SIPUR GEBURA: Elhanan, the Hero Who Came Down from the Mountains

Stories of courage from October 7, to read to children.

High in the mountains south of Hebron there is a small community called Otniel. The air there is cool, and from the top of the hill you can see far into the distance. In Otniel lived a man named Elhanan Kalmanson. He was 41 years old. He had a wife and five children. He was in charge of security for the community, and before that he had served many years in Israel's security forces and in the army. The people of Otniel knew that if something went wrong, Elhanan was the one to call.

Saturday, October 7, was Simchat Torah. That morning Elhanan was getting ready for the holiday, like everyone else. And then the news began to arrive, along with emergency calls to his phone. Something terrible was happening in the south, near Gaza. Thousands of terrorists had broken through the fence. They were inside the towns and the kibbutzim. People were calling for help, and help was not coming.

Otniel is far from Gaza. Very far. About two hours' drive, over mountains and difficult roads. Nobody called Elhanan. Nobody gave him an order. He was no longer in the army. He could have stayed home with his family, and nobody would have blamed him.

Elhanan went to his parents and his wife and said: "This does not look good. I have to go help my brothers, the Yehudim."

He turned to his younger brother Menachem, who had come to visit for the holiday. Menachem did not hesitate. The two brothers took their rifles, got into the car, and set out for

the south. Their nephew Itiel, a very young man, followed them.

The roads were dangerous. Nobody knew where the terrorists were. But the brothers kept driving until they reached the area of Kibbutz Be’eri, a beautiful kibbutz of about a thousand people, with green lawns and small white houses. Now the houses were in flames. There were still terrorists inside the kibbutz, walking from street to street. Hundreds of families were locked in their safe rooms, in the dark, holding the door handle with their hands. They had been there since morning. No food. No water. Babies crying. Phones running out of battery. And the army still had not arrived.

Near the kibbutz, Elhanan and Menachem found an army vehicle, a small armored truck, that some soldiers had left behind. They took it. It was built for four people. That did not matter. They drove it straight into Be’eri.

And then they began the rescue operation. House by house. Street by street. They would stop in front of a house, run to the door of the safe room, and knock. Inside, silence. The people hiding did not know who was knocking. The terrorists had also knocked on doors. The terrorists had also shouted in Hebrew.

So Elhanan would speak softly through the door. “We are Jews. We came to take you out. You are safe now.”

And when the people inside still did not believe him, when they asked, “How do we know you are really a Jew?”, Elhanan did the one thing no terrorist would ever do. He said the Shema. “Shema Israel, HaShem Elokenu, HaShem Echad.”

And the door would open.

Out came mothers with babies in their arms. Grandparents who could barely walk. Children who had not made a single sound in twelve hours. Elhanan, Menachem, and Itiel loaded them into

the little armored truck, ten, eleven, twelve people squeezed into a space made for four, and drove them out of the kibbutz, to where the soldiers and ambulances were waiting. Then they turned around and went back in, risking their lives.

Night fell, and the three men did not stop. Fourteen hours. More than a hundred people from Be’eri came out alive because three men from the mountains kept knocking on doors and rescued them.

On Sunday morning, October 8, the sun rose over Be’eri. Elhanan and Menachem approached one more house. It was dark inside. A terrorist was hiding there. He opened fire. And both brothers were hit. Menachem was wounded. Elhanan fell into his brother’s arms, in the kibbutz he had come so far to save.

Elhanan Kalmanson left behind a wife and five children in Otniel. And he also saved the lives of more than a hundred people in Be’eri, who are alive today because he decided, one Simchat Torah morning, that when Jews are in danger, “being far away” is not an excuse.

A few months later, the State of Israel awarded Menachem and Itiel the Israel Prize, the highest honor the country can give, for the brave thing the three of them did that day. Menachem accepted it on behalf of all three.

And in Be’eri, those who were saved still tell their children about the voice at the door that said Shema Israel to prove he was a Jew.