

Rabbi Lewis' Message for November, 2011

You have most certainly read and heard about the release yesterday (as I write) of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who had been held captive by Hamas in Gaza for almost six years. You know that he was released in exchange for 1000 Palestinian prisoners, many of whom were guilty of the deaths of Israelis in terrorist attacks. You can understand how feelings in Israel run the gamut today. They run the gamut here as well, but I think this is one of those events that is difficult for us to appreciate from afar. Gilad Shalit has long been a household name in our community in America, of course, but not in the same way he has been for the Israelis. For them, he has been both a symbol of Israeli powerlessness and also every mother's son.

Let me share with you what Israelis are saying about this decision made by the Israeli cabinet. My colleague Rabbi Mickey Boyden expressed his conflicted feelings well in an online posting:

While today is a day of celebration in Gaza and Ramallah, feelings in Israel are far more muted. There is joy at Gilead's release after over five years of solitary confinement while in captivity, but there is also the recognition that many terrorists with blood on their hands were set free instead of spending the rest of their lives in prison. It was only last night that Israel's Supreme Court ruled against the petition by families of terror victims, who tried to stop the exchange taking place. However, against that, there was the memory of how there might have been a chance of rescuing Ron Arad, but that that opportunity had been missed. Gilead Shalit had to be brought home in one piece and almost at any price.

Daniel Gordis, in [*Foreign Affairs*](#), explains that Israel is living up to its traditional values, what he calls "a central tenet of old-time Israeli ideology: we do not leave our sons in the field."

It stems from the fact that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is a citizens' army, in which conscription is universal and every family knows that it could face the same tragedy as the Shalits. And in the army itself, the "stretcher march," in which soldiers in training are ordered to carry one of their heaviest comrades on a stretcher up hills and down valleys for miles, is a formative ritual meant to instill one message: there is never a case in which soldiers cannot bring their wounded home.

This ethic is taught in other armies, too, but it resonates differently in Israel. From the moment of his capture, Gilad Shalit has been a household name. Compare this to the silence in the United States regarding Bowe Bergdahl, the U.S. soldier held hostage

by the Taliban since June 2009. Ever since Shalit's kidnapping, Israeli society has been wracked by a sense that it failed in its obligation to him.

Gordis says that saving Shalit is a way of saving Israel, of reminding Israelis of their foundation and uniting them in their deepest values.

Rabbi Danny Allen, the executive director of [ARZA](#), connected this event to values implicit in the holiday of Sukkot, the holiday during which Shalit was reunited joyfully with his family and his country:

The Sukkah in which we dwell reminds us of the frailty of life but also of the joy of celebration. Sukkot reminds us that we pray for all people to have rain not just Jews. The prayers of Sukkot, like the ancient sacrifices, remind us, if we need to be reminded, that ours is a people and a civilization that loves peace, that pursues peace, and that sees all human life as holy.

We cannot deny that the process to establish peace in Israel, to "spread over us the Sukkah of peace", is fraught with fear and risk. However, if we do nothing, if we do not attempt to construct our *Sukkat Shalom*, frail as it might be, then we are not living up to the highest ideals of Judaism and Zionism. Each time we recite *Oseh Shalom*, our anthem of peace, we literally take three steps back. We step back from our certainty that only we have truth on our side, we step back to allow space for others to join us in the pursuit of peace, and we step back in humility in order to include all peoples in our prayer.

I echo the words with which Rabbi Allen ends his writing: May God, who makes peace in the heavens, make peace for us, and all of Israel, and, in the universal spirit of Sukkot, for all of humanity.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis