



The Infant General

What saved Kibbutz Tirat Zvi – and especially its children – from General Fawzi al-Qawuqji's Arab Salvation Army in the months before the declaration of the State of Israel? // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)

Kibbutz Tirat Zvi

War of Independence memorial, model of the original kibbutz "tower," reconstructed water tower, northern lookout point, and Tirat Zvi Museum



I srael's War of Independence encompassed no fewer than fifty military operations, their names ranging from "Jebusite" (resulting in the capture of Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood and the

hill of Nebi Samuel; see "Battle for the Hill," *Segula* 28, and www.segulamag.com), "Nahshon" (which gained access to Jerusalem), and "Uvda" (in which the Gulf of Eilat was conquered) to the obscure "Broom," "Dust," and "Death to the Invader." But one noteworthy mission was never even acknowledged as an operation. Instead, it's known simply as the Battle of Tirat Zvi, named for the kibbutz where it took place.

The battle lasted a mere five hours and incurred only two casualties. (This despite the fact that Tirat Zvi wasn't evacuated, and had no bomb shelters.) Nevertheless, the incident included careful reconnaissance, daring action, and outright miracles – all hallmarks of a true military operation. Had Tirat Zvi fallen, the entire Beth She'an Valley could have been lost – and with it, perhaps even the war.

Heavy rain drenched the valley that dark night, disabling most of Tirat Zvi's guns, and its eighty riflemen were pitted against hundreds of seasoned troops from General Fawzi al-Qawuqji's volunteer Arab Salvation Army.

A secret phone conversation between the Arab towns of Jenin and Beisan was intercepted by

the Hagana on the evening of February 16, 1948 (6 Adar), alerting Israeli forces to an impending attack on the kibbutz – the Arabs' first strike at the Beth She'an Valley. So everyone in Tirat Zvi was wide awake and at his post, with field troops and a home guard on call as reinforcements, ready to spring to the small communal village's aid if necessary.

What about the Children?

Official versions of the battle, however, neglect to mention the drama that unfolded in the kibbutz children's dormitory. Later recorded in the annals of the kibbutz, the story went like this:

In the confusion of preparations for the expected attack, with the defenders taking up their posts, the gun-maintenance women hiding in the trenches, and the other kibbutz members cowering under their beds, no one remembered one essential detail – to send an adult to supervise the children sleeping in their dormitory.

At four in the morning, twenty children and infants awoke in alarm to the sound of heavy



One of many kibbutz settlements that stood firm against hundreds of attackers. Tirat Zvi today
Photo: Asaf Z.

Tirat Zvi in the late 1930s. The central tower has since been demolished
Photo: Zoltan Kluger

shelling and the rolling thunder of mortar fire. They leapt from their beds, clueless as to what was going on and what they were supposed to do.

Six-year-old Micah managed to make himself heard over all the crying and screaming. His father, Moshe Alan Horin, was the kibbutz security officer and later the IDF's first religious battalion commander. Micah had clearly inherited some of his leadership skills; he managed to persuade the other kids not to run out into the shelling and the rain, but to hide under their beds instead. That saved them from the blast that shattered the building's doors and windows.

As the minutes ticked away, and no adult appeared to take charge, the youngsters wondered: Had they been forgotten, or was everyone else already dead?

Hysteria broke out, which Micah suggested could be used to their advantage:

"You know what?" Micah told the children. "Let's cry for help! If we all scream, eventually they'll hear us, and someone will come." They needed no urging; they all burst into bitter tears, knowing that not only were they allowed to cry, but they had to, and the louder the better. (Nehemke Moran, "Presence of Mind," in *Local*

Leah Yorev was crawling toward the children's dormitory when suddenly a large shell crashed through the roof



By the By

- ▶ Kibbutz Tirat Zvi (Zvi's Tower) was founded in the summer of 1937. It was one of the "tower and stockade" settlements set up overnight to take advantage of a loophole in Ottoman law, stating that no illegal building could be demolished once its roof had been completed. Established by the Bahad religious pioneer movement, the community was named for proto-Zionist Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and for the two-story, mud-brick structure at the center of the training farm that preceded the kibbutz.
- ▶ On June 21, 1942, the temperature on the kibbutz soared to an unprecedented fifty-four degrees Celsius, making Tirat Zvi the hottest place in the Middle East, and possibly in all of Asia.
- ▶ The children's house where the bomb miraculously failed to explode is still standing, currently serving as a clubhouse for middle-schoolers. The tile roof pierced by the shell was replaced long ago with concrete. But Reuven Or, who works in the kibbutz archive next door, is happy to reconstruct everything else about the story. He was there. Catch him at (04) 607-8105.

Leah Yorev with kibbutz children, 1948

Stories, courtesy of the Tirat Zvi Archive [Hebrew]

Micah's strategy worked. Leah Yorev, who was with her son in the nearby babies' accommodation, heard the children's cries. She flew to the door, ignoring the shouts of the woman in charge entreating her to come straight back and hide under the bed. Yorev crawled through muddy puddles, dodging bursting shells and taking cover beneath a tree or behind a building. Then she heard a deafening explosion. The high

tower of Tirat Zvi's signaling station had taken a direct hit, killing the kibbutz member stationed there.

As Yorev continued doggedly toward the children's house, a huge shell suddenly crashed through its roof. Her mouth gaped in a scream as she momentarily imagined she'd been hit instead of them. The seconds passed, however, and she realized she was still breathing, *and* the dormitory was intact.

Yorev made one last dash through the pouring rain, despite the shells exploding around her, and burst breathlessly into the children's home. There she found herself face to face with the intact shell of an unexploded missile, its nose half-buried in the floor. From beneath the beds, twenty pairs of small, scared eyes peeked out, staring in shock at the uninvited "guest" that had descended on them through the ceiling.

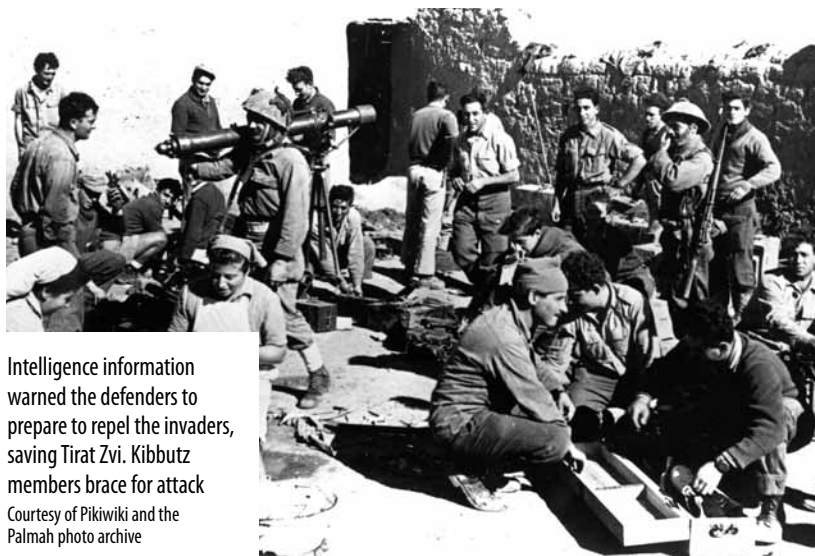
Giving Thanks

Every year on 6 Adar, Kibbutz Tirat Zvi still gives thanks for its salvation, and especially for the miracle that saved the children. Hundreds of rioting Arabs and over three hundred missiles destroyed almost the entire kibbutz but killed only one man – Naftali Friedlander, who'd been standing at the signaling post, summoning help while shooting at the invaders.

How was everyone else spared?

Reinforcements from the Palmah's First Battalion and the Hagana's Golani Brigade had arrived, sending Major Muhammad Zafa and his troops into retreat. Then British Mandate police turned up and ordered them to withdraw. Zafa agreed on condition that they open fire as they departed, so he could say they'd been repulsed by superior forces rather than by the kibbutz's





Intelligence information warned the defenders to prepare to repel the invaders, saving Tirat Zvi. Kibbutz members brace for attack
Courtesy of Pikiwiki and the Palmah photo archive

A six-year-old takes command and orders his friends to stay under cover during the shelling. Naftali Wertheim's illustration for the children's book *Local Stories*
Courtesy of the Tirat Zvi Archive



few dozen Jewish defenders.

Though not directly involved in the battle, Qawuqi was so certain of victory that he'd already informed Egypt's *Al Ahram* daily of Tirat Zvi's obliteration, boasting of three hundred Jewish casualties. When word of Zafa's defeat came the next day, the Arabs were demoralized. He'd lost sixty soldiers as well as all the weapons and ammunition dropped by his men as they fled. It took the Arab Salvation Army two

months to recover.

From a Jewish point of view, the battle was a resounding success, reinforcing the determination of many isolated Jewish settlements to hold out against the enemy. An illegal immigration ship was even named *Tirat Zvi* in honor of the triumph.

Leah Yorev lived in Tirat Zvi until her death in 2006. And Micah Horin is still there, delighted to recount his moment of glory to anyone who'd care to

Handy Info

Where to Eat

Ella's Courtyard

Farm 7, Sdeh Terumot
Kosher, meat, 052-673-2939

Rozalia

1 Shturman Street
Beth She'an
Kosher, dairy, (04) 645-3366

Kafeh Ba-sadeh

Bio-tour Campus
Kibbutz Sdeh Eliyahu
Kosher, dairy, (04) 609-6986

Don't Miss

Beth She'an National Park

Archaeological park and sound and light show (evenings only)
Entrance fee, (04) 658-7189

Bio-tour

Biological pest control and organic agriculture center
Kibbutz Sdeh Eliyahu
Entrance fee;
by appointment only,
(04) 609-6986

International Bird-Watching Center

Kfar Ruppin
Entrance fee, 073-767-6827

Gan Garoo and Gan Gu-Jura

Australian mini-zoo and dinosaur maze
Kibbutz Nir David
Entrance fee, (04) 648-8060



Tamar Hayardeni

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