



RABBI TULY Weisz displays the first copies of 'The Israel Bible.' (Courtesy Israel365)

Can one book interweave Israel's past, present and its prophecies?

In 1897, when Chicago Pastor William Eugene Blackstone learned that Zionist leader Theodor Herzl was considering an offer by the British government of an interim Jewish state in Uganda, he sent Herzl a personal Bible outlined with the specific biblical references to Jewish restoration to Israel only. That Bible was said to have been prominently displayed on Herzl's desk.

Some 120 years later a new *Tanach*, or Jewish Bible, is being published by Menorah Books (a division of Koren Publishers Jerusalem) and Israel365 that hopes to achieve a similar goal: to convince a divided Jewish people, Christian Zionists and what sometimes seems like an anti-Israel world that Israel belongs to the Jewish people.

The Israel Bible, edited by Orthodox Rabbi Tuly Weisz of Ramat Beit Shemesh, is the world's first Tanach centered on the Land of Israel, the people of Israel and the dynamic relationship between them.

Weisz started the project 10 years ago, when he heard about Blackstone's efforts and wondered just how many references to Israel there really are in the Bible. Several highlighters and a rainbow of sticky tabs later, Weisz had marked hundreds of references to Israel on nearly every page of the Tanach.

That exercise led him to move his family to Israel. Six years ago, he started a company that focuses on building a biblical bridge between Jews living in Israel and the nations of the world. For most of that time, Weisz was working on *The Israel Bible*, which was designed to be the company's flagship publication.

Weisz assumed that something like *The Israel Bible* already existed, perhaps published by the religious

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Zionist Bnei Akiva youth movement or by Israel's Education Ministry. In his research, Weisz discovered that the last original translation of Tanach was published more than two decades ago by the Brooklyn-based ArtScroll, and that version was not like his.

The Israel Bible contains more than 1,000 study notes. One of the first comments is the "first Rashi" in the Torah, in which the medieval scholar and commentator asks: Why, if the Torah is first and foremost a book of laws for the Jewish people, does it begin with the history of creation and the lives of our Jewish forefathers?

Rashi's answer is that there will be a time when the nations of the world will claim the Jews "stole the Land of Israel" and that the land belongs to others and not to the Jewish people. Rashi explains that God tells the story of creation first to establish the fact that all the land in the world belongs to God, and only He has the right to apportion it. And according to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, the Land of Israel was promised by God to the nation of Israel.

This comment by Rashi is well known among religious Zionists, but it is lesser known by people outside those circles. In *The Israel Bible*, Weisz brings the comment to the forefront.

The book is unique in the way it combines classic rabbinic Jewish commentaries, like the one by

Rashi, with Hebrew and "Israel" lessons, as Weisz calls them.

For example, Weisz highlights verse 15 in Ezekiel, chapter 3: "And I came to the exile community that dwelt in Tel Abib." Ezekiel goes to the Israelite captives at Tel Abib near the Chebar River.

Before he delivers his message of doom, however, he simply sits with them for a week, empathizing with their suffering before sharing the divine message. The name Tel Abib has been linked to the Akkadian "mound of the flood" mentioned in ancient Babylonian sources. Weisz said that when the founders of Tel Aviv needed to choose a name for the first Israeli city, they used a modern Hebrew name like Tel Aviv. But Tel Aviv comes from the Tanach.

SIMILARLY, WEISZ connects a verse in 1 Samuel 15:29, "The glory of God does not deceive" (transliterated as Nay-tzakh Yis-ra-Ayl Lo Y'-sha-kayr) with events that happened in 1914. *The Israel Bible* describes how when World War I broke out, many young Zionists perceived the crisis as an opportunity through which the political landscape of Palestine could be transformed to advance the dream of Jewish self-determination in their homeland. Sarah Aaronsohn and a group of young Zionist idealists formed a clandestine organization they called "NILI," which was a Hebrew acronym based on that phrase in the Book of Samuel.

NILI conducted espionage against the Ottoman authorities on behalf of the Allies until the group was discovered in 1917 by the Turks. Aaronsohn was

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tortured by the police but refused to disclose any information about her group's efforts. She ultimately took her own life, sacrificing herself for the millennia-old dream of Jewish independence.

Further, each book of the Bible is introduced with supplemental material, such as a chart, timeline, or map to help readers understand the Tanach's connection to the modern state. So, for example, a map introducing the Book of Psalms plots out the more than one dozen modern Israeli cities mentioned in the book, connecting modern Israel to the King David of ancient Israel.

Every Israeli prime minister, including the current one, is quoted in the volume.

Even the dust cover weaves together the message that the founding of the modern State of Israel is the Bible's prophecy fulfilled. If one looks carefully at the novel-like design, one can see an ancient biblical map of the Holy Land. In verses related to the Mediterranean Sea, there is traditional Torah scroll writing, signifying the Jewish understanding that the wisdom of the Torah is as broad and deep as the sea. At the bottom of the cover is the iconic image of paratroopers liberating the Western Wall 51 years ago. At the top right corner, enveloped in an Israeli flag, is the Temple. Those same enmeshed messages and symbols are built into every chapter of *The Israel Bible*.

Weisz and Menorah specifically aimed to release the hefty 2,000-page book in time for Israel's 70th Independence Day, which will be celebrated on April 19 and will draw even greater focus on Israel.

So much attention is today showered on the Jewish state, though much of it is negative, such as the unwarranted almost rejection of Israel by the United Nations or the damaging boycott, divestment and sanctions agenda, which can be virulent and tied to antisemitism on college campuses.

At the same time, in certain pockets of the world, such as among the fast-growing Evangelical Christian community, there is new biblical, political and diplomatic support for Israel. But this support can be confusing for both Jews and Christians. Jews were historically persecuted by Christians based on religion and are therefore weary of working alongside Evangelicals, even for the sake of Israel.

For Christians, whose faith is based on the theological premise that God rejected the Jewish people and chose them instead, there has had to be a 180-degree turn since the founding of the modern State of Israel 70 years ago. Many Christians have started to reject "replacement theology" and open their hearts and minds to how the people of Israel fit into God's plans.

Weisz's argument is that to understand what is going on in Israel in 2018, one cannot go back to 1967 or 1948. One must go back to Tanach.

Weisz said he hopes *The Israel Bible* will be studied by both Jews and Christians alike. His own organization, Israel365, is committed to teaching non-Jews about the biblical significance of Israel. In fact, it was Weisz's

Christian Zionist community that provided the seed funding through a crowdfunding campaign that enabled the company to move forward with this Menorah edition.

Jews teaching the world Tanach is a core Jewish concept that can be found in the Book of Isaiah, chapter 2. Isaiah describes that in the end of days, the nations will stream up to Jerusalem for Torah "shall come forth from Zion, The word of Hashem from Yerushalayim" (Isaiah 2:3).

That verse in Isaiah might seem unlikely. Any student of history knows that the Bible has been one of the greatest sources of division between its readers. But we are living in an unprecedented era, and today, for the first time, the Bible is being used as a source of unity between Jews and Christians.

Weisz believes that in this generation, we can fulfill Isaiah's vision and the Jews' historic mandate to be a light unto the nations.

The Israel Bible is a major milestone in Tanach literature, coming at a time to bring greater unity between the monotheistic faiths of Christianity and Judaism. At the same time, it should help strengthen the connection between the people of Israel and their land.