



Lessons from Tzfat in 1948

In 1948, things did not look promising for the Jews.

The Arab armies of Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and forces from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria prepared to attack the newly declared State of Israel as soon as the British pulled out in May of 1948, vowing to push the Jews into the sea.

In Tzfat, where 80,000 Arabs surrounded approximately 3,000 Jews living in the Jewish Quarter, the Jews were braced for the worst. Sure enough, as the British pulled out of Tzfat, thousands of Arabs armed with hunting rifles, knives and clubs attacked the Jewish Quarter. The few hundred Jewish fighters were hopelessly outnumbered and fierce fighting broke out at the entrance to the Old City.

The Citadel, the most important position in the city, with a strategic command of the entire area, was a British fortress, which the Jewish fighters had to take in order to survive. But the Arabs, with advanced notice from the British, had already taken command of the Citadel. In a bold move, members of the Palmach (the fighting arm of the Jewish underground Haganah) planted explosives at the base of the thick Citadel walls, determined to blast their way through in a desperate attempt to save the Jews and establish a position from which to hold out against the furious Arab onslaught.

Suddenly, just as they were ready to detonate the explosives, a freak rainstorm broke out, soaking the detonation wires and preventing the explosion. This was May, the beginning of spring. The rainy season usually ends a month or two

earlier. One of the fighters turned to one of his religious comrades asking: “Doesn’t G-d want us to come home? How could He let it rain in May?”

(Eventually fighters managed to cross the street under heavy gunfire and detonate the explosives from close range, but losing many men in the process. The bullet holes still mark the walls where this fierce battle took place.)

Meanwhile, down below, at the entrance to the Jewish Quarter, things were going from bad to worse, and in desperation, the Jews decided to employ their last resort.

Desperately short on arms, they had developed what they hoped would be an answer to Arab armor and artillery. The Davidka, (literally: ‘little David’) was essentially a home-built mortar. One could fill the Davidka with rocks, nails and metal balls and, setting it off with explosives, fire a deadly stream at the advancing enemy. It was a brilliant idea, as it would allow the Jews to use readily available supplies to arm themselves. Unfortunately, it did not work, barely knocking a man down at close range. It did, however, produce an incredibly loud explosion, and the Jews at this point had nothing to lose. Faced with thousands of Arabs, and without even enough bullets to fire at them all, they fired the Davidka just as the rain began pouring down. And to their amazement, the Arabs stopped, turned and ran.

Not quite understanding what was happening, they fired the Davidka three more times until the entire Arab army had fled the quarter, and the miracle legend of Tzfat was born.

This week’s *parasha*, Tazria, focuses on the issue of *tzara’at*. Tradition teaches that *tzara’at* was the direct consequence of *lashon hara* and *rechilus*, evil speech and gossip, and as such it was an opportunity for a person to do some introspection and consider the error of his ways.

The Sefer HaChinuch points out (*mitzvah* 168) that this particular process enabled us to recognize the power of Divine Providence, and relates to the larger issues of destiny, reward and punishment, and the balance between the nature of miracles and the miracle of nature.

As an example, one of the many signs of *tzara’at* for which an expert *Kohen* had to be consulted, was when a hair on a person’s body turned a particular shade of white (“like snow”) or yellow (like winter grass; see Vayikra 13:30). And the *Kohen*’s challenge was not only to find the correct shade, but to ensure that indeed there were two hairs which had turned white, and not one, because when only one hair had turned white, the person was not confined but remained in a state of ritual purity.

Think about it: the difference between being a *metzora* and being pure was one hair on a person’s body.

The Midrash in Vayikra Rabbah (15:3) shares a magnificent insight related to this detail of halacha:

“You will not find a single strand of hair for which G-d did not create an appropriate follicle in the skin, so that one (hair) should not benefit from what ‘belongs’ to another.”

Consider the importance of this Midrash. I can learn to become a more ethical human being simply by studying the hairs on my forearm! After all, if every hair on my arm has its place, then how much more must I consider that every human being, and every event, however challenging, has a place in G-d's plan.

The Baal Shem Tov points out that we often make the mistake of missing the messages sent our way. If you see someone desecrating Shabbat, do not assume it is because you are meant to exhort them on the error of their ways. Rather, assume it is a message to you regarding an error of yours. Imagine if we really lived life this way, struggling with what we need to fix in ourselves, instead of spending so much time figuring out what we need to fix in everybody else. What a different world it would be!

On the other hand, if I took the time to analyze every leaf, twig, insect, and sound that came my way, I would never get to shul in the morning. Yet to ignore the many powerful messages that often cross our path is to risk living a life of callousness and lose so many opportunities to grow as a person and as a society. How does one find the balance? And more: if everything is G-d-sent, where is man's role?

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 72a) states: **הבא להורגך השכם להורגו** – If a person comes to kill you, arise and kill him first. Indeed, when Abraham's nephew Lot is captured by the five kings, he does not wait for G-d to perform miracles – he musters an army and saves Lot himself.

How are we to find this ever-elusive balance, trusting in G-d and recognizing his master-plan on the one hand,



and being active partners in building a better world on the other?

This question was at the root of a controversy that remains a prominent social issue in Israel even today. If after 2,000 years, G-d has decided it is time to bring us home, who are we to try and take it into our own hands? Maybe the best thing for a young man or woman to do is to be immersed in Torah and good deeds, and leave the destiny of the Jewish people (and the defense of the Land of Israel) up to G-d?

Clearly, we need to be willing to trust in G-d that life will send us what we need to receive, as well as to be partners with G-d in making that happen. As the Vilna Gaon suggests, faith without *hishtadlut* is not really faith. It bespeaks a certain arrogance; who says I have earned the right to have faith that G-d will help me? On the other hand, the assumption that I can do it all, and that it all depends on me, stems from this very same arrogance.

Ultimately, once I have done my bit, then I have the right to believe that G-d, in one way or another, will do His.

Perhaps, like the *metzora*, we need to take some time for introspection, to consider how best to find that balance.

It was only after the war they found out what had really happened in Tzfat. It seems the Arabs' greatest fear was the fact that most of the people behind the development of America's atomic bomb were Jewish (most notably Einstein and Oppenheimer), and the Arabs had heard a little bit about acid rain. So they assumed the Jews had just set off an atomic bomb, and the rest is history!

Every tour guide worth their salt will show their tourists this spot and with a smile, ask the same question: was this a miracle? Or just a freak of nature? In Tzfat, there are no miracles, because all of nature is miraculous, and miracles surround us every day...

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