

I have tried over the years to go to as many of the shivas of terror victims or fallen soldiers as I can, as representative of the Rabbinical Council of America. The past 8 months has been overwhelming for me in many different ways. Attending funerals and shivas is emotionally draining. And especially since I have become a crier. Don't know when that happened exactly. But hugging and crying have become a part of our lives.

Over the past 8 months, I have attended a lot of funerals and shivas, but mostly those in Jerusalem or those with an English speaking connection. This week, I guess with the passage of time and also with so many soldiers falling in a couple of days, I tried to get to as many as I could around the country. Here are some random thoughts.

8 soldiers were killed when their Namer personnel carrier was attacked. After my last visit in Ashdod, at the shiva for Stanislav Kosterov, a"h, his officer was heading back to Jerusalem so I gave him a lift. He explained that this unit was an engineering corp. They are responsible for detonating buildings when there is a concern that the terrorists would occupy the building and be able to shoot down on troops from the roofs. And they also detonate the tunnels. Since they need to transport explosives on the personnel carrier, they are always worried about an attack that would hit the explosives and detonate the whole Namer. The Namer is fortified more than a tank, so it can withstand anti-tank missiles. But not if the explosives that they are using are hit. They try to have only the explosives they need for whatever they are doing, to limit this risk. This group was retreating, so they needed to transport all of their explosives out of that area. That was when they were hit.

The shiva for Eliyahu Moshe Zimbalist, a"h, son of American olim, in Beit Shemesh bore the signs of so many of the shivas of children of olim. There are so many people that it is often difficult to even get in the door. It becomes like a receiving line. People line up and pause for a brief exchange with the mourners and file past. I was able to speak for a moment with the grandfather who was born in St. Louis, besides briefly with the father. There were educators, people connected to the grandparents, connected through Silver Spring, connected in the Beit Shemesh community. And many olim who feel connected merely as fellow olim. There is a kinship of shared experience for English speaking olim and people come out in large numbers.

I tried to go to the shivas where I thought there would be less visitors. Yakir Levi, a"h, was 21, a student at Yeshivat Shaalvim where our son Dovid attended. His family was sitting shiva in their home on Kibbutz Chofetz Chaim. His father was describing his son's service. They had discussed the dangers of war, especially the danger of the explosives. Yakir had said: I am careful. I don't want to die. But if I need to, I am prepared for that.

The father then pointed to a man with a white beard, sitting in the kitchen in front of a large book of the Talmud. That is my father. He made aliya from Morocco with his 2 brothers. This month, in the past 30 days, all 3 of them have had grandchildren fall in battle.

An older couple approached the bereaved father and he rose to speak with them. Their son was killed in Tzuk Eitan, 15 years ago. The man said: our son was killed on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tevet. 3 months later was the Pesach Seder. When I got to the bracha of shehechyanu I froze. I couldn't get the words out. I was paralyzed. 50 days later was Shavuot. I looked around the room and had so much to be thankful for. This time I could say the Shehechyanu. I spoke with them, the Sterns, on the way out. An F-15 flying low in the distance. The roosters crowing. They traveled from Jerusalem, to go to shivas to comfort people, sharing their story, showing that life goes on, never the same, you never get over the loss of your child but here they are.

At the shiva of Slav Kosterov, a"h, in Ashdod I spoke with his mother through a translator. She spoke only Russian. Her sister also spoke only Russian. The niece translated for me. Each loss is tragic. The family will never be the same. But circumstances are different. Slav's family is small. His sister lives in Ukraine. His mother is alone, Russian speaking in a Hebrew speaking world. And now without the son that was her support.

When I arrived, the mother had gone inside. The shiva tent had 15 people. Some of his teachers, his relatives, friends. How could he be a soldier. He was so sweet and quiet. His officer, what they call the mem peh, mefaked pluga, the officer in charge of 50 soldiers spoke. When I arrived to become the officer – no one likes a new officer. They ignore you. Where is the old mefaked. Slav treated me like a friend. Told me the dynamics of the group. Said good morning, how are you. He eased me into my position. Another said – his mother never knew, but yesterday a soldier came and told her that he was wounded and Slav carried him to where he could be treated. On his back. And never told anyone. Like it was no big deal.

The young fellow sitting next to me spoke to me in English. His family made aliya from Ukraine. How do you speak English so well? I watch a lot of English TV and play video games. I was a cook in the army. There were 3 chefs and they taught a bunch of us how to cook. (I was curious but didn't ask him why instead of an earring he had a screw in his ear). A woman and man, in their 40s arrived, in army fatigues. I asked her what her connection was. She told me – every fallen soldier has officers who are with the family from the death until the burial. I was with them up until the burial and came to visit them now during their shiva. When she heard I was from Toronto, she said – I was just there for a conference for woman business executives. She is the CEO of a company and does miluim to escort families through those terrible days from the death of their relative until their burial.

On the way back from Ashdod, the officer told me in great detail of the work of the engineering corp. I could see he took comfort and pride in telling of their work. He was wounded in his eye 3 months ago. They were in a Namer armoured truck, going through Khan Yunis telling the people through a loudspeaker to move to Rafah. They could have dropped leaflets from a plane or helicopter but this was more effective and direct. Their officer had the turret open and was hit by a missile. (The soldier telling the civilians to move, to save their lives, is shot at). The shrapnel scattered and hit this fellow in his eye. He was the second in command, so he had to take over. Fortunately, they had a medic who was able to save the officer. Only later did

this fellow realize he couldn't see. The pressure of the moment to assume the position of officer overtook him and only later did he realize his injuries.

He was the only kipa at that shiva tent. He told me that in his unit, when people saw him put on tefillin, they asked to put them on as well, religious or not. One fellow asked him one day – where is your tefillin, why aren't you putting them on. He explained that it was Shabbat but that tomorrow he would have them.

The shiva for Yair Roitman, a"n, was in Karnei Shomron. Yair's parents are both educators. Yair didn't spend a lot of time in school. He started a sushi and pizza business at age 16. Lots of friends. His mother sat outside in the tent. She asked the Rav of the Yishuv, Rav Druckman what he remembers. Yair called me about the sushi. He wanted it all to be the highest level of kashrut. See, the mom said, he wasn't a shovavnik (rebel), just didn't want to sit in school when he could be doing something better. From the mom, the teacher. The women all had stories, sharing, most of them with the colorful head coverings that is the fashion in the Shomron. The father was inside. A Rav with a full, grey beard and fatigues was there. I spoke with him after. He is the Rav in Soroka hospital and was with Yair for his final days, fighting what was a futile fight for his life, with severe brain injuries.

The shiva for Itai Amar, 19, was in Kochav Yair. Kochav Yair is a secular yishuv. There were 20 people sitting around the salon. A man about 50 is speaking sitting right beside the mom. She is holding a scrapbook. A couple of kipot in the group. She is repeating what the man is saying, clearly the father of another boy in his unit, explaining how the explosion that killed her son happened. Often at these shivas, word goes around that the mem peh, the officer of the unit is coming in a half hour. The family desperately wants whatever information they can get on their son's death. And of his life in the army, the part of his life they know little about. The mom was clearly comforted to hear the details, repeating them to the group.

A man walked in. She said, I don't believe it. They hugged. He sat beside her, tears in his eyes. She said, Itai loved his shoes. He told me they were so comfortable. The man owns the shoe store. A local merchant coming to be with a bereaved mom. With tears.

I introduced myself to the mom, telling her I was here on behalf of the 1000 rabbis of the RCA to be with her as part of Am Yisrael. She said to me - have you met Itai's brother. No. She got up, left all the people, took me aside, walked toward a closed door. She opened it and there is the brother, wrapping up his tefilin (it is 12 noon) putting them in his tefilin bag, adorned with a picture of 770 Eastern Parkway. Full beard, kipa with melech hamashiach, tsitsis out. Chozer b'teshuva through chabad after selling jewelry in malls in North America. We need mashiach. Now.

I walked out with the shoe store owner. And thanked him for coming. You really gave her comfort to know that you cared to come. He shook my hand, more tears – there is too much pain. Enough.

There is more to write. War is bad. Such sweet souls. So many lost lives. On both sides. We wish it were different. This is a war we didn't want. And don't want. But that needs to be fought. It's bad. But not fighting is bad too.

Shabbat Shalom

Reuven Tradburks