

## Remembering Steven Zilberman, Z"L

On March 30, 2009, I was onboard the aircraft carrier USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER somewhere in the North Arabian Sea. I had arrived earlier in the week via COD (Carrier Onboard Delivery), and noticed as I disembarked the aircraft that the ordnance personnel were carrying and loading live missiles and bombs onboard the jet fighters. I was in a combat zone, and F-18s were flying combat sorties every day to provide CAS (Close Air Support) to United States Marines fighting in Afghanistan. Although I had been onboard an aircraft carrier before during my career as a Jewish Navy chaplain, yet I had never seen the loading of live ordnance. This was the real thing.

Fortunately, all Passover supplies had arrived long before my arrival, and I spent the afternoon of Erev Pesach preparing the dining room for First Night Seder. Tabletops were impeccably cleaned, a white tablecloth spread, and the ritual items set in their proper places on the Seder plate. Special Kosher for Passover MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) were provided in a separate space, ready for consumption during the Seder meal. Eight Sailors, in addition to myself, attended the Pesach Seder that night onboard the "Mighty Ike."

Three of the Sailors were aviators. One lieutenant was an F-18 pilot, and the other two were E-2C Hawkeye pilots. Lieutenant Steven (Miroslav) Zilberman was the second of the Hawkeye pilots attending the Pesach Seder that night.

LT Zilberman was born in Ukraine, and I could detect an accent. The Seder lasted long into the night; the Sailors were off duty, and we had nowhere else to go. We drank the *arba kosot* (four glasses) of *Kedem* grape juice, and jokingly lamented the fact that we didn't have any *Manischewitz* onboard. I explained to the Sailors how correctly to perform the *mitzvah* of *'akhilat matza* (eating the *matza*), and that each person is required by Jewish law to consume a *k'zayit bikh'dei 'akhilat pras* while reclining to the left. We recited the *b'rakhot*, read the *Haggadah*, ate *matza* and *maror*, sang songs, and told stories. I learned that LT Zilberman had two children learning in Hebrew school back home in Virginia.

After the Seder had concluded *k'hilkhato* (in accordance with Jewish law) LT Zilberman explained to me how his son knew all the words to the Passover songs. Had his son been onboard, said Steven, he would have been able to sing all the songs with us perfectly.

I distributed boxes of Passover candies to the Sailors, and cans of macaroons. LT Zilberman commented on the Pesach fruit jellies, joking that it was important to eat the lemon slices, as these prevented scurvy.

Eventually all the Sailors departed for the night and I was left alone with that unique feeling of joyful accomplishment and camaraderie that attends the observance of Jewish religious holidays out in the middle of nowhere in a war zone.

The next day, 31 March, 16 Nissan, LT Steven Zilberman was killed returning from a reconnaissance mission to Afghanistan. He was the flight crew commander onboard his E-2C Hawkeye when hydraulic pressure in the port engine failed. Flying on one engine alone, and unable to adjust the pitch of the second engine's propeller, the aircraft began to plummet to the sea. Only a few miles from USS EISENHOWER, Steve handed the flight controls to his co-pilot, and went aft to jettison the escape hatch. The co-pilot could barely grasp the controls; the aircraft was on the verge of spinning out of control, tumbling over and crashing into the waves. Steve resumed his seat behind the controls, took the wheel from his co-pilot's hands, and ordered his crew to bail out.

The three crewmembers safely floated to the sea in their open parachutes, but Steve did not make it out. His aircraft smashed into the North Arabian sea with him onboard, and disappeared in 18,000 fathoms of water.

The next day I flew back from the aircraft carrier to Bahrain, where the US Navy Fifth Fleet is headquartered. I asked permission from the Force Chaplain to extend my orders to the AO (Area of Operations) and return to USS EISENHOWER, in order to participate in LT Zilberman's memorial service and say prayers for him.

The entire squadron loved LT Steven Zilberman, and everyone knew he was Jewish. While discussing plans for the memorial, the wing chaplain informed me that the squadron commander had scheduled the memorial for Saturday. I explained that this should not be done, as LT Zilberman was Jewish, and such events are prohibited on the Sabbath. But everyone loved Steve Zilberman, and everyone knew he was Jewish. So the wing chaplain conveyed my recommendations to his commanding officer. He returned and told me, "Rabbi, the CO says that anything you say goes." I know this is because they wished to honor Steven Zilberman's heritage. The memorial service was scheduled for a different day.

Returning from Bahrain to EISENHOWER to conduct the memorial service, I could not get LT Zilberman out of my mind. I thought of how fragile and tentative is life; one moment a person is in this world, but in the next he may be gone. And yet LT Zilberman was a hero; he saved his crew. Steve could have made any number of decisions that day as he held the wheel, struggling to control his plane. He could have panicked and released it, and the aircraft would have tumbled out of control, killing all onboard. But he was the flight commander. He stayed the course as he had been trained, performed his duty and saved his crew.

I wondered what his last thoughts were as the Hawkeye plummeted to the sea. I shared this with his co-pilot, who was also Steve's roommate and best friend. I suggested that Steve was thinking about his children. But his co-pilot tried to assure me that Steve was a trained Naval aviator, and no doubt was thinking only of what actions he must take next to try to save his plane. But I was not convinced.

I am uncertain why I was so affected by the loss of Steven Zilberman, but I will suggest that the reason was because I was so affected by his life. In the one evening that I had the pleasure of Steven Zilberman's company at the Passover Seder, I was captivated by his wonderful humanity, his affability, his humor, and his joy. He was a joyful guy. *Barukh Hashem* that I was able to share this time with him, to say Hebrew prayers at his memorial service, and to hear his commanding officer's final farewell, "LT Zilberman, Shalom!" May his memory be for a blessing.