

## Stories about Moshiach

### Purim Saddam

"Hi, Mom. Got my orders today," David Zuk said. "I'm going to Saudi. I have to leave first thing tomorrow morning.

"Oh, no," his mother said, her "no" echoing in her 20-year old son's head.

"I was assigned to the 101st," David said with a sinking voice, as he slumped against the glass wall of the phone booth. "I almost cried when they told me."

The 101st Airborne Division, nicknamed the "Screaming Eagles," fought on the front lines during all the wars: World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and Viet Nam. Only a fraction of the early ranks had ever returned alive.

David's mother tried to find encouraging words for her only son, but it was hard. She had never been able to get used to her son's unpredictable life choices. When he was 16, he had become involved with Orthodox Jews and made himself separate from the family by eating only kosher. Two years later when he joined the Army, she just about gave up. Now, upon hearing this ominous news, all she could think was, "I told you so."

The Gulf War had broken out a month earlier, on January 17, 1991. David knew he would be on the front lines, facing the open jaws of the ravenous war. "They said we'll be there at least a year," David said, not knowing when he would see her next. "Take care, Mom. I love you," he added faintly, David closed the door of the phone booth and ambled back to his barrack. Gazing at the snow-covered hills surrounding Fort Knox Army Base in northwestern Kentucky, he was awe-struck by their quiet beauty, as if seeing them for the first time. He wondered if he would ever see them again. He thought of the preposterous story circulating around the army base that someone had predicted the war would end by Purim, the Jewish holiday instituted to thank and praise G-d for saving the Jewish people from a decree of annihilation some 2,300 years ago.

"Purim's only a month away. No way it will be over by then!" David said to himself.

Saddam Hussein, thought David, certainly fits the character of Haman, the villain of the story of Purim. The wicked Haman got the king of Persia to issue a royal decree to

command the populace to massacre all the Jews in the Persian Empire. Similarly, for a whole year Saddam Hussein had been boasting that he would "burn half of Israel" with SCUD missiles laden with deadly chemical gas. Those missiles would surely maim and kill thousands of Israelis and prove to the Arab nations that Israel was vulnerable. Then the world would clearly see that G-d had forsaken the Jews as the "Chosen People," and that instead Saddam Hussein had been chosen to rule the world. The scenario sounded preposterous... until Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

Back at the barracks, David stood beside his cot and *daavened* (prayed) the evening prayer. How ironic that he was being shipped to war to defend Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Before falling asleep, he vividly recalled news clips of the SCUD missiles fired at cities in Israel. These 40-foot Soviet-made missiles had been enhanced with a 600-pound, European-made payload of explosives. Designed to flatten buildings, the explosion of a SCUD warhead creates a frontal pressure wave that blasts away concrete and sends shattered glass flying up to 1,400 feet away in all directions, creating a torrent of lethal "knives."

As David lay in his bed, he continued to recall the news he had heard and read from Israel. The first night that SCUDs were fired at Israel, one of them made a direct hit on an apartment house in a crowded Tel Aviv neighborhood. As a result of this midnight strike, 400 apartments housing 1,200 people were either destroyed or damaged. Tel Aviv hospitals were prepared to handle mass casualties, as had been the experience in Teheran, Iran, when Iraq fired SCUDs into Teheran's neighborhoods in 1988 during the Iran-Iraq War.

The ambulances arrived at a Tel Aviv hospital. One young man had some scratches from broken glass; a woman had a sprain; the injuries were all minor. "The 'victims' could have doctored themselves," said one of the hospital staff. "Even the non-religious declared it a miracle."

During the first week of war, Iraq fired about two dozen SCUDs at Israel and damaged or destroyed thousands of apartments and other buildings. On the first Saturday of the

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attacks, one SCUD scored a direct hit on a bomb shelter, which was used as a makeshift synagogue on Saturday morning; two hundred worshippers were packed inside. The blast flung the people around like rag dolls. Only the shelter's eastern wall, upon which the ark housing the Torah scroll leaned against, remained standing. When Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir visited the site he asked if there were any people in the bomb shelter. "Yes," replied Tel Aviv Mayor Shlomo Lahat, "Two hundred. They were saved by a miracle." No one was injured. How long would their *mazal* (good fortune) last? To protect Israel, David was ready to risk his life. With that thought, David whispered the *Shema Yisrael* ("Hear O' Israel") prayer and fell asleep.

The next morning David and more than 300 other soldiers boarded a chartered 747 headed towards Saudi Arabia. They refueled in Rome at midnight and took off after two hours. Within minutes, David drifted into a deep sleep. In what seemed like minutes later but in reality turned out to be six hours, a blinding light flooded the cabin of the jet. David peered through the thick window next to his seat. "So this is Saudi," he mused. A harsh sun reflected off the whitest sand he had ever seen. Miles and miles of sand. For the next hour and a half, all David saw below was white sand, with an occasional darkened area which appeared to be some sort of man-made rock formation.

The 747 jet landed in the coastal city of Dhahran. David stepped down from the plane into the 115 degree heat. He felt like he had marched into a huge solar oven. The soldiers were transported across the burning sand to a stadium-size tent. They were directed to their cots and told to go to sleep. At 5:30 the next morning, nerve-shattering alarms blasted the dawn. In a heartbeat, David reached for his gas mask, took the required quick breath, and strapped the mask to his face. The maximum time limit for this procedure was 15 seconds; David did it in 3 seconds flat. Thousands of gas mask rehearsals had finally paid off. Like a machine gun firing into the dark, David's heart pounded uncontrollably at an invisible enemy. Three minutes later, an officer came into the tent and announced, "The Iraqis fired a SCUD, and our Patriot missile

intercepted it. No gas has been detected. Keep your masks on until the signal is given."

No gas was detected and no one was injured, but Saddam won a round on the psychological battlefield. Besides the constant fear of chemical weapons, Hussein had another silent ally: the desert. The first troops sent in August had all become sick with heat strokes. Even in the "winter," the midday temperature always rose above 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The desert proved to be a harsh, foreign environment. Water had to be rationed. Showers were allowed only once a month.

Every day, just before sunset, the hot, white sun would turn bright red, and at sunset, it would appear to melt into the sand -- an orangish red lava flowing off a huge ball of fire across the white sand. Then, within minutes, the temperature would drop 50 degrees. Everyone would have to wear thermal gloves and a warm jacket to keep from shivering. The temperature would be only 60 to 70 degrees, yet because of the rapid and drastic change in temperature, the soldiers would feel as if they were freezing. Hussein was proving himself to be more cunning and his soldiers more entrenched than originally thought. Dave heard reports that Hussein could drag out the war for years.

Saddam Hussein kept firing SCUDS into Israel. Civilian targets were hit, buildings were destroyed, but the human injuries were surprisingly light. Back in the States, many Americans were concluding that the SCUDS were basically harmless, giant firecrackers. Then, on the morning of February 25, David and 100 other soldiers received orders to fly that evening to Al-Khobar. They would be staying in the nearby Army barrack, which had originally been a large, steel-framed warehouse. Later that evening, during supertime, a fragment of a SCUD blasted through the barrack's metal roof, followed by a gigantic explosion which was heard for miles around. Nothing was left of the barrack, except an eight-foot deep crater. Twenty-eight soldiers were killed in the ensuing explosion; 89 others, wounded. "I'm supposed to be dead," David said to himself. At the last moment, the plane scheduled to transport David and 100 fellow soldiers to Al-Khobar the previous evening

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had malfunctioned. The "malfunction" saved their lives.

Before that attack, the American soldiers felt no anger towards the Iraqis, but now they were enraged. They wanted Saddam Hussein dead. Hussein became their Haman, the very embodiment of evil. They felt like the Jews who stamp their feet when the name of Haman is mentioned during the public reading of the *Scroll of Esther* on the Purim holiday: they wanted him stamped out, once and for all.

The Gulf War intensified and the Allied forces became more aggressive, sending countless air-raids into Iraq. The Army transferred David to the front lines, 50 miles from the village of Ur Kasdim, where the Jewish patriarch Abraham had refused to bow down to the idols of King Nimrod. The pagan king subsequently threw young Abraham into a fiery furnace, yet miraculously he was not burned.

On the quiet nights, when sorties were not taking off from the Army's makeshift runway, David often gazed at the stars. There were no lights for hundreds of miles and David could see thousands of stars in the Milky Way. Here G-d's blessing and promise to Abraham, "I will increase your seed as the stars of the heaven" (Genesis 22:17), had great meaning.

By now Saddam's army had fired more than 30 SCUDS which struck Israel. If only he could drag Israel into the war, then the other Arab nations would unite with him, and he would rule the oil-rich Middle East and the world would be at his mercy.

Suddenly, then the long-awaited land war was underway. The Allies marched into Kuwait and invaded Iraq. Then, on February 27, after a mere 100 hours of Allied fighting, the BBC announced that the Persian Gulf War was over. Not for a moment did any of the soldiers believe it. Two weeks later, on March 11, 1991, *Newsweek* published a cover story on the war and called the Persian Gulf War "a triumph of almost Biblical proportions." Only after returning to the United States, did David find out that the War had actually ended on Purim.

With David, every single soldier in the 101st Airborne Division returned home, alive! Like in the days following the miracle of Purim, joyous celebrations and prayers of thanksgiving were held in towns throughout

America, and "the days of darkness were transformed to light, joy and happiness."

Thirteen months after the Gulf War ended, while stationed at Fort Campbell, David spent Shabbat at the home of Rabbi Zalman Posner in Nashville, Tennessee. "Have you seen this booklet?" his host asked. David glanced at it, and saw it was entitled, "*I Will Show You Wonders: Public Statements of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, Shlita, Before and During the Gulf Crisis.*"

David had never before heard of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. On that Shabbat, he learned about the Rebbe's predictions regarding the Gulf War, how the Rebbe publicly proclaimed that the Land of Israel would be safe and that nobody in Israel would need gas masks, and that it was said in the Rebbe's name that the Gulf War would end by Purim.

Following the Gulf War, David completed a two-year stint in the Army and then joined the ranks of young men studying Torah in the Yeshiva *Tiferet Bachurim* at the Rabbinical College of America, in Morristown, New Jersey.