

Shabbat Lech Lecha 5784
Freeing Israel's Captives
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

There are many things about Israel's war against Hamas that are deeply complicated. But there are some things that are starkly clear, like this: in no way can Hamas's capture of about 224 hostages from Israeli soil on October 7th be justified or rationalized. Under no circumstances may any terrorist group, anywhere on earth, abduct any innocent grandparents, parents, children, and babies from their homes, anywhere on earth. Period.

I wish all people could just *acknowledge* that.

We must not let the media forget about the plight of these hostages, who range in age from 3 months to 85 years. Not today, not tomorrow. We dare not let our American political officials, who have been tremendously supportive of Israel in this crucial moment, lessen the pressure they can exert on the global stage to bring home these Israelis, Americans, and people of 23 other nationalities, whose names and faces we held in our hands and saw around the room just today.

As we heard earlier, today JUF has mobilized synagogues around Chicago to stand in solidarity to bring the captives' stories front and center. There are many ways we Americans cannot help with Israel's war efforts, as we do not live in Israel. But we *can* take up this specific issue, that of the hostages, because our politicians have real influence here and across the world. Indeed we must.

Most unfortunately, while the scale of hostages taken now is unprecedented, Jewish history has had to reckon with this nightmare before. *Pidyon Shvuyim*, Hebrew for 'redeeming the captives,' is not a new subject at all in the Jewish conversation. Today I want to share with you some of those Jewish voices about this important topic. At the outset of the sermon, I made something very simple: abducting any people anywhere is wrong in the deepest way. But the topic of what to do to bring home the captives is deeply complicated and nuanced. I dare not offer advice or propose solutions to the decision-makers, who know many more details and have much greater expertise and experience. But I urge them to do all they can to bring these innocent people home safely, while keeping Israel safe in the process.

Many of us are familiar with the name Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier Hamas kidnapped from Israel in 2006 and released 5 years later in exchange for about 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. At the time, Rabbi David Golinkin, a leading Conservative rabbi of Jerusalem, wrote an important essay, called “How Far Should Israel Go to Redeem Captive Soldiers?” In it, he quotes the classic Jewish sources, and I encourage you to Google this essay after Shabbat for the full explanation. Of course that example is not parallel to today because Shalit was one soldier and these are over 200 civilians, but the sources inform both situations.

Rabbi Golinkin writes: “Throughout history, Jews have been threatened by their enemies, and Jewish communities sometimes went to extraordinary lengths to redeem captives. Indeed...Maimonides rules that he who ignores ransoming a captive is guilty of transgressing commandments such as “you shall not stand idly by the blood of your [neighbor]”; and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Indeed, Maimonides himself wrote letters exhorting his fellow Jews to redeem captives and collect money for *Pidyon Shvuyim*; the Cairo Genizah even contains receipts to Jews who donated funds for that purpose.”

In other words, we must do everything we can to set them free. In the ancient world, it was *money* our enemies sought from us. Whereas today, Hamas demands that terrorists be released from jails.

The Mishnah, the first Jewish law code of 2000 years ago, names one major exception to *Pidyon Shvuyim*: “One does not ransom captives for more than their value because of *Tikkun Olam* (here it means “for the general good”) and one does not help captives escape because of *Tikkun Olam*...”

Rabbi Golinkin continues: “The Talmud explains this in two ways: A) Do not ransom captives because it will eventually cause a great financial burden on the Jewish community. B) Redeeming captives will give incentive to the kidnapers to seize more captives.”

“The Talmud, however, does not decide which explanation is correct, and contemporary scholars have debated the issue for generations. There have been those [Israeli rabbis], such as Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who were *against* such exchanges, while there have also been outspoken *proponents* of the deals, such as Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi.”

In other words, while we should do all we can to free the hostages, it should not reward the kidnapers, endanger the Jewish community, or incentivize the kidnapers to abduct again in the future. That’s why this situation is so fraught, because Israel loses if

the hostages never return home, and Israel loses if it releases thousands of Hamas terrorists from prison, as the enemy demands.

It would be dishonest for me to share false illusions that with the captives all will be okay in the end. But it would be wrong for me to leave us without something to hope for.

When faced with an existential threat, the Jewish response is to do all we can with our hands, and all we can with our hearts. With our hands, it is sharing these names and stories with our networks and our politicians this week, this month, this year, and however long it takes. This is a marathon and not a sprint.

And with our hearts, it is praying that G-d keep them safe and bring them home, while keeping Israel safe too.

Earlier we read the prayer for the captives, but there is another classic text that I think of that expresses my own hopes and prayers. We all hear these words on the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah as the Haftorah, from Jeremiah chapter 31. The verse begins: *Kol B'Ramah Nishma* - thus says Hashem: a cry is heard in Ramah - wailing, bitter weeping - [our matriarch] Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone."

In other words, Jews have been exiled from their homes in Israel.

The verse continues: "Thus says Hashem: restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears. For there is a reward for your labor, says Hashem. They shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future, says Hashem. *V'Shavu Vanim Legvulam*. Your children shall return to their country."

V'Shavu Vanim Legvulam. Let us remember these words. Let us echo these words until our children shall return safely to their country.

Shabbat Shalom.