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# Was Trumpeldor Mashiach Ben Yosef?

*Moshe Nachmani*

*Born in 1880 in Piatygor'sk, Joseph Trumpeldor served gallantly in the Russian army, losing his left hand during the siege of Port Arthur. Drawn to Zionism, Trumpeldor moved to Israel in 1912, but was expelled by the Turks in 1915. At a refugee camp in Egypt, Trumpeldor met Ze'ev Jabotinsky, where they hatched a plan to create a Jewish unit in the British army – a unit that eventually became the Zion Mule Corps. After serving with distinction at Gallipoli, Trumpeldor and other Zion Mule Corps veterans became the core of the British army's Jewish Legion, which helped liberate Israel from Turkish control in 1917–1918.*

*In 1919, the Jewish Defense Committee sent Trumpeldor to the Galilee to fortify the Jewish settlements in the region. On March 1, 1920 (the 11th of Adar), Trumpeldor and seven other Jews died while defending Tel Chai against Arab attackers. The last words attributed to Trumpeldor, אין דבר, טוב למות בעד ארצנו, "Never mind, it is good to die for our land," inspired Zionists all over the world. The city of Kiryat Shmona is named in their memory. May their memory inspire us all to serve our people – with strength and courage!*



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According to Jewish tradition, before *Mashiach ben David* will come *Mashiach ben Yosef*, who symbolizes the heroism of the people of Israel. This is mentioned in many books of *Kabbalah* and originates in the sayings of the Sages (Sukkah 52a, Zohar 1:25). In recent generations, *gedolei yisrael* have pointed to a variety of personalities who were known for their great bravery and dedication to the settlement of our people in the Land, claiming that they contained “sparks” or “aspects” of *Mashiach ben Yosef*.

In Rav Kook’s famous essay, *המקד בירושלים*, a 1904 obituary for Theodor Herzl, he describes the *Mashiach ben Yosef* as one who “physically strengthens the nation and provides for their other human needs, one who stems from the unique foundations of Yosef and Ephraim.” Rav Kook illustrates this idea through the example of King Achav, who also contained an aspect of *Mashiach ben Yosef* because “he loved Israel very much”. Though Rav Kook said this in his obituary for Herzl, his words are equally relevant to another Zionist personality.

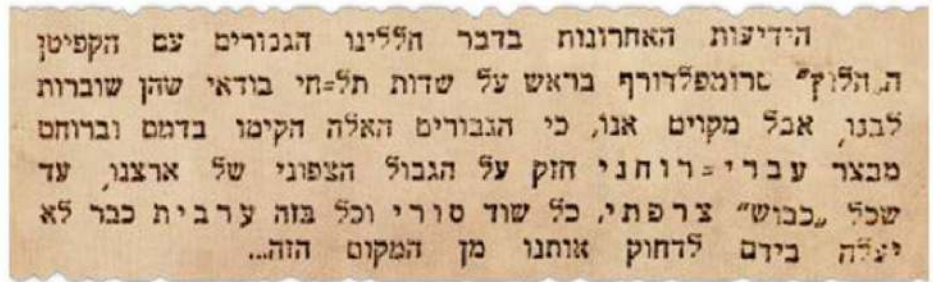
### A national hero

Joseph Trumpeldor was the national hero whose personal bravery awakened the latent heroism in the Jewish masses. One of Trumpeldor’s friends eulogized him: “With you, we were a tribe of lions; without you, we are sheep without a shepherd.” Yesha-yahu Drezner, one of the Tel Chai fighters, said of him: “Seeing him from afar, we were strengthened and encouraged.”

Trumpeldor became famous around the world as one of the founders and commanders of the the Zion Mule Corps. All the NCOs and some of the officers in the regiment were Jewish, and while training was done in English, routine orders were published in Hebrew.

At the time Rav Kook spoke about Herzl, Trumpeldor’s name was just beginning to become known in the Jewish world. In later years, and particularly after the Battle of Tel Chai, Trumpeldor became known internationally as *the* “Jewish national hero”, a rare expression used in articles about him in the newspapers of the time.

The attribute of heroism was associated with Trumpeldor far more than it was associated with Herzl, who represented the Jewish people’s stubborn demand for national rebirth. And so Rav Kook’s words about the national heroism of *Mashiach ben Yosef* are more appropriate concerning



The recent news of the fall of our heroes, led by Trumpeldor “the pioneer” on the fields of Tel Chai, breaks our hearts. But we hope that these heroes, with their blood and spirit, have established a powerful Hebrew fortress at the northern border of our Land, so that any French “conquering”, Syrian robbery, or Arab plundering will not succeed in removing us from this place... (HaMizrachi, March 1920)

Trumpeldor, particularly after his last battle at Tel Chai.

*Chazal*’s description of Achav, “who continued fighting even after he was struck by arrows, so as not to frighten Israel,” cited by Rav Kook, accurately describes Trumpeldor’s leadership in the last hours of his life, when he was suffering excruciating pain yet found the strength to encourage his friends to continue to fight.

In Trumpeldor there was the great light of *Mashiach ben Yosef*. According to ancient sources, the *Mashiach ben Yosef* was destined to appear precisely in the heights of the Galil, where Trumpeldor lived and worked: “[There shall step forth a star out of Ya’akov]... and shall smite through the corners of Moav’ (Bamidbar 24:17). Said Rav Huna in the name of Rav Levi: This teaches that Israel will be gathered in the upper Galil and the *Mashiach ben Yosef* will watch over them...” (*Midrash Lekach Tov*).

*Mashiach ben Yosef* was also described by *Chazal* as the “Anointed for War” because he was destined to go to war against the nations and begin the redemption. They further stated that *Mashiach ben Yosef* would fall in battle after only a few remnants of Israel would gather to him. As Rav Sa’adia Gaon explained in *Emunot V’Deot*: “Since time has passed and we have not returned [to the Land], we will be returned without repentance... And [our ancestors] also said that the reason for this would be the standing of a man from the seed of Yosef on Har HaGalil, and the remnants of people from the nation would gather around him... and he would sit there for a certain time, and then he would fight... and a man who was from the seed of Yosef will be among the slain.” (*Ma’amar* 8, Chapter 5)

Joseph Trumpeldor was not biologically “from the seed of Yosef”, but there is no doubt that he inherited the qualities of the righteous Yosef. Joseph Trumpeldor was named after *Yosef HaTzaddik* because he was

born in the month of Tevet, when the *parshiyot* describing the story of Yosef are read.

Rav Saadia Gaon wrote that *Mashiach ben Yosef* would stand in the Galil, and indeed both times that Trumpeldor came to Israel he chose to settle there – in Migdal and Degania, in Kfar Giladi and in Tel Chai – and friends and admirers gathered around him. In the battle for the defense of the Galil, Trumpeldor fell, saying in his final moments that “It is good to die for our land”, which became a symbol of heroism and devotion to the Land of Israel.

### Bar Kochba comes to life in Tel Chai

Trumpeldor’s similarity to Bar Kochba’s soldiers was mentioned in *Ha’aretz*’s announcement of his death: “Joseph Trumpeldor, the hero of Israel, has fallen! Like a magical figure of old, this man, a descendant of the ancient heroes of Israel, was of the camp of Bar Kochba, a follower of the hero from Gush Chalav” (*Ha’aretz*, March 5, 1920).

After Trumpeldor’s death, the writer and poet S. Ansky wrote: “I met him often in Petrograd and Moscow. He was an unusual person, strong, courageous and upright in body and soul. With his strong and tense lips, his hand pressed to his side, he seemed like a soldier in the army of Bar Kochba, passed down to us from previous generations... he was complete, fearless and silent. Even his severed hand reminded me of the legend of the heroes of Bar Kochba, who demonstrated their strength of will and self-sacrifice by cutting off their fingers.”

The name of the Beitar movement also expresses Jabotinsky’s belief that Trumpeldor was the successor of Bar Kochba. He spelled the name as בית"ר, which stands for ברית יוסף תרומפלדור, even though Trumpeldor is generally spelled in Hebrew with a ט, because he wanted to connect two historical episodes – the heroism of Trumpeldor and his friends at Tel Chai and the bravery of Bar Kochba in his last fortress in the city



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of Beitar (בֵּיתֶר) during the Second Temple period.

As is well known, many *gedolim* initially believed that Bar Kochba was the *Mashiach*, even though he did not carefully observe the *mitzvot*. Bar Kochba's status as a national hero was enough for Rabbi Akiva and the sages of his generation to consider him the *Mashiach* or at least the *Mashiach ben Yosef*. Similarly, Abarbanel wrote: "When Rabbi Akiva saw the miracles and heroic deeds performed by Ben Koziva (Bar Kochba) in all the Roman lands, he thought in his heart that he was the messenger of Providence, the *Mashiach* of the G-d of Ya'akov, but only in the matter of waging war and taking revenge upon our enemies" (*Yeshuat Meshicho*, 1:4).

Since the days of Beitar to the present, many have criticized Bar Kochba. But Trumpeldor himself identified with him. While studying at the university in Petrograd, Trumpeldor attended classes by the historian Shimon Dubnov. In one of the lessons, Dubnov said: "Yochanan of Gush Chalav and Bar Giora should not have fought against the Romans, for the zealots should have known that they had no chance of victory against the Roman Empire." Hearing this, Trumpeldor asked for permission to speak and responded: "This is exactly how the historians dismissed the Bar Kochba rebellion too! In every generation, we have preachers and moralists who advise us, out of a desire for *shalom bayit*, to kiss the whip of those who are stronger than us - weak people who consider our nation as lowly of spirit and

unworthy of being independent with our backs straight and tall. This is why we are begging for favors and collecting crumbs from the tables of our rulers!"

● This essay was originally published in Hebrew in *Olam Katan*.



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