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# The Ultimate Conversion

By Shmuel Rosner July 9, 2013 12:25 pm

MOUNT HERZL, Israel — Private Evgeny Tuluzko is buried in the military graveyard on Mount Herzl, area A, plot 23, row 1, grave 2. He died in February during basic training, and when Israel celebrated its Memorial Day, on April 9, he was the latest of its soldiers to have fallen.

It is customary on that holiday for the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces to place a flag on the grave of its newest dead. Yet this year, Maj. Gen. Benny Gantz honored the tomb not of Tuluzko but of Shlomo Nitzani, who died last October. Nitzani was a lieutenant colonel and a hero, while Tuluzko was a simple soldier. More relevant still: Nitzani was Jewish, and Tuluzko was not.

That earned Tuluzko the right to be buried outside the cemetery's main plot because the I.D.F. adheres to religious rules set by Orthodox rabbis, and those require that soldiers who aren't officially recognized as Jews be buried separately from those who are. This practice reflects the curious status of people, like Tuluzko, who come from immigrant families with Jewish ancestry: While they can obtain citizenship in Israel based on their Jewish roots (for example, a Jewish grandfather on their father's side), they might not be recognized as Jews by the rabbinate (because to the Orthodox Judaism is passed through the mother).

Politicians, officers and columnists — even the Nitzani family — were fierce in their criticism of the snub to Tuluzko. The I.D.F. soon apologized, promising that such an incident would not occur again. Gantz visited Tuluzko's family and said that had he known about him, he would have placed a flag on his grave.

That wasn't good enough for Elazar Stern, a former general and a legislator. Stern, himself an observant Orthodox, has long been fighting the rabbinate's

hardheadedness on issues like how to convert to Judaism and whether rabbis should adhere to civil rules. “It is unreasonable to separate soldiers who fight shoulder to shoulder after their deaths,” Stern told me Sunday by phone. Believing that Jewish law doesn’t forbid non-Jews and Jews from being buried in the same plot, immediately after the incident he proposed a bill that would mandate a shared burial space.

Both the I.D.F. and the religious political parties opposed the idea. The I.D.F. doesn’t want legislators to force it into religious battles, and the religious parties — as well as many Orthodox Jews — want to keep religious matters in the hands of the rabbis. Many of Stern’s opponents claim there was no problem to begin with: Non-Jewish soldiers are buried respectfully and in a non-discriminatory way. That Gantz placed the flag on the wrong grave was a mistake, and that’s no reason to change the rules.

Despite the opposition, Stern felt confident he had leverage to argue for change: He knew that public opinion would make it difficult for the Defense Ministry to counter his proposed legislation. The military remains a sacred institution in Israel. Memorial Day hasn’t yet turned into a shopping holiday; it’s still a time of national mourning. And so for most Israeli Jews, dying in uniform is, as Stern puts it, “the ultimate conversion.” Any soldier who falls for Israel is Jewish enough for purposes of sharing a cemetery with other soldiers.

Last week, the Defense Ministry agreed to change its rules, and in exchange Stern agreed to withdraw his bill. From now on, there will be no special burial plots for non-Jews — just special rows within shared plots.

When I asked Stern if he was satisfied with this compromise, he said, “for now.” It isn’t ideal, but it reflects “the complicated nature of Israel’s society.” For him, the most important thing was to do away with “plots in which you only hear Russian speakers” and to stop sending some people “to mourn in the non-Jewish area.”

If Stern is only half-happy with this solution, I am even less happy. I think separate rows should exist only for those families that specifically ask for them, and presumably that’s those for which the rabbinate’s rules are all-important. Since I doubt there are many such Israelis — Stern agrees — the solution to the Tuluzko affair isn’t much of a compromise. It’s just more evidence that Israel’s strict Orthodox minority exercises too much sway over the majority, Jewish and

not.