11 funerals for IDF commanders, soldiers held across Israel as nation mourns

June 16, 2024

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/11-funerals-for-idf-commanders-soldiers-held-across-israel-as-nation-mourns/>

Eleven funerals were held across Israel on Sunday for Israel Defense Forces troops who died over the weekend in three separate incidents in fighting in the Gaza Strip.

Most of the fallen soldiers laid to rest on Sunday were killed in a [blast](https://www.timesofisrael.com/eight-soldiers-killed-in-rafah-explosion-in-deadliest-incident-for-idf-in-6-months/) in southern Gaza’s Rafah on Saturday morning, in what marked the deadliest incident for the IDF in the Strip since January. The troops all served in the Combat Engineering Corps’ 601st Battalion. Seven of their funerals were held Sunday, and the eighth will be held on Monday.

Separately, two reservists were [killed Saturday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-reservists-killed-in-north-gaza-as-soldiers-slain-in-rafah-blast-named/) fighting in northern Gaza, while another soldier succumbed to his wounds sustained in battle five days earlier, and a soldier was also [killed in Rafah](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-names-8th-soldier-killed-in-rafah-blast-yesterday-announces-death-of-soldier-killed-earlier-today/) on Sunday.

Cpt. Wassem Mahmoud, 23, a deputy commander, was laid to rest in Beit Jann, where the village delayed celebrations for the Eid al-Adha Muslim holiday to pay their respects to the fallen soldier.

“It is a tragic day for the people of Israel, for the State of Israel, a great loss,” his uncle Sharif said on Sunday. “Wassem was meant to go and study, that was the last conversation I had with him. He was chosen as a representative from the battalion to go and study.”

Druze leader Sheikh Muakfak Tarif eulogized Mahmoud at his funeral as a dedicated soldier who fought for his country ever since war erupted with Hamas’s October 7 massacre in southern Israel.

“Wassem led his soldiers in the Combat Engineering Corps’ since the outbreak of the war, he didn’t give up, he kept his head held high, he pushed on and continued to fight even after he was wounded,” the spiritual leader said.

Mahmoud was injured fighting on October 7 but returned to the battlefield without telling his family that he had been hospitalized. Instead, he chose to “stay at the front, out of complete faith and identification with the goals of the war, to protect the southern border and prevent terrible massacres like what happened in the Gaza border communities on October 7,” Tarif said.

He added that the Druze community “carries the burden of service, and everything that comes with it, including the painful parts.”

Sgt. Eliyahu Moshe Zimbalist, also killed in the blast in Rafah on Saturday, was laid to rest in the Mount Herzl Military Cemetery in Jerusalem.

Zimbalist, 21, moved to Israel from the United States with his family in 2005 as a toddler, and grew up in Beit Shemesh. Community members lined the streets, waving Israeli flags, to support the mourning family as they made their way to the cemetery in Jerusalem.

“Eliyahu Moshe, the *gibor* (hero). You were supposed to be speaking at my funeral, not me speaking at yours,” his father Simmy said in English at his graveside. “You were supposed to say *kaddish* (the Jewish prayer for the dead), not me. This is one of the most difficult days for me and our family. There are no words to express our feelings.”

According to an initial IDF probe, the troops were all killed inside a Namer armored combat engineering vehicle (CEV). There were no survivors. The soldiers had been driving in a convoy that was heading to buildings captured by the army, for the troops to rest following the overnight operation. The Namer CEV was the fifth or sixth vehicle in the convoy, and at some point, it was hit by a major explosion.

It was not immediately clear from the investigation if it was a bomb planted ahead of time or if Hamas operatives had approached the vehicle with an explosive device and directly placed it on the CEV.

Staff Sgt. Stanislav Kostarev, 21, also from the 601st Battalion, was laid to rest on Sunday in Ashdod.

The principal of the Eva Tevet school where Kostarev studied remembered him as “quiet and introverted, always respectful of humanity, a wise and humble boy, pleasant and kind-hearted,” according to the Ynet news site.

Also killed in the explosion in Rafah, Sgt. Itay Amar, 19, was laid to rest in Kochav Yair on Sunday.

“Itay was a boy who would make everyone smile,” his close friend Ohad told the Walla news site. “You couldn’t be sad next to him. He’d cling to you and not let you go until he made you smile. He was really a stellar person.”

A video of Amar circulated on social media on Sunday showing him dancing at an elderly care home with [Liri Albag](https://www.timesofisrael.com/taken-captive-liri-albag-seen-in-hamas-video-being-abducted/), who was kidnapped on October 7 from her IDF base and is still held by terrorists in Gaza.

“Itay told us he had a friend who was kidnapped, Liri Albag, that was difficult for him. He had the honor of dying to defend the people of Israel,”  his brother Ofir told the Kan broadcaster.

Staff Sgt. Oz Yeshaya Gruber, 20, from Tal Menashe, was buried in the northern West Bank settlement of Shaked on Sunday. He is survived by his parents and five siblings.

Tal Menashe chairman Yuval Butzer remembered Gruber as “a hero on the battlefield who was always smiling, always with good vibes. Always happy to lend a hand.”

Staff Sgt. Orr Blumovitz, 20, was laid to rest on Sunday in Pardes Hanna-Karkur. His siblings remembered him at his funeral as “a bookworm,” who read over a thousand books on Israeli history, according to the Ynet news site.

“My brother, the fallen soldier was a great scholar of history, a kind of ‘bookworm’. He was a hero, I can’t comprehend that he won’t come home again,” Orr’s younger brother, Tal, was quoted as saying.

Sgt. Yakir Ya’akov Levi, 21, from Hafetz Haim, was buried at the Mount Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem. He is survived by his parents and four brothers and sisters.

One of Levi’s teachers in the hesder yeshiva program, in which religious soldiers are permitted to shorten their military service and combine it with Torah studies, Rabbi Zachariah Rabinovitch, eulogized him as “a very enlightening, sociable and pleasant person. Yakir was very bright, razor sharp. The last time he came to visit the yeshiva, Yakir sat with me to study with a light in his eyes… He was very determined to win and not to see blackness, to have his head held high and to give his all.”

The eighth soldier killed in the blast, Sgt. Shalom Menachem, 21, from Beit El, will be laid to rest in Jerusalem late Sunday evening. He studied in the hesder yeshiva program along with Levi and Zimbalist, and is survived by his parents and seven siblings.

“The grief is unfathomable. He fell as a hero in the war for our existence. Our hearts are with his family’s heavy loss,” Beit El council head Shay Alon eulogized the fallen soldier.

Cpt. (res.) Eitan Koplovich and Warrant Officer (res.) Elon Weiss, both from the IDF’s 8th Reserve Armored Brigade’s 129th Battalion, were [killed](https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-reservists-killed-in-north-gaza-as-soldiers-slain-in-rafah-blast-named/) by an explosive device detonated against their tank in northern Gaza over the weekend. Two other soldiers in the tank were seriously wounded by the blast.

Koplovich, 28, was laid to rest on Sunday in Hoshaya, in the north of Israel. He leaves behind him his wife and baby.

“Eitan was a captain in the Reserve Armored Brigade, and commanded the troops as part of the operation in which he fell,” his uncle Golan was quoted as saying by the Maariv newspaper. “He entered Gaza about a week and a half ago — after four months of fighting in the north since the outbreak of the war.”

“He entered Gaza at short notice, so he didn’t have time to tell us much about what he experienced. He graduated with honors from law at the Hebrew University, and was about to start interviewing for internships,” Golan said.

Weiss, 49, was also laid to rest on Sunday, in the Mount Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem. He leaves behind him seven children and one granddaughter.

His commander, Lt. Col. Ariel Ben Baruch, remembered him as a “veteran and dedicated fighter… an educator in both routine times and during emergencies. You always acted patiently.”

“Thank you for your bravery. I salute you on your final journey,” he added.

Weiss’s brother, Asaf, eulogized him at the funeral in Jerusalem: “My brother the hero. My brother, Elon, in four months you would have been 50 years old, with seven sweet children and a sweet granddaughter. You didn’t hesitate to report for reserves duty.”

Sgt. Yair Roitman, an IDF soldier who was seriously wounded last week in southern Gaza, succumbed to his wounds on Saturday and was buried in Karnei Shomron on Sunday.

Roitman, 19, of the Givati Brigade’s reconnaissance unit, was wounded in a [blast](https://www.timesofisrael.com/four-troops-killed-in-booby-trapped-building-as-fighting-rages-in-rafah-central-gaza/) in a booby-trapped building on June 10, in an incident that killed four other soldiers and wounded six, including four seriously.

At his funeral, his mother, Ricki, said Yair “was a perfect child — but I always felt like you were too good for this world. You were a child who never gave up, did what he wanted, and dragged everyone else toward your dreams… you were larger than life.”

Staff Sgt. Tzur Abraham, 22, of the Nahal Brigade’s reconnaissance unit, from Modiin, was killed fighting in Rafah on Sunday, and was slated to be buried late Sunday night in Modiin.

His parents, Shamir and Yifat, said that “the light in his eyes, the gentleness of his soul and his joy for life will accompany us forever.”

A total of 311 Israeli troops have been killed during the ground offensive against Hamas and amid operations along the Gaza border. The toll includes a police officer killed in a hostage rescue mission. A civilian Defense Ministry contractor has also been killed in the Strip.