

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

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## ***PURIM in Southern Lebanon***

Purim, 1985. The surroundings seemed so strange to me (**Daniel Bouskila**). From childhood, Purim always meant *Megillah* readings, noise from noisemakers, loud music, lively dancing, people dressed up in different costumes, lots of good food, exchange of *Mishloach Manot* (food-and-drink gift packages), and a little "*l'chaim*" to top things off. That was exactly the Purim I had in 1984, 1983, 1982... all the way back to 1964, the year I was born.

This year, it just wasn't the same. There was no *Megillah* scroll available to be read. There were some occasional loud noises, but they did not come from kids cranking noisemakers. There was no music to dance to, and nobody was really in the mood to dance. Not only were people not dressed up in costumes, but everyone was actually dressed exactly the same. The food was the same type of bland food we had eaten the day before, and the only exchanges were wishes of "*Purim Samayach*" ('Happy Purim'), with the sad and sarcastic response being "Yes, this is really *samayach* (Happy), isn't it?" If we said *l'chaim* – to life – it wasn't over a drink; it was a sincere hope that we will come out of this alive.

Purim 1985. Southern Lebanon. A lonely platoon of IDF soldiers, stuck in a small fortress. Not a very friendly place to be. The noise of gunfire, not the rhythm you would want to dance to. Young boys dressed up in khaki uniforms. Neighbors who were not interested in receiving *Mishloach Manot*. Strange, surreal.

"During the month of Adar, we increase in joy" says the Talmud. Not here. Not in this place. No joy, nothing to celebrate. Just long shifts of guard duty, and patrols that really warranted the wishes of "*l'chaim*."

That night of Purim is one big blur to me. Same with the morning – a total blank. All I could remember is the same exact things I could remember from any other day in Lebanon. But I will never, ever, ever forget the afternoon.

I was standing on guard duty with Moti, my sergeant who I had become very close to ever since basic training was over. We always did guard duty together, often talking about life, big dreams, and great hopes for the future. We would take turns looking through the binoculars, as there was this one long road we had to watch over. All sorts of traffic passed through this road. Lebanese delivery trucks, civilians driving from one town to the next, IDF convoys, ambulances.

Due to the rise in suicide car bombs in Southern Lebanon, the IDF declared a rule that any vehicle that had only a driver and no passengers would immediately be suspected as a suicide bomber, and the IDF would open fire towards it. We had the dubious honor of watching over this road.

Moti was staring through the high-powered binoculars, and he told me that an IDF convoy was on its way. “I see some IDF vehicles approaching us,” he said, “and there is some other non-IDF van with them, but I can’t recognize what it is from here. Take a look.”

I looked through the binoculars, and the convoy of jeeps and armored personnel carriers, still quite a distance away, was indeed accompanying a white van, but I could not make out the writing on the van. I looked and looked and looked, until the writing on the van suddenly became clear to me.

“Oh my G-d, I can’t believe my eyes,” I said in English. “What...What is it?” asked Moti. My eyes stared in amazement through the binoculars at the writing on the van: *Chabad*. That’s right, this IDF convoy was accompanying a Chabad van!

The convoy pulled up to our fortress, and my friends guarding the gate opened it up. In drove IDF jeeps, armored personnel carriers, and a van carrying Chabad rabbis and students. Like a mirage in the desert, the van stopped, and out came four Chabadniks. One of them held a *Megillah* scroll. Another had an accordion slung over his shoulders. Another had a bag filled with small copies of *Megillahs*, Purim cards from kids, and blessing notes from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, of righteous memory. Last but certainly not least, one of them brought out several bags of *hamentashen* pastries, various other sweets, and, of course, a bottle and shot glasses for a true “*l’chaim*.”

Just like that, out of nowhere, in the middle of a war zone, this little IDF fortress suddenly came alive with the spirit of Purim. It was surreal. Superimposed on the bleak picture I described above, I could see somebody reading the *Megillah* from a parchment scroll, with people following in small paperback *Magillahs* (I have mine to this day). I could hear joyous accordion music, and I could see people dancing with big smiles in small circles. People were eating *hamentashen*, and *l’chaim* was not about a patrol, but instead was a good shot of vodka.

We were all taking turns guarding the various posts, as everybody wanted to share in this sudden outburst of Purim joy. Purim was here, alive and well, in an IDF fortress in Southern Lebanon! Here we were – religious soldiers, secular soldiers, regular soldiers, officers, mechanics and cooks – together with these four Chabad angels, who brought us the purest sense of joy and the most sincere expressions of solidarity, support and unity I have ever experienced.

There is not a single mention of G-d’s name in *Magillah* scroll. Rabbinic tradition interprets this as the Purim story being an example of the “hidden hand of G-d,” where miracles happen behind the scenes.

I wasn’t in Shushan<sup>1</sup> 2,500 years ago, so I can only rely on what the *Megillah* tells us. But there is one thing I am sure of: on Purim Day, 1985, for my friends and I in an IDF fortress in Southern Lebanon, there were no “hidden miracles.” G-d’s name was in the air, and the miracle of Purim was out in the open – in the most unlikely of places – for all to see and hear.

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a report by Daniel Bouskila for //Chabad.org.

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<sup>1</sup> Capital city of the Persian empire at the time of the events recounted in Megillat Esther.

