

Our Secret Weapon

Unity is the strongest force
 the Jewish people have.

ZACH HERSCHFUS SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH NEWS



IDF paratrooper Zach Herschfus in the field during a training exercise.

I drafted as a Lone Soldier to the Paratroopers Unit of the Israel Defense Forces in March 2017. After months of challenging training, I now participate in patrols and missions that help ensure the safety and the continuity of the Jewish homeland. However, on the fourth day of the month of Iyar on the Jewish calendar, I participated in a mission like no other I have experienced before.

The fourth of Iyar is the day on the Hebrew calendar on which we commemorate Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day. On this day, the entire country of Israel mourns the loss of those who have died as soldiers or as victims of terror. Yom Hazikaron starts at sundown when a siren, which is heard across the country, is sounded for one minute. Everyone stops what they are doing and stands for a moment of silence to show respect for those who have fallen.

The following morning, the National Memorial Ceremony for fallen soldiers takes place at Har Herzl, Israel's military cemetery. Friends and families gather at the gravesides of their loved ones for the ceremony and at 11 a.m. the siren sounds once again, this time for two minutes.

The Israeli army sets out to make sure proper honor is given to all the brave soldiers who have sacrificed for the country and to bring comfort to their families. The army prepares with diligence and seriousness for this ceremony like they prepare for any of its missions. Currently, enlisted soldiers are carefully selected to stand by each of the graves at Har Herzl during the ceremony. When the siren wails, not one of our brave fallen

heroes is alone as there is a soldier standing at attention at each graveside.

Each soldier who is assigned to a grave learns about the person whose grave they are assigned to. I was assigned the name Raphael Mordechai. I learned that Raphael Mordechai immigrated with his family to Israel from Baghdad. He lived in the northern part of Israel and, as a teenager, he served as a leader in Bnei Akiva and other youth organizations. He enjoyed playing sports, especially basketball.

Raphael Mordechai served as an officer in the same division of paratroopers as I serve in today. He fought in the War of Attrition against Egypt and was badly injured when he was shot in the stomach. He managed to recover from this injury and returned to fight with his unit. He fell in battle during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

When I arrived at the cemetery and located Raphael Mordechai's grave, I found there were about 20 people of various ages standing around the grave, clearly having their family moment with their departed. I was hesitant to approach and introduce myself, as my initial thought was that I didn't really belong there and that I should be giving the family their privacy to mourn their loss.

My commanding officer encouraged me to go introduce myself. I slowly made my way toward the grave and wiggled my way through the family members to the eldest man at the graveside who I assumed was Raphael Mordechai's father. I put my hand on his shoulder and when he turned around he looked at me and immediately gave me a hug. I introduced myself as the repre-

sentative from the Paratroopers Unit, and he began to cry and grabbed me once again and gave me a hug and a kiss.

He proceeded to introduce me to the rest of the family including his grandson, Rafi, who is named in memory of his brave uncle. I talked with the family for the next hour as they warmly welcomed me as part of their group. I listened to their stories about life "back in the day" and the struggles and sacrifices they have endured and what they have given up for Israel to be where it is today.

As the ceremony was getting ready to start, I assumed my stance in *amod dom* (at attention). At 11 a.m., as the siren started to wail, although there were thousands of people standing crowded together in that cemetery, there was just pure silence. It was deafening! I felt Raphael Mordechai's father grab my hand and squeeze it and I heard him start to cry again. I realized tears were streaming down my face as well; and in that powerful moment in time I understood the meaning of my mission on that day. This mission was not about guns and grenades; rather it was about our people's most powerful weapon — unity.

I stood there thinking about how this man, who was a total stranger to me just an hour ago, had chosen to hold my hand at this moment. How together as one we were sharing the pain of loss and at the same time the pride in what Raphael Mordechai had given for the country. Knowing that we have what we have today because of soldiers like him and all the other soldiers who lay in their graves surrounding him.

I realized that I, in fact, *did* belong there with him because

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