

**Cost and Consequence:  
The Redemption of Gilad Schalit**

***Parashat Bereshit;*  
October 21, 2011**

Newspapers appear on our doorsteps every day, and, with rare exceptions, every day they are about the same size, filled with the same amount of print. The news programs on network television and cable tv face the same pre-slotted schedule, and sometimes it seems as if they are just spinning their wheels and filling up space. But occasionally... once in awhile... sometimes there's just a lot of news out there. And there are times, as well, when the headlines are not all about a temporary jockeying for power, or trivial squabbles destined for instant amnesia, but are rooted in real values – choices that reflect on character and conviction, events and ideals that reveal who we really are.

These past few weeks feel like one of those times. Rabbi Ackerman spoke about the Occupy movement and its relationship to Jewish values on this pulpit last Friday night, and Rabbi Jonathan Roos of Temple Sinai echoed those themes in his remarks at our joint festival morning service yesterday. We ran into the protests almost by accident last Saturday night, walking near Times Square in the Theater District with our Tenth Grade class, and on the way to a play encountered a very real drama – protesters with a diversity of signs and slogans facing off against a law enforcement crew with stun guns and batons and ready for a riot. Calls are starting to come in asking what the congregation can do, as we sense that this is not a flash in the pan single day's

story but a genuine outpouring of inchoate but deeply felt frustration. I am reminded of the adage that “if you are not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” I remember the addendum to that as well, the wisdom that teaches us to combine high moral expectations with openness to appreciation: “if you’re always outraged, you are also not paying attention.” A thoughtful... and Jewish values-based response... is called for, is beginning to emerge, and we will share more on this subject in the days to come.

Over the past two days, our attention has been taken by dramatic events in Libya, and the death of a dictator raises questions of due process, of the value of vengeance, over whether justice swift and certain is better than a drawn-out judicial procedure, or is a worrisome reflection of mob rule.

For me, though, this past week, my eyes and my heart have been... back in Israel. For me, the news that has occupied headlines and footnotes alike has been the details of a deal with the devil, and the redemption and return of Gilad Schalit.

I remember two rallies, from the summer of 2010. The first was massive, a caravan through the country and march through the streets of Jerusalem, thousands upon thousands of people gathering to call for the release of this single soldier, musicians playing in a park, his parents speaking from a podium calling on the politicians to do more, to give more, to work harder for their son’s release. And then, walking back from that rally, a smaller one, with a darker message: signs held aloft... “*lo b’chol machir*; not at any price!”

The specter of past lopsided prisoner exchanges loomed heavily in the mind: four Israeli soldiers for 6000 Arabs in 1967, 294 for 8400 after the Yom Kippur War, 6 for 4500 Lebanese and 100 Palestinian terrorists in 1983, 3 for 1150 terrorists in 1985. What would be the cost, and what would be the consequences?

Images, from this past summer, just to give a taste of how small and close-knit a country we are talking about. My apartment was in Rechavia, and every day I went by the Prime Minister's residence en route to my studies in Talbiye and the German Colony; every day, then, we passed by the tent erected by Gilad's family, we saw his father, his mother, his supporters who had vowed not to move until he came home. And then, one of the first presentations we had this past summer, from a senior security official, who told us the following. His eight-year old son had just said to him: "Abba, I should offer to trade places with Gilad Schalit, because he is a soldier, and we need our soldiers." Eight years old.

My favorite verse, the most powerful words of this week's portion, to me, come from the first chapter of Genesis, at the end of the first story of Creation, when we are told "*vayivra Elohim et ha'adam b'tzalmo, b'tzelem Elohim bara oto; zachar u'n'keivah bara otam*;" and God made human beings in the Divine image; in the image of God is the human being made, male and female God made them." Every human being is made in the image of God, of infinite dignity, unparalleled worth.

Much has been made of the implication of this ethos in Israeli society. The belief in the power of one, the potential of each person, the unwillingness to abandon a single soul in actual agony even in the face of potentially deadly results in the future... because the now is known and tomorrow is not, because the power of the real simply outweighs the threat of a theory.

And much has been made, as well, of the contrast with the way other countries might have acted in similar circumstances. Never mind negotiating with terrorists, by the way. Do you remember Willie Horton? What governor would ever dare furlough a felon...who even might return to crime later on?

I want to lay out some of the values at play before us, and share with you some of the voices I have heard over the past week, a small sense of what is going on in Israel at the moment. And never have all the implications of being a “Jewish” polity been so clear: how are the texts and values of Jewish tradition to guide a sovereign state, how does the population weigh in on and react to these considerations, what does it mean to be a community, and how much is this a part of the everyday reality... for every single Israeli family?

The *mitzvah*, the commandment at stake here is called *pidyon sh’vuyim*, the redemption of captives. Ancient texts attest to the fact that this was part of the sad reality and painful experience of Jewish history. From Biblical examples to Talmudic ones, stories are told of ransom paid to bring kidnapped relatives home. Sometimes this is done, in the words of the Babylonian Talmud, “at whatever price may be demanded.” Other texts, from another

place in the Talmud to the law code of Maimonides, warn us “not to redeem captives for more than they are worth, *mipnei tikkun olam*,” – an early use of a familiar phrase, which here must mean “for the sake of the betterment of the world” or even “to prevent abuses.”

But how do we play this out in practice? What is the worth of a man or a woman? What does it say, to trade one for 1000 – and one soldier who was merely on guard duty, representative of an oppressive force as he might be in the eyes of the Palestinians, for 1000 terrorists with proven and actual blood on their hands? Here is something I had never thought of, until a few years ago when a colleague raised it for my consideration. If you were an Palestinian, what would you think of Israel’s willingness to trade one for a thousand? Does it mean the Israelis value each life so highly? Or could it be seen as a kind of arrogance, a dehumanizing assumption...again, I am asking this only from an imagined Palestinian perspective -- that the Israelis really think that one of them, is worth thousands of us? Thus were some nagging doubts and back-of-the-mind questions raised for me, about an attitude I took pride in, I admired.

How do we weigh, then, the good of the one? The other day, in some deal which simultaneously lowered our cable bill, we were given free HBO for a few months. The very first movie on when I checked it out late at night was a Star Trek movie, *The Wrath of Khan*, in which, in choosing to rescue Spock while risking more lives than his, the following proposition comes before us: in a humane society, there are times when, for whatever violation this may entail of

detached utilitarian calculations, the good of the one does outweigh the good of the many. As my teacher Rabbi Donniel Hartman puts it in his latest blog, although this is my formulation of his idea: at some point over the five years of Gilad Schalit's captivity, the question of getting him back ceased being a rational balancing act, and became an emotional imperative instead.

There are proposals in Israel now, to make sure nothing like this ever happens again. One would codify in law the dictate that any future exchanges of prisoners would be... one for one. Codify it all you want, though; there is no telling that this would have any effect in practice, not with multiple precedents to the contrary in Israeli history already. Another proposal would reinstate the death penalty, which Israel does not, in fact, have on the books except for genocide, and which was carried out only once, in the case of Adolf Eichmann. But there is a reason I think this will not happen: a terrorist who has killed a number of hostages already but is still holding more *has to have* an incentive, a reason left to give up. Surrendering in order to face a known death penalty is simply a non-starter in a nation fighting this kind of war.

Ultimately, the case of Gilad Schalit is not an argument, but a human story. So I want to share with you... in story and song, words out of Israel this week. The first is the blog of a college classmate, now a Reconstructionist rabbi and lesbian mother of two living with her partner and children in a small town called Tzur Hadassah, just inside the Green Line, around ten miles southwest of Jerusalem. Rabbi Gail Diamond writes:

It's so hard to put into words the overwhelming feelings I have had today. I woke up at 5:30 am, not thinking anything special, but unable to sleep. At 7 am Alen called from on her way to work to say that Gilad Shalit would be released this morning. I told the kids they could not watch any cartoons and put on the tv news. We watched the build up on tv for awhile and then I dropped the kids at day care and got in the car to work. On my way to work I was listening to the radio news and several text messages came in from security updates I got. Then I sat at work with one eye on Haaretz.

I talked to my boss about how one of the people being released today is the woman who blew up the Sbarro restaurant in August 2001, right after Alen and I moved to Jerusalem. His friend's daughter, Malki Roth, was killed in that bombing, and her parents started Keren Malki in her memory to help families of children with disabilities.

I read online about the other woman who everyone was talking about today - the one who lured a 16 year old boy from Ashkelon over Facebook and got him to Ramallah where he was shot. I remember when that happened.

I went to the bank. The person who served me is someone who has worked there since I lived here. He said no one's mind is on work today. I started talking about the Sbarro bombing and the bombing at Moment cafe that happened in March, 2002. I was a block away when it happened. He told me about a customer who was right in the cafe and was miraculously unharmed. We agreed that we should hear only good news.

I came home and watched Gilad return to Mitzpe Hilah. We postponed dinner to watch Noam Shalit talk to the press at 6 pm. In our Sukkah Gabi said, "I don't understand why 1,000 Palestinian prisoners are exchanged for one person." We talked about how Sasha was less than 2 months old when Gilad Shalit was kidnapped. I tried to imagine what 5 years has meant - to him, to his parents. That's Sasha's whole life, all his growing, all his years.

Israel is considered a "high context society" - where what happens to the nation affects each person. I have never felt it more strongly than today. The kids' day care provider was telling me how she had the kids watch the news and how people would be asking, "do you remember where you were when Gilad Shalit was released?"

And all day I'm wondering - what does it mean to be a parent, to be a child, to be a citizen of this place. I so often wonder what I am doing here. And I have thought of something I heard on the radio - how one of the Hamas leaders, I think it was Haniyeh, told a reporter how he admires the Israeli spirit and commitment, how the Israeli people cared so much about one person.

And I thought of the poem, "Each of us has a name", and of how what has gone on with Gilad Shalit has expressed the notion that he who saves one life is as if he saved the entire world.

And I've felt sad because with all the joy of Gilad's release there's still the overwhelming sadness of the situation we are living in and the sense of intractability. And the fear - that the release of people who have taken innocent lives will lead to more terror attacks, that any one of us could become G-d forbid Noam or Aviva Shalit and any one of our children could be Gilad Shalit. And

amazement at the nobility and persistence of the Shalit family, how they have stood their ground and fought for this day, and incredible joy that it is finally here.

On the other hand.... From the writer Yossi Klein Halevi:

For the last five years I have tried not to think of Gilad Shalit. I avoided the newspaper photographs of his first months as an Israel Defense Forces draftee, a boy playing soldier in an ill-fitting uniform. Sometimes, despite myself, I'd imagine him in a Gaza cellar, bound, perhaps wired with explosives to thwart a rescue attempt. And then I would force myself to turn away.

I tried not to think of Gilad because I felt guilty. Not only was I doing nothing to help the campaign to free him, I opposed its implicit demand that the Israeli government release as many terrorists as it takes to bring him home. Israel has no death penalty, and now we would lose the deterrence of prison: If the deal went through, any potential terrorist would know it was just a matter of time before he'd be freed in the next deal for the next kidnapped Israeli.

But the argument could never be so neatly resolved. Each side was affirming a profound Jewish value: ransom the kidnapped, resist blackmail. And so any position one took was undermined by angst. What would you do, campaign activists challenged opponents, if he were your son? "He's everyone's son," sang rocker Aviv Gefen.

One day I passed a rally for Gilad in a park in downtown Jerusalem. Several counter-demonstrators were holding signs opposing surrender to terrorism. "I happen to agree with you," I said to one of them. "But don't you feel uneasy protesting against the Shalit family?"

"We're not protesting against the Shalit family," he replied. "We're protesting to save future victims of freed terrorists. Those victims don't have names yet. But they could be my son or your son." Every debate over Gilad ended at the same point: your son.

We never referred to him as "Shalit," always "Gilad." The Gilad dilemma set our parental responsibilities against our responsibilities as Israelis—one protective instinct against another. The prime minister's job is to resist emotional pressure and ensure the nation's security; a father's job is to try to save his son, regardless of the consequences.

And so I tried, too, not to think of Gilad's extraordinary parents, Noam and Aviva. Even when denouncing the government they spoke quietly, incapable of indignity. The best of Israel, as we say here, reminding ourselves that the best of Israel is the best of anywhere.

For more than a year the Shalits have lived in a tent near the prime minister's office. I wanted to shake Noam's hand, tell him to be strong, but I resisted the urge. I didn't deserve the privilege of comforting him. I wanted to tell Noam what we shared. As it happens, my son served in the same tank unit as Gilad, two years after he was kidnapped. I wanted to tell Noam that that was the real reason I couldn't bear thinking



about his family. That in opposing the mass release of terrorists for Gilad, it was my son I was betraying.

Now, inevitably, the government has given in to the emotional pressure. Inevitably, because we all knew it would—must—end this way. A few months ago, as part of its psychological war against the Israeli public, Hamas released an animated film depicting Gilad as an elderly gray-haired man, still a prisoner in Gaza. No image tormented us more.

For all my anxieties about the deal, I feel no ambivalence at this moment, only gratitude and relief. Gratitude that I live in a country whose hard leaders cannot resist the emotional pressure of a soldier's parents. And relief that I no longer have to choose between the well-being of my country and the well-being of my son.

Finally, and to bring our reflections this night to a close, words of a song written and released just this week, from Guy Boscati and Arik Einstein:

**“Now that you are here”**

And we will never forget  
The sweet moment  
That we heard it was over  
And that you are coming  
To be near

A smile of innocent children  
Took over our faces  
The first shudder  
After five years

Now that you are here  
Take it slow  
Don't run fast  
Remember, forget, laugh  
You'll always be a hero  
You are allowed to cry  
It's not simple at all  
To forgive fate

But now that you are here  
You can have love  
You can have a strong embrace  
You can breathe deep

For five years the heart ticked  
A clock ticking pain  
The fear that you would not return  
Killed our heart

We love  
To hear your name  
Now you are back  
And there is a great love here

Take what is possible  
Don't dare to be shy  
We have waited just to give you  
Everything you ask for

Oy, how wonderful that you are here