

"Remembering Zachary Baumel, z"l A Reflection of Birth, Death, Sadness, Anger, and Pride."



*Delivered by Rabbi Howard Morrison at Beth Emeth Bais Yehuda Synagogue
Shabbat April 6, 2019, Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5779, Parshat Ha'Chodesh*

Today, we have read from three sifrei torah, a rarity in the Jewish calendar. Many of us are familiar with the three scrolls we read from on Simchat Torah - The end of the Torah, the Festival Maftir, and the beginning of the Torah.

Many of us are familiar with the occasion when the weekly parsha, the shabbat of chanukah, and Rosh Chodesh Tevet coincide, resulting in our reading from three Torah scrolls.

Today marks the only other occasion, as the weekly parsha of Tazria, Rosh Chodesh Nissan, and Shabbat Ha'Chodesh all coincide, resulting in three Torah scrolls being used.

How blessed we are at Beth Emeth that we own multiple Torah scrolls, in that three were used earlier in the chapel, and a different three were used in the sanctuary this morning. Just a few weeks ago, I visited my older son in Alpena, Michigan, where a tiny shul owns just two sifrei Torah. How fortunate we are!

What do our three readings today share in common? Tazria means giving birth. The Parsha opens with the celebration and ritual of when a woman gave birth to a girl or a boy in Biblical times. Rosh Chodesh is the birth of a new month, with today being the first day of Nissan. The moon will be reborn, as our Jewish calendar celebrates the lunar cycle of the year. Shabbat Ha'Chodesh reminds us that Pesach is two weeks away, commemorating the birth of the Jewish people as a free liberated nation, celebrating its redemption from slavery to freedom and beginning its trek to Mount Sinai and to the Promised Land. The Shabbat Ha'Chodesh Torah reading provides the very first collective Mitzvah given to the Jewish people, the birth of the Jewish calendar. So, all three Torah texts deal with birth in one way or another.

In our shul today, we have celebrated births and new beginnings. Birthdays and anniversaries suggest a chapter of new beginnings and a new season of renewal in the lives of the celebrants and their families.

This coming Tuesday night, my lone soldier son, Yonah, will be returning for a few weeks to Toronto from his military service in Israel. As he has put it, his home is Toronto, and his homeland is Israel. There was, is, and will never be a conflict between the two regardless of what a sometimes anti-Jewish press has to say. Yonah will celebrate his birthday while he is here in Toronto on May 1, turning 21 years old. I look forward to celebrating his birthday with him.

Sadly, as we think of birth and renewal in different contexts today, we think of one other birthday, which tragically resulted in a very short life, one which ended at the age of 21, the age my lone soldier son is turning in a few weeks.

As many of us learned this past Wednesday, the remains of Zachary Baumel along with his tzizit were returned to Israel for proper burial. Ever since I became the rabbi of Beth Emeth, we have recited a Mi Shebarach prayer every Shabbat morning for our IDF soldiers missing in action, hoping and praying that they are still alive. Today is the first Shabbat that the name Zachary Baumel was not recited just moments ago.

Zachary moved with his family from Brooklyn to Israel in 1970. He was 21 years old when he went missing with two others during the first Lebanon war in 1982. His father, Yona, wanted only to know the truth of what happened to his son. Yona died in May 2009 at the age of 81. The two are now reunited in Gan Eden - paradise for eternity.

Zachary's last postcard to his family read, "Don't worry. Everything is okay, but it looks like I won't be home for a while." After 37 years of not knowing, his remains were buried with his tzizit so that his Jewish clothing of honour

and piety could be buried with him. Finally, Zachary has come home, but in the worst way that one could have imagined.

I am sad and angry today. I am sad for the loss of a precious young life, a life that went missing at the age of 21. Who knows when and under what horrific circumstances young Zachary lost his life???

I am angry at how the young men and women who serve in Israel's Defense Forces are maligned by so much of the world around us.

I am also proud today for the dignity and honour with which our young IDF soldiers serve and represent the State of Israel. On a personal note, a week and a half ago, when missiles were flying from Gaza into close proximity of my son's search and rescue base near Ashkelon, Yonah called me to explain that his base had to be evacuated for at least a couple of days. While I expressed a voice of parental concern, my son expressed a voice of confidence and optimism, the voice shared by every one of his colleagues serving in the IDF.

We mourn the loss of Zachary Baumel on this Shabbat when we have read three articulations of birth in our three Torah readings. We must, therefore, also celebrate the life of Zachary Baumel, as we celebrate the birthday and anniversaries being commemorated in shul today.

Yehi Zichro Baruch - May the memory of Zachary Baumel always be a blessing to his family and to the people of Israel.

Rabbi Howard Morrison

