‘They Are All Holy’:Rabbi Yisroel Zev Gustman on the Sanctity of IDF Soldiers

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The following essay was written many years ago. At the time, my children were young, and the thought of them serving in the army loomed far in the distance. In a subsequent postscript, I wrote about two of my sons who were then serving in combat units. As the years have gone by, more sons, and our only son-in-law, have served in combat units. As I write these lines, some of them are in Gaza, protecting our People, defending our Land. Our prayers are with these brave, dedicated, idealistic Jewish soldiers, with our own sons, our nephews and nieces and cousins, the children of our neighbors and of the immediate and extended family of Israel. May they all return to their families in perfect physical, spiritual and emotional health. In the merit of our righteous ancestors and our righteous children, may the people of Israel be granted peace and tranquility in the Land promised to us by God.

Many years ago when I was a relatively young yeshiva student, I had the opportunity to study with one of the great rabbis of the previous generation. His name was Rabbi Yisroel Zev Gustman (1908-1991) and he may have been one of the greatest rabbis of the 20th century. He was certainly the greatest “unknown” rabbi: While he fastidiously avoided the limelight and was therefore unfamiliar to the general public, he was well known to connoisseurs of Torah learning.

His meteoric rise from child prodigy to the exalted position of religious judge in the Rabbinical Court of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (1863-1940) at around the age of twenty was the stuff of legend – but nonetheless fact. Many years later, I heard Rav Gustman’s own modest version of the events leading to this appointment: A singular (brilliant) insight which he shared with his fellow students was later repeated to the visiting Rav Chaim Ozer, who invited the young student to repeat this same insight the following day in his office in Vilna. Unbeknownst to Rav Gustman, the insight clinched an argument in a complex case that had been debated among the judges in Rav Chaim Ozer’s court – and allowed a woman to remarry.

One of the judges presiding over the case, Rabbi Meir Bassin (1872- 1931), took an interest in a certain young man and subsequently arranged for him to marry his daughter, Sarah (1905-1978). Unfortunately, Rabbi Bassin passed away before the wedding could take place. Consequently, Rabbi Gustman was chosen to succeed him as the rabbi of Shnipishok and to assume his position on the rabbinical court. While Rabbi Gustman modestly attributed his selection to being “in the right place at the right time,” it was evident that both Rabbi Bassin and Rabbi Chaim Ozer had recognized greatness in him.

While a long, productive career on the outskirts of Vilna could have been anticipated, Jewish life in and around Vilna was obliterated by World War II. Rav Gustman escaped, though not unscathed. He hid among corpses. He hid in caves. He hid in a pig pen. Somehow, he survived.

Rav Gustman served as my personal connection to the pre-war Jewish world that was decimated by the Nazis. I didn’t have to imagine what a rabbi in pre-war Vilna might have been like; I had the privilege of seeing Rav Gustman, still embodying that era, 35 years after the war had ended. At the head of a small yeshiva in the Rechavia section of Jerusalem, Rav Gustman taught a small group of loyal students six days a week. But on Thursdays at noon, the study hall would fill to capacity: Rabbis, intellectuals, religious court judges, a Supreme Court justice and various professors would join along with any and all who sought a high– level Talmud shiur that offered a taste of what had been nearly destroyed. When Rav Gustman gave shiur, Vilna was once again alive and vibrant.

One of the regular participants was a professor at the Hebrew University, Robert J. (Yisrael) Aumann (b. 1930). Once a promising yeshiva student, he had eventually decided to pursue a career in academia, but made his weekly participation in Rav Gustman’s shiur part of his schedule, along with many other more or less illustrious residents of Rechavia and Jerusalem.

The year was 1982. Once again, Israel was at war. Soldiers were mobilized, reserve units activated. Among those called to duty was Ari D. Kahn 363 a Reserves soldier, a university student and a Talmudic scholar, who made his living as a high school teacher: Shlomo Aumann (1957-1982), Professor Yisrael Aumann’s son. On the eve of the 19th of Sivan, in particularly fierce combat, Shlomo fell in battle.

Rav Gustman mobilized his yeshiva: All of his students joined him in performing the mitzvah of burying the dead. At the cemetery, Rav Gustman was agitated: He surveyed the rows of graves of the young men, soldiers who died defending the Land. On the way back from the cemetery, Rav Gustman turned to another passenger in the car and said, “They are all holy.” Another passenger questioned the rabbi: “Even the non-religious soldiers?” Rav Gustman replied: “Every single one of them.” He then turned to the driver and said, “Take me to Professor Aumann’s home.”

The family had just returned from the cemetery and would now begin the week of shiv’a – mourning for their son, brother, husband, and father. (Shlomo was married and had one child. His widow, Shlomit, gave birth to their second daughter shortly after he was killed.)

Rav Gustman entered and asked to sit next to Professor Aumann, who said: “Rabbi, I so appreciate your coming to the cemetery, but now is time for you to return to your Yeshiva.”

Rav Gustman spoke, first in Yiddish and then in Hebrew, so that all those assembled would understand:

“I am sure that you don’t know this, but I had a son named Meir. He was a beautiful child. He was taken from my arms and executed. I escaped. I later bartered my child’s shoes so that we would have food, but I was never able to eat the food – I gave it away to others. My Meir is a kadosh – he is holy – he and all the six million who perished are holy.”

Rav Gustman then added:

“I will tell you what is transpiring now in the World of Truth in Gan Eden – in Heaven. My Meir is welcoming your Shlomo into the minyan and is saying to him ‘I died because I am a Jew – but I wasn’t able to save anyone else. But you – Shlomo, you died defending the Jewish People and the Land of Israel’. My Meir is a kadosh, he is holy – but your Shlomo is a Shaliach Zibbur – in that holy, heavenly minyan.”

Rav Gustman continued:

“I never had the opportunity to sit shiv’a for my Meir; let me sit here with you just a little longer.” Professor Aumann replied, “I thought I could never be comforted, but Rebbi, you have comforted me.”

Rav Gustman did not allow his painful memories to control his life. He found solace in his students, his daughter his grandchildren, and in every Jewish child. He and his wife would attend an annual parade (on Yom Yerushalayim) where children would march on Jerusalem in song and dance. A rabbi who happened upon them one year asked the Rabbi why he spent his valuable time in such a frivolous activity. Rav Gustman explained, “We who saw a generation of children die, will take pleasure in a generation of children who sing and dance in these streets.”

A student once implored Rav Gustman to share his memories of the ghetto and the war more publicly and more frequently. He asked him to tell people about his son, about his son’s shoes, to which the Rav replied, “I can’t, but I think about those shoes every day of my life. I see them every night before I go to sleep.”

On the 28th of Sivan 5751 (1991), Rav Gustman passed away. Thousands marched through the streets of Jerusalem accompanying Ari D. Kahn 365 Rav Gustman on his final journey. As night fell on the 29th of Sivan, nine years after Shlomo Aumann fell in battle, Rav Gustman was buried on the Mount of Olives. I am sure that upon entering Heaven he was reunited with his wife, his teachers, and his son Meir. I am also sure that Shlomo Aumann and all the other holy soldiers who died defending the People and the Land of Israel were there to greet this extraordinary Rabbi.

On December 10th 2005, Professor Robert J. Aumann was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, and in an autobiographical statement several months later,[[2]](#footnote-2) Professor Aumann reflected:

“Jews have been yearning for the land of Israel, and for Jerusalem, for close to 2000 years – ever since the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70, and the ensuing exile of the Jewish people. In our central prayer, which we recite three times a day, we ask the Lord to “return to Jerusalem Your city in mercy, and rebuild it and dwell therein.” Jerusalem is mentioned many thousands of times in the scriptures, in our other prayers, in the Talmud, and indeed in all our sources. So when the state of Israel was established in 1948, my brother and I made a determination eventually to make our lives there. My brother fulfilled this ambition shortly thereafter, in 1950, but I decided first to complete my education. In 1953 I met an Israeli girl, Esther Schlesinger, who was visiting the United States; we were married in Brooklyn in April of 1955. In the fall of 1956 I took up a position as instructor of mathematics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and have been there ever since. Esther and I had five beautiful children; the oldest, Shlomo, was killed in action in 1982, while serving in the Israeli Army in “Operation Peace for Galilee.”

... For me, life has been – and still is – one tremendous joyride, one magnificent tapestry. There have been bad – very bad – times, like when my son Shlomo was killed and when my wife Esther died. But even these somehow integrate into the magnificent tapestry. In one of his beautiful letters, Shlomo wrote that there can be no good without bad. Both Shlomo and Esther led beautiful, meaningful lives, affected many people, each in his own way.”

I suspect, as well, that he also took memories of his Rabbi, Rav Gustman.

The last time I saw Rav Gustman, I was walking in the Meah Sharim/Geulah section of Jerusalem with my wife and oldest son who was being pushed in a stroller. It was Friday morning and we saw the Rosh Yeshiva, we said hello, wished him “Good Shabbes.” Then, I did something I rarely do: I asked him to bless my son. Rav Gustman looked at the toddler, smiled and said “May he be a boy like all the other boys.” At first, my wife and I were stunned; what kind of blessing was this? We expected a blessing that the boy grow to be a zaddik – a righteous man – or that he be a Talmid Chacham – a Torah scholar. But no, he blessed him that he should be “like all the boys.”

It took many years for this beautiful blessing to make sense to us. The blessing was that he should have a normal childhood, that he have a normal life, that he have his health... Looking back, I realize what a tremendous blessing Rav Gustman gave, and why.

Today, that son – Matityahu, and our second son Hillel, are soldiers in combat units in the Israeli Defense Forces. Brave, strong, motivated and idealistic, they are wonderful soldiers, wonderful Jews. I pray that they return home safely along with all their comrades, and live normal lives – “just like all the boys.”

May it be the will of God that the People of Israel sanctify His Name by living lives of holiness which will serve as a light to the nations – and may no more children, soldiers or yeshiva students ever need to join that holy minyan in Heaven.

Addendum:

Over the years much more has been written about Rav Gustman. I would like to share a little more about him, specifically relating to the Land of Israel and the soldiers who protect her.

Rav Gustman had a student, Dr. Simcha Finegold, who was also his personal dentist and occasionally served as his driver; one such occasion was the drive to the funeral of Shlomo Auman. Dr Finegold recalled that once when Rav Gustman had come for treatment, while the Rosh Yeshiva was still sitting in the chair, Dr. Finegold asked the Rabbi’s permission to pose a question. He said that his two sons would soon be finishing high school and he wanted to know if there was an obligation to join the Israeli army. He added that this was a personal question, and he would not quote Rav Gustman. Rav Gustman asked him to wait; he stood up, put on his rabbinic frock and his hat. Rav Gustman wanted to answer as a rabbi, and not as a patient sitting in the dentist’s chair. He understood that this was an important question. When he was fully dressed, Rav Gustman asked Dr. Finegold to repeat the question. “What does the Torah, given to us by Moshe Rabbenu, say about this situation?” Dr. Finegold asked.

Rav Gustman replied, “What does the Torah say?! It says “Shall your brothers go to war, and you remain here?” (Bamidbar 32:6) He repeated the verse over and over as he paced the office, and then Rav Gustman added: “You can quote me – that is what I say to whoever asks me,” and as his voice trailed off, he added “but no one asks me.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

During the Peace for the Galilee War, Rav Gustman was quoted as saying that had he been a bit younger, he would have joined the army to help in the battle. He instructed his staff at the Yeshiva to interrupt him, no matter what he was doing, if soldiers came with questions. When some of the Yeshiva students complained that these soldiers were interrupting the shiur, Rav Gustman remonstrated them: “What they are doing is more important than what you are doing.”

Another student recalled one particular morning in 1982, during the Lebanon War, when the atmosphere in the Yeshiva was light, even whimsical.

In the middle of delivering a lecture, Rav Gustman sensed the feeling in the room. He stood up abruptly, pounded the desk with his hand, and roared like a lion: “Your brothers went to war, and you remain here?” With tears rolling down his cheeks, Rav Gustman cried, “Jewish men – boys, are endangering their lives and you are sitting here!” he added “Do not stand on your brother’s blood,” and he lectured the yeshiva students from the depth of his soul for many minutes. Everyone present sat in stunned silence. After he calmed down a bit, Rav Gustman said, “If anyone here has merit or permission not to be in the battlefield, it is only if now in yeshiva –you understand that you are on the battlefield. You are soldiers in a time of war, which means there are no luxuries or comfort. Anyone who does not abide by these conditions, for even one moment, is guilty of spilling blood. Only someone who not only believes but behaves as if they are in battle to save lives, and their learning is saving lives, can stay. Anyone who doesn’t believe that can leave now.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

All those who were eligible to go and fight were encouraged to do so.

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1. This article draws from direct experience and reconstructed events relayed to me. It first appeared in an initial form on my blog ‘Explorations’ and at Aish. com, and since then, it has been republished and referenced in numerous books and articles.

More recently, it has appeared in the anthology Praying for the Defenders of our Destiny | The Mi sheberach for IDF Soldiers, Ed. by Aviad Hacohen and Menachem Butler, The Institute for Jewish Research and Publications, Cambridge, MA 2023. ([https://amzn.to/3t775X6](https://amzn.to/3t775X6?fbclid=IwAR1eGtlIhaux8OtEdu6yunG6UjFo2QZI9REWoWdUAwFFI4dAzp1Em2p98wU)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Robert J. Aumann, “Biographical,” NobelPrize.org (2006), available here (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2005/aumann/ biographical). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Eliezer Melamed, “The Last Gaon from Vilna,” Besheva, no. 109 (13 November 1987), and see Uriel Banner, “Rav Israel Zev Gustman: Sparks of Light from His Personality,” Asif, vol. 4 (2017): 537-616 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Uriel Banner, pp. 589-590, citing Rabbi Reuven Oriyah. The article by Banner explores different positions which Rav Gustman may have expressed at different times to different people regarding serving in the army. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)