

World Religions Complete Glossary

If you come across a word and are unsure to which particular world religion it relates, this World Religions Complete Glossary should help you. Simply click on the first letter of the word via the index box below. This will take you to the appropriate alphabetical section and the colour coding will immediately identify the correct world religion. Click on "Back to Index" on the page to return to the index box.

Definitions are taken from 'The Glossary of Terms' (SCAA 1994). Literal translations into English are printed in *italics*.

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A	
ADVENT	<i>Coming.</i> The period beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas (40 days before Christmas in the Eastern Orthodox tradition). A time of spiritual preparation for Christmas.
ADHAN	Call to prayer.
AHIMSA	<i>Not killing.</i> Non-violence; respect for life.
ALLAH	The Islamic for God in the Arabic language. Used in preference to the word God, this Arabic term is singular, has no plural, nor is it associated with the masculine, feminine or neuter characteristics.
AMRIT	<i>Nectar.</i> Sanctified liquid made of sugar and water, used in initiation ceremonies.
ANGELS	Beings created by Allah from light. They have no free will and are completely obedient to Allah.
ANGLICAN	Churches in full communion with the See of Canterbury. Their origins and traditions are linked to the Church of England, and are part of the Anglican Communion.
APOCRYPHA	Books of the Old Testament that are in the Greek but not the Hebrew Canon. Some Churches recognise the Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament Canon.
ARDAS	<i>Prayer.</i> The formal prayer offered at most religious acts.
ARTHA	Economic development. The second aim of life.
ARTI	Welcoming ceremony in which auspicious articles such as incense and lamps are offered to the deity or to saintly people.
ARYAN	<i>Noble.</i> Refers to those who know the spiritual values of life. Scholars say it refers to the original inhabitants of the Sindhu region in India.
ASCENSION	The event, 40 days after the Resurrection, when Jesus 'ascended into heaven' (see Luke 24 and Acts 1).
ASH WEDNESDAY	The first day of Lent. In some Churches, penitents receive the sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads.
ASHKENAZIM	Jews of Central and Eastern European origin.
ASHRAMA	A stage of life (of which there are four)
ATMAN	<i>Self.</i> Can refer to body, mind or soul, depending on context. Ultimately, it refers to the real self, the soul.
ATONEMENT	Reconciliation between God and humanity restoring a relationship broken by sin.
AUM (OM)	The sacred symbol and sound representing the ultimate; the most sacred of Hindu words.
AVATAR	<i>One who descends.</i> Refers to the descent of a deity, most commonly Vishnu.

B C H I J S

B	
BAISAKHI	A major Sikh festival celebrating the formation of the Khalsa, 1699, CE.
BAPTISM	<i>Rite of initiation.</i> It involves the use of water for immersion, sprinkling or pouring of water.
BAR MITZVAH	<i>Son of Commandment.</i> A boy's coming of age at thirteen years old, usually marked by a synagogue ceremony and family celebration.
BAT MITZVAH	<i>Daughter of Commandment.</i> As with Bar Mitzvah, but for girls from 12 years old. May be marked differently between communities.
BHAGAVAD GITA	<i>The Song of the Lord.</i> Spoken by Krishna, this is the most important scripture for most Hindus.
BHAKTI-YOGA	The path of loving devotion, aimed at developing pure love of God.
BIMAH	<i>Dais.</i> Raised platform primarily for reading the Torah in the synagogue.
BODHI TREE	The tree under which the Buddha realised Enlightenment. It is known as the tree of wisdom.
BRAHMAN	The ultimate reality.
BRAHMIN	The first of the four varnas, the principal social groupings from which priests are drawn.
BRIT MILAH	Circumcision.
CANON OF SCRIPTURE	Generally Protestants do not accept the Apocrypha as part of the canon.
C	
CATHOLIC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universal. 2. Often used as an abbreviation for Roman Catholic.
CHALLAH	Enriched bread used particularly on Shabbat and during festivals.
CHARISMATIC	A modern movement within the Church, emphasizing spiritual gifts, such as healing or speaking with tongues.
CHAURI	Symbol of the authority of the Guru Granth Sahib. Fan waved over the scriptures, made of yak hairs or nylon. It should not be called a 'fly whisk'.
CHRIST	<i>The anointed one.</i> Messiah is used in the Jewish tradition to refer to the expected leader sent by God, who will bring salvation to God's people. Jesus' followers applied this title to Him, and its Greek equivalent, Christ, is the source of the words Christian and Christianity.
CHRISTMAS	Festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ (25 December, in most Churches).
CREED	<i>Summary statement</i> of Christian beliefs, often today recited in worship, especially the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

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D	
DAWUD	David (peace be upon him). A prophet of Allah to whom the Zabur (the Book of Psalms) was given.
DHAMMA	<i>Universal law; ultimate truth.</i> The teachings of the Buddha. A key Buddhist term.
DHARMA	<i>Religion or religious duty</i> - literally means the intrinsic quality of the self or that which sustains one's existence.
DHOTI	A garment made of natural fibre worn by males, which covers the lower body and legs.
DIVALI	Festival of lights at the end of one year and beginning of the new year, according to one Hindu calendar.
DUKKHA	<i>Suffering; ill; unsatisfactoriness; imperfection.</i> The nature of existence according to the first Noble Truth.
DURGA GANESHA	A Hindu deity portrayed with an elephant's head - sign of strength.
E	
EASTER	Central Christian festival which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.
ECUMENISM	Movement within the Church towards co-operation and eventual unity.
EUCCHARIST	<i>A thanksgiving service.</i> It recalls the last meal of Jesus and celebrates his sacrificial and saving death, using bread and wine (also known as Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, Mass).
G	
GANESHA	A Hindu deity portrayed with an elephant's head - sign of strength.
GEMARA	Commentary on the Mishnah included in the Talmud.
GOOD FRIDAY	<i>The Friday in Holy Week.</i> Commemorates the day Jesus died on the cross.
GOSPEL	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Good news (of salvation in Jesus Christ). 2. An account of Jesus' life and work.
GRACE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The freely given and unmerited favour of God's love for humanity. 2. Blessing. 3. Prayer of thanks before or after meals.
GRANTHI	Reader of the Guru Granth Sahib who officiates at ceremonies.
GUNA	<i>Rope; quality.</i> Specifically refers to the three qualities of sattva (goodness), rajas (passion) and tamas (ignorance), which permeate and control matter.
GURDWARA	Sikh place of worship. Literally the 'doorway to the Guru'.

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GURPURB	A Guru's anniversary (birth or death). Also used for other anniversaries, e.g. of the installation of the Adi Granth, 1604. CE.
GURU	Spiritual teacher, preceptor or enlightener.
GURU	Teacher. In Sikhism, the title of Guru is reserved for the ten human Gurus and The Guru Granth Sahib.
GURU GOBIND SINGH	Tenth Sikh Guru.
GURU GRANTH SAHIB (ADI GRANTH)	Primal collection of Sikh scriptures, compiled by Guru Arjan and given its final form by Guru Gobind Singh
GURU NANAK	The first Guru and the founder of the Sikh faith (1469-1539)
H	
HADITH	Saying; report; account. The sayings of The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).
HAGADAH (HAGGADAH)	<i>Telling</i> . A book used at Seder.
HAJJ	Annual pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca) which each Muslim must undertake at least once in a lifetime if he or she has the health or the wealth.
HAJJAH	A Muslim female who has completed Hajj.
HAJJI	A Muslim male who has completed Hajj.
HANUKKAH	<i>Dedication</i> . An eight-day festival of lights to celebrate the re-dedication of the temple following the Maccabean victory over the Greeks.
HANUMAN	The monkey warrior who faithfully served Rama and Sita.
HASIDISM	A religious and social movement formed by Israel Baal Shem Tov (from the 18th century onwards).
HAVAN	Also known as Agnihotra. The basis of many Hindu rituals used at weddings and on other ceremonial occasions; the ceremony or act of worship in which the offerings of ghee and grains are made into fire.
HOLI	The festival of colours, celebrated in Spring.
HOLY SPIRIT	<i>The third person of the Holy Trinity</i> . Active as divine presence and power in the world, and in dwelling in believers to make them like Christ and empower them to do God's will.
HOLY WEEK	The week before Easter, when Christians recall the last week of Jesus' life on Earth.

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I**B C H I J S**

I	
IBADAH	All acts of worship. Any permissible action performed with the intention to obey Allah.
IBRAHIM	Abraham (peace be upon him). A prophet of Allah to whom the 'scrolls' were given.
ICON	Painting or mosaic of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, a saint, or a Church feast. Used as an aid to devotion, usually in the Orthodox tradition.
ID-UL-ADHA	Celebration of the sacrifice commemorating Prophet Ibrahim's (peace be upon him) willingness to sacrifice His son.
ID-UL-FITR (EID-UL-FITR)	Celebration of breaking the fast on the day after Ramadan ends.
INCARNATION	The doctrine that God took human form in Jesus Christ. It is also the belief that God is active in the Church and is revealed actively in the world in situations and people.
ISLAM	Peace attained through willing obedience to Allah's divine guidance.
J	
JAPJI SAHIB	A morning prayer, composed by Guru Nanak which forms the first chapter of The Guru Granth Sahib.
JATI	Caste is the usual translation, meaning occupational kinship group.
JESUS CHRIST	The central figure of Christian history and devotion. The second person of the Trinity.
JIHAD	Personal individual struggle against evil in the way of Allah. It can also be collective defence of the Muslim community.
JNANA-YOGA	The path of knowledge, that aims at liberation.
JUMU'AH	The weekly communal salah, and attendance at the Khutbah performed shortly after midday on Fridays.

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K

B C H I J S

KACHERA	Traditional underwear/shorts. One of the 5 K's.
KADDISH	Prayer publicly recited by mourners.
KALI	Name given to that power of God which delivers justice - often represented by the Goddess Kali (a form of Durga).
KALI-YUGA	The fourth of the ages; the iron age or the age of quarrelling and hypocrisy.
KAMA	The third of the four aims of life - regulated sense of enjoyment.
KAMMA	<i>Action.</i> Intentional actions that affect one's circumstances in this and future lives. The Buddha's insistence that the effect depends on volition marks the Buddhist treatment of kamma as different from the Hindu understanding of karma.
KANGA	Comb
KARA	Steel band worn on the right wrist. One of the 5 K's.
KARAH PARSHAD	Sanctified food distributed at Sikh ceremonies.
KARMA	<i>Action.</i> Used of work to refer to the law of cause and effect.
KARMA-YOGA	The path of self-realisation through dedicating the fruits of one's work to God.
KASHRUT	Laws relating to keeping a kosher home and lifestyle.
KAUR	Princess. Name given to all Sikh females by Guru Gobind Singh.
KESH	Uncut hair. One of the 5 K's.
KHALIFAH	Successor; inheritor; custodian; vice-regent.
KHALSA	<i>The community of the pure.</i> The Sikh community.
KHANDA	Double-edged sword used in the initiation ceremony. Also used as the emblem on the Sikh flag.
KHUTBAH	Speech. Talk delivered on special occasions.
KIBBUTZ	Israeli collective village based on socialist principles.
KIPPAH	Head covering worn during prayers, Torah study, etc. Some followers wear it constantly.
KIRAT KARNA	Earning one's livelihood by one's own efforts.
KIRPAN	Sword. One of the 5 K's. The use of the word 'Dagger' should be avoided.
KIRTAN	Devotional singing of the compositions found in the Guru Granth Sahib.
KIRTAN SOHILA	A prayer said before retiring for sleep. It is also used at the cremation ceremony and when the Guru Granth Sahib is laid to rest.

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L	
LAKSHMI	The goddess of fortune.
LANGAR	Guru's kitchen. The gurdwara dining hall and the food served in it.
LECTIONARY	List of scriptural passages for systematic reading throughout the year.
LENT	<i>Penitential season.</i> The 40 days leading up to Easter.
LITURGY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Service of worship according to the prescribed ritual such as Eucharist or Evensong. 2. Term used in the Orthodox Church for the Eucharist.
LORD	Title used for Jesus to express His divine lordship over people, time and space.
M	
MAHAYANA	<i>Great Way or Vehicle.</i> Teachings that spread from India into Tibet, parts of Asia and the Far East, characterised by the Bodhisattva Ideal and the prominence given to the development of both compassion and wisdom.
MAKKAH (MECCA)	City where the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was born, and where the Ka'bah is located.
MANDIR	Temple.
MANTRA	That which delivers the mind. Refers to a short sacred text or prayer, often recited repetitiously.
MAUNDY THURSDAY	<i>The Thursday in Holy Week.</i> Commemorates the last supper.
MENORAH	Seven-branched candelabrum which was lit daily in the temple.
MEZUZAH	A scroll placed on doorposts of Jewish homes, containing a section from the Torah and often enclosed in a decorative case.
MIDRASH	Collections of various Rabbinic commentaries on the Tenakh.
MISHNAH	First writing down of the Oral Tradition. An authoritative document forming part of the Talmud, codified about 200 CE.
MITZVAH	<i>Commandment.</i> The Torah contains 613
MITZVOT (pl)	Mitzvot. Commonly used to describe good deeds.
MOKSHA	Ultimate liberation from the process of transmigration, the continuous cycle of birth and death.
MOOL MANTAR	Basic teaching; essential teaching. The basic statement of belief at the beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib.
MUHAMMAD (p.b.u.h)	<i>Praised.</i> Name of the final Prophet.
MURTI	<i>Form.</i> The image or deity used as a focus of worship.

B C H I J S

MUSA	Moses (peace be upon him). A prophet of Allah to whom the Tawrah (Torah) was given.
MUSLIM	One who claims to have accepted Islam by professing Shahadah.
N	
NAM SIMRAN	Meditation on the divine name, using passages of scripture.
NAMAKARA	Naming ceremony.
NAVARATRI	The Nine Nights Festival preceding Dassehra, and held in honour of the goddess Durga.
NEW TESTAMENT	Collection of 27 books forming the second section of the Canon of Christian scriptures.
NIRVANA	Blowing out of the fires of greed, hatred and ignorance, and the state of secure perfect peace that follows. A key Buddhist term.
NISHAN SAHIB	Sikh flag flown at gurdwaras.
NOACHIDE LAWS	Seven laws given to Noah after the flood, which are incumbent on all humankind. These laws form the foundation for a just society.
NON-CONFORMIST	Protestant Christian bodies which became separated from the established Church of England in the 17 th century.
O	
OLD TESTAMENT	The part of the Canon of Christian scriptures which the Church shares with Judaism, comprising 39 books covering the Hebrew Canon, and in the case of certain denominations, some books of the Apocrypha.
ORTHODOX	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Eastern Orthodox Church consisting of national Churches (mainly Greek or Slav), including the ancient Eastern Patriarchates. They hold the common Orthodox faith, and are in communion with the Patriarchates of Constantinople. 2. Conforming to the creeds sanctioned by the ecumenical councils, e.g: Nicaea, Chalcedon.

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P



P	
PALM SUNDAY	The Sunday before Easter, commemorating the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem when he was acknowledged by crowds waving palm branches.
PANJ PIARE	The five beloved ones. Those first initiated into the Khalsa; those who perform the rite today.
PAROUSIA	<i>Presence.</i> The Return or the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.
PARVATI	The consort of Shiva, also known by other names such as Durga, Devi etc.
PENTECOST	The Greek name for the Jewish Festival of Weeks or Shavuot, which comes seven weeks ('fifty days') after Passover. On the day of this feast, the followers of Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit.
PESACH (PASSOVER)	Festival commemorating the Exodus from Egypt. One of the three biblical pilgrim festivals. Pesach is celebrated in the spring.
PUJA	Worship. General term referring to a variety of practices in the home or Mandir.
PURANA	Ancient. Part of the Smriti scriptures. Contains many of the well-known stories of Hinduism.
PURIM	Festival commemorating the rescue of Persian Jewry as told in the book of Esther.
Q	
QUR'AN	That which is read or recited. The Divine Book revealed to The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). Allah's final revelation to humankind.
R	
RABBI	<i>My teacher.</i> An ordained Jewish teacher. Often the religious leader of a Jewish community.
RAHIT	Sikh obligations, e.g: to meditate on God.
RAHIT MARYADA	Sikh code of discipline.
RAKHI	A bracelet, usually made out of silk or cotton, tied to give protection and to strengthen the bond of mutual love.
RAKSHA GANDHAN	The festival when women tie a decorative bracelet on their brothers' wrists.
RAMA	The incarnation of the Lord, and hero of the Ramayana.
RAMADAN	The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during which fasting is required from just before dawn until sunset, as ordered by Allah in the Qur'an.

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RAMAYANA	The Hindu epic that relates the story of Rama and Sita, composed by the sage Valmiki thousands of years ago.
RASHI	Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak (1040-1105). A French rabbinical scholar and leading commentator on the Torah and Talmud.
REDEMPTION	Derived from the practice of paying the price of a slave's freedom: and so, the work of Jesus Christ in setting people free through His death.
RESURRECTION	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The rising from the dead of Jesus Christ on the third day after the crucifixion. 2. The rising from the dead of believers at the Last Day. 3. The new, or risen, life of Christians.
RIG VEDA	The first scripture of Hinduism, containing spiritual and scientific knowledge.
ROMAN CATHOLIC	That part of the Church owing loyalty to the Bishop of Rome (the Pope), as distinct from Orthodox and Protestant Churches.
ROSH HASHANAH	<i>Head of the Year.</i> Jewish New Year.
S	
SACRAMENT	An outward sign of an inward blessing, as in baptism or the Eucharist.
SALAH	Prescribed communication with, and worship of Allah, performed under specific conditions, in the manner taught by the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).
SAMSARA	<i>Everyday life.</i> The continual round of birth, sickness, old age and death which can be transcended by following the Eightfold Path and Buddhist teaching.
SAMSKAR	Sacraments designed to initiate a new stage of life.
SANCTIFICATION	The process by which a believer is made holy, to become like Jesus Christ.
SANGHA	<i>Community; assembly.</i>
SAWM	Fasting from just before dawn until sunset. Abstinence is required from all food and drink (including water) as well as smoking and conjugal relations.
SEDER	<i>Order.</i> A home-based ceremonial meal during Pesach.
SEFER TORAH	Torah scroll. The five books of Moses handwritten on parchment and rolled to form a scroll.
SEPHARDIM	Jews originating from Mediterranean countries, especially Spain, North Africa and the Middle East.
SEWA (SEVA)	Service directed at the sadhsangat and gurdwara, but also to humanity in general.
SHABBAT	Day of spiritual renewal and rest commencing at sunset on Friday, terminating at nightfall on Saturday.

SHAHADAH	Declaration of faith, which consists of the statement, 'There is no God except Allah, Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) is the 'Messenger of Allah'.
SHAVUOT	<i>Weeks.</i> One of the three pilgrim festivals. Shavuot is celebrated in the summer, seven weeks after Pesach.
SHI'AH	Followers. Muslims who believe in the Imamah, successorship of Ali (may Allah be pleased with) after the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and 11 of his most pious, knowledgeable descendants.
SHIVA	A Hindu god. The name means <i>kindly</i> or <i>auspicious</i> .
SHOAH	<i>Desolation.</i> The suffering experienced by European Jews at the hands of the Nazis, including the systematic murder of six million Jews between 1933 and 1945.
SHOFAR	Ram's horn blown at the season of Rosh Hashanah.
SIDDUR	<i>Order.</i> Daily prayer book.
SIKH	<i>Learner; disciple.</i> A person who believes in the ten Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib, and who has no other religion.
SIMCHAT TORAH	Rejoicing of the law. Festival celebrating the completion and recommencement of the cycle of the weekly Torah reading.
SIN	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Act of rebellion or disobedience against the known will of God. 2. An assessment of the human condition as disordered and in need of transformation.
SINGH	<i>Lion.</i> Name adopted by Sikh males.
SIRAH	Biographical writings about the conduct and example of The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).
SITA UPANAYANA	Ceremony when the sacred thread is tied - to mark the start of learning with a guru.
SUKKOT	One of the three biblical pilgrim festivals, Sukkot is celebrated in the Autumn.
SUNNAH	Model practices, customs and traditions of the The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).
SUNNI	Muslims who believe in the successorship of Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali (may Allah be pleased with them) after the The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).
SYNOPTIC	<i>Having a common viewpoint.</i> It is applied to the presentation of Jesus' life in the first three gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke in contrast with that given in the Gospel of John.

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T



T	
TALLIT	Prayer shawl. Four cornered garment with fringes.
TALMUD	Misnah and Gemara, collected together.
TEFILLAH	<i>Self-judgement.</i> Jewish prayer and meditation.
TENAKH	The collected 24 books of the Jewish Bible, comprising three sections Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim.
TESHUVA	<i>Repentance.</i> Returning to God.
THERAVADA	<i>Way of the elders.</i> A principal school of Buddhism established in Sri Lanka and South East Asia. Also found in the West.
TORAH	<i>Law; teaching.</i> The Five Books of Moses.
TRINITY	<i>Three persons in one God;</i> doctrine of the threefold being of God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
TZEDAKA	<i>Righteousness.</i> An act of charity.
U	
UMMAH	Community. World-wide community of Muslims; the nation of Islam.
UPANISHAD	<i>To sit down near.</i> A sacred text based on the teaching of a guru to a disciple. The Upanishads explain the teachings of the Vedas.
V	
VAJRAYANA	<i>Thunderbolt; Diamond Way.</i> Teachings promulgated later, mainly in India and Tibet. Another term for esoteric Buddhism.
VAK	A random reading taken for guidance from the Guru Granth Sahib.
VAND CHHAKNA	Sharing one's time, talents and earnings with the less fortunate.
VARNA	<i>Colour.</i> The four principal divisions of Hindu society. It is important to note that the word 'caste' refers strictly to subdivisions within each varna, and not to the varnas themselves.
VEDA	<i>Knowledge.</i> Specifically refers to the four Vedas, though any teaching which is consistent with the conclusions of these scriptures is also accepted as Vedic.
VIRGIN BIRTH	The doctrine of the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ by the Virgin Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit and without the agency of a human father.
VISHNU	A Hindu god.

B C H I J S

W	
WESAK	Buddha Day. Name of a festival and a month. On the full moon of Wesak (in May or June), the birth, Enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha took place.
WUDU	Ablution before salah
Y	
YAD	Hand-held pointer used in reading the Sefer Torah.
YOM KIPPUR	<i>Day of Atonement.</i> Fast day occurring on the tenth day after Rosh Hashanah, a solemn day of Tefillah and Teshuva.
YUGA	<i>Age,</i> or extended period time of which there are four.
Z	
ZAKAH	Purification of wealth by payment of annual welfare due. An obligatory act of worship.
ZIONISM	Political movement securing the Jewish return to the land of Israel.

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