



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

The Unburied Corpse

Dead. Unburied. Abandoned. Forgotten.

What can be a worse fate?

I once read a very moving novel about the events immediately preceding World War I and the fate of those who were caught up in the chaos of the opening days of that war. The author of the book, a Jew, was Joseph Roth, and the name of the book is *The Radetzky March*.

I was drawn to this book because it deals, in part, with the Jews of Galicia and the effect that World War I had upon them. Both my paternal and maternal great-grandparents were caught up in the events of those times, and I wished to learn more about those events, if only from a fictional account.

I found the book informative and troubling, but the single event recorded

in it that had the most impact on me was a description of the novel's hero, a combatant in the initial outbreak of the battle and gunfire. At one point, as he was fleeing for safety, he encountered the corpse of one of his fellows. Rather than pass this corpse by in his flight, he chose to drag the corpse to a nearby graveyard, dig a shallow grave with his bayonet, and bury the poor man.

Although the hero of this story was not a Jew, he was acting in accordance with a supreme Jewish value. At great personal risk, he buried a *met mitzvah*, an abandoned corpse with no one else present to bury it. Our Torah insists that giving such a corpse the dignity of a proper burial is a *mitzvah*, one which takes priority over almost any other good deed.

The source for this great *mitzvah* is in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Emor*, where we read of the strict prohibition upon *kohanim*, members of the priestly caste, to come into contact with the dead. Exceptions are made for the *kohen's* parents, children, siblings, and spouse.

And an exception is made for the *met mitzvah*. Should the *kohen* encounter an abandoned corpse, and no one else is available to bury it, he is commanded to ignore the prohibition against contact

Mazal Tov

to Sara & Danny Berelowitz
and family on the birth of a grandson

with the dead, and he must bury that corpse himself.

This is the meaning of the phrase in the very first verse of our *parsha*, "... he shall not defile himself for any dead person among his people..." (*Leviticus* 21:1). Paraphrasing Rashi's words here: "When the dead man is among his people, the *kohen* cannot defile himself, but when the dead man is not among his people, i.e., there is no one else to bury him, then the prohibition does not apply."

Our tradition is unusually sensitive to the sanctity of the human body. In life, certainly. But even in death. A proper Jewish burial is the last *chesed shel emet* (kindness of truth) that one can perform for another.

It is this important Jewish value which has led Jewish communities throughout the ages to do all that they could to recover the bodies of those of our brethren who perished in prisons, on battlefields, or in tragic natural disasters.

I must note a poignant incident in our history, an incident which culminated in the recovery of two *metei mitzvah*. Part of the narrative of these two heroes is recounted in the book *The Deed* by Gerold Frank. It is the story of two boys who gave their lives to assassinate a high British official, based in Egypt, whose policies threatened to block Jewish immigration into what was then Palestine. Their names were Eliahu Bet Zouri and Eliahu Hakim. They acted under the orders of the high command of the "Stern Group." They succeeded in assassinating the

official, but were tried and hanged for their efforts. They were buried near Cairo in 1945.

But they were never forgotten. In 1975, the State of Israel exchanged twenty Arab prisoners for the bodies of these two young men and reburied them in hero's graves upon Mount Herzl.

In recovering their bodies and eventually affording them an appropriate Jewish burial, the Israeli government was adhering to the teaching of this week's Torah portion. They saw to it that these *metei mitzvah* were buried properly.

Even at this moment, the remains of several Israel soldiers are unrecovered and are held by our enemies. We hope and pray that even in these uncertain times, and perhaps especially in these times, our efforts to reclaim the bodies of these heroes will be successful. These soldiers are *metei mitzvah* in every sense of that phrase. They performed great *mitzvot* in their military service, and bringing them home for a proper burial is the least we can do to honor their memories.

And so, this week again, as so often in our study of the *parsha*, we discovered a value of paramount importance, a priority *mitzvah*, buried between the lines, nay between the words, of a simple phrase. This week, that phrase is in the very first verse of *Parshat Emor*. ■

