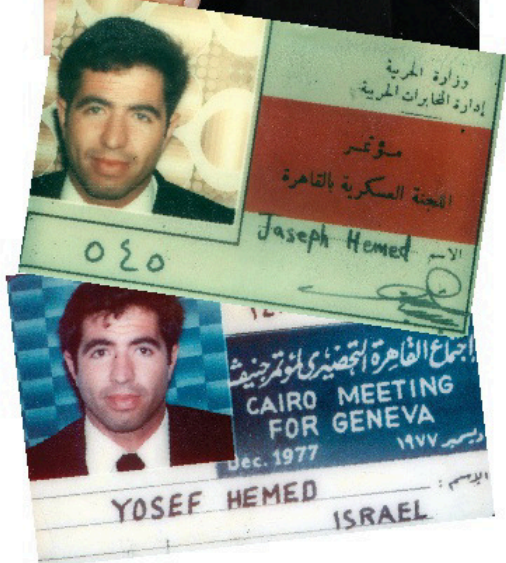


Israel's Forgotten Hero

"...they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." (Song of Solomon 1:6)



Tsvi SADAN

Had Yossi Gino lived in the time of King David, his name would have been enshrined forever in the list of the Israel's mighty heroes. But when Gino died some seven months ago at the age of 69, his youngest daughter Noa told me that not one official representative of the Israeli government attended the funeral.

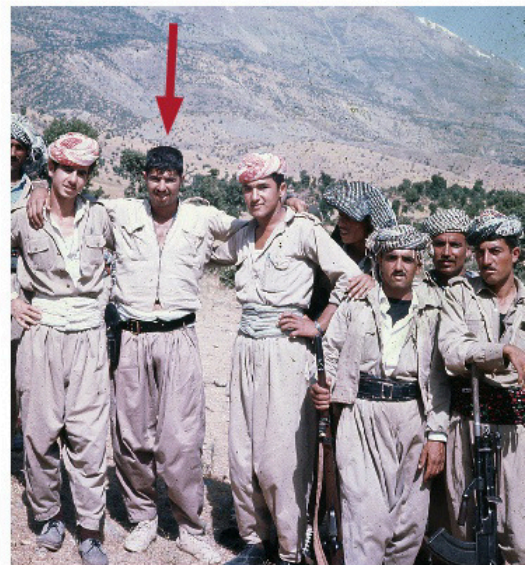
But it was clear by the throngs that did attend Gino's being laid to rest, including many of Israel's top former security figures, that he was an exceptional man.

In a rare interview with Ha'aretz published in February 2006, one of Gino's friends stated: "With all due respect, James Bond himself could have learned a few things from Gino." At his funeral, former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, said that Gino had been "a living legend."

Until his retirement in 1993, Gino served in the most clandestine units of the IDF, Israel Security Agency and the Mossad. Most of his activities remained highly classified, even after half a century. As a son of Jews who came to Israel from Syria, Gino was able to blend in to any Arab community. And he was incredibly resourceful. Gino once recalled being asked by a policeman in a neighboring Arab country to present his papers. Since he didn't have any, Gino puked on the policeman's shoes. Apologizing profusely, Gino proceeded to make the officer forget all about the papers by telling a series of local jokes.

While the goals of his missions remain secret, such stories reveal the man's courage and skill. One of his missions, however, has been declassified. In the run-up to the 1982 Lebanon War, Israel worried about how to deal with the formidable Syrian air defenses. Particularly troubling were the new Russian SA-6 surface-to-air missiles. Gino and his friends went to work, and managed to steal an SA-6. Israel subsequently shocked the world by destroying Syria's air defenses with relative ease.

Gino's familiarity with the Arab world sobered him with regards to the never-ending conflicts characterizing this region. Though he tried to stay out of politics, his views were more in line with the political right. In his very last



lecture, Gino said: "The Arab Muslim world is completely different from our world. Different logic, different morality...whoever tries to understand what the Arabs will do according to our logic will get nowhere."

But for all his successes on the battlefield, Gino was unable to adequately provide for his family. A series of bad business decisions put him deep in debt. And despite his heroic status, the State of Israel could do little to help. Heartless protocol precluded using taxpayers' money to aid one whose actions had saved the lives of so many others.

Though saddled with half a million dollars in debt and facing foreclosure on their house, Gino's wife and daughters could not be persuaded to "beg for money" after his passing. It was the youngest daughter, Noa, who finally decided to bring her father's story to the public, hoping to remind Israelis that basic human decency and camaraderie could still overcome protocol and bureaucracy.

Many of our readers who visited Israel in the past could very well have met Gino at his restaurant on the beach at Capernaum, the center of Jesus' ministry in the Galilee. At any rate, it is fitting to close by quoting the last birthday card Gino gave to his daughter Noa: "Love, only love, is the spark that floods life with light, turns on the sun, colors the universe, excites the heart." ■

www.yossigino.com

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