfulness, based on his covenant with Noah. After the Flood, God says, “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:13, NIV).

Jewish tradition teaches that a rainbow mimics an archer’s bow pointed away from the ground as a sign that God will never again rain down arrows on the earth. And just as God promised, the earth has never again experienced a flood of the magnitude of Noah’s day. The seasons come one after another, and God’s rainbow can still be seen in the sky—an eternal representation of his graciousness to the world.

A Christian Reflection on the Noahite Covenant

Christians agree that God’s covenant with Noah encompasses all of humanity and even Creation itself. But as Rabbi Eckstein indicates, Christians respectfully disagree that obedience to seven moral laws can earn one a place in eternity. For one thing, the apostle Paul cites the *Tanakh* (a Jewish term for the Hebrew Bible) itself to point out that no one is worthy. In Romans 3, after quoting from the Psalms, Isaiah, and Ecclesiastes, Paul concludes that “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law” (Romans 3:20, NIV), a reference to the Mosaic law, which also applies to the seven moral laws associated with the Noahite covenant. Paul maintains that “a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Romans 3:28, NIV) when that faith is placed in Jesus as the one who rescues us from sin and death.

OUR FATHER KNOWS BEST

I command you this day to love the LORD your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy. But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. ❖ DEUTERONOMY 30:16-18

If you're a parent, your children have probably expressed displeasure when you've given them a curfew or told them certain events were off-limits. They probably thought you were just being mean and didn't want them to have any fun, right?

What they didn't understand was *why* you made those decisions. You knew that getting enough sleep is better than staying out late. You knew the potential dangers of an unknown situation. You made rules based on what is best for your children.

It's often like that in our relationship with God, isn't it?

This is perhaps most clear in the covenant God made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, called the Sinaitic covenant. God promised to bless and reward the Israelites, and they promised to obey God's Word and the commandments contained in the *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

According to Jewish belief, God gave his people 613 commandments at Mount Sinai. That's a lot of rules! But each one was designed by our heavenly Father for our own good—just as our parental rules are designed for our children's well-being. God did not give us his commandments to make our lives difficult, burden us, or punish us. Rather, he established his law to enhance our relationship with him.

The Sages point out that *mitzvah*, the Hebrew word for “commandment,” comes from the word *tzav*, which means “to connect.” Instead of seeing the 613 laws as 613 obligations, the Sages urge us to see them as 613 opportunities to connect with our Creator.

God knows better than we do that our ultimate happiness and deepest satisfaction are found when we act in harmony with his will. Our disobedience causes us *and* God sorrow and pain. Thus, the Sinaitic covenant (also known as the Mosaic covenant) teaches us to keep God's commandments not as a chore but as a privilege.

A Christian Reflection on God's Law

The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament agree that our relationship with God is based on grace, not law. Notice, for instance, how the giving of the Ten Commandments is preceded by the statement that God brought the nation of Israel out of the land of Egypt. Their salvation did not depend on their obedience to the law. Some Christians wrongly believe that the Mosaic law is no longer relevant. However, the law is an expression of God's will for how his human creatures should behave in order to live life happily. God knows that we flourish in our relationship with him when we keep his commandments.

A CHOOSING PEOPLE

Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. ❖ DEUTERONOMY 30:15

We make choices every day. Most of our choices are rather innocuous: what to wear, what to eat, what to do with our free time. Other choices carry more importance: whom we will marry, where we will live, and which job opportunities we will pursue.

Our ability to choose is something we treasure, particularly if we are blessed to live in a democracy such as Israel or America. We have the ability to choose who will govern us, how we will worship, and what principles will govern our lives.

We are a choosing people.

God created us this way, and he incorporated our ability to choose as part of our covenantal relationship with him. In the case of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, God reached out to his people, Israel, who in turn responded to his divine initiative by accepting and obeying his Word. In this way, Israel is both the *chosen* people of God and the *choosing* people of God. A covenant relationship is not based simply on God's extending his promises; we also must respond with our reciprocal commitment.

Moses Maimonides, a preeminent Jewish thinker in medieval Spain during the Middle Ages, listed the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith, among which is the belief that God gives us free will to choose him or deny him. Judaism is based on choice, because God doesn't want spiritual robots. He isn't interested in a forced relationship and lackluster obedience. God chooses us, and though he deeply desires that we choose him in return, he will never force us to do so.

Ultimately, the choice to obey God rests with each of us. This is clear in Moses' address in Deuteronomy 30:15: "Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster." Moses challenged the people: Obey, and God will bless you; disobey, and you will face certain disaster. The better choice may be obvious, but it is yours alone to make.

A Christian Reflection on the Ultimate Choice

"Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends" (Revelation 3:20). The picture of Jesus at the door requesting entry is one of the most familiar images of the New Testament. Sharing a meal represents the development of an intimate relationship. The passage suggests that we have a choice. Will we open the door to relationship with Jesus or shut him out? As John indicates in Revelation, those who choose to open the door will receive victory and honor (see Revelation 3:20-21).

FATHER ABRAHAM

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. . . .” So Abram departed as the LORD had instructed. ❖ GENESIS 12:1, 4

When God commanded Abraham (then known as Abram) to leave his country and go to a distant land, Abraham responded immediately and “departed as the LORD had instructed” (Genesis 12:4). We often overlook what a remarkable response this was.

Abraham grew up in a society where multiple gods and idols were worshiped. In fact, his father, Terah, not only worshiped idols—he *made* idols. As the eldest son, Abraham more than likely was expected to follow in the family business and become an idol producer himself.

According to rabbinic tradition, Abraham came to realize that there was only one true God and that idols weren’t the answer. He wanted his father to understand this as well. So when Terah was out of the workshop, Abraham destroyed all the idols, except the largest one, putting a stick next to it.

As the story goes, when Terah returned and saw the damage, he was furious and asked his son, “What happened?” Abraham replied, “Well, the big idol got angry at all the other idols, and he destroyed them.” To which his father answered, “That’s impossible. He doesn’t move. It’s just stone.”

“Exactly, Father,” Abraham said. “There is but one true God.”

Because of his faith and his willingness to stand against the cultural norms of his day, Abraham has been credited as the founder of monotheism. He became the first person to be called a Hebrew (see Genesis 14:13). How did he get that name? The word *Hebrew* comes from a word that means “side.” The whole world was on one side, and Abraham was on the other. The whole world believed one thing, but Abraham steadfastly believed something entirely different.

Abraham’s bedrock faith in the one true God is the very foundation upon which Jews and Christians alike have built their faith traditions. His willingness to stand against the culture is a model for us all.

A Christian Reflection on Father Abraham

God’s call to Abraham to leave his idolatrous background and worship God alone is recognized by the New Testament authors as a momentous decision. Paul reminds his readers that Abraham was “the founder of our Jewish nation” (Romans 4:1) and that Abraham serves as an example of how faith is the key to a relationship with God. Paul argues that Abraham was accepted by God even before he was circumcised, citing God’s pronouncement: “Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith” (Romans 4:3, citing Genesis 15:6). This message, according to Paul, is a blessing for Jews as well as for Gentiles (see Romans 4:9).

WEEK 1 // DAY 7

Sabbath Reflections

What new truth about our covenantal relationship with God did you learn from this week's devotions?

How has this truth affected your faith?

How will you apply this truth to your daily life?

Your Key Verse for the Week:

❖ OTHER REFLECTIONS