

Rabbi Bini Freedman

Yeshivat Orayta

I remember that evening like it was yesterday. When we returned to yeshiva Sunday morning, half of the guys hadn't returned. We were told that they had been drafted over Shabbat...that evening, during night Seder, Rav Amital entered the Beit Midrash and went to the Bima. Total silence fell over the Beit Midrash, and in an emotional voice, the Rav instructed the boys from shiur Daled and Heh to go to their rooms and pack their gear. "In 30 minutes, buses will be coming to take you north. Go in peace and return in peace."

I accompanied Zechariah Baumel to the bus, and I still remember his smile. It was the last time I would see Zechariah.

I have so many memories when I think of Zechariah's face. We were in rooms next to each other in Dorm 10. During night Seder, we sat in rows in the Beit Midrash. I remember him as if it was yesterday, opposite the Aron Kodesh, in the third seat from the right in the front row, sitting and learning. We learned Baba Metzia together in chavruta. Often, we would find ourselves going from the opinions of Abaya and Rava, into deep discussions. There, well into the night in the Beit Midrash, Zechariah taught me, a young foreign student, about the significance of free will. Soon after, with that same free will, Zechariah would find himself on the battlefield, after our forces had withdrawn and he remained alone in the darkness behind enemy lines.

I had arrived at yeshiva as a young American student, expecting to learn for a year before returning to study law in New York. Something influenced me, and I stayed. One of the guys who took me under his wings was Zechariah. It is impossible to forget our deep conversations, at night, under the stars. We spoke about the State and the Army, about the people and the Diaspora, about destiny and choice - discussions which now looking back take on such deep meaning. Often, we discussed the concept of 'Hesder', the guys who love to learn Torah but also understood the need to fulfill their duty.

I didn't fully understand the depth of pain and anguish of the Baumel family, until I spoke with Zachariah's parents when they came to celebrate my wedding. At the beginning of the meal, they apologized to us that they would not be able to stay, and it was clear they wanted to celebrate with us, despite their pain. When I looked into Miriam Baumel's eyes, I understood. They didn't just see me under the Chuppa, With me, celebrating in joy, stood Zechariah.

"May death be forever swallowed up and HaShem wipe the tears from every face."