

From My Desk 2025-11 On the Release of Our Captives

“The hostages are home”. When President Trump said that, as he addressed the Israeli Knesset one week ago, he added, “It feels so good to say those words”. His joyful expression was an understatement.

Of course these weren’t “the hostages”. They were OUR hostages. Any person with even the slightest sympathy for Judaism, the Jewish people, or even common decency, would admit that the collective Jewish people’s worry and, even, obsession for the return of these innocent captives, was predicated upon a moral imperative. The capture and holding of babies, elderly Holocaust survivors, and -unbelievably- Jews who for years had been personally assisting Gazan people with medical appointments and food shopping was despicable. This was truly a barbaric attack on civilization.

The return of the living hostages does not, however, mean that we can say the problem has been solved. As of this writing, Hamas (may God avenge their cruelty) still has not released those who were murdered by their rampage and their bodies dragged into Gaza as “trophies”. We pray that Israel will not have to return to war to recover the dead bodies of our extended Jewish family.

Nevertheless, after two years of hearing harrowing stories, it’s good to take some time to calm down, and happily reflect on the fact that our families in Israel can now enjoy the company of their loved ones. That, in itself, is something to celebrate.

But the ethical questions raised by the capture of Jewish hostages is still important to consider. Sadly, throughout our long history, Jews have had to face these issues more than once. (We pray, now, that we never again will have to face such heartwrenching problems). Let’s take a moment to consider a few of the principles underlying this matter.

The first, and perhaps, overriding principle is that of *Pikuach nefesh*. This principle holds that almost any mitzvah may be temporarily ignored, in order to save the lives and ensure the safety of Jewish hostages. “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor”, teaches the Torah in the Book of Leviticus (19:16). Because we are made in the image of God, we are to exert every effort on behalf of saving peoples’ lives.

Second, the Talmud prioritizes redeeming captives, and places no limits on our efforts. (Bavli, Gittin 4:5). In a beautiful statement, the Talmud also urges us “Just as God redeems the Jewish people, so should they redeem captive brothers [and sisters]” (Avodah Zara 17b.)

The Talmud also directs that communal funds, which might otherwise be used for other purposes, be directed to redeem captives. (Bava Batra 8a). There is also the idea that “*kol yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*” (“All Jews are responsible for each other” [Shevuot 39a]).

This idea that the Jewish people must consider itself a close -knit family, (even if thousands of miles separate us physically), has become part of the fabric of Jewish life. A Jew in one part of the world is always regarded as our brother or sister, and every effort is made to ensure their safety.

There are, of course, debates as to exactly how all these teachings come into play. Jewish law refines these teachings to answer questions such as, “Does paying enemies to release captives simply encourage more hostage-taking (God forbid) ?” “If the enemy demands the turnover of a particular Jewish man, in return for sparing an entire community, what do we do ?” “Are Jewish women /children considered differently for purposes of redemption?” “How much must we pay for an individual captive, or for many captives ?” These are not insignificant questions, and are discussed at length in Jewish literature.

For now, let us pray that we never again have to consider these as anything more than theoretical questions. May God bless our people with strength, health and safety, and may this last two year period usher in the time called “*Atchalta D’Geulta*”- the beginning of Ultimate Redemption of the Jewish people.