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ISRAEL BIBLE CENTER
מכון התנ"ך בישראל



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1

What Does “Hanukkah” Mean in Hebrew?

You may have run in the Hebrew word Hanukkah spelled in a variety of ways (Chanukkah or Hannuka). Because Hebrew and English phonetics do not align, the word can be represented with various combinations of English letters. This “festival of lights” (hag haurim) was instituted to commemorate the Maccabean cleansing and rededication of the Jerusalem Temple in the second century BCE (2 Macc 10:1-8). You probably heard that it means “dedication.” But there is another, lesser-known meaning of the word Hanukkah that can only be seen in Hebrew!

On the one hand, Hanukkah certainly means “dedication.” When Solomon builds the first Temple in Jerusalem, Scriptures states, “Solomon offered for the sacrifice of peace offerings, which he offered to the LORD, 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the sons of Israel dedicated (vayach’nehu) the house of the Lord ” (1 Kings 8:63 NASB).

Deuteronomy asks, “Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated (velo chanaho) it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate (yach’nehenu) it” (Deut 20:5). In Numbers 7:10, the “dedication offering” is called a hanukkah. It’s not hard to see the “dedication” meaning, but that’s not all: the verb behind the noun Hanukkah (chanach) also has to do with “training” and “teaching.”

Genesis 14:14 tells us that Abraham took 318 “trained men” (chanichav) from his household to free Lot from his captors. A famous proverb admonishes, “train up a child (chanoch lanear) the way he should go” (Prov 22:6). In Jewish tradition, children’s education is often called chinuch. So how are these two meanings of Hanukkah related? A complete understanding of the word shows us that “teaching” and “training” cannot be accomplished without “dedication”! It takes time, intentionality, and devotion to practice any skill. These ideas are interrelated. Maybe it’s time for all of us this season to dedicate ourselves to the training God has for us, because even simple words like Hanukkah can teach is something more when we consider them in Hebrew!

by Prof. Pinchas Shir

2

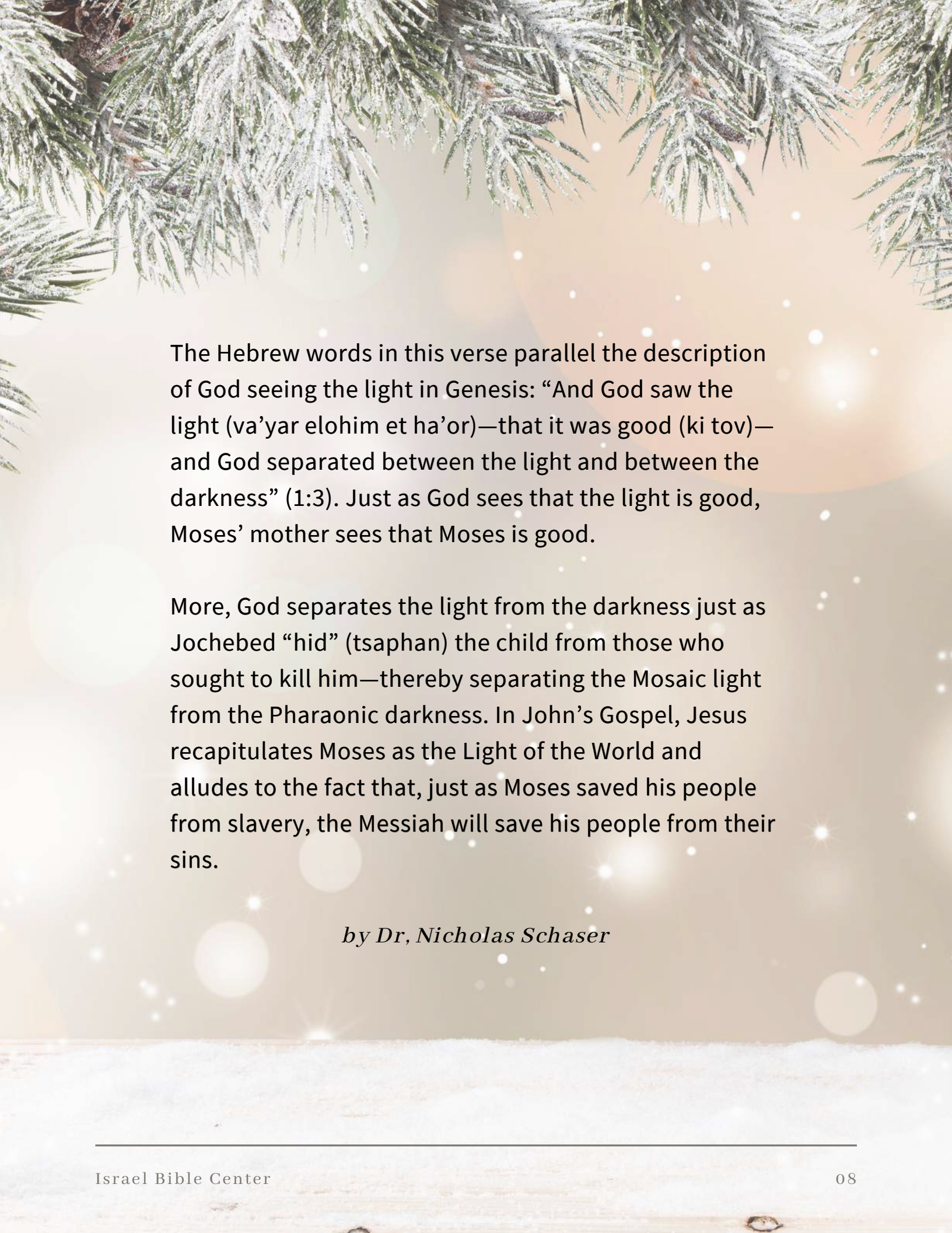
Moses, the Light of the World

Readers of John’s Gospel are familiar with Jesus’ statement at the “time of the Feast of Dedication” (Jn 10:22)—otherwise known as Hanukkah—that he is the “Light of the World.” The Messiah declares, “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12; cf. 9:5). While this declaration reminds us of God’s first creative words at creation, there is another biblical precedent for Jesus’ words. The start of Exodus echoes Genesis’ creation account to present Moses as the Light of the World.

According to Genesis, these are God’s first words to the world: “Let there be light (yehi ‘or)” (1:3). After speaking, “God saw the light—that it was good—and God separated between the light and between the darkness” (1:4). According to John’s Gospel, since Jesus is also the “Light of the World,” he is separated from the darkness so that anyone who follows him “will not walk in darkness” (Jn 8:12).

Indeed, the separation between light and darkness at creation underscores John's assertion at the outset of the Gospel with reference to the Word: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it" (1:5). In presenting Yeshua as the Light of the World, John alludes to the fact that the Messiah was the very first thought in God's mind.

Yet, Jesus is not the first Jewish savior to be identified as the light of the world. In fact, the most famous birth narrative of the Torah presents Moses as the light of the world all the way back in Exodus. The Bible's second book recalls Genesis in various ways, and its exposition of Moses' origins is no exception. After Moses' mother gives birth to her son, Exodus reads, "And she saw him (va'tere oto)—that he was good (ki tov hu)—and she hid him for three months" (2:2).



The Hebrew words in this verse parallel the description of God seeing the light in Genesis: “And God saw the light (va’yar elohim et ha’or)—that it was good (ki tov)—and God separated between the light and between the darkness” (1:3). Just as God sees that the light is good, Moses’ mother sees that Moses is good.

More, God separates the light from the darkness just as Jochebed “hid” (tsaphan) the child from those who sought to kill him—thereby separating the Mosaic light from the Pharaonic darkness. In John’s Gospel, Jesus recapitulates Moses as the Light of the World and alludes to the fact that, just as Moses saved his people from slavery, the Messiah will save his people from their sins.

by Dr, Nicholas Schaser

3

Were the Magi Jews or Gentiles?

There is debate over the ethnic identities of Matthew’s magi. Some argue that these travelers from the East were Jews who had learned the arts of magic and astrology in Babylonia after the Jewish exile in 586 BCE. Others hold that these visitors to Judea were Gentiles. While it is possible that these ancient star-followers were Jews, the textual data in Matthew and Israel’s Scriptures support the conclusion that the magi were Gentiles.

Those who see the magi as Jews note that the Jewish exiles interacted with Babylonian magi according to the Greek translation of Daniel. When Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream, he calls for interpreters among “the enchanters, and the magi (μάγους; mágous), and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans” (Dan 2:2 LXX). “Magi” is an Old Persian term that described Zoroastrian priests; according to Daniel, these figures attempt to interpret the king’s dream along with the “Chaldeans”—another word for “Babylonians.”

Since the Jewish Daniel proves to be the greatest interpreter in Babylon, he becomes the “leader” (ἄρχοντα; *árchonta*) of the “enchanters, magi (μάγων; *mágon*), Chaldeans, and sorcerers” (Dan 5:11 LXX). Thus, some readers speculate, perhaps Daniel taught Jewish traditions to his underlings (or even converted some of them to Judaism), so that we should identify Matthew’s magi as learned Jews who emerged from Daniel’s intellectual lineage. The main problem with such speculation is that Daniel and his fellow Jews are never called “magi” themselves; to the contrary, the Septuagint distinguishes them from the magi: Daniel and his Jewish friends were “ten times wiser than all the enchanters and magi (μάγους; *mágous*)” (Dan 1:20 LXX). Thus, while Daniel becomes the chief of all sages under Nebuchadnezzar, Scripture provides no evidence that Daniel was one of the magi or that Jews became magi while living in Babylon.

Much of Matthew’s information suggests that the magi were Gentiles. First, the visitors to Jerusalem ask, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matt 2:2). This question about the “king of the Jews” suggests that the magi are not Jews themselves, or else they would have asked, “Where has our king been born?” Indeed, since only Gentiles use the phrase “king of the Jews” elsewhere in Matthew (cf. 27:11, 29, 37) it’s likely that the magi are Gentiles also—Jews, on the other hand, refer to the “king of Israel” (27:42).

Second, if the magi were learned Jews under the tutelage of Daniel’s sagacious successors, then why don’t they already know that the Jewish Messiah must be born in Bethlehem? Based on the prophecy of Micah, the Jewish chief priests and scribes know that the Messiah will be born “in Bethlehem of Judea” (2:5) but the magi do not. This lack of knowledge does not fit the scenario of Jewish magi trained in biblical tradition; instead, Matthew’s presentation suggests a non-Jewish ethnic background for the magi.

The Gospel narrative recalls verses from Israel’s Scriptures that foresee Gentiles bringing gifts to Israel. Once the magi arrive in Bethlehem, they offer Yeshua “gifts (δῶρα; dora)” of “gold and frankincense (χρυσὸν καὶ λίβανον; chrusòn kaì líbanon) and myrrh” (Matt 2:11). This scene echoes the Psalms’ picture of other nations bringing “gifts” (δῶρα; dora) to Israel (cf. Ps 72:10 [71:10 LXX]; 76:11-12 [75:11-12 LXX]). Isaiah 60:5-6 calls these foreign gifts the “wealth of the Gentiles,” which includes “gold and frankincense” (χρυσίον καὶ λίβανον; chrusíon kaì líbanon).

Matthew also notes that the magi bring “myrrh” (σμύρνα; smúrna)—an aromatic resin that the Jewish Queen Esther receives from a Persian king (see Est 2:12 LXX).

More, the oil made from myrrh—called στακτή (stakté)—is said to have been an item of trade among traveling Gentiles in Joseph’s day (see Gen 37:25 LXX), and royal figures of other nations offer it as tribute to King Solomon (cf. 1 Kgs 10:25; 2 Chron 9:24 LXX). Thus, it is fitting for Matthew’s traveling Gentile magi to offer myrrh to Jesus, the King of the Jews. Insofar as the Gospel’s eastern visitors recapitulate biblical passages about non-Jews offering treasures to Israelites, it makes the most sense to see Matthew’s magi as Gentiles whose worship of Jesus foreshadows his commission to make disciples of “all the nations” (Matt 28:19).

by Dr. Nicholas Schaser



4

Why Swaddling Clothes?

According to Luke’s birth narrative, Mary “gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes (ἐσπαργάνωσεν; espargánosen) and laid him in a manger” (2:7). An angel describes the scene to shepherds, saying, “This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (2:12).

Why does Luke repeat the seemingly mundane act of swaddling the infant Jesus, and why does the angel call the swaddled baby a “sign” (σημεῖον; semeion) for the shepherds?

In the Jewish and Hellenistic cultural contexts of the first century, these verses denote human kingship and divine supervision. Luke refers to “swaddling clothes” in order to highlight Jesus as a royal son of David, and the anointed one of God.

In the Jewish book of Wisdom (c. 1st century BCE), king Solomon describes his earliest days, saying, “I was nursed with care in swaddling clothes (σπαργάνοις; spargánois). For no king has a different beginning of existence” (Wis 7:4-5). Luke notes that Yeshua is wrapped in swaddling clothes, just like Solomon, to show that this infant is a king in the line of David.

The Lukan angel’s rhetoric supports this connection between Jesus and Solomon: “To you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes” (Lk 2:11-12). The swaddling clothes constitute a sign of Jewish royalty, and an affirmation of Jesus’ identity as the Davidic king of the Jewish people.

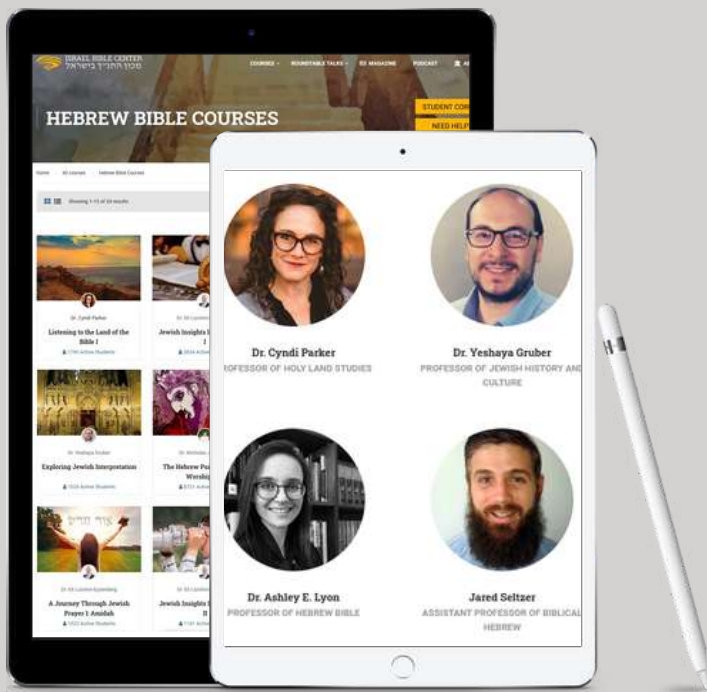
Another well-known reference to swaddling clothes appears in the Greek literature of Hesiod (8th century BCE). In a text called Theogony, Hesiod narrates the birth of Zeus to the goddess Rhea amidst her husband Cronus’s attempt to eat the infant!

In order to trick her husband and save her child, Rhea wraps “a great stone in swaddling clothes (σπαργανίσασα; sparganísasa),” and Cronus consumes the rock thinking it is his son (Theogony 485).

Cronus vomits up the stone, the child is saved, and Zeus grows to defeat his father and become the supreme god of the Greek pantheon. Any educated ancient reader of Luke's Greek Gospel would have known this story of Zeus's birth, but the evangelist echoes Hesiod's terminology in a very different context: at Jesus' birth, there is no other deity to threaten him; to the contrary, Yeshua is the "Lord" of all (Lk 2:11), and he brings "glory to God in the highest heaven" (2:14).

The heavenly sign of Jesus' swaddling clothes proclaims that this Jewish infant—not Hesiod's Zeus—is the true king of kings and Lord of Lords.

by Dr. Nicholas Schaser



About Israel Bible Center

Israel Bible Center is an independent institution of higher learning located in Israel. We offer academic perspectives on a variety of topics around Jewish history, culture, and Scripture.

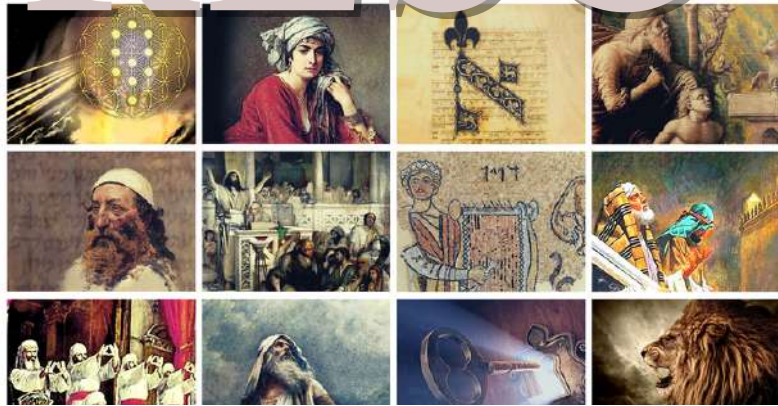
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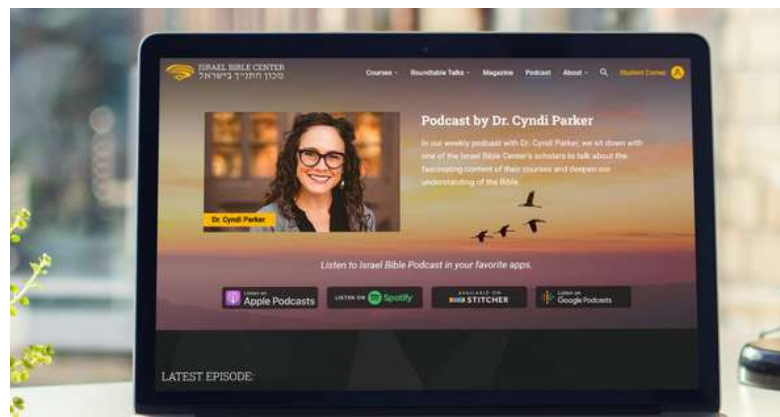
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