

Steven Sotloff's Jewish values shaped a life seeing godliness in every face

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(RNS) As thousands gathered Friday (September 5) at Temple Beth Am in Miami to mourn journalist Steven Sotloff, they paid tribute to the one quality his family and friends tried hard to conceal from his Islamic State captors: his Jewishness.

Sotloff was not only Jewish, he held U.S.-Israel dual citizenship. But during that terrible year of his captivity, dozens of family and friends worked to scrub that detail from any public mention of the 31-year-old reporter for fear he would be persecuted for it. It appears word never got out, though he was brutally killed nonetheless.

In death, the Jewish values that informed his life are coming forward. One of the most moving testimonies Friday came from a childhood classmate Danielle Berrin, who writes for the *Jewish Journal* in Los Angeles.

Speaking to Jose Diaz-Balart on his morning MSNBC talk show, Berrin said Sotloff's Jewish education was "one of the beautiful things" about him.

"The foundational narrative of the Jewish tradition is the Exodus story," she said. "That is a story of a people going from slavery to freedom, darkness to light, degradation to dignity. I really think that was the lens through which Steven saw the world.

"So when he traveled to these very dangerous places, his interest was in shining a light on injustice and telling stories of human suffering. And I think the work he did in his journalism was so much about giving voice to these ordinary people, helping people who were suffering and helping them realize some of their dignity wherever they were," she said.

The tightly knit Miami Jewish community is also profoundly aware of the legacy of the Holocaust. Sotloff was the grandchild of survivors, and when it's that personal,

said Berrin, “It hits you in an incredibly visceral way and it shapes the way you see the world.”

The great lesson, she said, “is that you have to live. And you have to respond to pain and evil and injustice with life and determination. So much of what Steven was doing was about really lifting people up and helping to bring more dignity and more light into the world.”

Berrin also addressed a question raised by some about why Sotloff, who had reportedly read the Qur’an and chose to report in the Muslim world, was “so interested in Islam.”

This was also rooted in Sotloff’s Jewish center, Berrin said.

“He saw the beauty in every single human being. . . . When Steven looked at these all these people all over the world, and he looked into their faces and he wanted to tell their stories, I think he was seeing godliness in all of them.”