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The Psalm-Sayer and the Medal of Courage

Moshe Levy was one of the few soldiers that received the 'Ot Gevura' ['Medal of Courage'] -- the highest Israeli combat award for bravery. In his case it was for his service in the Yom Kippur war (in October 1973).

The Yom Kippur war was won solely by Divine intervention. As is already well known, the Israeli Government at that time made a deadly mistake. They knew that the Arabs were planning to attack Israel, but thought that if we let them attack first the world would see who the real aggressor is and come to our help.

The result was disastrous. No one came to our aid. Our troops were totally unprepared, undermanned and under-armed, thousands of young Israelis needlessly lost their lives and, if it weren't for a series of clear miracles proving that G-D Almighty is protecting us, the Arabs would (Heaven forbid) have easily overrun the country!

Moshe Levy tells his story.

He was in a battalion of seventy-five soldiers guarding the southern Israeli border when suddenly they received orders from head command that a full battalion of Egyptian tanks backed up by foot soldiers were heading toward their position, and they were the only thing standing between the Arabs and Tel Aviv!

They requested reinforcements and ammunition but there were none. War had been declared and Israel was being attacked from all sides! The Syrians were attacking from the north and the Egyptians from the south, and all our forces were in confusion!

The desert night was silent. Only in the far distance could be heard a faint rumbling through the wind that became louder and louder. Was it the Egyptians?

Suddenly they appeared -- over a hundred tanks. They couldn't possibly destroy so many tanks; they didn't even have that many anti-tank missiles! And who knows how many hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of enemy soldiers were behind the tanks?

The horrible truth was too obvious; They didn't stand a chance. None of them would get out alive. One of the soldiers mumbled dejectedly, "We're all dead! How can we possibly defeat 120 tanks?"

Suddenly one of the soldiers, a Yemenite Jew by the name of Zandani, jumped to his feet, took out a small book of *Tehilim* (Psalms) from his pocket, held it up and declared, "I'll tell you how we'll defeat them. With this! Because the G-d of Israel is with us."

Most of the other soldiers were Israeli-style total atheists and almost totally ignorant about Judaism. Nevertheless, after the first few words the Yemenite read they all yelled out a hearty 'Amen!' (although, of course, 'Amen' is said only after blessings).

He began to read aloud, each holy word ringing out in the desert night. Moshe Levy stood, put his hand on his heart, and swore to G-d that if he got out alive he would put on *tefillin* every weekday for the rest of his life.

The battle began. The Egyptian tanks all opened fire with everything they had. The Israelis spread out and fired their bazookas and mortars, while Zandani stood and yelled the holy words of Psalms through the smoke and explosions.

Moshe Levy related: "We fired and fired while the Yemenite read aloud and it was miraculous. Every shot we fired was a direct hit! Their tanks were exploding all over the place. Perhaps the biggest miracle was that just as we were running out of ammunition and it looked like we were done for, suddenly, amazingly, the Egyptians retreated! They just turned around and left.

"The greatest miracle of all was that although a lot of us were wounded none of us got killed! That is, all except for one soldier...Zandani, the Yemenite that yelled out the Psalms, the only religious one in the group. The one that saved us. He was the only one killed.

"Something else too. My left arm got blown off!

"It took me nine months in the hospital to recover and during that period I had a lot of time to think. It really bothered me what that happened. If anyone should have been protected by G-d, it was Zandani. Why? And since my arm that I vowed to put Tefillin on got blown off, how was I supposed to keep my oath?

"The two questions began to drive me crazy. During the time I was in the hospital I was visited by a lot of rabbis, and I asked each one both questions but none of them had an explanation for me.

"Three or four years later," Moshe continued, "I went to the United States to have an artificial arm constructed and fitted. While I was there a good friend called me and told me that he spoke to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and that the Rebbe told him he was interested in seeing me.

"At first I couldn't figure what he was talking about. I was a totally non-religious person and had no connection with this rabbi or any rabbis, so why would he want to see me? How did he even know about me? So I refused.

"But my friend told me I was crazy. He said that people come from all over the world and wait months to see this Rebbe, and now I'm refusing?

"So I figured, what do I have to lose? The meeting was set for twelve midnight the next night. As soon as I entered the Rebbe's room and looked at him I knew he was someone special. In fact, the entire time I was there I tried several times to look him in the eyes but I wasn't able to. He was just too holy. It's difficult to explain.

"He asked me to sit down and tell him about my experiences. We talked about the war and he was simply amazing. He knew each and every detail of each and every battle! He also had very strong opinions. For example, he was very disappointed with the Israeli government that they didn't allow the army to take Damascus and Cairo, even if for just one day, just to show them who is boss.

"He also said that although we should have been better prepared, it was a big miracle that the enemy decided to attack on Yom Kippur. The holiness of the day protected us, and also because the streets were empty [and most of the reserve soldiers were in synagogues –y.t.], so it was easy to mobilize the troops.

"We spoke for an hour and forty-five minutes, yet to me it seemed like five minutes. This was a novel experience that had never happened to me in my life and never happened again..

At some point in the middle of our meeting I asked him my question about Zandani and my arm. The Rebbe said that the answer was simple.

"Simple! I had asked this question to dozens of Rabbis who couldn't answer and he says it is simple?

"He explained that in fact our entire company should have died, but Zandani made himself close to G-d, so G-d took only him instead. And the same with my arm: I was supposed to die even after Zandani's sacrifice, but because I devoted my arm to G-d, so G-d took only it instead of my life.

"So you see, what had been bothering me for years the Rebbe answered in one minute."

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from Rosh Yeshiva Tuvia Bolton's free rendition in the *Parshat Vayeishev 5778* email of Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, Israel, of the JEM video interview of Moshe Levy in 1975.