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THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

Huge forest fires that left hundreds homeless and caused over a billion shekels in damages highlighted the ability of Israelis to rally in times of adversity, but also fanned sectarian tensions and raised questions about disaster preparations



A firefighting plane in action over Haifa, November 24

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.”

These are the opening words of Charles Dickens’ 1859 novel, “A Tale of Two Cities,” about tumultuous London and Paris before and during the French Revolution.

Dickens’ words also describe the people of Israel and its leadership during and after the disastrous series of fires that began November 22 and burned for almost a week.

The most serious damage occurred in Haifa, where the fires forced 75,000 residents to be evacuated from their homes and damaged 175 buildings; 100 buildings were destroyed and 500 people left homeless.

It was the biggest such fire since the Mount Carmel forest fire in 2010 that killed 44. In that fire, a Prison Service bus was trapped and burned, killing many cadets, as well as three senior police officers. The fire itself was caused by negligence – a teenage resident of Isfiya, a Druse town, told police he inadvertently started the fire with a hookah ember. After the Carmel fire, there was a wave of arson throughout Israel and the West Bank. All these fires were put out quickly.

In times of crisis, we see the very best of ourselves and, at the same time, the very worst. We see much wisdom and much foolishness.

Worst of Times: The total damage caused by more than 600 fires throughout Israel is estimated at 1 billion shekels, half of it in Haifa. Nearly 5,000 acres of forest and brush land were burned. Mercifully, there was no loss of life, though more than 100 people were taken to hospitals suffering from smoke inhalation.

The series of fires came after a two-month drought, followed by high temperatures, near-zero humidity and fierce winds that left underbrush and fallen leaves tinder dry. Wind-blown sparks fanned by gale winds leaped hundreds of meters to start new fires.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan told Army Radio that “almost half the fires were the result of arson” long before fire investigators had completed their investigation. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh made similar claims.



“Fire caused by arson or incitement to arson is terrorism,” Netanyahu said. The Haifa fires seem to have begun simultaneously in at least four locations, lending credence to the suspicion.

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It is known that Arab villages, too, suffered fires, including Daliat al-Carmel, Ka’abiyye, Iksal, Kabul and Tamra.

I received an email from a student in Egypt who took some of my online entrepreneurship courses. He stated his disgust over numerous gleeful posts on Arab social media, trumpeting “Israel is Burning!” We agreed that those who gloat over human suffering of any kind are beneath contempt.

Best of Times: Israel’s neighbors rallied to send help. Eleven countries – Cyprus, Russia, Croatia, Italy, Turkey, Greece, Jordan, Egypt, Azerbaijan, France and Ukraine – sent

aircraft, equipment and firefighters. And, according to The Jerusalem Post, 40 veteran US firefighters “refused to watch the tragedy unfold from afar” and boarded planes, traveled up to 20 hours and fought the fires alongside their Israeli brothers. They were part of the Emergency Volunteer Project, launched by Israel seven years ago to train and work with US firefighters during emergencies.

“If there is anything I can do to help Israel and my fellow firefighters,” said Ben Arnold, a Los Angeles firefighter, “I am willing and love to do it.”

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas sent firetrucks and crews to help battle the blaze. They were active in Haifa, in the West Bank settlement of Halamish, and especially at the fire in Nataf, a small community in the Jerusalem hills. Netanyahu called to thank him. Israeli police have apprehended a suspect from an Arab village, Kattana, bordering Nataf, who is suspected of throwing a gasoline-filled bottle over the security fence and starting the blaze.

Israelis rallied to support the exhausted firefighters, who raced from fire to fire, mostly without sleep, for a week or more. Many volunteers helped evacuate the elderly, rescue family pets and bring food and



AMIR COHEN / REUTERS

A firefighter douses flames outside Haifa; the fires destroyed some 5,000 acres of woodland

drink to the firefighters.

Firefighters, police, the IDF, emergency medical squads, Home Front officers and soldiers all worked together in close harmony, having prepared through numerous simulated exercises. On-site command posts were set up quickly, and helicopters and drones gave fire crews a bird's-eye view. The Haifa residents ordered to evacuate did so quickly and willingly, despite the immense traffic jams; senior citizens were taken from their homes for the elderly to Haifa Auditorium, where they were cared for by volunteers and youth. Many offered to put up those who were made homeless. By Saturday night, November 26, most residents were able to return to their homes, except, of course, for those who now had none.

Foolishness: Netanyahu is quick to take credit for establishing Israel's 14-plane firefighting squadron after the Mount Carmel fire. Pilots of these planes risked their lives, flying at low altitudes and dumping fire-retarding chemicals on the raging fires, work-

ing around the clock.

But Amir Oren, writing in the daily Haaretz, cited airborne firefighting experts who cast doubt on the effectiveness of these planes. They noted that before the squadron existed, Israel used crop-spraying planes.

"With the establishment of the new squadron," said the expert, "spray-plane pilots were taken off their supplementary job of firefighting. Their small and nimble planes with their diving and climbing abilities allowed the dispersal of fire retardants much closer to the target, allowing them to attack fires that larger planes could not tackle."

How should we prepare for an earthquake? For another series of fires? For massive rocket attacks in a future war?

"In the past," continued the expert, "houses didn't burn because spray planes came down low, nipping the fires in the bud. It's not the amount of water or retardant that's important, but the accuracy of hitting the right spots. Aerial firefighting used to cost 5 million shekels a year (\$1.25m.), without the price of retardants. Now, with 14 designated planes, the costs are 10 times higher and houses are burning."

Each of these 14 small planes carries 3,000 liters of chemicals. After dumping their load on the fire, they need to land to reload. Much larger planes from Russia, Greece and Turkey proved able to skim the ocean just offshore and load up with water – 6,000 liters worth – returning to dump it on the Haifa fires within five minutes. They proved very effective.

Netanyahu has proposed establishing a multi-nation airborne firefighting squadron. This makes a lot of sense. What a single country cannot afford, a dozen countries can. The planes could quickly fly from one country to another when needed.

After the fires were extinguished, the iconic supertanker arrived from the US. This is a Boeing 747-400 that is able to dump 20,000 gallons (74,200 liters) of wa-

ter on a fire, or 25 times that of each of the 14 smaller planes in Israel's airborne squadron. The supertanker soaked the forests surrounding Nataf to prevent the fire from recurring. Watching this huge plane swoop low over the trees and dump its vast tonnage of water was quite amazing. I'm certain the bill for its services was as huge as the plane itself.

Predictably, even while the fires raged, opposition politicians called for a parliamentary inquiry into the debacle. This violates the most important principle of debriefing (the process of dissecting an event and drawing conclusions): Seek insights and lessons learned rather than assign blame. No debrief can be effective if participants are trying to evade blame and conceal the truth.

Wisdom: The disastrous fires point to at least two conclusions related to Israel's lovely forests that resulted from the debrief.

First, pine forests. Over the years, the Jewish National Fund planted more than 240 million trees all over Israel, providing "luscious belts of green covering more than 250,000 acres." For this we applaud them.

But, those luscious belts of green are mostly pine forests and they are particularly flammable, as we saw in Haifa, Nataf and elsewhere. Today, the JNF is planting other types of trees and is thinning out existing pine groves.

Second, firebreaks. When you drive through US forests, everywhere, you see fire breaks – swaths of cleared land designed to keep wildfires from spreading. Some fire breaks were put in place after the 2010 Mount Carmel fire, but not nearly enough. They may not have helped much in the 60-mph winds that fanned the latest blazes, as burning branches were blown for long distances, but more firebreaks are needed and more should have been in place long ago.

Technion Prof. Yohay Carmel notes that climate change is causing "things we haven't seen before. In the 2010 [Mount Carmel fire], there was no significant rainfall until early December so the vegetation had endured nine months of aridity." Now, six years later, a similar situation arose. And it will likely recur. Forest fires have raged annually throughout the Mediterranean basin,

in France, Spain, Portugal and Greece, as well as in California and Australia.

According to Israel's firefighting service, the number of forest fires in Israel has actually declined in the past two years. But the magnitude of the fires, and the damage they caused, is unprecedented.

Hanoch Tzoref, a Jewish National Fund official also attributes this to climate change. "Winter is coming later," he noted, "and the months of November and December have become very dry, with strong winds. Continuous dry, strong winds not only dry the laundry, but also the vegetation and turns it into highly flammable material... I've had 40 years of experience in the Jerusalem Hills and don't remember continuous dry winds for an entire week."

Who will compensate those whose homes were damaged or destroyed? The answer lies somewhere between wisdom and foolishness.

FINANCE MINISTER Moshe Kahlon lives in Haifa, so for him the fire was very personal. He was quick to announce that the government will compensate those who suffered damage. The prime minister held the weekly cabinet meeting in Haifa and said the same. Interior Minister Arye Deri said small initial payments of 2,500 shekels would be made at once to all those who suffered damage.

Under Israeli law, property damage due to terrorism is compensated through the Property Tax Fund. This fund has NIS 8.3b. at present, many times more than the fire damage, and the government has committed to transferring another NIS 1.7b. billion to the fund, topping it up to NIS 10b. The fund is administered by the Israel Tax Authority.

Home insurance has two parts: The structure itself and the home's contents and furnishings. The declaration that the fires were caused by arson nullifies policy owners' claims against the insurance companies. At the same time, the Property Tax Fund pays only up to NIS 150,000 in compensation for damage to furnishings. Kahlon wants the insurance companies to pay the difference between the total damage to furnishings and the NIS 150,000 ceiling that the government will cover. The insurers probably will agree because the government has

generously relieved them of huge sums of compensation with its rather hasty "terrorist arson" declaration.

Netanyahu, Erdan and other ministers were quick to ascribe the fires to arson, but arson investigations take time and the jury is still out.

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According to The Marker columnist and editor Merav Arlosoroff, only 60 percent of homes in Israel have any insurance at all, and only half of those have full insurance on the furnishings, as well as the structure. In the Mount Carmel fire, for instance, allegedly caused by negligence, the government did not compensate those whose homes burned and who had no insurance at all.

So, Arlosoroff notes, we have an absurd situation in which those who were prudent and responsible and did pay for full home insurance (structure and contents) stand to lose since they cannot claim damages from their insurers because the government has declared the cause terrorist arson and because the Property Tax Fund pays for only part of the damage. This is why many of the insurance adjusters sent by the Property Tax Fund were unwelcome when they visited burned homes in Zichron Ya'acov. The owners understand that the government's hurried declaration of arson may cost them dearly.

What should we do to prepare for future

fires and natural disasters? Israel borders on the Syria-Africa rift, an earthquake-prone region. How should we prepare for an earthquake? For another series of fires? For massive rocket attacks in a future war? The latter could cause damage far worse than that caused by the fires.

In their book, "Playing Against Nature," Prof. Seth Stein, a geophysicist and seismologist, and his father, the late Prof. Jerome Stein, an economist, tackle this tough question. They note that, facing nature, you can do four things: Accept, transfer, avoid, mitigate.

Accept – Decide the risk is not big enough to justify massive investment of resources and effort to reduce its effects. Not all risks justify huge investments.

Transfer – Use insurance or another method to pass the risk on to someone else. "There is no such thing as 'other people's money,'" note the two authors. The Property Tax Fund, for instance, which compensates those who incur loss is the money of the people, paid for by taxes. So when it is used to compensate for property damage, we are transferring money from one pocket to another.

This process may be just, or it may not be. But, always, the criteria of social justice and cost-benefit should be applied. Those resources could have other alternate uses. Using them must be justified.

Avoid – Minimize exposure to the risk. There are a great many things to be done to avoid future fire damage. Home owners and municipalities, for instance, can be required to keep trees, brush and bushes a safe distance away from homes. Fire breaks should be more common.

Mitigate – Take other measures to reduce damage and losses. After the 2010 fire, Israel's firefighting capability was upgraded, new equipment purchased and "first responder" teams were more closely integrated. This paid off during the latest fires.

In my column, I generally write about issues that are impersonal and remote from me and my family. But this fire was, to me, very personal. On Thursday, November 24, it proved difficult to return to our home in Zichron Ya'acov, a community of 22,000 people located 22 miles south of Haifa, along the Carmel mountain ridge. A raging fire in the neighborhood known as Givat Eden just

north of our home led police to evacuate everyone and close adjacent roads. At least 10 homes were destroyed by fire there.

From the road, I watched the raging fires that scorched the hillsides and filled the air with acrid smoke. I watched the water-bombing planes spray red fire-retarding chemicals on the flames. It was apocalyptic, surreal. Once at home, I turned on the garden hose and sprinkled the nearby trees and bushes as a precaution. In the face of Mother Nature's rage, a garden hose is puny but somehow reassuring.

Later, on Saturday morning, I went for a hike through Givat Eden. I saw this pastoral suburb, still green and beautiful, with ugly scorched patches of ground and trees on the hillsides, and then saw a single house, badly burned, with a motor scooter in the driveway that had been reduced to ashes. None of the nearby homes had been touched. The randomness of the fire shook me. In the face of disaster, we ask, why me? Why us? Why this particular house? There are no good answers.

My wife and I sold our apartment in Haifa last summer, when we moved south to Zichron Ya'acov. That building, a series of apartments that slope down the mountain-side, borders on a wadi (dry river bed) and was damaged by the fire – the top apartment belonging to a close friend and neighbor for 35 years was utterly destroyed. She lost priceless memorabilia worth far more to her than the furnishings and paintings.

We all live in bubbles of security, routine and certainty. Once in a blue moon, that bubble is burst by a cataclysmic and unexpected event. For me, this fire was such an event. Many good people I know are suffering. And, but for chance, my wife and I might well have joined them. This has shaken me.

At the same time, the people of Israel again have shown their enormous resilience, their ability to bounce back from adversity, their ability to rally together and help one another in times of disaster. And, as always, perhaps naively, I wish this social resilience and sense of community could endure in good times, as well as in bad, forever. ■

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