

# Tetzaveh 5777

BS"D Parashat Tetzaveh Purim 5777

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

## Purim, Fasting & Military Victories

This Thursday the 11th of Adar, Taanit Ester – the Fast of Esther, we will commemorate the fast which was in effect on the day the Jews went to war (the soldiers didn't fast), as was the custom of our nation.

The military victory is the essential, although underplayed, miracle of Purim. The Megillah records that on the 13th of Adar in the outlying areas, and on the 13th and 14th in Shushan, the capital, the Jews killed 75,800 of the enemy while losing none of our own.

In the lighter spirit of Purim and the military victory, I wish to cite four non-military anecdotal episodes which appear in my forthcoming autobiography dealing with the 22 years I served as a reserve soldier in Tzahal.

### Basic Training

**1- At the end of the three-month basic training course, about which there is so much to write, I was assigned to the army rabbinate.**

I requested a transfer, explaining that in civilian life I was a rabbi but here I wanted to be an active soldier.

The officers were not very happy because it meant more paperwork. The officer in charge threatened me, saying that the only opening was in the infantry and that I would be sent to the Suez Canal. At that time, we were fighting the "War of Attrition", which was a static war with our troops on the eastern side of the canal and Egypt on the western side. We endured many casualties in that war, which lasted several years. I told the officer that I had no problem serving at the canal. After a slight hesitation, the officer assigned me to an anti-aircraft unit, which at the time was part of the artillery forces, and ordered me to report in one month.

I returned home happy with my lot – a lot of calluses and a lot of weight lost!

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) relates what is asked of every Jew when appearing before the Heavenly court. One question is: "Did you anticipate the salvation of Am Yisrael"? When I became a soldier in Tzahal, it dawned on me that I would now be able to answer the angel's question: "Yes, I was a participant in anticipating God's salvation".

A month later, I reported to artillery headquarters. To my great astonishment, the major in charge was my cousin, Shalom, a hero in the Six Day War when he commanded the artillery units which decimated the Egyptian city of Suez. His unit made it possible for our troops to occupy the city with minimum casualties. Shalom was equally surprised to see me, and after looking through some documents on his desk assigned me to an anti-aircraft unit protecting sensitive installations in Tel Aviv; such as water and electric facilities. I happily accepted my fate, and was given a thirty-day call up date for six months later.

A short time after meeting Shalom, the entire anti-aircraft section was transferred to the air force. I received notice to report for thirty days of service at the anti-aircraft school, where we underwent a very comprehensive course on aircraft

identification relating to everything which flies in the Middle East.

“What use will this be to me guarding the electric company in Tel Aviv?”, I asked myself.

The answer was swift in coming. No electric company. No Tel Aviv. Our unit was sent to Bir Gifgafa (the biblical Refidim, where the Israelites fought Amalek) thirty kilometers from the Suez Canal. I was to serve there annually for the next 10+ years until 1978, when Menachem Begin gave the Egyptians the entire Sinai Peninsula on a silver platter.

## **Reconnaissance Unit**

**2- I was assigned to the reconnaissance unit. Our job was to man positions well in front of the radar network in order to intercept enemy planes which were attempting to fly under the radar.**

On the first thirty-day call up in 1968, my unit was positioned close to the Suez Canal. Two of our soldiers were olim from Ukraine. We were under strict orders not to change the frequency of our radio, since there were pilots in their planes on the runway who were tuned in to us and ready to take off as soon as we said the “word”. One lazy, hot, desert afternoon, our Russian speaking “comrades” decided that it was too late in the day to go to war so they changed the radio’s frequency. Suddenly, they hit the jackpot – the frequency of the Russian advisors to the Egyptian army on the other side of the canal! Our soldiers immediately let out a string of curses to the Russian advisors. One did not have to be Doesteyefsky to understand what was being said. The Russian advisors responded with a verbal barrage of their own which caused the faces of our “guys” to get more red by the second. I heard the word “jid” (dirty Jew) coming over the radio, but even that was not enough to make me stop laughing.

After a minute or so, the cursing ceased and our "Russians" returned the radio to the original frequency. Fifteen minutes later a command car came to our camouflaged lookout (which unfortunately for our comrade was not camouflaged enough). They were arrested and rumor persists that they were traded to the other side in return for the other two Russians who were more disciplined.

## Haga

**3- When I turned forty, I was transferred to Haga (the branch of the army which dealt with the "home front", in the event of a mass attack on civilian areas.)**

Following military logic, I was sent to be trained as a paramedic, despite my explanations that as a Kohen I could not do reserve duty in hospitals, due to the prohibition of a Kohen coming into contact with dead bodies or even amputated limbs. I completed the course, as well as an advanced course, which permitted me to command a mobile hospital facility.

During one reserve duty stint in a base south of Tel Aviv, we were informed that an observer committee from NATO was to be present at a very large and impressive drill in the event of a massive attack in a populated area. We were further informed that the head of the visiting committee was a German general on loan to NATO.

I decided that no German general was going to step foot on my base. That evening, I prepared twenty-five yellow Magen David patches with the word "Jude" in the center. During line-up on the morning of the drill each of our 25 soldiers (including 7 doctors) wore the yellow patch. Our captain's face turned crimson from screaming at us to remove the patches. I told him that no one would remove anything until we were assured that the German general would not step foot on the base. The assistant commander of the base came and threatened us with court martials. No one moved. We were then released to our

barracks. A few hours later the commander of the base came and informed us that there had been an error, and that the general was not German but Swiss. I was not in a position to contradict this new development since I had no information to the contrary. We removed the patches and later that day went out to take part in the drill. While we were doing our medical duties, the committee arrived. Everyone in the committee was in the uniform of their respective country, except for one, very tall, person, speaking German. A friend said that this was "high" German which was spoken in Switzerland as well. That evening I was traumatized when I recalled that Switzerland as a neutral country was not a member of NATO.

In any event our message came over loud and clear.

## **Yom Kippur War**

**4- At six o'clock on the morning of Yom Kippur 5734, my brother Meir zt"l and I were walking to the bet kneset. Suddenly, with a deafening roar, two Israeli Skyhawk fighter bombers passed overhead.**

They were flying so low we could see the ordinance on their wings and fuselage. This was totally out of context, because on Yom Kippur the army suspends all activities except for the barest minimum necessary for national security. The prayers were about to begin and our involvement in matters of great national security would have to wait till the evening; or so we thought.

At exactly one forty-five in the afternoon, sirens began going off. I now understood the presence of the two war planes which we had seen in the morning. Israel was being attacked on her holiest day.

Soldiers began appearing in the bet kneset delivering emergency call-up documents for specific people. They left hurriedly. I could not understand why I was not called up, in

view of the fact that the anti-aircraft are among the first units to be called up. This question was to be answered a few hours later.

We were attacked by Egypt and Syria when our army was most unprepared. On the Syrian border in the Golan Heights there were only 300 soldiers, and along the entire span of the canal there were only 900. In the Sinai desert, the usual alignment of the armored cavalry is two thirds of the tanks at the front and one third in the rear. On that day, it was reversed. The army of Israel was taken by surprise. Or was it? My feelings, supported by things I saw and heard later, told me otherwise. My delayed call up was a major reason for my belief that we were not taken by surprise, as I will explain.

At four o'clock on Sunday morning, the knock at my door found me dozing on the couch fully dressed and ready to leave. I left my family, not knowing what the future had in store. I arrived at the central anti-aircraft base, which looked like a ghost town. We were twenty-five soldiers present out of several hundreds. "Where is everyone", I asked. They were all in Sinai, sent there on Friday afternoon, an entire day before the "surprise attack". On Friday, it was already known that on the following day we would be at war. The soldiers of the anti-aircraft units are, as I said, always called up first. Those who lived closest to the base were called on Friday and were in position in the Sinai that same night. But those, like me, who lived further from the base were called up only after Yom Kippur.

The big question is: Since we knew there was going to be war, why did the government not call up the reserves a week before? The Egyptian and Syrian armies did not assemble at their points of departure overnight. It is a process which takes several weeks at least.

Another question: If the soldiers in the anti-aircraft units were already in position on Friday night, why did the army not

make a pre-emptive strike? Or at the very least, why were our soldiers on the canal and the Golan not warned of the impending war? These soldiers were absolutely taken by surprise. Some had been lounging in the sun and others, in the canal, cooling off.

We stayed at the base until Monday night when we were permitted to return home and wait to replace the soldiers who were then in Sinai. In the end, we were never called up, and they stayed in their positions for several months. I hitched a ride on an army truck going to Yerushalayim. On the way, we picked up other soldiers, including two women soldiers who had just returned from Sinai. They told us that they were radio operators and heard that two-thousand of our soldiers had been killed in the first three days of fighting. There was total silence of disbelief all the way to Yerushalayim.

The end of the war found our forces 101 kilometers from Cairo and 35 kilometers from Damascus. Despite the great loss of life, the war was a miracle of the first order, transformed from almost certain defeat and death to absolute victory and life; something on the order of a modern Purim.

**In closing:** How we utilize the short time that HaShem grants us on this planet is determined by our freedom to choose. To learn Torah, perform mitzvot and take part in the physical defense of HaShem's chosen people in this holy land, constitutes the ultimate sanctification of HaShem's name.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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