

Mikreh

By William Rabinowitz

Perhaps it was a coincidence. Perhaps these things do just occur – a *mikreh* as the Israeli's call it. Now, so many years later I still find it hard to believe, (even if **true** believing is hard) that it was nothing but a *mikreh*.

Mr. C. is my nickname for Chandler, my inquisitive little grandson who likes to flop down in front of me and ask question after question – why this or why that, why... Once, when he was smaller, he put his head on my chest and heard my heart beating. I told him “the beat of the heart is the rhythm of God telling us we are alive”. He pulled back and looked into my eyes, “Is that the way I know God is there,” he asked. “If I can't hear your heart, does that mean God is not there?”

“Mr. C., you ask such hard questions. Let me share with you something that happened to me.

“Many years ago, before your father was even a passing thought, something happened when I was in the Israeli army. Your father told you, I volunteered to serve in the first Jewish army since the Temple was destroyed by the Romans 2,000 years ago. It was a duty, an obligation.

“We were out on patrol in the northern Sinai. It was a very routine thing. Corporal Karmi, a Kibbutz boy, would gather five of us for a day of tramping through sand and desert scrub. We were patrolling for marauders, intruders and any tracks of strangers. We were sent out to look for land mines and whatever. The advanced military technique was walking around and around, hoping we did not discover the land mine by stepping on it. That was not the way I wished to meet God. Actually, it was very quiet. The most exciting thing was when a Phantom jet roared 100 feet above us heading to the Canal.

“Tzahal (the Israel Defense Forces) decided for me I should be a Nahal soldier – a sort of part pioneer and part fighter farmer. We never farmed. We watched over some nearby fishermen. The army sent me to Nahal Yam. It is long gone now – returned to Egypt in a peace treaty. Back then, it was a small base of wooden shacks and machine gun bunkers, located halfway between the coastal, yellow bricked, fly infested Egyptian town of El-Arish and the Suez Canal. Theodor Herzl actually considered accepting the British offer of El Arish for the beginning of the Jewish State if *Eretz Israel* was not an immediate option. The desperation of our people for a home was so great. Fortunately, the offer was not a serious one.

“Nahal Yam was planted next to the lagoon of Baldwin - *Bardaveel* – Arabic for Baldwin. The lagoon, and that is a stretch to call it a lagoon, with its imagery of a gentle, aqua colored South Pacific Island shelter with tall swaying palm trees was a muddy, depressing grey, barren shallow of stagnant, ugly water that cut into the coast like a big crescent moon. Quicksand pools lay invisibly just below the surface and could swallow a man within minutes. A barrier reef protected Bardaveel about a mile out. They called it Bardaveel because it was said the Crusader King Baldwin had mistakenly landed there. He thought he was going to reach Jerusalem to fight

for the Holy City against the Muslims. Only he came to the lagoon, and died here. His crusade died with him.

“The Mediterranean sea and Europe across from it, lay to the north of Nahal Yam. To the East and West – was a road we called *kvish Edom* – the Red Road – because it was a red asphalt color. It snaked along the empty coastline from Gaza to Kantara on the Suez. The far south; across miles of nothingness, I could see the blue mountains of the interior rising out of the barren desert plains.

“During the day, I liked to be assigned to the watchtower. No one would bother me up there and I could look far out and about to see – not much. I loved to look at the mountains and wonder – which one was Mt. Sinai. Which one was the *Holy Mountain* that Moses climbed and the Children of Israel gathered about and waited. Then they waited some more and finally they gave up waiting and decided that they needed a God. The God that could not be seen or touched or felt, as Moses taught, was just not good enough. They needed a real God – a God made out of Gold. It had been forty days and Moses had not returned from the Mountain – surely he was dead they reasoned.

‘If we had a real God’, they said, ‘a God we could see and feel and touch, then that would be God’. Aaron, Moses’ brother, made an idol. He made a Golden Calf resembling a God from Egypt. When Moses descended from the fiery smoke clouded mountain heights, he returned carrying the Ten Commandments, written with the finger of God. The stone tablets were cradled in his arms. Moses was saddened, angered and deeply hurt that so little faith had endured. He was gone for so short a time. Moses broke the Commandments of Stone upon the Golden Calf of evil. Many of our people were swallowed up in the earth in a fierce earthquake.

“Mr. C., I could only see the edge of the mountains of the Sinai and what I imagined – it was just imagination. But it seemed all so real in my mind’s eye.

“Corporal Karmi would pick a lucky soldier for the regular patrol. That soldier was given the honor of carrying the heavy field radio strapped to his back as well as his rifle. I am not sure why we carried the radio – it didn’t work most of the time – but we were expected to take the radio. It was just another thing that we had to do. We had no expectation of seeing anything that would have required a call for help.

That day, he picked me to carry the radio pack. The novelty wore off after five minutes of carrying and trudging through the nothingness of the desert. Mr. C. there was nothing there. We patrolled about half a mile from the base amid nothing. If there had been another human being there in the last five hundred years you saw nothing to say that was so.

“As we trugged, we sweated. We talked. Corporal Karmi led the way. He was a *gingee* – a redhead heavily freckled scrawn about five years my junior. I still remember his favorite drink – a *gogul mogul* he called it. He would mix three raw eggs, beaten with enough sugar to cause a diabetic fit into a glass and drink it down.

“I had been a volunteer; Karmi was drafted. There was a whole group of us who came to Israel to do our duty, to defend our people. Some of us stayed, others returned home as I did afterwards. We were called *Machal – Meetnadvim Me’Hutz L’Aretz* – volunteers from outside Israel. There were South Africans, Brits, Poles, Argentineans, Americans, French and Russians with me. Most of us could hardly speak or read Hebrew. Sometimes that came in handy. If we did not want to do something – nothing that was really serious – we simply did not understand the Hebrew. Of course, we understood but it worked for me.

“I had leave from the Sinai to go to our cousin’s house in Haifa for a few days. I was outside Tel Aviv hitchhiking north, dirty, tired, and standing in the road with my hand out trying to flag down a ride. A military jeep screeched to a halt just ahead of me. I thought - ride. A lieutenant in a clean pressed uniform jumped out demanding to see my pass. He thought otherwise about the ride. It was easy to tell he was a behind the lines officer. He was an administrative type. I showed him my pass. Looking for any fault he could to prove his worth, he began to berate me for not having my beret neatly hanging from my shoulder epaulet in regulation style. He really worked himself up that my beret was in my back pocket. The louder he squawked the less Hebrew I seemed to understand. Why did I not have my beret on my shoulder, under my epaulet? Why was it in my back pocket? I made hand motions that it kept falling out and I had nothing to hold it in place. His face, about a foot from mine, was pushing his authority. I resorted to – sorry but I don’t understand a word you are saying in Hebrew look. He thought he was smarter. He started yelling in French. For real, I don’t speak French. If I didn’t speak Hebrew, why should I speak French? I looked him in the face and said - English. He squawked some more in French and with a frustrated gesture threw up his hands saying he did not speak English. He called me a “foreigner”. Flopping himself back into the jeep, the gendarme of the military administrative police left.

“It wasn’t the first time I had to try and choose things in the army. Clothing was hard to choose because the sizes were different from what I understood from the States. The boots were the worst and I paid dearly with huge blisters until my feet hardened. But the simplest choice for me was the hardest and that had to do with God.

“My first days in the army they asked me a simple question – *dati oh lo dati* - religious or non-religious? What kind of a question was that – religious or not religious?! You mean unless I have curly side locks hanging from my temples, wore a *kippah*, and prayed three times a day I was not religious. I have always believed there was a God. In the States I was raised to be a Conservative Jew- a middle of the road Jew. I did not pray three times a day, I could keep kosher or not if I wished, I could wear a *kippah*, if I wished. But what did that have to do with whether or not I believed in God.

“In Israel there is no middle ground between being an Orthodox Jew and being a non-Orthodox believing Jew. So I answered, *lo – dati*, not religious. I did not understand that meant I would be sent to units that practiced almost no religion – units that if God was mentioned it was only in derision and *you have got to be kidding* cynicism. The Israeli army says, either you believe or you do not believe – there is nothing in the middle.

“During basic training, I obtained a small *tallit* and a prayer book in Hebrew and English. I used to go off by myself on Shabbat and put on my *tallit* and say prayers. In the Sinai it was a quiet time before going back to my machine gun and stare into the nothingness in front of me. The nothingness was good I did not want to see something out there.

“I did want a set of *teffilin*. It was not that I was becoming super religious or anything; it was that I wanted to do something daily by putting on *teffilin*. I wanted to feel the binding on my arm and the weight of the *teffilin* on my head to remind me daily that by my actions and by my thoughts that God is above me. At Nahal Yam there were no *teffilin*. It was a *lo-dati* base.

“Our little patrol stopped for a rest on a sand dune, miles from anything other than more sand and scrub. There was a galvanized hollow metal tube standing alone, very strangely out of place. Where had it come from – who put it there – who knew. For me that tube was super. I could rest against it. The radio pack was very heavy.

“Karmi was nearby, so I asked a favor of him. I asked if he could contact someone and help me get a set of *teffilin*. Karmi looked at me as if I had fallen from the planet Mars. His face contorted into almost pure hatred. “Whatever it was about *teffilin* that set him off I don’t know. Within a minute he was renaming our ancestry and calling me every vicious name he could come up with. Stupid, superstitious, were nicer names.

“As usual, I did what I always did when I did not want to hear anymore. I turned off the Hebrew translator so all I had to listen to was angry noise. I stood up next to the pole and happened to look inside the top of the hollowed out tube. The pole stood about four feet above the ground – just standing there. Inside, at the top, was something, tightly scrolled up – a booklet or pamphlet of some sort. Karmi was still screaming at me, what sort of idiot I must be, as I pulled out the light green weathered papers.

“I looked at it and read the title. I handed it to my enraged corporal so he could read the title too.

“The pamphlet was titled “*The Meaning and Significance of Tefillin.*”

“Karmi stopped his new vindictive of derision proclaiming my religious idiocy. The words were frozen on his lips, unfinished. His angry face turned white, deathly white, as the blood drained away. He handed me back the pamphlet that materialized from nowhere, quietly. Karmi walked away silent. We did not share a word afterward.

“I never did get my *teffilin* but I still have that little pamphlet from nowhere. Maybe it was a *mikreh*, a coincidence – maybe it was something more. I, Karmi, and the soldiers on that patrol, will never know for sure. We know that something extraordinary happened on that patrol in the middle of nowhere. Was it God, telling us something or was it a coincidence?

“Other strange things happened to me in the desert that winter. Someday, maybe I will tell you about the white light. A respected professor of Jewish mysticism called me a fool for believing in the stories of the white light. “It is not real,” he said.

“Maybe that was true for the learned professor but for me, and what I saw....

“That is another story.

“It is time to go to bed Mr. C. It is time to dream.”