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Spared By A Sign

Written by Matias Travieso-Diaz | 👁 Hits: 26



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He gave their crops to the grasshopper, their produce to the locust.

Psalm 78:46

Once, in a remote corner of the world, two tribes dwelt in nearby settlements along a plain that opened beneath towering mountains. The land was fertile but its expanse was narrow, and the tribes were ceaselessly at war with each other, jockeying for control of one strip of terrain or another. After countless deaths and great devastation, both sides remained bloodied but resolute in their determination to overwhelm, and if possibly annihilate, each other.

The tribe that had settled to the west came to be headed by a ruthless chieftain who intended to pursue the war by whatever means required to succeed. He ordained surprise raids on outlying farms of the other tribe; these attacks were ineffectual, taking many innocent lives without gaining much material advantage.

Not everyone agreed with these tactics, but dissenting voices were silenced by the chieftain's supporters. Soon, public expressions of opposition became rare. One morning Tzaddik, the head of one of the families that disagreed with the ongoing campaign, summoned his relatives, servants, and lieges, and revealed that an angel had appeared to him in a dream the previous night to announce that a great misfortune was coming to the land in punishment for human misdeeds. "Those like you, who justly oppose what is going on, will be spared as long as they supply physical evidence of their views." When pressed on what evidence would suffice, the angel would only repeat: "A sign, you must provide a clear sign of how you stand."

Tzaddik went on: "I have thought about the angel's message and concluded it must be taken literally. I want to post a sign at the entrance of the farm setting forth our opposition to this unjust war. That will put us at risk, but it is necessary. Let us think of what the wording of our statement should be. In the meantime, I will get suitable materials for the sign."

While the others were discussing the sign's wording, Tzaddik went to the village to acquire materials for erecting it: a large square of polished wood, brushes, and paint. The merchant he met had a good supply of everything but paint; his stock was depleted save for two colors, white primer and a bright deep blue. The merchant noted, regarding the blue paint: "This paint has been around for years, and now nobody wants to buy it because it smells of rotten eggs. I have six or seven jars that I can sell you at a discount." Tzaddik was about to turn down the offer, but then he thought of the farmer next door, whose views were similar to his. "I'll take them all, plus a matching amount of white primer."

By the time he returned to his farm, the family had agreed on the message, which read: "IN THIS HOUSE WE BELIEVE HUMAN LIFE IS MORE PRECIOUS THAN PROPERTY, ACKNOWLEDGE THE RIGHT OF OTHER PEOPLE TO CONDUCT THEIR AFFAIRS AS THEY SEE FIT, AND HONOR OUR SACRED GODS WHILE RESPECTING THE GODS WORSHIPPED BY OTHERS." Tzaddik was pleased with the wording and placed a large wooden sign at the gate of his farm that bore, over a layer of white paint as base, the words of the message in large, vivid blue characters. When his work was done and the sign had been erected, Tzaddik visited all his neighbors to relate the details of his dream, invite them over to inspect the sign he had erected, and decide whether they would like to install something similar on their properties.

Some neighbors were afraid of possible reprisals and declined to follow Tzaddik's example, but many went on and installed similarly worded signs that dotted the length and width of the land.

One afternoon, a month after Tzaddik's dream, ominous clouds gathered from one end of the horizon to the other. Soon the clouds parted, but instead of rain they discharged wave after wave of orange and yellow insects, which flew downward in a solid mass. Upon reaching the ground, the invaders began feeding voraciously on each other and on all standing vegetation.

"It's the locusts!" screamed someone in Tzaddik's household. "Quick, take cover, hide under something solid! They'll eat through everything!"

A swarm of locusts was a rare but well-known natural disaster, more destructive than an earthquake or a forest fire. In a matter of hours, insects numbering in the billions would eat through an entire province and turn thriving farmland into a desert. Nothing could stand in the path of a swarm, and even wild animals would flee in terror, although the hordes of tiny insects would only eat plant matter.

Tzaddik delayed going into hiding, hoping against hope that the wave of insects would fly by his property without causing much damage. Then, as the first line of invaders reached the boundary of his farm, a few flyers touched on the large sign at the gate and bounced back sharply. It was as if the insects had read the words inscribed on the wooden board and reacted to it; they flew back to the front of the line and caused some confusion among the other insects. Something like a signal was transmitted to the entire contingent and the mass of locusts veered slightly off course, skirting Tzaddik's property.

Hours later, after the swarm had moved eastward, Tzaddik discovered that all the farms that displayed signs like his were free from damage; the rest of the territory lay in ruins. Tzaddik and others debated for a long time why they had been spared. Surely, the creatures could not have read the words!

Tzaddik was the first to come up with an astounding explanation. The locusts could not read the words inscribed on the sign but could detect the lingering reek of the decaying paint. Somehow, they had been instructed to fly past areas where such a smell could be detected.

"Blessed be the Gods" he exclaimed. "Thanks to the sign we were instructed to erect, we have been passed over."

THE END



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