

SHABBOS SERMON
OCTOBER 22, 2011
RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

Gilad Shalit and “Let’s Make a Deal”

One of Israel’s most popular songs, written by its most popular songwriter, Naomi Shemer, is entitled, “*Al kol ele* – for all these things.” It begins with the words: “*Al ha-devash v’al ha-okets al hamar vehamatok al biteinu ha-tinoket shmor eli ha-tov* – For all these things, over the honey and the stinger, over the bitter and the sweet, over our daughter, our baby, my God watch over what is good.” The song most poignantly describes the reality of life. There is honey and a stinger, there is bitter and there is sweet ... and all we can ask of God is that He watches over what is good.

Those words go to the heart of our feelings as Jews this weekend when Gilad Shalit has finally come home. There is a feeling of “the honey and the stinger,” “the bitter and the sweet.”

My friend, Rabbi Jack Riemer, expressed the feeling so well: On the one hand, we are ecstatic at the news that Gilad Shalit has come home at last. For more than five and a half long years, this brave young man has rotted somewhere in Gaza. His parents moved heaven and earth in an effort to bring him home.

They went to Europe, they went to America, they went to the United Nations, they went anywhere and everywhere they could in the hope of arousing world public opinion on behalf of their son. And all of us who watched them work so passionately and so patiently had to be moved by their determination and their devotion. How could you not feel for these parents?

And yet, happy as we are to see him come home at last, part of us worries that the price that Israel has had to pay for rescuing him may be

too high. A thousand terrorists, killers who have the blood of innocent people on their hands, were released by Israel in exchange for Gilad Shalit. Amongst the released murderers are perpetrators of some of Israel's most painful and bloodthirsty terrorist attacks. People responsible for the Park Hotel Seder massacre, and the one at the Sbarro Pizzeria in Jerusalem, the lynching of Israeli soldiers in Ramallah, bus bombings and suicide attacks ... people like Hassan Salameh.

Barbara Sofer, writing in the Jerusalem Post, tells the story of Hassan Salameh. Hassan Salameh was convicted of initiating twin simultaneous attacks in an Ashkelon bus station and two attacks – one week apart – on Jerusalem bus No. 18. Salameh was serving 38 life sentences.

Salameh was not on the buses he decided to blow up. He was apprehended, wounded in the firefight. Hadassah surgeon, Prof. Avi Rivkind was called out of bed on a Friday night to operate on him. Rivkind, the son of Holocaust survivors, has often spoken of it. On CBS's 60 Minutes, he told Bob Simon, "I want to prove to him that when you come to an Israeli Jewish doctor, you receive the best treatment in the world ... to show them we are human beings." It's a message he says he hopes Salameh's followers have digested: "They know that Hassan Salameh the hero, severely wounded by Israeli soldiers during his capture, was saved by an Israeli doctor."

Do you think Hassan Salameh expressed any regret for his horrible crimes ... or any gratitude for a Jewish doctor saving his life? Don't hold your breath waiting for it! He and each and every one of these terrorists released deserves to go to hell. And believe me when I tell you: they will!

But until then, Israelis worry, and understandably so, about what these thousand murderers will do now that they are free. They are given a hero's welcome, and they are praised for the acts of brutality that they committed. And then what? Will they go back to killing innocent Jews

once again? And if they do, then will the price that Israel has paid for getting Gilad Shalit back end up being too high?

I ask you: What would you have done if you were in Prime Minister Netanyahu's shoes? I don't envy the prime minister who had to make this decision, and I am glad that I was not him, for pick a side, and I can give you the arguments for the other side.

I can tell you, for example, about the long and the sacred Jewish tradition of '*Pidyon Shvuim*', of rescuing hostages. I think that you know how precious and how sacred the Torah Scroll is to Jews, and yet the law provides that, if you need money with which to rescue a hostage, you are permitted - no, I said that wrong - you are **REQUIRED** to sell a Sefer Torah in order to raise the money with which to rescue a hostage.

And therefore, judging by this law, you could say that Judaism teaches that whatever the cost, whatever the price that must be paid, no matter what, the government of Israel did right in rescuing Gilad Shalit. They carried out the mitzvah of *Pidyon Shvuim*, which is one of the most important mitzvot in our religion. They sent a message to their soldiers that, if they are ever captured, they will not be forgotten or abandoned, but that their government will do whatever it has to do to bring them back.

But that is only part of the Jewish tradition. If I am to be honest with you, I must also tell you the story of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg. Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg was one of the great scholars and teachers and leaders of the Jewish community in the Middle Ages. And therefore, the duke of the area in which he lived arrested him and put him into a dungeon. He did so, because he figured that the Jewish people would pay any price he demanded in order to rescue their teacher. And they would have, had Rabbi Meir not sent them a message from prison, **FORBIDDING** them to rescue him. He told them that if they paid an exorbitant figure to save him, then no rabbi and no leader and no teacher in the land would ever be safe. Whenever a cruel monarch needed funds,

he would simply kidnap a Jewish leader and the Jews would pay any price to get him back.

So I ask you: Who was right: those like the sages of the Talmud who taught us the importance of *Pidyon Shvuim*, or those like Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg who insisted that you do not do business with monsters or with greedy thugs, because if you do, you only encourage them to continue kidnapping and holding innocent people for hostage? Who was right: the Sages of the Talmud or Rabbi Meir?

And who is right today ... those who fought to rescue Gilad Shalit at any cost, or those who held to the belief that you dare not encourage murderers by giving in to their demands, and that, if you do, you encourage them to continue doing horrible things?

I can tell you one man's opinion ... one man who would definitely be against such a deal ... a man who knows quite a bit about terrorism. He wrote in his book entitled, Fighting Terrorism regarding the exchanges of terrorists for a kidnapped soldier that it was, and I quote, "A mistake that Israel made over and over again." And that refusing to release terrorists from prison was, "Among the most important policies that must be adopted in the face of terrorism." He went on to write, "The release of convicted terrorists before they have served their full sentences seems like an easy and tempting way of defusing blackmail situations in which innocent people may lose their lives, but its utility is momentary at best. Prisoner releases only embolden terrorists by giving them the feeling that even if they are caught, their punishment will be brief. Worse, by leading terrorists to think such demands are likely to be met, they encourage precisely the terrorist's blackmail they are supposed to defuse." These words were written in 1995 by Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu. So why did he make such a deal now? Well, one answer can be that it is one thing when you're writing a book ... and it's another when you are the Prime Minister. It's one thing when you are writing in theory ... it's another thing when you have to put it into practice.

But perhaps there is another explanation. Perhaps the explanation comes from this morning's Torah portion where we began at the beginning with the description of the creation of the world. There is a well known verse, with a well known question, in the Torah's description where we are told that God says, "*Naaseh adam* – Let us make man in our image." Who is God talking to? The most common answer given, as it is expounded in the Talmud, is that God is conferring with the angels, his heavenly court, regarding the decision whether to create man.

And there is a midrash which relates that conversation. In the midrash, there are four angels conversing with God. The first, *chesed* - kindness - says that man should be created because he does good deeds. The second, *Emet* - truth - says that man should not be created because all he does is lie. The third, *Tzedek* - justice - says that man should be created for he does act of righteousness. And the fourth, *Shalom* - peace - says man should not be created for all he does is fight.

So the score is two votes for and two votes against. It seems deadlocked. So what does God do? He throws *Emet* - truth - to the ground. Now with the score two to one, God creates man.

As is common in many midrashim, the meaning behind this one is far from clear. But in our context I think this is its message: the truth of the matter is, you really shouldn't be trading a thousand terrorists for one person. No country would do that! The mathematics just doesn't add up. And the truth is, in the past, many of the terrorists released went back to killing more Jews. And the truth is, there is no reason to doubt that the same will happen in the future. But this is one of those times that truth in is conflict with *chesed* – with kindness and compassion. And *chesed* must take precedence. Gilat Shalit is, as they say in Yiddish, "*ah momma's ah kind*" – Gilad Shalit is a mother's child. And for Israelis, he is *every* mother's child. All of them know that "there but for the grace of God ..." goes their own child. Kindness and compassion must take precedence. And nobody said this better than Yehudit Shahor, whose teenage son, Uri, was killed by Palestinians in

1995. When the announcement of the Shalit deal was made public, she told Israeli television that “Despite the fear I feel as an Israeli citizen and a terror victim, I am very happy for the Shalit family and feel moved as a mother that this boy will come home.” She said she has no doubt that killers among the released Palestinians will kill again, but she said, “I will never see Uri again but Aviva Shalit has a chance to see her son, Gilad, and even if this is a tough deal, a living boy must be returned home at all costs.”

Let us be proud of Israel for having gambled on the side of compassion this time. 80% of Israelis supported this! Let us be proud of Israel which values every human life so much, as it has demonstrated this week. And let us hope and pray that the gamble does not turn out – God forbid – to be wrong.

And one thing more. In that heavenly debate between the four angels where the score was 2 for and 2 against ... with kindness and justice saying that man should be created, and truth and peace saying that man should not ... God chose to throw truth to the ground so that the vote would be in favor of man. But why did he throw truth to the ground when He could have just as well thrown peace to the ground? The answer: because hope for peace must never be buried. Dealing with an enemy that thinks and acts like Hamas, that could hold this young man in total captivity and isolation for more than five years, going against all civilized norms, leaves one with the feeling that it's impossible to ever make peace. But we can't allow ourselves to think that way because then all hope is lost. The most oft-used verse we Jews recite comes at the end of the grace after meals and comes at the end of Kaddish and it comes at the end of the Silent Devotion: “*Oseh shalom bimromov* – may He who makes peace in the Heavens above, make peace for us and for all Israel.” Asks Rabbi Harold Kushner, “What does it mean – may He who makes peace in the Heavens above . . .?” What kind of peace does God have to make in Heaven? And he explains: the word for Heaven is “*Shamayim*” which is a combination of two words, “*esh*” meaning “fire,” and “*mayim*” meaning “water.” In the heavens, we have fire and water. And when God created them, they

saw each other as an enemy. The fire claimed that the water was going to extinguish it, and the water feared that the fire would cause it to evaporate. And so they were in constant conflict. And then God showed them their affect on the earth. If there would only be the sun and fire, the world would burn. And if there would only be rain then the world would drown. God was able to make peace in the heavens above by showing fire and water – the two opposites – that ultimately they were both needed and they needed each other.

And we must believe that someday the Israelis and Palestinians will do the same. Let us not give in to despair. Let us not lose all hope. Let us rejoice today that after missing 280 weekends with his parents, after missing 280 Shabbatot, today Gilad Shalit spent Shabbos at home. Let us learn to accept the bitter and the sweet, with the hope that God will watch over the good. *Hashem oz l'amo yetain Hashem yevoreich et amo bashalom* – the Lord hath given strength to His people, may He now bless us with peace.” Amen.

Follow “What the rabbi is reading” at: rabbiwohlberg.wordpress.com and on Twitter: twitter.com/rabbiwohlberg

Sermons/102211

© copyright 2011 by Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. All rights reserved.