

El Malei Rachamim for Soldiers and 10/7

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody

On November 17th, 1949, the young State of Israel buried 323 soldiers and citizens who were killed in Gush Etzion, Latrun, and elsewhere during the War of Independence. Stores were shuttered throughout Jerusalem as tens of thousands came to pay final respects during the first military funeral at Mt. Herzl. What prayer does one say on such an occasion?

The man arguably most responsible for making these burials possible was IDF Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren. For weeks, he and his comrades made painstaking efforts to locate and retrieve the corpses and body parts of killed fighters. At times, they even entered minefields within enemy territory. Clearly, an appropriate *tefillah* had to be composed for this somber moment.

Rabbi Goren chose to adapt the classic *El Malei Rachamim* memorial prayer with the following tribute: “G-d, full of mercy... grant fitting rest... to the souls of the Israel Defense Forces that sacrificed their lives for the sanctification of G-d’s name, the nation, and the Land.” This became the basis for the prayer recited at all military funerals and on Yom HaZikaron.

A few weeks later, on the eve of Chanukah, the prayer was similarly adapted by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate to commemorate the Jews, known as “*ma’apilim*,” who died at sea while attempting to make it to the shores of Israel. As Dr. Yoel Rappel has shown, the text continued to be utilized after other tragedies. When an El Al flight was shot down over Bulgaria in 1955, killing 58, Rabbi Goren’s prayer commemorated the “holy souls of our brothers and sisters... whose blood was spilled over foreign soil.”

This powerful Israeli use of *El Malei Rachamim* is the latest way in which the storied prayer has been utilized to memorialize communal tragedies. The *tefillah* itself is first referred to in *Yaven M’tzulah* (“Abyss of Despair”), a book by Nathan of Hanover, who chronicled the Chmielnicki

massacres in 1648–49. He describes how a certain cantor, Reb Hirsch of Zywtow, mournfully chanted *El Malei Rachamim* over their brethren slaughtered in 1648, which caused everyone to break out in loud cries. An extended version is frequently attributed to Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller, the author of the *Tosafot Yom Tov* commentary, who composed a *selicha* in 1650 to the memory of Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Nemerov and his community. Another version of the text appears in 1656 to memorialize the holy ones murdered in Warsaw and other Polish cities. It is considerably longer than the version that we have today, and reads more like a *kinah* lamentation recited on Tisha B’Av. Various versions of *El Malei Rachamim* were adapted for different tragedies, like the great 1689 fire in Prague.

Over time, the prayer was also utilized to commemorate the loss of individuals on their *yahrzeit* and in *Yizkor*. Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin argued that the same text should not be used for people who did not die as martyrs; his suggestion, however, was not accepted. Nonetheless, *El Malei Rachamim* remains at its core a prayer composed for martyrs.

In the midst of the Holocaust and soon afterwards, figures like Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog wrote versions in memory of those murdered by the Nazis. At times, the language became contentious, as rabbis, politicians, and historians debated whether to detail the ways in which *Shoah* victims died (should “buried alive” be included?), their countries of origin (why mention some but not others?), and how to mark their murderers (Germans? Nazis? Their allies?). The details are symbolically significant, although most important in my mind is to make sure that we continue to recite one version or another as the number of survivors dwindle. Given this history, it’s not surprising that various versions of *El Malei Rachamim* have already been composed for the victims of October 7th and the subsequent war. One version, composed by IDF Chief Cantor



The funeral procession down King George Street for the 323 fallen soldiers. (PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Shai Abramson, is translated on the Ematai website.

To a large extent, the post-1948 versions of *El Malei Rachamim* continue the tradition of 1648. Yet we should never lose sight of one key difference. Since 1948, we not only memorialize those who died as victims but also those who gave their lives as defenders of the Jewish people. Today, the history of *El Malei Rachamim* tells both the travail – and triumph – of Jewish history.



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