The Lesson of the Almond Tree

Amidst our weakness, frailties and the turmoil of nations, God is watching!

It is amazing to see beautiful almond trees blossoming all over Israel every winter. They are the first tree to blossom and yet the last to bear fruit.

The almond tree is associated with one of the earliest prophecies of a young Jeremiah. “Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch of an almond tree.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching to perform My word.’” (Jeremiah 1:11-12)

This prophecy uses a play on words that carries a vital truth for Israel as well as for us. The Hebrew word for almond, shaked, is also translated “to watch”. By seeing the almond branch, God assured Jeremiah that He is watching over His word to bring it to pass, no matter the passage of time.

In context, God had just given Israel a warning. “I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out Jerusalem and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:9-10) Then after Jeremiah sees the almond tree, God shows him a boiling pot over Jerusalem which portends “calamity” (Jeremiah 1:13-14). While the almond is a sign of hope that God will eventually fulfill His wonderful promises to Israel (or to us), the context is more ominous.

Later, God repeated the warning through Jeremiah: “Behold, I will watch (shaked) over them for evil, and not for good…” (Jeremiah 44:27). God’s message to Israel was that sin has consequences and there will come a time of reckoning – namely the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of Israel.

Years later, Daniel would pray: “Therefore has the Lord watched (shaked) upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the Lord our God is righteous in all His works which He does: for we obeyed not His voice.” (Daniel 9:14)

The lesson of the almond tree, therefore, is that God in heaven watches a sinful nation walking away from Him and declares it will have consequences. His message to humanity today is still the same: God is watching! He will watch over His word either for curse or for blessing. When sin and immorality engulf nations and even penetrate the Church, we should remember: God is watching! When nations assail Israel and seek to divide her land, we can be sure: God is watching!

Still, the message of the “almond” does carry a strong encouragement. Jeremiah also foresees a miraculous restoration for Israel. “And it shall come to pass, that as I have watched over them, to destroy, and to afflict… so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 31:28)

If we decide to consecrate our lives to God, then He promises to watch over us for good. Even with our weaknesses and frailties, His eyes are always upon us! (Dr Jürgen Bühler)
Shomer Israel
Support the ICEJ in your planned giving

Many of us wish we could give more to the strategic ministry of the ICEJ. But there are things we can do beyond simply writing a check that allow us to give more both now and in the future. With proper planning it is possible to save on taxes, provide for loved ones and also bless Israel in far greater measure than most of us ever imagined! Some of these ways are listed below:

**Stock:** You may own stocks that are worth considerably more than when purchased. Rather than paying the high taxes due on the increased value, donate that stock to the ICEJ. Then the full value is tax deductible to you and goes to benefit the Lord’s work!

**Gift Annuity:** Through a Gift Annuity you can make a gift to the ICEJ today, and enjoy the tax deductions, while receiving a fixed income for the rest of your life.

**Life Insurance:** If you have a life insurance policy that is no longer needed, you can name the ICEJ as the beneficiary. Or you can take out a life insurance policy on yourself just for the purpose of benefiting the Embassy’s work in Israel.

**IRA:** You can name the ICEJ as the beneficiary on your IRA.

**Will:** You can use your will or trust to make a gift to the ICEJ and save enough on taxes that your family will still receive the level of financial provision that you intended.

As we prepare for and plan the future of this ministry, we ask you to plan with us. Through these simple planned giving instruments you may be able to make a greater and more far reaching impact than you ever thought possible.

Of course, everyone’s situation is different, so be sure to consult a financial adviser about the approach to planned giving that is most appropriate for you. And remember, the decision to give to the ministry of the ICEJ through your estate is one of the best ways to ensure a lasting legacy of blessing for Israel and the Jewish people for many years to come.

To become a member of the ICEJ’s Shomer Society (“Keeper of Israel”) and include our ministry in your planned giving please notify us at:
PO Box 332974, Murfreesboro, TN 37133.

For more information call 1-800-379-3897

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Isaiah 62 Prayer Initiative

“He has set preappointed times and boundaries”

Dr Jürgen Bühler

And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwelling, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us... (Acts 17:26-27)

I sense it is no coincidence that, at the beginning of 2011, God called the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem to increased prayer and fasting for Israel and the region. These are crucial times for the entire Middle East and though God does not need us, He invites us to work with Him in prayer.

In Acts 17:26-27, it states that God has “determined pre-appointed times and the boundaries” for people and nations in order “that they should seek the Lord”.

We can be totally assured that in the midst of all the turmoil raging in the Middle East, our God is in full control. As we gather in Jerusalem, united in prayer with our staff and supporters across the world, let us pray that the current events unfolding before us in Egypt, Libya and beyond will indeed lead the peoples of the Middle East to seek the Lord.

He desires for each one of us to stand in the place of prayer, lest He say: “I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one.” (Ezekiel 22:30)

The Isaiah 62 Prayer Campaign is our response. We have decided to set aside time each month to fast and pray for Israel, the region and our ministry.

So we urge you to join us in whatever way you are able by downloading the latest prayer letter and encouraging others in your local churches and Bible study groups to do the same.

Prayer Points for Israel:
- Wisdom for the government facing times of increasing international isolation
- For the surviving children of the Fogel family killed in the March 11 terrorist attack in Itamar
- For greater honesty and integrity in the world media with respect to Israel (see p.10)

For Libya:
- An end to the conflict, bloodshed and the rise of a just government
- The Libyan Church - for Bibles and teachers
- That new leaders would arise who are favorable to Israel
- That the gospel would spread to Libya’s unreached tribal areas

For Egypt:
- Revival and freedom for the Egyptian Church
- Protection for Christians and a curbing of the influence of Muslim Brotherhood
- For leaders that honor the peace treaty with Israel and refuse to enter an alliance with Iran

For the wider Middle East:
- For the persecuted Church of Jesus Christ: for courage to be a witness
- Rulers that would seek peace & righteousness
- For those caught up in the unrest in Bahrain
- For freedom from the oppression of Islam
- For people willing to “seek the Lord” according to Acts 17:27 - that they would find the Truth

Dr. Jürgen Bühler serves as ICEJ International Director and lives with his family in Jerusalem.

Sign up for latest project news and Isaiah 62 Prayer Alerts from Israel at: www.icej.org
ICEJ funds Arab sector survey

Study identifies main social needs of Israeli Arabs

David Parsons

n an expression of its care and concern for all the peoples of Israel, the International Christianity Embassy Jerusalem recently sponsored a pioneering nationwide survey of the current state of welfare bureaus among Israel’s Arab minority to determine their most pressing social needs and funding priorities. The most comprehensive survey ever of Arab sector social workers, the results will be used to guide Israeli authorities in targeting the most critical problems identified by the study: social workers overburdened by case loads involving large families, and not enough specialists in handling at-risk children.

Now 20% of Israel’s population, the Arab sector is well ahead of most Arab populations in the region in terms of economic development. This has been cited as one of the catalysts for the recent protests for democratic reforms in surrounding Arab countries, as other peoples of the Middle East press for the freedoms and quality of life they see being enjoyed by their fellow Arabs in Israel.

Yet there are still many daunting challenges within the Israeli Arab community, which lags well behind the national averages according to most economic indicators. This gap is growing again due to the increasing number of large Arab families with low wage-earners and multiple children, and many Jewish social activists believe the nation can gain greater acceptance in the region by taking better care of its Arab citizenry.

One of those Jewish activists is Carmi Ashboren, a consultant for several non-profit agencies combating social ills like poverty and domestic violence. He approached the ICEJ AID department last year with a request for funding of a ground-breaking survey of Arab social needs on behalf of the Forum of Social Services Directors for the Arab Community, an umbrella organization set up in 2003 to coordinate efforts among directors of welfare departments in the 75 Arab-run municipalities throughout Israel.

“There were prior surveys done of the Arab sector, but their conclusions were never adopted by the government,” said Ashboren. “This time, the Ministry of Social Welfare has commented positively on the findings and is much more likely to use the results. New minister Moshe Kahlon (Likud) is also receptive to the survey’s findings.”

“We were extremely pleased to fund this first systematic study of the welfare needs of Israeli Arab society,” said Rev. Malcolm Hedding, Executive Director of the International Christian Embassy. “It is also our hope that the results will be used wisely to lift many deserving families out of poverty and its ill effects, while also demonstrating Israel’s credentials as a fair and just society.”

Working in unison, the Forum has managed to secure increased expenditures for the Arab sector from the annual state budget in recent
years. But this has failed to keep pace with the growing numbers of large families in need of social welfare services.

In addition, municipal sources of funding – which by law account for one-quarter of social welfare budgets – have been cut due to the global financial downturn. This in turn reduces the state’s 75% share, as it is based on matching funds.

“Due to severe pressures, most welfare departments devote their time and resources to extinguishing fires, rather than on planning and activities which can prevent them,” explained Emile Sema’an, chairman of the Forum and the head social worker in the mixed Druze-Christian town of Peqi’in. “This problem is even greater in the Arab sector since most of the population falls within a low socio-economic category.”

Thanks to the grant from the ICEJ, the Forum commissioned the Massar Institute, assisted by a team of researchers, to conduct the comprehensive survey with the aim of pinpointing the most glaring deficiencies and recommending solutions. Social welfare managers in twenty of the 75 Arab-majority municipalities took part in the extensive interview process concerning current practices and needs. The results have been compiled into an 85-page report that has been sent to all social welfare departments in the country.

Ashboren is confident the study will lead to increased resources and enhanced performance for the Arab sector and applauded the Forum for deciding to conduct it.

“The Forum does not focus on protests and complaining, but has a professional approach for constructive action in close cooperation with governmental authorities, with proven success,” noted Ashboren.

A non-partisan organization serving all the Muslim, Christian and Druze communities in Israel, the Forum hopes the study will build on its previous successes in advocating for improvements in both policies and direct levels of welfare services. This has included higher budgets for youth day care centers, programs for children at risk, community boarding schools, family treatment, and combating violence.

The Forum will now seek official approval for implementing the survey’s recommendations nationwide while finding private charitable partners to fill in the gaps where government resources are lacking.

ICEJ AID, the Embassy’s social assistance program, is committed to supporting Arab youth-at-risk in Israel as part of our ongoing efforts to provide practical solutions to the issues raised in this report.

Support this vital work with your online donation at: www.icej.org

Findings & Recommendations

The main findings of the survey include:
1) Most managers of Arab welfare departments are saddled with too much daily case work to engage in proper planning and budgeting.
2) Half the Arab welfare departments have no case workers trained in the field of at-risk children, which is the most urgent problem area in the Arab sector.
3) Over 30% of the households in Arab communities (and 50% in four such municipalities) are in need of social assistance.
4) The two main types of social aid recipients were at-risk children (37%), and individuals with poverty and income difficulties (20.5%).
5) The social problems which have continually grown over the past five years are poverty, unemployment and violence.
6) Lack of manpower, specialized training and budgets are the major obstacles to the adequate handling of most of these social problems.
7) Social workers in the Jewish sector handle 43% fewer cases on average than in the Arab sector, with the average size of assisted Jewish families standing at 3.5 persons in 2008, as against 4.8 in the Arab sector.
8) During the years 2007-2009, some 252 new social worker positions were added nationwide, of which 42% went to the Arab sector. This slightly reduced the gap in case loads per social worker, but more are still needed.

Among the primary recommendations are:
1) A mechanism to guarantee a more equitable sharing of case loads between welfare departments in the Jewish and Arab sectors, taking into account family sizes.
2) A more equitable formula for allocating budgets.
3) More training programs for Arab social workers, including in specialized fields like at-risk children, which is the most prominent social problem in the Arab communities.

David Parsons serves as ICEJ Media Director and Contributing Christian Editor of The Jerusalem Post Christian Edition.
Recent events unfolding in the Middle East have been welcomed all over the world, though with some uneasiness. The revolution in Egypt was especially inspiring, as young people demanded a true democratic form of government with all the freedoms that entails. Having lived for thirty years under the heel of dictatorial rule, they deserve it as do all the other peoples of the region.

However, it is not a given that Egypt is headed towards a true democracy. The younger generation lacks organization and proven leadership.

Meanwhile, waiting in the wings are the members of the Muslim Brotherhood, with their dream of imposing a new Caliphate over the entire region! They are shrewd operators and will not immediately seize power. Rather, they will seek to put forward a “moderate” front while working by stealth and intrigue to slowly usurp power and steer the nation toward Shari’a law. All the while, they will pursue and encourage a wider confrontation with Israel.

All of this has emboldened similar groups in surrounding Arab countries. The younger generation in countries like Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Iran, and the Gulf states want democratic freedoms. But the local chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadist groups want to exploit the current political turmoil to impose strict Islamic law and renew hostilities with Israel. Given the deeper roots and determination of the Islamist movements, the Middle East has truly entered treacherous waters!

It is thus madness to expect Israel to vigorously pursue a peace process aimed at a two-state solution anytime soon. Yet I hear even Israelis and her committed friends abroad expressing support for a fresh push towards birthing a Palestinian state.
Besides the threat of hostile regimes arising in neighboring countries, Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas is a weak, ineffectual leader, as well as an unsuitable and unwilling partner for peace. His tentative hold on the West Bank could easily fall to Hamas, especially if it is bolstered by fellow radical Islamists who rise to positions of power in nearby capitals. This was exactly the intent of the Islamist regime in Turkey in sponsoring the ill-fated Gaza aid flotilla last year. More such provocations are sure to come.

So with Hizbullah gaining ascendance in Lebanon, Iran sending warships to Syria, the Jordanian monarchy under siege, and Egypt’s future clouded by uncertainty, the noose is effectively tightening around Israel. Yet she is expected to concede more territory strategically vital to her defence to a feeble Abbas, who is losing ground to his radical Islamist rivals.

Under these conditions, it is irresponsible for the so-called “friends of Israel” to get up, time and time again, to express support for a two-state solution to the conflict. This politically correct game has to end! Maybe a few years ago it had a glimmer of hope, but today it is not feasible by any stretch of the imagination and those who desire Israel’s best interests had better reassess their position.

In the Middle East so far, the notion of democratic elections consists of one man, one vote, one time - as we witnessed in Gaza in 2006. Hamas is biding its time, as all the events around it are serving its interests. A new government in Egypt will likely lift the blockade on Gaza – for humanitarian reasons, of course – and arms from Iran will flow anew to Hamas.

The Middle East is changing rapidly and until the “fog has cleared”, the oft quoted cliché of two democratic states living side-by-side in peace and security should be shelved.

It is also high time that the fear of God should take hold of us. Israel’s modern-day restoration has happened against the tide of history because it enjoys God’s favor. He watches over Israel day and night. Indeed, He warns the world not to divide the land He bequeathed to Israel. To disregard this great purpose and warning of God is foolishness.

Israel is the vehicle of world redemption and has given birth to a moral code that has enlightened much of the world. She has given to the world the greatest and most beloved Man that ever lived. We who claim to love her and stand by her should be careful, lest we too find ourselves in conflict with the God of Heaven!

Rev. Malcolm Hedding serves as ICEJ Executive Director and travels extensively speaking on Israel and the days in which we live.
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A Biblical perspective on Middle East events
David Parsons with music by Sergei Popov

Saturday May 21st: 9:00am-2.30pm
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Saturday May 21st: 5pm & 7pm
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Susan Michael

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Fellowship Bible Church
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Friday April 29th: 6.30pm
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Ray Ramirez

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