

The Heroic Dead of Israel

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Living with the oppressive reality of death is difficult for most societies. Israel is no different in this respect. But there is a way in which Israel is impertinently different. Here death is somehow more fitly celebrated. Not in a macabre fashion, but accepted for what it is: both a tragedy and an opportunity for celebration. It is celebrated in the true meaning of that word: "solemnized, with appropriate rites and ceremonies." Anthropologists studying primitive peoples find the rites associated with death a clue to many values of the tribes. I believe that a trenchant sociological analysis of societies from the perspective of funeral rites may get us closer to the inmost core of values than their other analytic strategies. This essay is to be understood in that light.

Most people know how Jews react to dying when they live in the Diaspora, outside of Israel. Jews recognize grief publicly, refuse to deny the loss psychologically, engage in elaborate rituals such as seven days of mourning, thirty days of abstinence from merrymaking, saying the Kaddish prayer daily for eleven months, participating in yearly memorial services which are integrated into the Jewish holidays, and celebrating an annual memorial on the anniversary of the death. These institutionalized forms are relatively known, and some of them have their parallels in other religions. But what of the reaction to death once Jews live in a Jewish state? Are there any intrinsic differences or unnoticed particularities under the new conditions? I think so.

The most striking difference is that under the conditions of life in the Jewish state one finds with greater frequency than in the Diaspora rituals celebrating the heroic, bold, brave, gallant and valorous dead.

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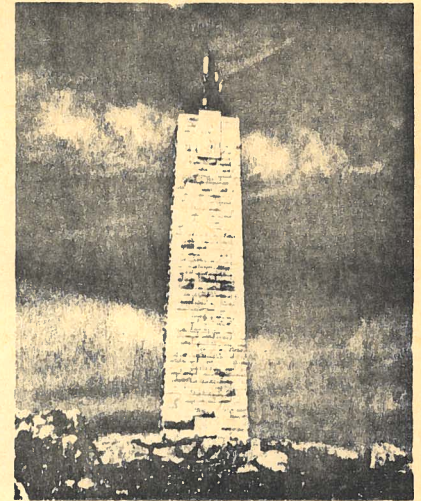
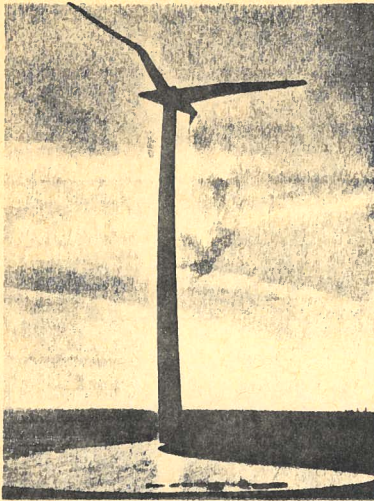
Israel shares with the Diaspora the three other major types of dead: the ordinary dead who are for the most part unseen and silent; the illustrious and venerable dead; the martyred dead, the pitiful and ghastly dead.

It is Israel's recently commemorated heroic dead that I wish to consider here. But these dead have much competition for veneration. For while the type is new, the presence of the symbolic reminders of the other types crowds out the uniqueness and claims for priority among the heroic dead. The symbolic reminders of these other types are everywhere in Israel: Jews have been dying there for at least 4,000 years. For example, in Jerusalem the Mount of Olives is a raw mountain of thousands of artless gravemarkers; in Bet Shearim in Southern Galilee there is a vast, largely unexplored city of tombs from the period of the Mishna and the Talmud. Every year there are discoveries of family sarcophagi and burial caves.

Israel's ancient dead have a number of characteristics, the most salient of which is their ubiquity. A friend of mine found a large burial cave while in the process of building his home near Haifa. Just recently a large burial cave was found by a workman digging a ditch in Nablus. The Ministry of Religion has a group of busy men who go around collecting bones that have been unearthed and are then given respectful reburial.

The second characteristic of Israel's ancient dead is that they are periodized and thus historically relevant. The dried bones in the stratigraphy of an archeological city, such as Caesarea with its different layers of skulls and bones in opened mounds, are indispensable indicators of past civilizations. They may be the clue to provide definitive identification of the strata to the Roman, Byzantine or Crusader periods. Indeed, entire sites have been identified by the direction in which a skull was placed—facing Jerusalem or not—or whether or not the arms were crossed.

Third, Israel's ancient dead are political facts, since



they tend to substantiate the claims of Jews to particular areas. Every time a Jewish burial site is found in occupied territory it gives greater legitimacy to Israel's claims for the particular land. The television announcer might say: "At such a period this land was ours." While it is absurd to imply that every place where Jewish bones are to be found is to be claimed for Israel, there is nonetheless an emotional appeal that adds greater legitimacy to claims for land.

The fourth characteristic of Israel's ancient dead is that they are venerable and sacred. When bones are found in excavations it is not the Health Department that is called but the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Bones in Israel are not disposable litter when they are found. In accordance with Jewish Law they are religiously potent. They have the power to contaminate if you are a priest. The very possibility that the skull you hold in your hand may be a venerable sage gives the bones special importance.

The last major characteristic of Israel's dead and perhaps the most difficult to formulate is that the bones are the reminders of death as well as the foundation upon which the living walk. Somehow, in Israel, the dead are more alive. In any country one feels the peculiar pathos of the dead—their tragedy and finality but also their indispensability and potentiality. Here in Israel there is something additional. As in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, *these* bones are potentially alive. They can acquire living flesh in a trice and start to move. Israel's ancient dead are not simply the necessary condition to life today, they are potentially the sufficient conditions. They seem to convey the message, as in rabbinic legends of resurrection, that even if there were no Jews alive one could create Jews with these bones alone.

In brief, Israel's ancient dead are always potentially contemporary and remain so with a special intensity. Resurrection remains an imminent possibility and, insofar as it does, all of Israel's dead are alive.

What of Israel's *contemporary* heroic war dead? Who are they? Let us be clear. By heroic dead we mean people honored after death with public praise for acts of distinguished valor and fortitude. Just how many potential heroic dead are

there? If one considers those killed in Israel's four major wars—the War of Independence (1948), the Suez Campaign (1956), the Six-Day War (1967), and the War of Attrition (1967-1970)—there are thousands. Considering only some of them, the most recent figures are as follows: In the Six-Day War 777 soldiers were killed and 2,811 were wounded. During the War of Attrition 594 soldiers were killed and 1,959 were wounded. Since the exhausting War of Attrition 43 soldiers were killed and 227 wounded. The total is 1,414 soldiers killed and 4,997 wounded. During that period 180 civilians were killed and 1,027 wounded.

Thus, in just the past five years there have been 1,594 candidates for the status of individualized hero. It should be borne in mind that there is a difference between an individual hero who is known, memorialized separately, treated with individualized rites, and a member of the dead mass. In the public rhetoric all of Israel's dead are heroes. But it is quite different when an individual is singled out as one, and it is the process of how individuals are made into heroes that interests us.

There are two major obstacles, I believe, to making everyman a hero, and they are found not in the "true" circumstances of death but in the social conditions. What are these social conditions that prevent everyman from being made into a hero? The first of these is that perpetuating the individual memory of the dead hero requires an output. The story of the heroism, if it is to endure—and that is the point of it all—requires a suitable embodiment. That embodiment, or concretization, requires forms which are costly in money, time, materials and sometimes land. And there seem to be limits on how much individualization of heroism a society can permit itself. If everyman's death is celebrated as heroic, the society can go bankrupt. Indeed, some primitive tribes periodically do just that because of the ruinous expense of funeral and memorial rites. The reason a major output is required is that a dominant characteristic of heroism is that it atrophies with time if it is not continuously celebrated. Emerson was referring to this fact when he wrote that "Every hero becomes a bore at last." Keeping the heroic act fresh, memorable

and interesting is a formidable enterprise. It requires imagination, tact and persistence.

The second condition that prevents the heroic coin from being devalued, that prevents everyman's death being celebrated as heroic, is the pressure of the "haves," who are in this case the friends and family of already publicly acknowledged heroes. They are a natural pressure group that press for a sober, restrained distribution of accolades. They have to remain forever alert in a society in a state of war. For there are always the newly killed, whose memorable acts and death are more manifestly relevant to the here and now. While dead heroes who died long ago and who have been felicitously celebrated become more redoubtable with age, it is the recent dead whose demands for recognition are most poignant and pressing. There is an uneasy alliance of fate that joins the families of the dead of different periods. There is an ongoing process or redefinition of the degree of venerability of dead soldiers. In addition there is a constant reevaluation of heroic periods. The emotional intensity is very great in the entire process. All of the factors mentioned are at work in Israel's organization of bereaved families, Yad LeBanim.

But in spite of the obstacles, some of the dead do become heroes. Although there are background value factors in Israel that have sedulously worked against the recognition of individual heroism, in themselves these factors have not been sufficiently powerful to prevent the recognition of individual heroism. Nonetheless, these factors did tend to impede its development. They are the equalitarian ethos and the spirit of voluntarism. A hero is not like everyone else; that is the point of giving him recognition. In a society which aspires to equality, the self-conscious creation of élites is regarded as counterproductive. Secondly, Israel's precarious position prior to the Six-Day War required a high degree of voluntarism from the average citizen. The extraordinary valorous and zealous act on behalf of the group was the norm rather than the ideal. Each person had to extend himself to the limit. It is particularly hard to single out individuals for special veneration in a situation such as that.

Israel, like others, has always glorified her defenders who died fighting. Yosef Trumpelder was killed in the twenties and was recognized as a hero. But there was no hero-creating institution then. The recognition of his heroism was idiosyncratic and singular. It was not until recently that Israeli heroism became organized, institutionalized, with state-sanctioned procedures, ceremonies and memorials that acknowledge, publicize and perpetuate. That is new.

Although such procedures were instituted with hesitation and carried through with ambivalence and reluctance, they are nonetheless part of the institutional scene. For example, as every Israeli schoolboy knows, a "Tzalash" is a mark of commendation for

military heroism which was instituted, in spite of the objection of the Palmach, at the insistence of Jewish soldiers trained in the British Army. There are nonetheless comparatively few "Tzalushim" meted out. What course is open for those whose dead did not receive a "Tzalash"? Did their sons not die fighting? Are they not to be acknowledged, publicized and perpetuated as heroes? Of course. But how?

There are in Israel two major ways for relatives and friends of fallen soldiers to do this: erecting a monument or writing a book. Each of these is interesting in its own right.

Representative of the type, if not the extent, of the efforts expended to erect suitable monuments is the recently commemorated Red Rock of the Negev. On July 8, 1971, ten air force personnel died under mysterious circumstances. Their bomber crashed offshore near a Bedouin encampment between Rafiah and El Arish—occupied territory since the Six-Day War. The families of the ten boys decided to have one memorial for the ten. But where? To place it in occupied territory was to risk having it ultimately in Egypt. The parents were so sure that the territory would remain under Israel's jurisdiction that as an act of faith they decided on the monument's erection near the disaster on the beach. This attitude toward the occupied territories by bereaved parents is typical as far as I can determine. "Our boys have died for this land and it belongs to us."

What kind of a memorial can one erect for ten young boys? The parents decided it was to be something large, but simple. A rock! But not any old rock. An expedition was organized to search for a suitable rock in the Sinai peninsula. Finally, after much searching, one was found near Mount Sinai. A rock measuring 35 ft. x 13 ft. x 7 ft. Getting it to the site was a prodigious undertaking, but they managed. There on the beach in occupied territory—already a favorite bathing spot and perhaps a future site for development—a rock from Sinai commemorates the death of ten Israeli fliers. When the rock was dedicated in the presence of 1,500 friends and relatives of the ten, Prime Minister Golda Meir had this to say: "This monument perpetuates the memory of the ten, the élite among the warriors of Israel." In all the memorial doings this note of apotheosis is consistently reechoed. The number ten with all of its potency—the ten commandments, the minyan (basic unit for public prayer)—appears as the mystical, symbolic accompaniment to the act of commemoration. The most revealing words were uttered at the commemorative exercises by the commanding officer of the Southern Region: "In their death, the ten join the long line of Israeli warriors who have given that which is most precious—their lives—for that which is most precious—the existence, security and peace of the land of Israel. The monument of the ten has become another of the cornerstones in the settlement of the boundaries of Israel. I know that there is no

consolation for bereaved parents but perhaps there is some consolation in this—that by their last deed the ten have transformed this desolate beach into a place bustling with life.”

Here then are all the ingredients of heroism: potent symbols, important personages, unrestrained homage, a promise of life to overcome desolation. We have chosen only one of the memorials erected, but the same could be written about the thousands to be found all over the country. They are not all rocks. Some are burned out tanks, others are huge concrete structures or metal masses, or curtains to cover the cell of the Torah in the Synagogue, or rooms set aside at kibbutzim, or large buildings devoted to the memorabilia of the fallen heroes. All of these empty cenotaphs have the same primary function: to acknowledge, publicize and perpetuate heroes. Unlike the prevailing mood of Shelley's hero in "The Cloud" ("I silently laugh at my own cenotaph and arise and unbuild it again"), in Israel cenotaphs are a serious affair. They are built to last. Maybe some future day there will be silent laughter, but it is still very far distant. The sorrowful memories are too fresh for that. It is unlikely that true peace will come to the Middle East until all the cenotaphs in all the countries in the area are unbuilt. That will take some doing. In the meantime we may have to settle for a more realistic perception of death, with the hopeful result of restraining aggression. Golda Meir remarked that peace may come to the Middle East when all the countries' chiefs of state leave standing instructions with their war ministers, as she does, to wake them at night every time someone is killed in any hostilities. Every country honors its war dead. The important point is to value them. In addition to the monuments of various sorts there is a second rather distinctive Israeli-Jewish way to perpetuate war heroes—by a book.

I first became interested in Israel's literature of the dead when I received a present from a relative as a gift of welcome for coming to live in Israel. It was a book such as I had never seen before. It was about a fallen pilot, a cousin I had never seen, a 23-year-old member of Kibbutz Ashdod Hatzor. I found it difficult to read the book, for it was during the period of the War of Attrition and fallen soldiers' pictures were appearing every day in the newspapers. My own son was perilously close to a bomb explosion set by terrorists in a residential quarter of Haifa. I kept the book on my table and looked at the title, *A Boy Forever*, and the birds in flight against the cloudy background. On the back cover is a close-up of three birds. The birds seem as if they have just been hit by a bullet and are appallingly still against the clouds—they are about to plummet to their destruction but temporarily remain frozen.

The book is designed to be a memorial. It contains

a diary that my cousin's mother kept while he grew up. It also includes letters and short compositions as well as comments, evaluations and memories by friends, teachers and relatives. I have since discovered that there are thousands of such publications. There exists a veritable library of commemorative literature in Israel. The Defense Department employs a well-known Israeli author, Reuven Avinoam, whose job consists of sifting through the literary remains of fallen soldiers. He chooses the very best of their writings in order to include them in the commemorative anthology that is periodically published. To date there have been four such anthologies. Each volume is some 600 folio-size pages. The selections consist of poems, letters, compositions and stories, as well as examinations and term papers. The quality is very uneven, but the overall impact of the volumes is powerful. Many Israeli households contain one or more of these volumes.

In addition, there are thousands of individual commemorative books. They range in size and elaborateness from professionally written, designed, printed, bound publications, to mimeographed, stapled sheets. The Defense Department has a budget that enables it to make substantial contributions to bereaved families wishing to publish a book. As a result there are books aplenty. Although the contents are sometimes uniform, there are frequently distinctive features worthy of note.

One of the earliest of the type is a trilogy about Shmuel Kaufman and Zahara Levitov, his fiancée, both killed in the 1948 war. The story of his heroism in the 1948 war as a member of the Palmach, and her heroism as the first woman pilot in the fledgling Israeli Air Force, as well as their young love, is brilliantly told in three magnificent volumes. Many of the themes repeated in later books can be found in theirs, such as the idea that death is not alone a matter for the dead or those about to die but rather for those whose lives are intertwined with the dead and dying and their hopes for the future. Wherever literary remains are found, they are to be quoted rather than appreciative statements by friends and relatives. The real purpose of these commemorative books is to depict "a spiritual picture of a special young being who lives his life in the light of a dream and vision." Another theme is that the ultimate death has some cosmic, transcendent, foreordained quality: "While he was still in the hospital beside his mother, it seemed as if from heaven they came to snatch him; on the 11th of the month of Tammuz, 3:30 in the afternoon, there were severe earth tremors." There is strong identification with the national memories and aspirations of the Jewish people. For example, as a young child "He would say to his sister, 'Father has books in Hebrew, English and Greek.' When asked: 'What is Greek?' he answered, 'The language of the Greeks that destroyed our temple.'" And as a young boy of fifteen seeking consolation when his mother

died, he sought it in national aspirations: "It is a weighty question: what consolation can we find [for our mother's death] . . . the answer lies in Zionist exertion and working for our homeland." One finds too the painfully tragic story of young love. "They read together in their holy temple [Shmuel and Zahara] during a leave they both had from the army. They read poetry they loved to each other and listened to classical music." "It seemed to me [writes the father] that they were elevated to heavenly spheres in their mutual love." And finally, the plans for the future: a university education and . . . marriage. Most of these themes can be found in the hundreds of books written subsequently.

There are subtle differences between the themes and ideas expressed in the commemorative literature written in the period around 1948 and those written during the Six-Day War and after. The most interesting is the status of war. The pacifistic values of worldwide youth culture began to impinge themselves on the consciousness of Israeli youth. Following the Six-Day War the most blatant manifestation of these values in Israel was the well-known "letter of the 12th graders" which challenged the prevailing assumptions about the inevitability of the war with the Arabs and the willingness of the government to make peace. During this period as well there was a stage presentation, "The Queen of the Bathtub," a satirical treatment of patriotism and the zeal to engage in war, which was finally removed from the stage because of the outraged public reaction.

In the commemorative book for David Uzan, who was killed at the age of nineteen at the Suez Canal, May 23, 1970, one finds the following letter by David written in a bunker on the Bar Lev line at the Canal, addressed to a friend in Switzerland. "Enough Mickey, enough! . . . Have you thought of what a boy my age does who lives in Europe? . . . He is demonstrating for progressive socialism, against the Establishment. For the love of freedom, against the war in Vietnam, for the free distribution of birth control pills in the University, against Zionism and Imperialism, anti-everything. . . . Anti. For nothing positive, only for the anti. Can anything be better? And what does a fellow my age in Israel do? If you don't know I will tell you—he guards the borders of his country . . . and here I am in a few months about to celebrate my twentieth birthday . . . but I do not envy the European rebel. He leads a boring life by comparison and one without any worthy end." David was killed ten months later. But in the published letter there is a motif that is new. It is the same moral wrestling one finds in *The Seventh Day*, edited by Avraham Shapiro. It is not enough to fight and die for one's country. There are moral questions to respond to. Some of these wrestlings can be found in the memorial literature. In fact, the more introspective side of Israeli character is revealed in this literature more than any other.

What is the impact of these hundreds of memorials all over the country and thousands of books perpetuating fallen heroes? Their impact is enormous. So great that some critics are in awe of it. Leah Ben Dor comments: "Mourning is a tradition for the Jews, and no wonder, there has been too much opportunity to practice it, too many who have died before they had run their span. It is in danger of becoming a substitute religion." What of the claim? I believe it to be an apt description of the Israeli scene. Every society has its deaths. But the deaths are mostly ordinary deaths, not heroicized. In Israel the dead are memorialized with a passion not only in the two ways I have mentioned but in others as well. There are in Israel nineteen sturdy structures dedicated to dead soldiers, hundreds of rooms in settlements of all kinds (kibbutzim, moshavim, development towns, schools, etc.). The papers are filled with notices of memorial gatherings and conferences. The dead of all Israel's history have found a visible memorial in Israel. Israel remembers its dead as few societies do.

There are a series of memorial days in the spring that bring much of the population of Israel to a fever of passionate memorializing activity! *Holocaust and Heroes Day*, with its stark realism, followed by *Jerusalem Day*, which perpetuates the memory of those who died reuniting Jerusalem, followed by *Remembrance Day* for all of Israel's dead, followed by *Independence Day*. In slightly more than one month there are four public holidays commemorating the dead and their valor. Each of them has powerful symbols that are effectively communicated by the mass media and in institutionalized settings. It is very hard to remain indifferent as sixty sets of parents, each of whom has lost at least two sons in the fighting, light a lamp of remembrance at the Western Wall, or when the sirens sound in the morning and the entire country stands to attention in the middle of the streets in silent tribute, or when viewing on television interviews with the little children of fallen soldiers. No effort is spared to sharpen the memory, to make one aware of the sacrifice. In short, to make the dead relevant to the living. There are those such as the writer A. B. Yehoshua who see in the preoccupation with death the distinguishing characteristic of Israeli society.

Perhaps of all the peoples existing in the world Israelis understand best the character in Elton John's *Old Soldier*, who says: "Well do they know what it's like to have a graveyard as a friend. Cos that's where they are, boy, all of them. Doesn't seem likely I'll get friends like that again." It is another of the tragic realities of the Jewish people that in Israel so many of the population are preoccupied with monuments and graveyards as friends. It is perhaps gratifying that finally there are Jewish heroes. The terrible reality is that they are dead. These celebrations are one way of handling that tragedy.