

Hanukkah

Rumors circulated for months at the bar in the Jerusalem Hilton, gathering place for journalists and the "unnamed government sources" they relied on. An unbelievable story, something usually found in the tabloids and more than a few ran numerous versions. "2000 Year Old Skeleton Found With Dental Fillings" said one story. "Nylon Burial Shroud on Ancient Mummy" said another.

Tales of little consequence, until the package came in the morning mail; three pages and a computer disk. The unsigned letter documented an archaeological find during a road improvement project. Earth moving equipment retreating from a hillside, its bucket filled with the light colored rock, sand, and pebbles that impersonate dirt in much of Israel, uncovered an opening. Construction stopped and the Antiquities Ministry contacted, as is the law. Skeletal remains and numerous artifacts were recovered and taken to the University of Israel.

A capstone, broken into three pieces by the equipment, was found and, when pieced together, its Hebrew inscription was startlingly clear:

EL OHIM B'LUKUM SON OF HEAVEN
SERVANT OF YAHWEH

BY HIS COMMAND
WE SEAL THIS TOMB FOREVER
AND DEPART THIS FORBIDDEN PLACE

Carbon dating on bone and organic material returned an age of just over two thousand years. There was one item, however, that did not respond in any anticipated manner to the carbon 14 test. The article appeared to be a scroll of woven fabric about 4 inches in diameter and 18 inches long. Brittle with age, the material would not carbonize under heat, rather it seemed to shrivel and melt. Samples were sent to other University Departments for identification.

While awaiting results, the artifact was exposed to ultra-violet light and time faded Hebrew characters awakened from years of silence.

THE SACRED BOOK OF EL OHIM B'LUKUM
BY HIS OWN HAND

That's when things became complicated. Samples of the cloth were identified as nylon by the Chemistry Department, and Anthropology reported finding evidence of dental work in the skeleton. Immediately, agencies so secret even their coded acronyms were classified, clamped down. All records were sealed; cover

stories developed, and misinformation disseminated. But not before some details leaked, the nuggets the tabloids mined and tried unsuccessfully to develop.

Without additional information, the stories eventually died in the papers but the letter continued.

With the fabric now identified, the object was subjected to treatment in a softening solution. When technicians unrolled the piece under the revealing black light, the characters leapt from the cloth, neon like. The text was in English. What follows is purported to be the complete contents of the cloth, transcribed on the computer disk.

Grp. VII AS4 2AS

This record is for those who will wonder, for those who will grieve. I write in English, a language still a millennium from even its infancy and meaningless to those who might chance early upon it.

There were five of us. Group VII, Advanced Squadron Four, Second Air Assault. Sergeant Malaka, the only career military man among us, was the mission leader. The rest of us were citizen soldiers, called from our civilian jobs for the crisis. Isser Beeri, our communications specialist, worked for NiTel; Meir Herzog, our stores coordinator, was on leave from his job at Iteck Ltd.; Yigel Moluchim, in his third year at Hassama Clinic, was our medic. I freelanced as a correspondent for Reuters and CNN, among others. I was the language specialist for the group. My name is Eli Baluk.

It was 1992. The Arab-Israeli peace process was stalled, Syria was making threats, and the Mossad reported suspicious military movements toward the Golan Heights. We sat in the cargo hold of a C-130, behind two pallets of supplies, headed for a pre-positioning area somewhere near the border. The amber warning light came on and the huge cargo door opened to an eerie blackness. The roar of the engines faded and I felt the familiar floating sensation that accompanies descent. The cargomaster released the locks and watched the drop light. The light blinked green and the first pallet slid into the blackness. A moment later a hazy blue flash, like distant lightning, lit the night sky.

"Static," said the cargomaster, noticing our concern "it happens here in the desert. Nothing to worry about." The second pallet slipped away, its static discharge briefly illuminating the interior of the plane.

"OK lets go," said Malaka, hurrying us toward the black nothing at the rear of the plane.

The intensity of the flash surprised me. My eyes clamped down in reaction but the flash was still there, etched on my brain. Jumping at 300 meters our chutes should have deployed immediately but I felt a sickening sensation of freefall. At last I felt the sharp jolt of my canopy opening and felt my weight tugging reassuringly against the straps.

The air whispering past my ears was the only sound. Just before contact, the slight, almost imperceptible, ground effect warned me and I bent my knees in anticipation of the landing.

"Did you feel it Eli, the shock?" Yigel's voice startled me. My eyes, still affected by the flash, could see Yigel's outline in the dim starlight but his features were just a light smear against a dark silhouette.

We gathered together, stowing our parachutes, voices my only clue to identity. Malaka could not get a fix on the pallets. The radio beacons were silent. The static seemed to have taken them out and Beerli could not get a position from his GPU. Only our short range PCU's were operational.

"Anyone got a fix?" asked Malaka.

"There's something about that ridge back there," said Herzog, "reminds me of Hamora."

"You'd need a few TV towers for that," said Malaka.

"No, I mean during the blackouts when the lights were off. You couldn't see the towers then," answered Herzog.

"Yeah it does. I was down there then. It does look a bit like that," added Yigel.

"Well we're far from Hamora," said Malaka, "keep looking for a positive. In the meantime lets find those pallets. And no chatter. We may be further north then we planned."

The pallets should have been behind us. We walked toward the distant ridgeline, wary of Syrian patrols that may have had more reason than we to be in the area.

My vision recovered somewhat. I could see the faces of my group clearly now but the monochrome luminance of the rising moon gave them a surreal glow, an effect unnoticed on previous night exercises.

I thought I saw something behind us, but could not be certain. My eyes were still not fully recovered. Each time I looked back though, I became more convinced. A shadow, moving from bush to bush, from rock to rock.

"There's somebody back there." I whispered to Malaka.

"How many?" He asked.

"Just one." I said.

"There's some cover up ahead, when we get there drop out and wait for him. But whatever you have to do, do it quietly," said Malaka.

I slipped behind a scraggly bush as Malaka and the others walked on. It took only a minute to find him as he flitted amongst the underbrush. As he approached I saw he was not carrying a weapon or wearing a uniform. He wore the short loose garment common to the hill tribes in the area. I stepped from behind the bush.

"Hold it." I said.

He stopped, hands at his side, mouth open, staring at me. He began to shake.

"Take it easy," I said. "I won't hurt you." He fell to his knees, then flat out on the ground, arms extended, head buried in the dirt, and began to chant. The sound was familiar. A Hebrew phrase, a bit of Arabic, a strange mixture of middle eastern dialects came through in a sing-song intonation, most of which was unintelligible. It took awhile to quiet him. I told him to get up but he seemed not to understand. Finally, using hand signals, I got through and he stood, a boy about sixteen, eyes wide with fear.

I called Malaka on my PCU.

"Bring him up here," said Malaka, "lets see if he can tell us where we are."

Malaka asked the questions and I translated as best I could. I spoke slowly in Hebrew and he answered in Hebrew, but not any kind I had heard before. It had an odd sound to it, an inflection, familiar yet foreign and a strange speech

pattern. There was much repeating and puzzled looks and gestures on both sides of the conversation.

His name was Eshoshua., that was the only certainty. I recognized the words "...descendant of Abraham." I heard "Syrians" and "Jerusalem" in the same sentence. The name Judah was mentioned numerous times and finally, "Judah, son of Mattathias."

"Judah the Maccabee?" said Herzog. "What is this, some kind of cult that survived the centuries?"

We knew the story of Judah the Maccabee. How, though greatly outnumbered, he defeated the Syrians in miraculous battles and went on to recapture Jerusalem, cleanse the Temple, and witness the Miracle of the Lamp. The story of the first Hanukkah.

"Tell him to stop the history lesson," said Herzog. "Tell him we know all about Judah, it's in the Talmud. It's history."

"Our history, maybe not his," said Malaka.

"History is history," said Herzog, "its the same for everybody. You can't change it."

"It's only history if you know it happened," said Malaka.

"What are you saying?" said Herzog.

"I'm just saying maybe this area is hard to access, except by air. There are always earthquakes here, maybe it's been cut off and nobody's bothered," said Malaka.

"Oh come on," said Herzog, "what do you think this is, some 'Lost Valley' that's been missed by all the armies that have been through here in the last two thousand years?"

Eshoshua was getting excited. He chattered on about Judah, the Syrians and Jerusalem. He pointed to the ridge, repeating some undecipherable phrase.

"Maybe he saw the pallets come down," I said.

I formed a parachute with my hands and brought them slowly down. Eshoshua pointed again to the ridge. "I think he's telling us the pallets are over that ridge." I said.

“They shouldn’t have been that far behind us,” said Malaka. “I think we missed them in the dark. We’ll wait until morning.”

We made camp in a small grove of desert brush. I retrieved a couple of MRE’s from my pack and gave one to Ehoshua. He took it hesitantly and turned it over and over, looking at it from every angle. “Eat, eat.” I said, gesturing. He just stared. I opened mine and then helped him with his. He was fascinated; examining every part of the package, the foil wrap, the disposable utensils, everything was scrutinized. He sniffed and sampled cautiously before finally smiling and eating.

Dawn gave us the first good look at our surroundings. Something about the terrain nagged at me. The ridgeline, the way the ground fell off to the right, all looked familiar. I’ve been here before, I thought as I struggled to place myself. Somehow I knew the ridge in the distance was the rim of a shallow valley. I knew also a wadi cut through the valley floor, the remnants of an ancient river that took the water the mountains squeezed from ancient Mediterranean clouds and channeled it back to the sea. I knew it was there. I didn’t know how, but I knew.

Malaka wanted to retrace our path but I talked him into checking the ridge. “It will take less than an hour to get there and back.” I said, “And besides, from up there we can see all around.”

We used our chutes to hide our battle gear, wrapping ourselves into a pretty good group of desert nomads. From a distance at least we looked authentic. Ehoshua became more excited when we reached the base of the ridge. A faint buzzing sound seemed to come and go with the breeze as we climbed until gradually, I couldn’t remember when, it became a constant whirl. Occasionally I thought I could hear horns. The buzz would explode in volume only to fade again. It reminded me of a soccer stadium parking lot, when I’d left early and the fans reacted to a late score. Yigel must have thought the same. “Wonder who’s winning?” he said.

We were near the top now and I could almost make out individual voices and words. A pattern, an inflection, familiar yet foreign, teased me as I attempted to filter one distinct sound from the cacophony rising from the valley. The buzzing grew louder, with shouts and horns and clanging bells. We climbed to the edge together.

The valley floor was almost as I expected. Where I envisioned a dry wadi, a shallow but wide stream flowed, muddy and streaked red with the blood of men, hundreds of them, fighting and cursing in the river. Horns from both sides of the

water trumpeted directions, over the clatter of swords and shields, to the men battling in the stream.

On the far side, a large force waited their chance to join the fight. The terrain prevented a full assault and the smaller group also enjoyed the tactical advantage of a wide sandbar that provided a firmer footing than the swift current their adversaries struggled in.

The men on the sandbar wore not much more than loincloths. Yellow headbands, their only common badge, held long hair in place and they fought mostly with spears and clubs. Some though, had picked up the swords and shields of fallen enemy soldiers and were using them to good effect.

The attackers were a more organized force, at least in equipment. They wore vests and skirts of heavy leather. Their metal helmets and short swords flashed in the sun. Not the best equipment for a water assault.

The water was only knee deep but moving quickly. The footing was treacherous; holes, rocks, dead and dying, and dropped equipment hindered their advance. All had slipped at least once. By the time they reached the sandbar, the effort of dragging their water logged leather armor through the current had drained most of their energy and the unencumbered defenders had some advantage. But they could not last. The attackers were flanking them to the left and right. Soon they would be surrounded.

We watched, so mesmerized by the spectacle below we did not hear them approach. They were on us before we saw them, weapons held high. I pointed my M16 and squeezed a short burst as the heavy sword, now mostly gravity effecting its motion, came down on my head. My helmet absorbed most of the blow but still I was stunned. I could feel my thoughts spinning away.

The gunfire thundered down the valley, bouncing from cliff to cliff, boulder to boulder, magnifying itself in echoes before dying slowly away. Then silence. The horns, the bells, the noise of battle stopped. Our attackers dropped their swords and fled. The army in the stream was hastily retreating, some looked back, pointing at us. The defenders stayed in midstream, afraid to go forward or back. Ehoshua stood frozen, hands at his side, mouth open, staring, as my knees buckled under me.

I heard the pulsing of the engines, propellers slicing through the air, droning on and on. I tried to open my eyes. The sound faded and I was back on the ridge watching the sword come down again, in slow motion. A dream I thought or perhaps delirium. I wasn't sure of anything anymore. The droning returned, pushing the images from my mind.. The sound was changing. I imagined

words, a mantra, repeated over and over. Was I dead or dying, my body lying crushed and flattened on the desert floor; the neurons and axons of my brain mixing their last stored memories in a confused mirage?

The chanting stopped as I opened my eyes. Ehoshua was kneeling beside me. I looked beyond him. "Malaka." I said. "Where's Malaka and the others?" Ehoshua looked puzzled, he did not understand. I sat up, too fast, my head began to spin. Ehoshua was trying to tell me something. Yahweh had heard their prayers and had sent his angels to slay their enemies. Even now Judah the Maccabee was pursuing the fleeing Syrians, he said. Soon Jerusalem would be captured and the Temple cleansed.

I called Malaka on my PCU. There was no reply. Did they go with them? Ehoshua still did not understand. I struggled to my feet and started down into the valley.

We crossed the river in pursuit. Ahead we heard the sudden eruption of battle noise, shouts and cries of attacker and victim. The Syrians must have overcome their earlier fear. They lay in wait in a narrow valley, hidden among the boulders and caves. It was an obvious ambush site, but the Maccabee, now convinced of Yahweh's protection, rushed in. When we caught up, Judah and the Israelites needed another miracle. I shouted into my PCU for Malaka.

I heard the roar over the battle noise. The distinctive bark of M16's on full auto, two on one side of the valley, two on the other. They kept it up, louder and louder, clip after clip until it seemed the entire valley shook. Small pebbles and stones, loosened from their perches by the vibrations, rolled down the cliff, knocking ever-larger rocks before them. Soon hundreds of avalanches shook the narrow valley floor with rocks and dirt and dust. Then I felt the sharp crack beneath my feet, and the illusion of M16's gave way to the unmistakable and unforgettable reality of tectonic plates in motion.

The thunder faded as the earthquake rolled away. The sound of battle was gone also, replaced by moans of the dying.

I waited for the dream to end. It hasn't yet. Day after day I awake to the same ancient sun. The Talmud records what followed the battle. I won't repeat it. I only hope we haven't somehow changed what was meant to be. I never saw Malaka or the others again, buried in the avalanches I thought. Only years later did Ehoshua admit he never saw them, never heard them. He saw only me, calling for malakh- angels- to shake the earth and bury the Syrian army.

They called me Elohim, an ancient Hebrew word meaning "Messenger of God". And maybe they are right. How else could I have come to this place, this time? God works in mysterious ways and I've given up trying to understand it.

It won't be long now, before I'm gone. The harsh life here has taken its toll. I've picked a spot, not far from Jerusalem, where two thousand years from now a ribbon of asphalt called the Ben-Gurion Expressway will cut through the hills toward Hamora. In 1992 they were beginning its construction. My tomb should be in its path.

I've often thought of that first day here. Of climbing that ridge almost expecting to see a kibbutz, with rows of orange trees, instead of men dying in the mud. That is what should be in that valley millenniums from now. I remembered. And those Israelis living then may never know, it was there Judah the Maccabee defeated the Syrians.

If, when reading this, it makes no sense. If, in that distant future there is no Talmud, no Hanukkah, no Israel, do not concern yourself. Consider this a fantasy from the mind of a lost and hopeless soul. If, however, there is a Talmud, a Hanukkah, then Herzog was right, you can't change history. But perhaps you can fulfill it.

Epilog

The search team found them, crushed and broken on the desert floor. Malaka, Herzog, Beer, and Yigel, their parachutes shredded and burnt, were dead before impact. The pallets were nearby. Static or lightning some said. A freak occurrence. There was no sign of Baluk.

They were reported killed in a training accident, their bodies "unrecoverable". Not unusual in military exercises. The delicate peace negotiations could have been derailed if Israeli Commandos were found in the buffer zone. It was thought Baluk was captured or killed by Syrian forces. But an Israeli inquiry or Syrian admission might acknowledge a cease-fire violation on either side.

My sources revealed this much, unofficially of course, and there was more. In 1991, during the Gulf War, American stealth technology amazed the world's military leaders. The F-117A fighter was invisible. Israeli defense contractors could not duplicate the stealth hardware but they attempted to electronically simulate it.

The C-130 was outfitted with special equipment causing the aircraft to act as a huge capacitor. Radar frequencies absorbed by the plane were stored, not allowing the return echo. On-board computers monitored incoming radar

probes, releasing the accumulated energy between sweeps in random, small bursts, virtually undetectable or unrecognizable. But something went wrong. Perhaps the sweeps came from too many sources, one after another, with no time for release, charging the plane, its contents, and an envelope of air around it, with microwave energy of varying frequencies. When the pallets and the men exited the envelope, the positive and negatively charged atoms, the differing frequencies, would attempt parity. The current flow through the shorting bridge, men or pallets, could be enough to electrocute the men and shred the parachutes.

So far, laboratory attempts to duplicate the incident have failed. The possible combination of voltages, frequencies, speed, and atmospheric conditions are infinite. But that night it appears the combination, man made, natural, or perhaps supernatural, came together to throw Baluk, and the spirits of the others, back two thousand years to satisfy history.

The End