37 Years Without a Grave

In 1982, during the first Lebanon War, the young sergeant Zachary Baumel z”l, fell together with his brothers in arms who operated the same tank, in the battle of Sultan Yaaqov. For years it was presumed that Baumel was no longer alive, but his body did not appear. Last week, soldiers from the Russian army stationed in Syrian territory, exhumed Baumel’s remains and took them to Moscow, where they were positively identified by Israeli pathologists. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was urgently called to Moscow where, on Thursday, April 4, Russian Army General Valery Gerasimov led the ceremony in honor of Baumel, being the first time in Russian history that the highest command of the army carries out a service of this level to honor a foreign soldier. The remains of Baumel, along with his *talit qatan*, were taken from Moscow to Israel and buried with all the honors in the Har Hertzel military cemetery.

This Shabbat I was thinking about the Baumel family and what it meant for them to have been able to bury their son.

To understand a little better the great relief they will have felt, I had to remind myself what I experienced in 1994. I was the rabbi of Agudat Dodim, a Syrian community in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I spent almost 10 days in the basement of Ayacucho Street (the Rambam School) with more than 80 families who were waiting to receive news of their missing loved ones. We all sensed the worst, yet there was something inexplicable, an illogical hope, that can only be understood when one lives through these extreme circumstances. The families, almost without exceptions, clung to the illusion that their loved ones were alive, that they had survived the explosion, that somehow they had left the rabbles and were walking around the streets, disoriented, in shock and amnesia, waiting to be found. Everyone embraced this “irrational fantasy”, a deep denial; fruit of the deep love we feel for our loved ones,

that refuses to disappear.
Now imagine being in this torturous state of mind, but for 37 years. Imagine Miryam Baumel, Zachary's mother, and the uncountable times she has clung, awake or in her dreams, to the illusion that her son is alive, in prison, or lost, disorientated, with amnesia or abandoned.
It is impossible to conceive the psychological torture that a a family member, especially a parent, lives in a situation like this. Burying the body of a loved one brings that relief, and allows the true mourning to begin, even 37 years later.

Beyond the deep emotional aspect, the recovery of the remains of Baumel is seen as a victory for the state of Israel. Why? Because in this case Israel did not have to pay any "price" to recover the body of a fallen soldier. For example, Israel freed 1,000 terrorists in exchange for one Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. These released terrorists, it has been demonstrated, involve the risk of more terrorism against Israel. And still, at the moment of truth, Israel was willing to pay that price for the life of a soldier. What is less known is that Israel has also released terrorists in exchange for "the bodies" of Israeli soldiers. Simply to bury him in the Holy Land (qeber Israel) and bring some relief to his family. Our enemies know our nobility (which they see as "weakness") and exploit it infinitely. To this day, Hamas has in its possession the remains of two Israeli soldiers – Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul – which they cynically keep as bargaining chips for "future negotiations". In the case of Baumel, Israel did not have to release any terrorists for his body. The Russian army gave Israel the remains of Sargent Baumel z"l, without asking for anything in exchange, and with all due respects.

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