

Remembering Zechariah

Tazria Ha-Chodesh

1 Nissan 5779

Zechariah Shlomo ben Miriam Baumel.

I know that name not because I looked it up this week, after one of the most stirring and poignant moments in the history of the Jewish state occurred, and Zachary Baumel, after thirty seven years in captivity, was finally brought home to *kever yisrael*, to a proper Jewish grave in the Jewish homeland. As his sister so beautifully noted in the funeral in Har Hetzl on Thursday, the Land for which he gave everything can finally reciprocate and envelop him in its soil for eternal rest, למנוחות עולמים.

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I know that name, rather, because for so many years, like the rest of the Jewish people, I recited that name in prayer that the terrible nightmare which the Baumel family was suffering, not knowing the fate of their son, whether he was alive or dead, cold and freezing or hot and thirsty, subject to torture, would come to an end. And, despite the terrible sadness of knowing that Zachary is no longer with us here on this earth, we all take no small measure of comfort in the knowledge that he is not suffering, and that the family can begin to heal. As the Sages of the Talmud, in their profound

wisdom, taught us, 'there is no joy equal to the removal of doubt',
אין שמחה כהתרת הספיקות.

For me, there is a deep measure of personal identification, and there has been for years, with Zachary Baumel. Not only was he American, but he attended the same day school as my father, Yeshiva Etz Chaim Boro Park. He studied in the same yeshiva in Israel, Yeshivat Har Etzion, where my father, my brothers, and I all studied, which is the largest yeshiva hesder in Israel, where students go from the Beit Midrash to the battlefield, as Zachary did on that June day thirty seven years ago.

Even as I arrived in the yeshiva twenty years after his disappearance, it was, in the yeshiva, not some kind of historical event. There is a familial aspect to those who study Torah immersively together, and, as such, the sense one had was truly that of an extended member of the family being missing. And, this living sense of what it truly means that we are all responsible for each other, that we are all guarantors of each other, כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, felt so deeply in the Land of Israel, is something which continues to inspire, and to which we can all aspire.

II.

Today, there is an almost inexpressible pride that is ours in the Israel Defense Forces, in the entire intelligence community, in the entire political echelon, for all of their help in achieving that which seemed, at times, nothing more than a fantasy.

As the prophet Zechariah said over two thousand years ago, ‘not with armed might and now with physical strength, but through the spirit’, **לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי אמר ה' צבקות**, only through the indomitable spirit of the the security services to bring back each soldier was this possible. Persistence and determination, and never forgetting Zechariah, were the essential elements in the historic events which transpired this week.

The halakhic worldview establishes an equation between a single member of the Jewish people and literally, an entire world, an **עולם מלא**, and, as such, the ethos demanded by this equation lead the army and the state, of which we can be so proud, to undertake unparalleled operations and investments to bring all of our soldiers home.

There is something extraordinary about this unwavering commitment to each and every soldier who puts on the uniform of the Israel Defense Forces, which was manifest so magnificently this

week, and I see in it as a fulfillment of the Biblical mandate for our army to be a sanctified one, **והיה מחניך קדוש**.

We read this morning of the *metzora*, whose asocial behaviors, his *lashon ha-ra*, his divisive and derogatory speech, who arrogance, **גסות רוח**, whose lack of generosity and cynicism, **צרות העין**, require his temporary expulsion from the Jewish camp, **בדד ישב מחוץ**, **למחנה מושבו**.

Belonging to the camp, to the **מחנה**, is a privilege to which only the *metzora* is not entitled until he repents and we were reminded this week of why this is true, because the camp, the Jewish people, is sanctified in its very essence, and it is sanctified through its heroism to ensure that none but the *metzora* is left outside the camp, and alone.

III.

Twice, Maimonides wrote, there is no mitzvah as great as redeeming captives, **אין לך מצוה רבה כפדיון שבויים**. The roots of this mitzvah takes us back to the very dawn of our nation, when Avraham incurred enormous personal risk in launching a daring rescue operation to bring the captive Lot back home. Avraham's mission to rescue Lot took him to the very outskirts of Damascus, **אשר** **מצפון לדמשק**, and indeed, these are the distances to which Tzahal went to bring Zechariah back as well.

Ma'aseh Avot Siman L'Banim, the lives of our ancestors continue to resonate for us as well. And in this instance, the connections run even deeper.

The Sages of the Talmud taught us that Avraham's rescue of Lot, for which he categorically rejected any earthly remuneration, **אם ילך** **מחוט ועד שרוך נעל ואם אקח מכל אשר יש לך**, established the merit through which his children would receive the mitzvah of tzitzit, which would serve as an eternal reminder of our commitments to the Almighty. It was, in that sense, deeply moving that one of the two central identifying markers of Zechariah were his tzitzit.

In this instance, the *tzitzit* were not only a mechanism through which to remember the Almighty, **למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי**, and of course, the very name Zechariah means to remember the Almighty, but a mechanism that allowed us to remember and to identify Zechariah, and to bring him back home.

Zechariah Shlomo ben Miriam Baumel.

This name, is for me, linked inextricably with two other names, which were always recited immediately after his. Yehuda Nachman ben Sarah Katz, and Tzvi ben Penina Feldman. Yehuda Katz and Tzvika Feldman are the two soldiers still missing from the battle of Sultan Yaaqub, and we know now that the chances of their recovery

have never been greater. Tzvika was in the very same tank as Zechariah, and Yehuda was just two kilometers away during the battle.

And so, even as our hearts swell with pride to be members of a people that behaves with such humanity, and such bravery, and such sanctity, let us once again storm the very gates of heaven on behalf of all of those who have gone missing, Yehuda Katz and Tzvi Feldman, on the one hand, and those whose bodies have yet to be returned, Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin, to experience that great merit for which Yaakov and Yosef yearned so fervently, burial in the Land of Israel.

In Nissan we were redeemed, and in Nissan, we will be redeemed. בניסן נגאלו, בניסן עתידין ליגאל. As we begin the month of of Nissan today, the month of redemption, we are once again reminded that the long arm of He who is the guardian of Israel, and its redeemer, is capable of anything, and everything.

ושבו בנים לגבולם, and the sons will be returned to the Land which yearns so deeply for them, בקיבוץ בניה לתוכה בשמחה, and who will joyously, welcome each and every one of them.