

Living Tombstones

Category: Holidays, Shavuot

A yizkor message.

Between 200 and 500 Jewish soldiers in the U.S. military who fell in battle against the Nazis were buried in a Christian burial, under a cross. An estimated 11,000 American Jewish soldiers were killed during World War II, and as mentioned, hundreds of them did not receive a proper Jewish burial.

Apparently, these were mistakes made by priests in the US military, partly because Jewish soldiers would hide their Jewish identity, so as not to stand out in the army, and especially for fear that if they were captured by the Nazis, they would be tortured or killed. When they fell, people didn't know that they were Jewish, and they were therefore often buried under the crosses. In recent years, a Jewish organization has emerged that seeks to correct the historical injustice, replacing the crosses with the Star of David, in coordination with the US military and with the consent of the family.

On the eve of the last Holocaust Remembrance Day, 77 years after he was accidentally buried under a cross, the Christian emblem over the grave of a Jewish soldier, Everett Seixas, Jr., was replaced with a Star of David.

Seixas was a member of a very old Jewish-American family, whose family escaped Portugal and came to the United States while it was under British colonial rule. He was killed in the Battle of Baston against the Germans in the Luxembourg area. In January 1945, he was mistakenly buried under a cross, and now the mistake has been corrected and a Star of David has replaced the cross.

The event was attended by the United States Ambassador to Luxembourg and the Israeli Ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg and members of the soldier's family who came especially from the United States. Rabbis recited the "Kel Maleh Rachamim" prayer in front of the new Star of David on the tomb, and the American ambassador praised the heroism of the Jewish soldiers who fought against the Nazis.

To date, 19 crosses have been replaced over the graves of American Jewish men

and women soldiers.

The Star of David Cross-Replacement Project begins with the identification of Jewish names in American military cemeteries around the world. They then begin a genealogical investigation through the lists of Jewish immigrants who came to the United States. If it seems to indeed be a Jewish soldier, the organization turns to the family and asks for their consent to change the grave marker.

The organization's name is "Operation Benjamin." It was established in 2018, and is named after a Jewish soldier named Benjamin Garadetsky, a resident of the Bronx in New York, the son of a Jewish refugee from Ukraine who fought as a combat medic and fell in 1944 in France. Garadetsky was killed in a Nazi airstrike bombing, and was accidentally buried in a Normandy cemetery under a cross.

As part of the organization's activities, gravestones over Jewish graves were replaced in American military cemeteries in Normandy, France, in Manila, the capital of the Philippines, in Belgium, Luxembourg, and the United States itself. Among others, crosses were replaced over the graves of two pilot brothers who were killed several months apart — one buried in Normandy and the other in the American cemetery in Belgium. In February 2020, a ceremony was held in the Manila Cemetery, where five gravestones of Jewish soldiers were replaced.

There are those who might wonder: why is it so important to wander around cemeteries all over Europe and look for gravestones with Jewish names and then locate the family to find out if they are really Jews, then coordinate the ceremony with the cemetery, etc., — does the end-result justify the effort?

I want to share with you a story that will shed light on the importance of gravestones:

About two hundred years ago, Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Homil, one of the greatest Chabad chassidim, famous as a holy man, lived in Russia. In the city of Homil, they used to visit the cemetery on Lag B'Omer, as was the custom in many communities. This was an especially important custom for the members of the Jewish burial society. They would visit the cemetery to inspect whatever elements needed attention — gates, fallen gravestones, etc. — they would enter the nearby synagogue and hold a small meal with l'chaim and refreshments.

When Rabbi Eizik served as rabbi in Homil, it was customary that after the

members of the burial society completed their visit to the cemetery and entered the synagogue for the gatherings, they would send a wagon to fetch the rabbi. Rabbi Eizik would enter the cemetery for a short time and then sit with the community members gathered at the synagogue, spending time with them and speaking words of Torah.

One Lag B'Omer, when Rabbi Eizik entered the cemetery, he lingered near one tombstone. He read the inscription on the tombstone and stood for some time occupied in his thoughts. He then turned to the head of the burial society and said: "Up there, in the world of truth, they are demanding of this deceased: 'Where are all those virtues written in your tombstone?'"

He stood there a bit longer and added: "Please go immediately and bring an ax." He was given an ax, and Rabbi Eizik ordered to scrape off the inscription above the tombstone. After his instructions had been fulfilled, he finally entered the synagogue to the crowd that was waiting for him, and said: "Now let's say l'chaim; I have done a favor for the soul." (Toldos Yitzchak Eizik p. 105.)

This story teaches us that a correct gravestone could make a real difference for the soul in the world of truth.

On one occasion, when the Rebbe spoke about gravestones, he emphasized that the main point is not the memory on the gravestone, but the legacy perpetuated in the person's descendants. In addition to a person doing good deeds because of their obligation as a person and as a Jew, the Rebbe said, a person should do good deeds in memory of relatives. If we enjoy bringing pleasure to our loved ones during their lifetimes — how much more so we should do so when they no longer can do the good deed on their own. When we do such an act, it goes to the merit of the loved one in the next world.

"This is expressed in the Mi Sheberach prayer which is recited during Yizkor on the last day of Pesach, on the second day of Shavuot, on Yom Kippur and on Shemini-Atzeret, in which we promise to donate charity toward the ascension of the soul.

"Mi Sheberach is recited on specific occasions" the Rebbe noted, "but with regard to good deeds, one should imagine all the good deeds that the deceased would have done had he been alive — and do them in his place, in addition to what he does on his own." (Toras Menachem v. 57 pg. 243).

There is a concept called “living tombstone” — when we establish an institution or foundation that does good in the world in memory of the deceased. We are the living tombstones that our parents left in this world, in that we live and continue their tradition. Following in their footsteps is indeed the most meaningful yizkor. The best way to commemorate those who have passed away is to follow their ways and make them proud. Let’s be “living tombstones.”