Home at Last: Two Sons, Two Stories, One Homeland

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Two Israeli soldiers returned home this past week from captivity.

The more public and widely followed return — at least earlier in the week when this article was written — was that of Edan Alexander, who had been held by Hamas in inhumane conditions for 583 days. His release stirred national gratitude and relief — another one of our sons was returning alive.

But beneath the celebration, the ache of the other families sears through joy. Once again, their children were left behind.

Yet amidst all the noise and emotion, a different kind of return unfolded — quieter, more subdued, and forty-three years in the making. The body of Tzvi Feldman, a missing soldier captured during a brutal battle in Syria in 1983, was finally brought home to Israel for burial. It was a more serene moment, one that closed a long and agonizing chapter for his family — and for all of us.

Though this quieter return may have been overshadowed by the more dramatic release of Edan, it echoed powerfully about who we are as a people, the depth of our faith, and how to relate to the current and painful state of paralysis.

**Cruelty and Contempt**

We have always lived under the shadow of hatred and discrimination. But when even the lifeless are denied burial, hatred curdles into something crueler. A body poses no threat — yet they hold our bodies captive to prolong our pain and deepen our wounds.

Across every culture, there’s a shared instinct to grant dignity in death through a final resting place. Yet Jews stir a hatred so raw that even our dead are not spared. Our enemies cannot bear even the trace of a Jew — not a name, a face, not even our silence. Holding the bodies of soldiers for over 40 years isn’t a strategy — it’s vengeance and cruelty. It sent an additional reminder about how deep antisemitism runs.

**Patience**

The 43-year-long journey to return a soldier’s remains serves as a poignant reminder of the long and protracted arc of Jewish history.

In Parashat Kedoshim, the Torah introduces *orla* as the first mitzva upon entering the land — a mitzva that directs us to refrain from eating the first three years' crops and to treat the fourth year's produce as *ma’aser sheni* which may only be eaten in Yerushalayim.

It’s an unusual mitzva to present at the threshold of Eretz Israel. What is so significant about this seemingly standard *issur*, and why is this the first mitzva to greet us as we step into our ancient homeland?

**Orla and Mila**

Orla is best understood when compared and contrasted with the related mitzva of *mila* — the act of removing the foreskin (the uncircumcised in Hebrew is called an *arel*). These two commandments share a common purpose: both seek to perfect Hashem’s world.

In a famous conversation with the Roman governor of Judea, Tunus Rufus (Tinneius Rufus), Rebbi Akiva highlighted this role of *mila* as perfecting Hashem’s intentionally imperfect world. Tinneius had challenged the logic of circumcision, asking, “Had God wanted males to be circumcised, wouldn’t He have created them that way?” To Romans, circumcision was a mutilation of God’s human design, a distortion of His intended perfection.

Rebbi Akiva responded that Hashem intentionally creates His world imperfect, inviting us to perfect it on His behalf. Removing the foreskin is a dramatic moment in completing Hashem’s intentionally imperfect creation.

*Orla* is both similar to *mila* and yet very different. Waiting three years to eat the fruit of a tree also perfects nature, allowing the fruit to ripen, to become more refined and more edible. But there is a crucial difference between *mila* and *orla*. *Mila* achieves perfection immediately, in one quick and decisive action. *Orla*, on the other hand, takes time, and there is no way to rush the process. Three years must pass, and only then will perfection be realized. *Orla* embodies the lesson of patience.

For this reason, *orla* is the first mitzva described upon entering Eretz Yisrael. Returning to our homeland — a land of hopes and dreams — awakens many expectations. Yet, Hashem wants us to train our patience, to understand that, just as a tree takes time to grow, so too will the settlement of our land. Sometimes, there is little we can do to accelerate the process.

The return of a soldier’s remains took 43 years, reminding us that much in the land of history takes time. The process unfolds at its own pace, and we must learn to accept that some things cannot be hurried.

We are currently caught in a deep quagmire, unable to find a path to decisive victory that will also bring our hostages home. Unfortunately, we have also fallen back into the social divisions that tore us apart in the year before the war. Perhaps we all need to step back and realize that most of our hopes and dreams may not be fully realized in our lifetime. We should celebrate our victories, no matter how small, but understand that this historical project will take time.

**Headlines or Heartlines?**

Finally, the burial of a fallen soldier after 43 years puts perspective on what is and isn’t important. The headlines this week were exploding with news. Yet the return of a soldier’s remains after 43 years touched something far deeper than headlines.

Many other nations have programs to recover remains, but these are usually slow, clinical, and forensic — focused on identification and closure over time, not on daring missions under fire.

But in Israel, our efforts to recover remains run deeper. It’s not merely a policy — it’s a solemn mitzva and a social covenant. We have returned home, and we’ve pledged to one another: this land will be a home for the living and a burial place for the dead.

Our soldier’s remains were recovered at great risk, pulled from danger under enemy fire. Our army is not some distant force — it is us. Our children. Our spouses. Our brothers. And in this family, we leave no one behind. We will search, fight, and wait — whatever it takes — to bring our fallen home.

This pact feels more eternal than any headlines that flooded the news this week: Trump visited Arab countries in the Middle East, while Israelis were left in the dark about his intentions. Meanwhile, the Houthis continued their missile attacks, with American intervention nowhere to be found. Headlines were bursting with names and screaming with tumult and intrigue.

I found myself wondering who were the people in the headlines 43 years ago, when Tzvi Feldman was captured. Many readers weren’t even alive then, and those who were would have a hard time remembering the stories that once gripped our attention and filled headlines.

Some things — like our common pact to one another and our religious calling to treat human remains with dignity — are more enduring than the fleeting news of the moment. These spiritual values are built to last. Politicians come and go. In 43 years, will people even remember Trump and Netanyahu? But the values we affirmed this week, and the solidarity we can hopefully continue to build despite the divisions that threaten us, will remain. They will form the foundation of who we are as a people, enduring long after the headlines fade.

So, as our headlines continue to spiral uncontrollably, always be careful to look beyond their façade and ponder something deeper. Ponder the values we stand for and fight for. Ponder the values we will continue to uphold, even when the headlines may not always support them or voice them. These values will outlast the headlines. This week reminded us of the difference between *chayei olam* and *chayei sha’a*, between the eternal and the fleeting. Headlines are fleeting; heartlines are eternal.