

The Makings of a Miracle: Chanuka Stories

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Excerpt from the first story, *To Fight and To Live*

To Fight and To Live

The rays of the rising sun entered the cave and illuminated the black letters in the Torah scroll before Ovadiah. The parchment now looked white, rather than the faint yellow it had appeared to be under the glow of the oil lamp. Ovadiah's eyes relaxed, and his body followed. He shifted his position on the rock, leaned against the cave wall, and allowed himself to be pulled inside the holy words. Absorbed by their depth, he momentarily forgot all about the war, the training for the upcoming battle, the nine men that Yehuda Hamaccabi entrusted under his command, and the mixture of fear and hope that had become his constant companion over the past three years.

A shadow fell on the scroll, and Ovadiah looked up. Aharon entered the cave, together with an unfamiliar, quite tall young man. Ovadiah rose in greeting.

"Good morning!" Aharon said. "You have a new arrival. This is Yitzchak. He'll be the tenth soldier in your division."

"*Shalom aleichem!*" Ovadiah smiled at Yitzchak, taking in his haggard face, a torn sleeve, and the dirt on the bottom of his robe. Aharon slipped out of the cave.

Yitzchak looked down, avoiding Ovadiah's gaze. "*Aleichem shalom,*" he mumbled, barely audibly.

"I'm glad you've come to join us." Although Ovadiah was trying to make the young man feel comfortable, Yitzchak stiffened instead. Maybe he was intimidated by Ovadiah, his new superior.

"Where are you from?" Ovadiah tried again.

Yitzchak mumbled the name of his village, without further elaboration.

"Have you had breakfast yet?"

“No.” The youth looked clearly uncomfortable, and Ovadiah wondered if he should simply leave him alone. He gave him some bread and cheese, told him to come to him if he ever needed anything, and went back to his scroll. Yitzchak seemed relieved as he went back outside.

An hour later, Ovadiah gathered his group for training. Yitzchak joined them, just as stiff as before. Ovadiah introduced him to the other nine soldiers, all about the same age as Yitzchak, all villagers from throughout the land of Yehudah. Throughout the introductions, Yitzchak kept his gaze averted from the other men.

“Have you ever used a sword?” Ovadiah asked Yitzchak, handing him a weapon recently procured in an attack on a Greek patrol.

“No,” Yitzchak shook his head, his face expressionless. Ovadiah was surprised. He was used to new soldiers being either excited or nervous at the sight of a sword. Yitzchak was neither. He took it from Ovadiah’s hand as if it were a hammer.

“Here’s how you hold it,” Ovadiah showed him, searching Yitzchak’s face. He saw no zeal, no fire. All of his fierce fighters initially joined the Maccabi army with no experience, but they were always eager to learn. This Yitzchak seemed very indifferent. Would he make a good soldier?

Ovadiah turned his attention to the rest of his division.

“All right, soldiers, line up!”

The men assumed their positions in a straight line — except for Yitzchak, who stood on the side, holding his sword tightly.

“Yitzchak, over here!” Ovadiah commanded.

Yitzchak shrugged and moved a step closer, but not close enough.

“No, over here, right next to Ezra!” Ovadiah insisted.

Reluctantly, Yitzchak took another step. Ovadiah turned around to take the lead and instructed his men to follow him, holding their swords properly. A few minutes later, when Ovadiah looked back, Yitzchak was again standing on the side. Ovadiah squeezed his sword a little too hard and then took a deep breath. He had to give Yitzchak a break. It was his first day.

“Yitzchak, come closer,” he said softly.

Yitzchak made a tiny step forward. Ovadiah sighed. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

But the next day was no different, and neither was the day after that. Nine men followed each of Ovadiah’s instructions precisely, but Yitzchak wandered off to the side as soon as Ovadiah turned around. Ovadiah could see that it wasn’t clumsiness or lack of understanding that was keeping him

from obeying Ovadiah's orders; he *did* get the hang of holding and using the sword. Frustration was building inside Ovadiah. How would they ever win this war if he couldn't get his soldiers to follow his commands?

At lunch, Ovadiah made his way over to Yitzchak, who was sitting alone a few *amos* away from the other men in his division.

"May I join you?" he asked.

Yitzchak shrugged wordlessly. Ovadiah took the liberty of interpreting that as acquiescence and sat down next to him.

"How is it going?" he asked.

"Fine," Yitzchak replied, looking down at his piece of bread as if it were a scroll worthy of studying.

"I see that you've learned to use a sword," Ovadiah continued.

Yitzchak nodded without lifting his eyes.

"Good! We are about to go into battle against General Lysias and his army." Ovadiah searched Yitzchak's face to get a glimpse of some kind of reaction but got absolutely none. He tried again.

"The Maccabi forces battled Lysias a year ago. King Antiochus sent him to fight us with 40,000 soldiers and 7,000 horsemen. Do you know how many Maccabi soldiers we had?"

Not getting a response, Ovadiah continued, "Only 3,000! And with barely any weapons! Can you imagine?"

Ovadiah paused, expecting some kind of exclamation — or at least appreciation — of the military feat that had taken place the year before, despite such disparate numbers. But Yitzchak said nothing, and his expression did not change. It was as if the young man's face were made of stone.

Ovadiah continued, "I took part in that battle, and I saw how brilliant Yehudah Hamaccabi's strategy was."

Ovadiah paused again. Should he explain how they had tricked the Greeks by leaving fires burning on the hills at night, luring part of the Greek army to climb up and look for them there, and then leaving the camp, descending to the valley, and attacking the unsuspecting remaining Greek forces? Other new recruits always peppered him with questions when he mentioned the previous year's victory. They wanted to know all the little details, and their eyes sparkled and looked up at him with admiration when he would indulge their curiosity. After all, it was after that battle that he turned from a studious young *kohen* to a commander of 10.

But Yitzchak remained indifferent. Ovadiah sighed. “I’d better do some learning while I can,” he said, mostly to himself, and took out his scroll. But before he became completely immersed in his Torah, he thought he noticed Yitzchak glance inside the scroll, if only for a moment.

The next day, after a similarly frustrating training session, Ovadiah decided to be more direct. He cornered Yitzchak right afterwards and asked, “Do you feel ready for battle?”

“Yes,” Yitzchak replied without hesitation, his voice as even and expressionless as his face. Ovadiah wondered if he would ever see through the mask to what Yitzchak was really feeling. But he had to get down to business.

“There is something I need to talk to you about,” he began, trying in vain to catch the young man’s eyes. “Yitzchak, an army needs structure,” he went on. “We need to act as one in order to defeat the Greeks. That means that each soldier needs to follow his commander’s instructions precisely, without deviating one *amah*.”

Ovadiah stopped. Yitzchak’s expression did not change, and he continued to avoid Ovadiah’s eyes.

“Yitzchak, I need you to follow my commands to the letter!” Ovadiah’s voice rose.

“What does it matter?” Yitzchak replied, startling Ovadiah. It was the longest sentence he had heard from Yitzchak so far, but instead of satisfaction, he felt bubbles of anger rising up inside him.

“Yitzchak, you need to listen to me if you want to win this war!”

“Hashem wins wars, not us,” Yitzchak replied, in the same even voice, with the same stony expression.

Ovadiah jumped up. “You need to listen, or you’ll have to leave the Maccabi army!”

Yitzchak just shrugged.

Ovadiah walked off, kicking the ground. Who was this Yitzchak to talk about Hashem? Didn’t he know that no *korbanos* had been offered in the Beis Hamikdash for almost three years? Hashem didn’t want their sacrifices. Hashem had rejected their *avodah*. And all that was left was this war, the deaths it had wrought, the *tumah* that had become permanent. Ovadiah took a deep breath. All he could do now was fight, and he was determined to do it well.

Later that day, Ovadiah thought about Yitzchak again. He tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe something was bothering the young man. Maybe his chutzpah was covering up for something. Fear, perhaps? Was Yitzchak terrified of going into battle and embarrassed to show it? Ovadiah wondered if he should have tried to be a bit more understanding.

Military life did not provide much time to think. That night, Aharon asked Ovadiah and several other commanders of 10 to join him on an expedition to a nearby Greek outpost. Yehudah Hamaccabi wanted to get information about the Greek army's plans. The expedition was successful, and with the first lights of dawn they brought back a prisoner.

"Do any of you speak Greek?" Aharon asked his men when they neared the caves. Ovadiah and the others shook their heads.

"Well, then, let's get this fellow into this cave," Aharon pointed to the right, "and wait until we find someone who can translate."

Ovadiah and Aharon were leading the Greek towards the cave when Ovadiah spotted a tall figure outlined by the rays of the rising sun. He almost shouted when he recognized Yitzchak.

"What are you doing here?" he asked instead, trying to sound as warm as he could, but unquestionably failing.

"Praying." Yitzchak shuffled his feet.

"*Praying?* Are you serious? You are supposed to be in the cave sleeping! You never know when you'll be called to go to battle!"

Ovadiah felt Aharon's gaze and blushed. Now Aharon knew that he wasn't doing such a good job controlling his division. But he had tried so hard! He put his heart and soul into this war. Would Aharon think it wasn't good enough?

But Aharon addressed Yitzchak instead.

"How is your stay here, in the Maccabi army?" he asked.

"Fine," Yitzchak replied, looking down. Then, surprising Ovadiah, he looked up at Aharon and said, "I speak Greek. I can translate for you."

Ovadiah looked at Yitzchak closely. So Yitzchak *could* speak in full sentences. Moreover, Yitzchak could speak Greek. He was clearly hiding something from Ovadiah. Maybe he was a spy? Maybe he was a Hellenist posing as a G-d-fearing Jew? Praying, he said? What a great disguise! He was praying like Ovadiah was dancing. Ovadiah motioned to Aharon, wanting to tell him of his suspicions, but Aharon either didn't notice or deliberately ignored him.

"Great!" he said to Yitzchak. "Come, let's go inside this cave."

This time, Yitzchak followed Aharon, Ovadiah, and the other men. Aharon motioned for everyone to sit down. Someone lit two oil lamps, and now Ovadiah could see the prisoner well. He was a heavyset man with a round face and olive skin. He sat awkwardly on a rock, his red cape

draping around it. His shiny, pointy helmet covered his forehead, but his dark eyes could be seen darting from one Jew to another. Aharon asked Ovadiah to bring the prisoner some water. The Greek soldier took a few sips, swallowing slowly.

“Tell him that we won’t harm him if he tells us about Lysias’ plans,” Aharon told Yitzchak. Ovadiah watched as Yitzchak turned to the prisoner and said something in Greek. The prisoner replied in one sentence.

“He says he doesn’t know anything,” translated Yitzchak, meeting neither Ovadiah’s gaze nor Aharon’s eyes.

“Tell him I don’t believe him,” said Aharon calmly.

Yitzchak turned to the prisoner, and Ovadiah noted that he looked the Greek straight in the eye. Yitzchak began to yell something at the prisoner, whose knees began to shake. Ovadiah got increasingly nervous. What was Yitzchak telling the Greek? Aharon had only said four words, but Yitzchak yelled several sentences. Were they conspiring? Were the prisoner’s shaking knees an act?

The Greek said something in a trembling voice.

“He’ll talk,” Yitzchak said simply.

“What did you tell him?” Ovadiah demanded, forgetting for a moment to wait for Aharon’s response.

Yitzchak shrugged. “I simply threatened him with some unmentionable damages toward his extremities...” Ovadiah thought he saw Aharon stifle a laugh.

“Good job!” Aharon said. “Thank you, Yitzchak. Now ask him again about Lysias’ plans.”

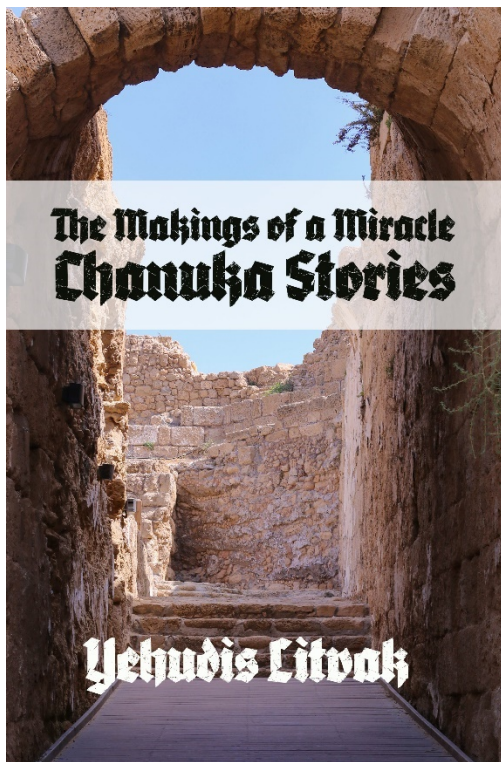
Yitzchak again yelled something at the Greek. Ovadiah watched Yitzchak’s face closely and saw a flicker of hatred in his eyes. Was it real?

The Greek began to talk, and Aharon jotted down the map of Lysias’ troops as Yitzchak translated. An hour later, Aharon asked Yitzchak to thank the Greek for the information and tell him that he’d be given breakfast shortly. Yitzchak said something to the Greek, his voice harsh, his eyes blazing.

“That didn’t sound like a thank you,” Aharon said, with a twinkle in his eye. “Thank you, Yitzchak. You’re dismissed. Go get some breakfast for yourself,” Aharon said, just as matter-of-factly.

Ovadhah was soon dismissed too. His thoughts were running around in circles. Was Yitzchak a dangerous spy? Had he translated the prisoner's description of Lysias' position and future plans accurately, or had he made it all up to confuse the Jewish army?

You can read the rest of the story in [The Makings of a Miracle: Chanuka Stories](#) by Yehudis Litvak.



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