

The Shepherd of Israel



THE SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL, P.O. Box 1331, ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, NJ 07632

Inside this issue:

A few years ago, Steve Schwartz blithely admitted "God was nowhere to be found" in his brand of Judaism.

Yet, when some Christians at his job challenged the validity of Judaism—he staunchly defended it.

He began reading the Jewish commentaries, *The Talmud*, books on archaeology and philosophy. He considered both sides. Then he reconsidered God. He relates his experience inside this issue.

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For the first 13 years of my life I was what you'd call a typical Jewish boy, growing up in a modern secular society. I lived in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, called University City.

I came from a middle-class, Conservative Jewish home that followed many of the traditions of modern Jewish life. My Orthodox Jewish grandparents (who lived downstairs) followed *all* of the traditions, including keeping a kosher home and lighting the *Shabbas* candles every Friday night.

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" . . . I was determined to show them Judaism is the true faith but first I had to prepare my case. . . . I started devouring everything I could get my hands on. Books on archaeology, history, philosophy . . . you name it . . ."

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I grew up amid all the Jewish traditions, and I loved them all—from the noisemakers and songs of Purim to the *menorah* and merriment of Chanukah.

After school each day I attended *cheder* where I learned to read Hebrew and all the other necessities involved in that most important event of my life—my *bar mitzva*. It bothered me that I wasn't taught how to *understand* what I was reading, but at least I knew I'd be able to read straight from the Torah when called upon.

It also bothered me that we weren't taught very much about the Old Testament. It seemed to me that I was being taught mainly to *perform* on my *bar mitzva* day.

It wasn't surprising, therefore, that I started to let my Judaism slide after my *bar mitzva* was over. My Jewish education, so I thought, was completed. Soon the Jewish traditions began to seem meaningless, and I found it difficult to have any interest in a nebulous God about whom the rabbis could tell me little.

Of course, I was still proud of my Jewish heritage and would have defended my faith at the drop of a hat. While I had never been the target of anti-Semitism, I knew it existed and that made me angry. I maintained a few Jewish customs—including the day-long fast on *Yom Kippur*—but I performed them strictly out of habit.

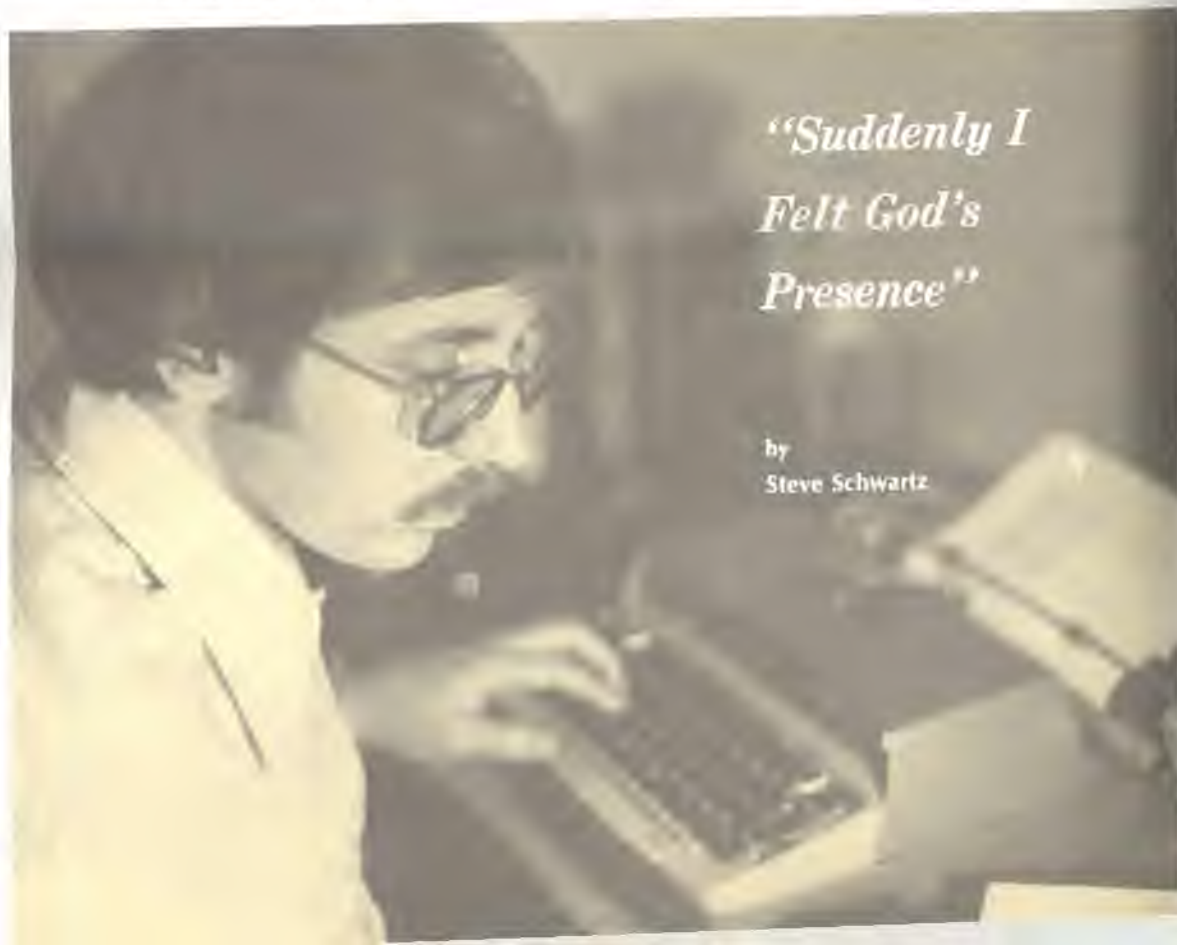
While I really didn't feel that my sins were forgiven, I knew that Jews fasted on the Day of Atonement and I was determined to be a good Jew. My parents only insisted that I attend synagogue on the really important holidays . . . and that suited me just fine.

Although I never actually became atheistic or agnostic, I did become apathetic about my relationship with God. And I felt that He too was apathetic. When my father died a premature death when I was 16, two relationships were severed. The one with my father and the one with God.

Strangely, my sense of Jewish identity was unaffected by my growing apathy. I considered Judaism to be not so much a religion as it was a nationality or ethnic group. God was nowhere to be found in my brand of Judaism, and I was content to leave it that way.

When I was 19, I committed that most horrible of sins—I fell in love with a gentile girl, a *schiksa* as my mother called her. If I had killed a man it wouldn't have caused such a commotion in my household. Yet, Carol was willing to convert from Catholicism to Judaism to keep peace in the family, and this calmed my mother down.

Carol and I attended conversion classes for several weeks. When she had learned to say the *Shema* in Hebrew and English, she was ready. After a brief but formal ceremony, she became a Jew and experienced the same let-down I had



*“Suddenly I
Felt God’s
Presence”*

by
Steve Schwartz

experienced after my *bar mitzva*. Soon we were married; we had each other so we had no need of God.

Though she asked me from time to time if I wanted to go to synagogue, I always begged off. I just wasn't interested. I took my Bible off the shelf every once in awhile, but it seemed to have been written by and for a different age. Surely in this modern, scientific era the Bible had little value.

That's how it remained until I was 27 years old. At that time my faith was threatened by some people with whom I worked. They had the audacity to suggest that the Jewish people were no longer worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They said that they, rather than Jews, had received forgiveness of their sins.

"Who are you," I demanded, "that you should tell me about the Jewish God and the Jewish Scriptures?"

One of them said he was a born-again Christian, and he claimed to know the Old Testament better than I did. The other proclaimed that her Lord was a Jew, and she followed Him faithfully. She also told me how lucky I was to be a Jew, the same religion as the God she worshipped.

This was too much to take! I saw them as idolaters who worshiped three gods, the chief of whom being a man named Jesus! While I'd been taught that such a man had actually lived, by no stretch of the imagination could he ever be thought of as God. After all, the *Shema* proudly proclaimed, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one." And that was straight from the Bible!

One of these co-workers asked me why God was mentioned three times in the *Shema*. (Funny, I had never thought of that before.) He also told me the Hebrew word for "one" in the passage actually means "unity" or a "oneness made up of more than one part." According to him, the *Shema* was one of the best proofs in the Old Testament for the trinity of God.

He also asked me why it is recorded in Genesis: "Then God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." Why the plural pronouns?

He asked me a number of other questions I was powerless to answer. My Hebrew-school training had left me totally unprepared for discussions about the Old Testament. While I'm not much of a fighter in the physical realm, all these questions and comments sparked within me a desire to "fight it out" in the intellectual arena.

I was determined to show them both that Judaism is the true faith and that it

was as sure a way to God as Christianity.

But first I had to prepare my case. And that required studying, a lot of studying. I sent away for books and booklets that stated their case, so I could view their side and then attack it. I also acquired books by Jewish authors that I thought would give me a good Jewish defense.

Then I started devouring everything I could get my hands on. Books on archaeology, history, the physical sciences, philosophy, theology, you name it. Since my commuting to and from work took three hours per day, I had plenty of time to study.



I also started to read the New Testament to find out what this Jesus was all about. I was surprised to discover that the book was written by Jews and for a Jewish audience. Still, it didn't impress me.

I had started with the pre-conception that the Bible — both the Old and New Testaments — was filled with myth, allegory, scientific blunders and historical inaccuracies.

I distinctly remembered my Hebrew-school teacher telling me, "The Old Testament prophets couldn't really foresee the future; they were just wise men."

It's a very unsettling experience to find one's preconceptions start to crumble under the weight of facts. Examining the Bible in the light of archaeological, scientific and historical source materials, I discovered that the Bible *could* be trusted. The prophets had made hundreds of *specific* prophecies which were fulfilled to the letter, in some cases hundreds of years later.

Occasionally a prophet would even mention a man by name hundreds of years before the person was born! I couldn't believe it! . . . yet there it was. The only way I could explain it was that

this was a supernaturally-written book, a book written by God.

With this new respect for the Bible, I started examining in depth the prophecies concerning the Messiah. My rabbi had told me we were waiting not for a man but for a Messianic Age, a time of perfect peace. But the Bible describes the Messiah as a *man*. Which was true?

I decided to believe the Bible. After all, if the Hebrew prophets never made a mistake on their numerous prophecies concerning the nations, it followed logically that what they said about the Messiah would also be true.

According to the materials I had received from various Messianic Jewish

organizations, there were more than 300 Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. A few I found of particular interest were:

Micah 5:2 — The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but he had been in existence from everlasting ages past.

Isaiah 7:14 — The Messiah would be born of a virgin.

Isaiah 9:6 — A child would be born who would be called "Wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Psalms 2 — God has a "Son" in whom we should put all our trust.

Psalms 22 — The Messiah's death by crucifixion is described in detail hundreds of years before this manner of capital punishment was practiced.

Daniel 9 — Predicts that the time of the Messiah's arrival and death would be before the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 A.D.

But the most amazing prophecy of all was the entire fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. It describes in full detail the life, death and mission of the Messiah . . . and I saw here the same Jesus I had encountered in the New Testament! Yet

Isaiah wrote this some 700 years before Christ!

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I later learned that this amazing chapter is *never read* in synagogue although the chapters immediately before and after it *are* read.

This not only shocked me, it made me angry! I don't like being deceived. Why was I never allowed to see Isaiah 53?

At this time, the guy at work delivered the death blow to my arguments. "How are your sins forgiven?" he asked.

"Well, we Jews fast and pray on the Day of Atonement," I replied, not really believing that this worked at all. Still, that's the Jewish answer.

That's when he showed me what the Bible says about the obtaining of forgiveness, or atonement, from God. According to the Old Testament, a blood sacrifice is needed; there was no mention of fasting. "When God became a Man and died on the cross," said my friend, "that was my blood sacrifice. What's yours?"

Isaiah 53 provided the answer. According to that Hebrew prophet, the Messiah was to be our sacrifice for sin:

"But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

When I had reached the inescapable conclusion that Jesus was who he had claimed to be—the eternal Son of God, the Messiah of Israel—I knew I would have to admit defeat to my Christian friends. That made me feel uncomfortable, but what made me feel more uncomfortable was the feeling that I should ask Jesus to be my personal Messiah, ask Him into my life, so to speak. But I wasn't ready for that yet.

On the evening of July 3, 1975, I was playing piano at a little bar near my home. (I was moonlighting to supplement my income as an advertising copywriter.) From my position on the stage, I could see the people dancing and drinking, trying their best to have a good time.

Suddenly I "felt" God's presence (that's the only way I can describe it), and He seemed to be telling me there was much more to life than this. He was telling me to entrust my life to Him and that He would take care of my every need. Most of all, I felt the need of a close relationship with God—not a new religion but the same kind of relationship with God that Abraham and David had.

That night I surrendered my life to Jesus. While I didn't feel any different, I knew there had been a change when I acquired a deep desire to tell people about the Messiah.

The first person I told was my wife. During my months of investigation, I had never told her what I was up to. After all, I never thought it would amount to anything. Plus, she had converted to Judaism for me; how could I tell her I was studying the life of Jesus?

When I finally did tell her, she told me that she had just accepted Jesus as her Messiah! Apparently, she had been reading some of the books I had carelessly left lying around the house. While she had been raised a Catholic, she had never been told the truth about Jesus. So now she was a Catholic turned Jew turned Hebrew Christian.

Then I started telling others—neighbors, friends, total strangers, people at work, anybody who'd stop to listen. To my surprise, many who called themselves Christians knew virtually nothing about Jesus and cared even less.

My friends at work (my former adversaries) rejoiced at my news. I soon realized that my relationship with God had turned from a purely intellectual experience to an emotional one as well. Bible-reading and prayer became a daily event.

In September my mother called, telling me that my 85-year-old grandmother had been rushed to the St. Louis Jewish Hospital for emergency surgery. The doctors didn't expect her to survive the operation, but she did. Immediately I made plans to take a week-long vacation.

I couldn't let my grandmother die without hearing that the Messiah she had always waited for had already come. Somebody told me I would kill her with my news about Jesus, but I refused to listen.

I shared this news with her in the privacy of her hospital room. My grandmother weakly smiled when I told her about the Messiah . . . and accepted Him as her personal Savior. As I told her the Old Testament Messianic prophecies, she knew at once that it was Jesus I was talking about . . . and we prayed together for the first time in our lives.

The news hadn't killed her; it had given her peace.

My mother, on the other hand, wasn't willing to believe. She didn't trust the Bible, saying it was written too long ago for her to have any confidence in it. Still, she promised to read the Bible I gave her and said she'd be willing to talk to some Messianic Jews in the St. Louis area.

After this, my wife and I traveled to Indianapolis and Lansing, Michigan, to share our discovery with the rest of my family. My sister had arranged for me to talk to her rabbi, so he could persuade me to give up this foolishness. After our discussion, however, my sister admitted that I had the answers her rabbi didn't have.

About a month after returning to our home, my mother informed me by telephone that she had accepted Jesus as her Messiah. "It was like I'd been looking through a fog, but now I see an unpolluted, beautiful world!" she said. That was one telephone call I'll never forget!

My mother had changed overnight from the most miserable woman I had ever known . . . to one of the happiest. Her friends noticed the vast change and desired to have what she had. What she had was Jesus . . . and now many of her Jewish friends have Him too.

Has Jesus made a difference in my own life? I'll say He has! The far-off God I cared nothing about has now become my closest companion. Even in the midst of troubles I know He cares about me and that He'll take care of the situation.

While I used to put my trust in friends, family and possessions, I now trust only in Him . . . and He has never forsaken me. I now have peace and the wonderful knowledge of His forgiveness.

And I know the answers to life's three great questions: (1) Who am I? (2) Why am I here? and (3) Where am I going? I could never have found the answers had I not found Jesus.

What about my Jewishness? While I had lost all interest in Judaism and its traditions, now I am proud of my Jewish heritage. Whereas I was once a Jew in name only, today I am a Jew in the Bible-sense of the word. I'm comforted in knowing that there are tens of thousands of Jews who believe, as I do, that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

I now love the Jewish people and understand the traditions. Who knows? I might even fast on Yom Kippur like I used to. But if I do, it will be because I want to honor a Jewish tradition. My atonement with God has already been procured . . . by my Messiah's death.

Incidentally, I forgot to mention one thing: The Messiah rose from the dead . . . and someday so will I.

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