

Missing in Action **by Rabbi Shraga Simmons**

The Talmud says that after one year, a person is consoled of a loved one's death. But the biblical Jacob mourned for 22 long years following the disappearance of his son Joseph -- given the uncertain evidence of whether Joseph was dead or alive.

A similar ordeal confronts those Israeli families whose loved one has been captured by Arab militias and his fate remains unknown.

Since Israeli independence in 1948, 420 Israeli soldiers have been declared "Missing in Action" (MIA). Every year, a state ceremony is held at Mt. Herzl, Israel's military cemetery in Jerusalem. The ceremony is on Adar 7, the Hebrew anniversary of the death of Moses, whose final resting place is also unknown.

At any one time, some of the MIAs are listed as "missing but presumed alive." The IDF follows Jewish law that he is presumed to be alive without concrete evidence of a person's death.

Over the years, a steady flow of information supports the presumption that some of these MIAs may be alive and held under Syrian and Iranian control. Yet despite the diplomatic and military efforts of over seven successive Israeli governments, almost no progress has been made in determining the missing men's fate.

There is no way of knowing their situation -- who exactly is holding them, where, and under what conditions. Representatives of international relief organizations have not been allowed to visit them, nor do captors allow the delivery of even a brief note from the MIAs to their families (or from family members to them).

The families all suffer with nagging questions: Was their loved one wounded? Have they received medical treatment? What conditions are they being kept in? Are they under interrogation and torture?

Penina Feldman, the mother of one of the MIAs, says: "I cried on Yom Hazikaron (Israeli Memorial Day). I don't even belong to this day. I have nothing. I sit and cry. I don't even have a grave. I want the Jewish people not to forget these boys. Lately, many mothers are mourning their children. For us, to remain not knowing is the worst thing that can be."

The ransoming of captives is closely connected to the commandment of saving a life and occupies a place of supreme importance in Jewish law. Even if there is only a remote chance of finding the person, Jewish law obligates us to search relentlessly

until we find him, dead or alive. "Never leave a soldier behind" is the policy of the Israeli army.

Even if there is for certain no chance for survival, Jewish law obligates us to persevere, to try and retrieve the body for burial and identification purposes.

Indeed, the search never stops. In 2001, after an amateur diver found the remnants of an IDF plane that crashed at sea in 1953, the IDF recovered the bodies of the plane's two pilots. After 48 years, the pilots were accorded proper burial.

INTERMINABLE WAIT

For the families of MIAs, the pain of being plunged into the deep unknown is unspeakable. As long as the bodies of missing soldiers are not brought home, the families know no comfort and have no closure.

Yosef Fink and Rahamim Alsheikh were kidnapped by Hezbollah in 1986 while serving in Lebanon. For five years, the families believed they were alive until the IDF told them in 1991 that new intelligence indicated that the two soldiers were dead. Only five years later were their bodies returned, in a deal involving the release of Hizbullah prisoners.

"When we were told the boys were dead, we had mixed feelings," Yosef's mother Hadassah Fink told Ha'artez. "On the one hand, we were relieved because there was an end to the mystery that had been plaguing us, and we knew that at least the boys weren't suffering anymore -- all the while we believed and hoped they were alive, we worried about the conditions of their captivity. On the other hand, it was difficult to accept a conclusion that ended all our hopes.

"My husband and I had different reactions to the announcement. He immediately accepted it and began mourning the boy. I refused to accept what they said without proof. I wanted them to give me at least something so I could believe it was final... I allowed myself five more years of illusion that maybe he was alive, that he would suddenly show up. I only began to mourn in 1996, when the bodies were returned."



Hadassah Fink has experienced the anguish before. Her father disappeared toward the end of World War II, and his body was never recovered, Yair Sheleg of Ha'aretz writes. "The uncertainty is maddening," she says. "The most difficult thing when there's no grave is that everything is up in the air. As much as you know there's no chance he's alive, the fact there's no sign, and nobody, makes it difficult to accept he's gone."

In October 2000, three Israeli soldiers -- Adi Avitan, Benny Avraham, and Omar Suad -- were ambushed and kidnapped on the Israeli side of the Lebanese border. Hizbullah guerrillas surprised the three soldiers by disguising themselves as United Nations peacekeepers. (It was later discovered that the UN possessed a videotape of the kidnapping, which they refused to release to Israel.)

During the ordeal, Avitan's father Yaakov told the Jerusalem Post: "I can't scream, so I scream on paper by writing his name each day that isn't here." He kept an appointment book to write Adi's name each day, counting how many days passed since the kidnapping.

After 12 months of agony for the families, and toil for the defense establishment, the IDF declared the three soldiers dead and their place of burial unknown. Upon hearing the news, the families began sitting shiva, the Jewish mourning ritual. "Measuring success is very difficult," says Brigitte Silverberg, who is active on behalf of the MIAs. After the bodies of two MIAs were returned to Israel for burial, someone wished her, "Mazel Tov" (congratulations).

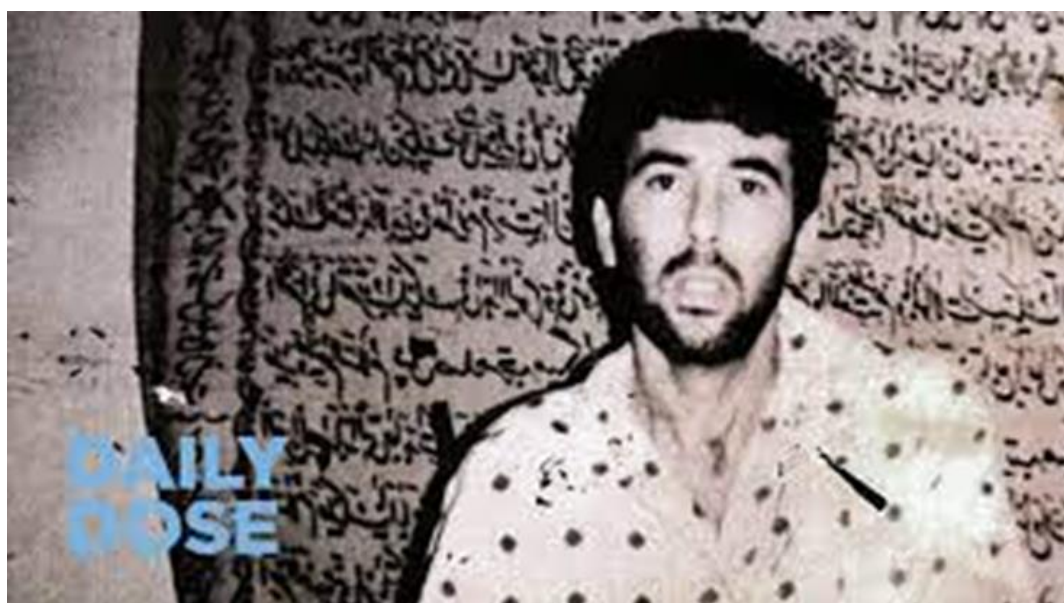
Silverberg said, "Mazel tov?! I'm going to a funeral! On the other hand, the enormous significance of bringing back a missing soldier, even in the most tragic of circumstances, cannot be overstated."

FREE RON ARAD

Perhaps the most well-known Israeli soldier listed as "missing but presumed alive," is Ron Arad.

On October 16, 1986, Israeli Air Force navigator Ron Arad and a pilot parachuted to the ground when their F-4 Phantom warplane went down over Syrian-controlled Lebanon. The pilot was flown to safety under fire, holding onto the bottom of an Israeli helicopter in a spectacular rescue operation. Arad was taken captive by Amal (a Shi'ite militia group led by Nabih Berri, who later served as speaker of the Lebanese Parliament).

One year after the capture, two photos, and three letters -- in Arad's handwriting -- arrived. "Try to do whatever you can for me," he wrote to his family. "I don't know how, but please say something to our leaders, to the government, to anyone who could do something to get me out of here..."



Israeli Air Force pilot Ron Arad still missing 37 years later

Arad had been held with Syrian knowledge and approval, and negotiations for his release ended after Arad was "sold" to Iranian-backed forces in Lebanon. The 1949 Geneva Convention (Section 2, Articles 11 & 12) holds Syria responsible for its fate.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The MIA issue is of extraordinary importance in Israel, where almost every household has a loved one serving in the armed forces. The issue continues to make headlines in Israel, and Israeli schoolchildren know the names and personal histories of the missing men.

The MIA issue has the broadest consensus in Israeli society. A 1999 Gallup poll showed that the overwhelming majority of Israelis (75.2%) demand that Syria must provide all information about the MIAs before any peace treaty can be signed.

Yet there was a growing sense that not enough was being done. So in 1994, Danny Eisen, an American who made aliyah, founded the International Coalition for Missing Israeli Soldiers (ICMIS), an organization that works tirelessly on behalf of MIAs and their families. (www.mia.org.il)

"When the Oslo negotiators first met in 1993, a cornerstone of Palestinian demands was the release of thousands of Palestinians being held in Israeli prisons," says Eisen. "It was obvious that much more needed to be done from our side."

Many people ask: Is it reasonable to believe that after so many years, the MIAs are still alive? If they are alive, why haven't the Arabs used the MIAs as negotiation leverage?

Eisen explains that thugs and dictators are driven by the need to control; by murdering or releasing a prisoner they lose control. Deceased Syrian President Hafez Assad was once quoted as saying that he "likes the idea of getting up in the morning having something that the Israelis want." It is not unusual to hold prisoners for decades; last year, North Korea released some prisoners it had been holding for 40 years (and others remain).

"Humans are better equipped to deal with death than with the unknown," says Eisen. "Our enemies know that and have exploited it."

ICMIS has taken the cause globally, and in 1999 U.S. President Clinton signed into law House of Representatives Bill #1175 calling for the release of Israeli MIAs.

Yet what is needed is more than politicians issuing statements, or international bodies volunteering to mediate. Every caring individual must speak out and demand that the terrorists (and the governments that support them) make information on the captives open and available.

To this end, ICMIS has an online petition to gather one million signatures in support of Israel's missing soldiers.

Until the issue is resolved, the agony will endure. "We can't forget," says one mother, Penina Feldman. "I once had a dream about the matriarch Rachel. I told her: My destiny is your destiny. (Rachel's son Joseph remained missing for 22 years.) When I woke up, I saw it was the day of Rachel's yahrtzeit. We went to her grave and lit a candle."



Rabbi Shraga Simmons is the co-founder of Aish.com, and co-author of "48 Ways to Wisdom" (ArtScroll). He is the Founder and Director of Aish.com's advanced learning site. He is co-founder of HonestReporting.com, and author of "David & Goliath", the definitive account of anti-Israel media bias. Originally from Buffalo, New York, he holds a degree in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin, and rabbinic ordination from the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. He lives with his wife and children in the Modi'in region of Israel.