As Israel Passes 2,000 COVID Deaths: The Lives Behind the Numbers

A world-renowned scientist, a female Haredi rabbi and a communist who ran an Arab city – the rich stories of some of those who have been lost

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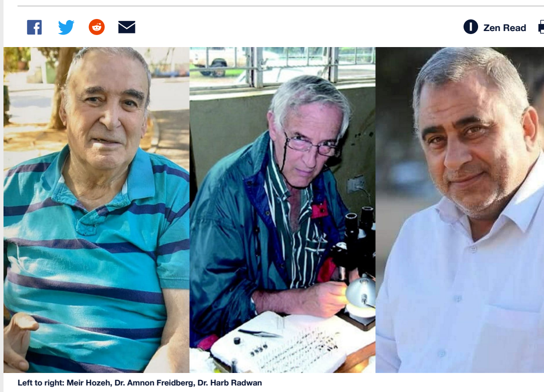

Left to right: Meir Hozeh, Dr. Amnon Freidberg, Dr. Harb Radwan

Ofer Aderet
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The Hebrew Facebook page for photography of bugs, insects, reptiles and amphibians was in mourning this week. The group's members were informed of the death of Dr. Amnon Freidberg, one of Israel's greatest entomologists and an international expert on flies. Hundreds of species of flies were identified based on his work. He had 99 species and 3 genera were named after him, a sign of the great respect that other scientists had for him.

On Saturday, the day of the Simhat Torah holiday, Freidberg joined the long and growing list of Israelis from all backgrounds who succumbed to COVID-19. The number of those who have died of the virus is expected to pass 2,000 on Monday, doubling in just over a month.

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"With a broken and pained heart, I am sorry to inform you that Amnon has passed away," wrote his daughter, Liat. She said he suffered from amnesia, but physically he was "okay." He wasn't ill for a long time with the coronavirus, and was diagnosed only a few days previous. At first, he suffered only from mild symptoms. But suddenly, a rapid deterioration in his condition began and he died within a few hours. "He left us in sadness, in pain and with a large and empty hole," said Liat.

Recently, when he celebrated his 75th birthday, his friend Ariel-Leib-Leonid Friedman wrote a comprehensive article summing up Freidberg's work, including a biography alongside selected pictures. It reveals an exceptional life filled with adventures. Freidberg was born in 1945 in Haifa to Asher Oscar, a businessman and store owner who came from Latvia, and Geula (nee Katz), who was born in Israel to a family from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

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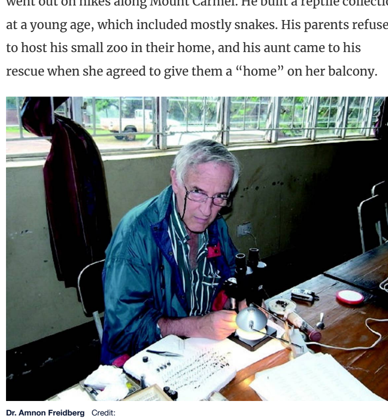
Freidberg showed interest in animals even as a child, when he went out on hikes along Mount Carmel. He built a reptile collection at a young age, which included mostly snakes. His parents refused to host his small zoo in their home, and his aunt came to his rescue when she agreed to give them a "home" on her balcony.



Dr. Amnon Freidberg Credit:

In 1965, after he finished his military service, he began turning his hobby into a profession and began studying biology at Tel Aviv University – which remained his academic home throughout his entire life. His mentor was Prof. Jehoshua Kugler, one of the founders of the study of entomology in Israel, who founded and curated the entomology collection, which today is part of the new Museum of Natural History at Tel Aviv University. At Kugler's suggestion, Freidberg began collecting flies for his scientific research. He also took advantage of his reserve duty for his professional interests, when he collected flies in the Sinai when it was under Israeli control, and in Syria during the Yom Kippur War.

Freidberg was quickly revealed to be a very successful collector and enriched Kugler's collection with rare flies. Later the two went on a research and collecting trip for three months in east and southern Africa, which included Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Freidberg visited almost 70 countries to augment the collection. The distances didn't scare him and he traveled to the Peruvian Amazon and Papua New Guinea to follow his beloved flies.

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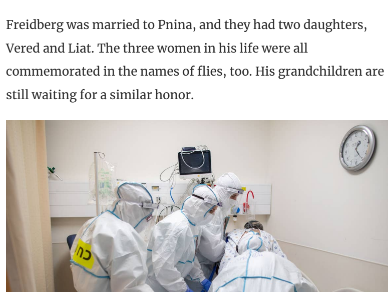
During his 40 years of academic research, he published over 150 scientific articles and had a great number of students, many of whom are today important scientists in their own right. Freidberg – who curated the entomological collection at Tel Aviv University until 2013 – was also responsible for giving flies many of the Hebrew names still used by entomologists today. The Academy of the Hebrew Language even published an official and systematic list of Hebrew names of the order of Diptera (flies) in 2018 that Friedman had worked on.

Freidberg was married to Pnina, and they had two daughters, Vered and Liat. The three women in his life were all commemorated in the names of flies, too. His grandchildren are still waiting for a similar honor.



A patient being treated at the Shaare Zedek Medical Center's COVID-19 ward, Jerusalem, October 7, 2020. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg

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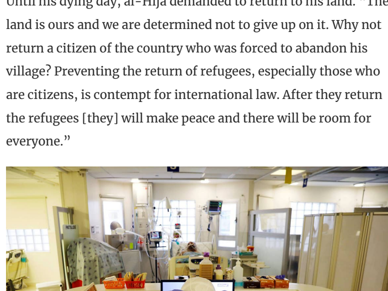
A few days before Freidberg's death, Adel Abu al-Hija, the former mayor of the town of Tamra, was also added to the statistics of coronavirus deaths. He was 81. He was born in a place that no longer exists on the map of Israel: The village Hadatha near Tiberias. "I remember that there were very good relations between us and the Jews in Yavniel – business relations. We bought and sold to one another," he told the Zochrot organization about the days before the founding of Israel. "There were also mutual visits. There was mutual respect. They didn't take part in our expulsion. The opposite, they said 'Stay. If the Jews attack, we will protect you, and if the Arabs attack you will protect us.'"

But after the massacre at Deir Yassin during the War of Independence, many people from the village fled out of fear of a similar fate. "They put us on a rented truck," al-Hija said about leaving the village. "I sat next to the back door and was happy. It was the first time I rode in a vehicle." Later, the IDF expelled the rest of the families and began demolishing the village, including blowing up the mosque, he said.

After a harsh journey, he and his family arrived in Tamra and received Israeli citizenship. He stayed there for the rest of his life, and from 2003 to 2013 he served as mayor. In his childhood, he studied at the local school through eighth grade, and then left to help his father sell eggs in Jewish communities – mostly in the Krayot, north of Haifa. As a teen he joined the Communist Party, an ideology that he never abandoned. "I saw it as a party with principles, protecting the rights of Arabs and calling for the return of the refugees to their villages," he said many years later. "I learned the steadfastness in the struggle and the importance of the ideology that connected me to the party."

20 years after he left the village, al-Hija returned as part of an organized visit. "When we arrived, we were in a difficult emotional state," he said. "The entire village was destroyed. The crying and wailing that broke out there was impossible to describe, as if something suffocated was sitting inside the people and suddenly broke out."

Until his dying day, al-Hija demanded to return to his land. "The land is ours and we are determined not to give up on it. Why not return a citizen of the country who was forced to abandon his village? Preventing the return of refugees, especially those who are citizens, is contempt for international law. After they return the refugees [they] will make peace and there will be room for everyone."



A hospital staffer fixes her protective suite at a coronavirus ward at Ichilov Hospital, Tel Aviv, September 21, 2020. Credit: RONEN ZVULUN/Reuters

Her husband recovered

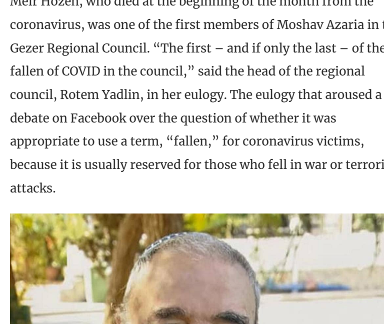
On the eve of Yom Kippur, Pnina Katzburg did not feel well. She hurried to take a coronavirus test and discovered she had been infected with the virus. This was the second time the coronavirus had entered her home: Her husband had been infected recently too, but recovered within a short time. But the story of the rabbi's wife was different. Pnina was in a high-risk group. In recent years, she suffered from poor health and underwent heart surgery, which she recovered from. But she was unable to defeat the coronavirus. On the intermediate days of the Sukkot holiday she passed away at age 70.

Katzburg was born in Jerusalem in 1970. His father's father, Rabbi Baruch Kunshtat, was born in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. During World War II he was sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. Because of a forged document prepared by his family, he was released. In the camp, he vowed that if he got out alive, he would make Aliyah to Israel and found a yeshiva there – and so he did. He was one of the founders of the Kol Torah Yeshiva in Jerusalem for young men who had come from Germany. This was the first yeshiva in Israel among the Haredi Ashkenazi yeshivas where the religious studies were conducted in Hebrew. His son, Pnina's father, Rabbi Elchanan Moshe Kunshtat, inherited his father's position as head of the yeshiva. Her mother, Ruth, was the daughter of Rabbi Uri Shraga Beifuss from Frankfurt.

For 30 years, Pnina volunteered for the Ezer Mizion organization, which helps the ill and disabled. She also helped orphans and widows and every Friday she prepared food for needy families. For decades, she woke up early to pray in the Lederman Synagogue in Bnei Brak along with Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky, the wife of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, who is now himself sick with COVID-19. A few weeks before her death, Pnina moved with her husband, Rabbi Chaim Hizkiyahu Hacohen Katzburg, to live in the Haredi city of Elad. She was survived by her husband and nine children. Her picture was not published.

Died all alone

Meir Hozeh, who died at the beginning of the month from the coronavirus, was one of the first members of Moshav Azaria in the Gezer Regional Council. "The first – and if only the last – of the fallen of COVID in the council," said the head of the regional council, Rotem Yadlin, in her eulogy. The eulogy that aroused a debate on Facebook over the question of whether it was appropriate to use a term, "fallen," for coronavirus victims, because it is usually reserved for those who fell in war or terrorist attacks.



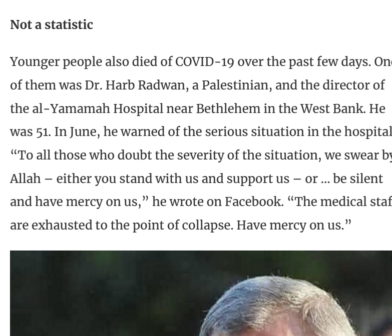
Meir Hozeh Credit:

Hozeh was born 77 years ago in Tunisia. He made his home in Azaria along with his wife Dalia. At first, he was a farmer and later ran the grocery store on the moshav for many years. Their three sons stayed on to live in Azaria, along with eight grandchildren and two great-granddaughters.

"In spite of the loving family that surrounded him from all sides, he was forced to spend his last days alone, hospitalized, isolated from the family he nurtured with such great love," said Yadlin. "It is impossible to imagine the family's anguish when they could not visit him during his hospitalization, and the bitter grief that many of them were forbidden to accompany him on his final journey."

Not a statistic

Younger people also died of COVID-19 over the past few days. One of them was Dr. Harb Radwan, a Palestinian, and the director of the al-Yamamah Hospital near Bethlehem in the West Bank. He was 51. In June, he warned of the serious situation in the hospital. "To all those who doubt the severity of the situation, we swear by Allah – either you stand with us and support us – or ... be silent and have mercy on us," he wrote on Facebook. "The medical staff are exhausted to the point of collapse. Have mercy on us."



Dr. Harb Radwan Credit:

Because Radwan was a Palestinian, he was not counted in the statistics of Israel's deceased. He was one of the about 380 Palestinians who died since the beginning of the pandemic. After his long and crushing work with the victims of COVID-19, and being infected himself, he passed away, said a Palestinian journalist. "We are mourning a victim of humanity."

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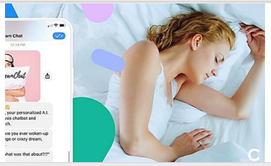

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