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New IDF order allows non-religious funeral for fallen soldiers

The IDF has changed its orders allowing families of fallen soldiers to determine whether to have a religious or civil funeral, the NGO Hiddush said Sunday.

For decades, the military order dictated that soldiers would be laid to rest in an Orthodox religious ceremony, led by a military rabbi and in accordance with Jewish law.

Hiddush, which fights for religious freedom and equality, has been waging a long legal battle against the IDF on this issue. It petitioned the High Court of Justice against the order and even held talks on the matter with the Defense Ministry's previous legal adviser, Ahaz Ben-Ari.



The military plot on Mount Herzl (Photo: Gil Yohanan)

The struggle has finally borne fruit this week when the Military Advocate General informed the organization the new General Staff orders on the topic have gone into effect, allowing soldiers and their families to choose what funeral service to hold.

"The order has gone into effect and has been signed," Capt. Zviya Moskowitz, the legal adviser of the IDF's Casualty and Wounded Soldiers Department, informed Hiddush.

"The default set in the order is that a military funeral must be held at a military cemetery. However, this could be deviated from, allowing a military funeral to be held at a non military cemetery, if that was the wish of the deceased or, if the deceased's wish hadn't been made known, of the closest next of kin.

"Alternatively, it was determined a civil funeral can be held without any military characteristics at a civil cemetery. In addition, new provisions have been added to the order allowing for deviation from the religious characteristics in a military funeral or in a headstone unveiling ceremony of a soldier whose place of burial is unknown."

While the new order allows for civil funerals for fallen soldiers, it would not include several military characteristics, such as the ceremonial carrying of the coffin, a wreath-laying ceremony, an honor guard and a firing squad, and an official eulogy made by the IDF. However, the unit's commander will be able to speak in memory of the fallen soldier.

The Defense Ministry will, however, provide the family with full logistical assistance in preparing for the funeral, such as organizing shuttles to the cemetery, publishing death notices, and helping digging the grave. In the event the funeral is held close to the beginning of Shabbat or immediately upon its conclusion, this assistance will not be provided.