



**MARKETPLACE:** Shlomo Maital

# Blackened Forest, Black Swan

**T**HE AFTERMATH OF THE Carmel Forest fire in early December left over 12,000 acres of scorched earth and charred trees, and 44 deaths. During the height of the blaze, I watched, from the patio of my home in Haifa, four Greek water-bombing planes circle in neat formation, dipping into the Mediterranean to scoop up water, then flying east, circling back and expertly diving down the Carmel hillsides to dump tons of water on the fire. Many countries swiftly came to Israel's aid – Greece, Turkey, Cyprus and Russia, to name a few. Even the Palestinians sent three fire trucks.

Expectedly, the daily papers scream "Negligence! Failure!" and seek to pin the blame on someone, anyone. Why didn't Israel have water-bombing planes? Why did Israel not organize its fire-fighters in a national, professional organization, rather than leaving it to each budget-strapped local authority? Why were many fire trucks so old they could not even climb the steep road to Beit Oren, a kibbutz that suffered heavy damage? "A two-billion shekel (\$540 m.) screw-up," screamed the business daily *The Marker*.

Israel is a world leader in investigatory commissions. It must be our Jewish DNA. Norman Bentwich, a British Jew who was the first attorney general in Mandatory Palestine, wrote in his biography, "Wanderer Between Two Worlds," "the Jew is not only the scapegoat of history but the barometer of liberty." After the birth of Israel, we are no longer the scapegoats of history. But we are definitely obsessed, almost daily, with creating a history of scapegoats.

Perhaps journalists should read more carefully the best-selling book by Nasim Nicholas Taleb, "The Black Swan," first published in 2007. Taleb uses "black swan" as a metaphor for rare events that are unpredictable and have high impact, but that are highly predictable in hindsight. (Black Swans were thought non-existent, impossible, until discovered in Australia; then their existence was of course obvious.) With little or no rain this summer, tinder-dry forests, too-densely-planted forests and few fire-break roads or fire access roads, of course the Carmel Forest fire was predictable. Those seeking scapegoats have 20/20 hindsight. But their foresight? Generally, legally blind.



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Taleb says rightly that the world pretends Black Swans do not exist. We arrogant humans pretend everything is understandable and predictable. If this is so, then someone is always to blame for every disaster. For Taleb, the 2007-2009 global crisis was a Black Swan. He is at odds with economist Nuriel Roubini, who says it was a White Swan – predictable, and in fact predicted (Roubini warned of it in speeches as early as 2005). I myself wrote an article in a Hebrew business daily in 2005 headed "the US Ship is Sinking." But the extent and nature of the 2007-2009 crisis definitely makes it a Black Swan. No one foresaw it. And so is the Carmel Forest Fire.

There will always be important things that we do not know, Taleb writes. Pretending that we should always know what we do not know is very dangerous. The problem is, we do not know what we do not know. So we cannot prepare for the consequences. Sometimes, he notes, there are positive Black Swans. Louis Pasteur wrote, "chance favors the prepared mind." If you prepare your mind for serendipitous events, you are better equipped to seize them. This is how penicillin was discovered, when in 1928 Alexander Fleming noted how blue mold in a Petri dish "circles the wagons" to keep out staphylococcus bacteria.

"Our world is dominated," Taleb writes, "by the extreme, the unknown, and the very improbable – and all the while we spend our

time engaged in small talk, focusing on the known and the repeated. ... The future will be increasingly less predictable, while both human nature and social science conspire to hide the idea from us."

Taleb is speaking directly to Israel, a nation that faces more Black Swans than any other, except perhaps Haiti, and has developed enormous social resilience to deal with them. The people of Israel have pulled together to support those who lost loved ones and possessions in the fire. My synagogue quickly raised money and a synagogue full of clothing for the children whose Yemin Orde orphanage burned down. The Israel Air Force performed superbly, coordinating a fleet of 35 water-bombing planes in a highly complex and risky operation. Firefighters worked almost without sleep for four days.

Enormous energy is wasted on finding scapegoats. It's time we stopped this. Let's debrief the fire, draw conclusions, take appropriate action, look to the future and move ahead. Let us emulate nature. Soon, green shoots will appear in the smoldering ruins as nature again renews itself. Israel has had, and will always have, flocks of Black Swans. Treating them all as if they were White Swans, while seeking those to blame, is futile, arrogant and destructive.

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