

From the Sacrifice of Nebbi Yusha

A Tale of Comradeship

Amnon Ben-Yehuda's story is one of extraordinary survival: during the heroic battle of Nebbi Yusha in the Upper Galilee on April 20, 1948, the Palmach soldier and squad leader was shot in the head and rescued by his fellow soldiers to Ramot Naftali (a mountaintop settlement about a mile away), where he remained for two days before being carried down the mountain, ultimately to a hospital outside of Tel Aviv. His story symbolizes the true friendship that took place there.

What happened at Nebbi Yusha, also known as *Metzudat Koach*, was a harrowing event in Israel's path to independence. An attempt to capture the fortress, which the British had transferred to the Arabs five days prior, it ended with the deaths of 28 Palmach heroes. Their sacrifice is memorialized at the nearby HaReut Museum, which stands as a symbol of their comradeship (*reut*). Ben-Yehuda relates, "All of us [who survived] have lived under the dark cloud of that experience our entire lives."

Twelve of the soldiers who died at Nebbi Yusha were childhood friends and lived together in Kibbutz Daphna in the Upper Galilee, serving their two years of Palmach training. By the time the Nebbi Yusha night operation occurred, many of the kibbutzniks were seasoned fighters, having been involved in numerous military incidents.

"This is where history was made," said Ben-Yehuda. "We lost quite a few guys because they stayed behind to try and rescue friends who were wounded. This is what you call brotherhood." Ben-Yehuda himself was saved by a childhood friend, Aharon "Aharonchick" Kuperman. "My squad was retreating and Aharonchick saw me lying wounded. He saw to it that I was evacuated, this all took place while we were under fire."

Ben-Yehuda was taken to Ramot Naftali where, he would learn 40 years later, two young women acting as medics—with limited training—kept him alive by using damp rags to prevent dehydration. When a group of his unit climbed up the mountain with supplies to evacuate seven infants, they were amazed to find Ben-Yehuda alive. They tied him to a stretcher and carried him down the mountain, from



there he was taken to Beilinson Hospital and operated on by Dr. Harden Ashkenazy, a renowned Romanian Jewish neurosurgeon and Holocaust survivor who had just arrived in Israel. Ben-Yehuda was the first Israeli soldier on whom Dr. Ashkenazy operated. The doctor gave him 0.5% chance of survival.

Ben-Yehuda survived, and spent a year at home rehabilitating himself with a program of his own design. He came to the United States to attend UC Berkeley, where he met his wife, and has lived in California ever since, his family having grown to include grandchildren.

Since 1960, Ben-Yehuda has attended an annual memorial in Nebbi Yusha for the fallen soldiers. The 40th anniversary in 1988 marked a turning point. He decided to deliver a eulogy for his fallen friends and expressed his feelings of guilt for surviving when they did not.

"For 40 years we never talked about it," he said. "This is true for all of us. It was a subject that was kept inside. When I delivered my eulogy, it was important for me to clear my soul. We were all suffering from PTSD, and that was my coming out. It helped so many of my friends."

This struck a chord with the late Menachem Shoval, z"l, a member of the same Palmach unit and one of the soldiers who carried Ben-Yehuda down the mountain. Shoval sent Ben-Yehuda a letter following the memorial ceremony and admitted that he wished to produce a film about their experience in this heroic battle, but found it hard to breach the subject matter because of the guilt he carried. "You relieved my guilt to do the film," Shoval

wrote. Ben-Yehuda talks about his experiences in Shoval's film, *I Will Not Forget This, My Friend*, which aired on Israeli television in 1990. The name of the film is taken from a Natan Alterman poem. Ben-Yehuda produced and translated an English version that he shares with audiences at his speaking engagements.

SPIHS, led by the late Yehuda Dekel, founded the HaReut Museum next to Nebbi Yusha; the goal was to share the story of this important battle with the public. In January 2014, SPIHS, together with JNF, celebrated the grand opening of the museum, which provides an interactive learning experience through dynamic 3D figures, life-size models, personal effects of the fighters, and more. Six hundred people, among them many of the Palmach heroes who fought in Nebbi Yusha including Amnon Ben-Yehuda, participated in the moving ceremony. Since the opening, tens of thousands of visitors have come to visit the mountain and the new museum. The memorial site has come to symbolize the spirit of '48: tenacity, camaraderie, loyalty, the pioneering spirit, and the readiness to sacrifice.

Though this is but one story of bravery and comradeship in battle, for Ben-Yehuda, it is a universal tale.

"It's a soldier's story. It could be anywhere. During the war, there were many acts of heroism by many young soldiers. We have to talk about it; we can't keep everything buried inside. Going through war is a unique and painful experience, and adjusting back to civilian life is not simple or easy. It's a human issue."