

Shana Tovah

In my family we used to make signs and hang balloons whenever anyone returned from camp or school or a distant vacation. It always felt so great! Such a warm welcome.

If I were one of those guys who make signs, I would hold up a big one that says Welcome Home to my family. Welcome Home! I say home and not welcome to this house of worship because a home is a place of comfort and warmth. A home is where you share essential values. A home is for family. It's nice to be back, nice, so nice to be with family. It's so great to stand here and see your own reunions in the midst of this big family reunion.

It is remarkable, this annual gathering. We are together as one, as community. We have been repeating very ancient words and hearing old melodies. And they continue to speak to us. This makes a difference. We express deep longing and yearning. We express deep appreciation. After thousands of years, we continue to do this. Because through the experience of being a Jew, and in its attempt to understand the world, and life itself, we try to find meaning and give life purpose. It's been a difficult few weeks. It has been a challenging year. Perhaps we come together to restore some sense of balance.

This isn't like other religions, you know. We are not **simply** about faith. No, our journey is much more challenging than that. You don't find simple right or wrong answers in the synagogue. We are a culture, with a sacred literature, and values, that speak to life's greatest challenges and tries to create order and sense out of a world that can be very senseless. The challenges around us are immense. But, we will never back down from them. Using our minds and spirit we try to make the world we live in worthwhile, meaningful. We have introduced concepts like justice and mercy, freedom and the equality of all human beings. It is a privilege, a blessing to be here!

We have come too far to let this go. We've experienced too much. We understand that our past has imposed a responsibility on us. We hear the voices that go back to Abraham and they continue to teach. And we have come to learn that the world needs us. We can continue to teach from this tradition valuable lessons that can transform this world. We do it through learning and a continual engagement with Torah and the texts of the past, we do it through the lessons we learn from our lives and the history we know.

Of all the things I could speak about this morning, I want to talk about one event of the past year that defines us and gives a message about us to the world. The event speaks to the complexity, of our tradition and our people. It cuts to the heart of our values. It opens a wound, but I think we need to speak about it on this day.

Remember the prisoner exchange that took place on Israel's northern border on July 16, 2008? I want to talk to the issues it evokes and I want to speak about what it means to us as a people.

Two years ago, Karnit Goldwasser, the wife of Israeli citizen, Ehud, said goodbye to her husband of less than one year. He went off, like most Israeli men to miluim, reserves. Their farewell kiss was rather unremarkable. She said at the cemetery this past July, "your embrace was warm, your kiss loving, but quick." The parting words were personal, but gave no hint of the future. It never occurred to that young couple that that would be the last time they would see each other. Ehud was with a small band of soldiers that included Eldad Regev. These two men were ambushed and died in the ambush or shortly thereafter, perhaps in captivity. But their dead bodies were held as trade bait for two years. Through the years of captivity, Ehud Goldwasser's family, like the family of Eldad Regev and the Gilad Shalit, who remains in captivity to this day, have proven themselves to be models of decency, compassion and hope. They presented themselves as loyal citizens and loving family. They continually expressed hope that they would survive. They are made of the stuff that Jewish people create, resolute, strong, yet never falling into either despair or cruel hostility. They were dignified in their pain.

And they had the support of a government and a nation and an entire people. You know that we prayed for their well being consistently here and joined with the Jews of Los Angeles, Chicago and London and Sydney and Jerusalem.

This summer, two bodies were exchanged for 198 prisoners, murderers, terrorists.

This past summer, eulogizing her husband, Karnit said, "You left smiling. From your perspective it was just one day in which you were volunteering to serve your country. You weren't fearful." The funeral was one day short of what would have been only his thirty-third birthday. She went back to the fateful day of July 12, 2006 when time stopped for her and for so many. It was then that Hezbollah attacked a reserve patrol along the northern border. Because Hezbollah had taken their bodies, the fate of those two soldiers wasn't known until the exchange. Hoping that they would be welcoming them home, the families found themselves instead eulogizing them on Thursday, July 17, 2008 in two separate funerals. One was in Nahariya and the other in Haifa. Karnit said in her eulogy, "My love, they say that time heals and covers wounds. Is that so? Two years have passed since that one moment; with a wave of a knife, the artery of our life together was cut. The moment, the worst of all moments was turned into a horrible reality. It sunk us all into a dark and complicated world." "Suddenly," Karnit said, "you belong to everyone. And now they move onto their next journey."

Micky Rosenwasser said, "We have found this nation to be a wonderful nation. We have found bereaved families with superior mental fortitude. We have found generosity. We have found the spirit of volunteering that exists amongst our people and we have found the meaning of the word friendship. This is an amazing nation." Then she took a moment to recognize the family of the missing pilot, Ron Arad, whose plane was shot down in Lebanon in 1986, who Israeli's continue to remember daily.

At the funeral there was another woman. Her name was Smadar Haran. Smadar Haran's husband, Danny and four year old daughter, Enait and two year old daughter, Yael, were killed in a terrorist attack twenty years ago. The terrorist who killed Danny and two years old, Yael, whose head he smashed with the butt of his rifle was released in the prisoner exchange with 197 other terrorists, murderers and criminals. In return, Israel received the dead bodies of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser.

Why did Israel do this? Who does this? If on a scale of things, Israel and America are partners in shared values we might ask: Would America do this? And now we know [from a credible journalist, Sydney Schanberg](#), that America left behind and suppressed information about an estimated 1,200 soldiers, MIA's in Viet Nam!

It's not the way the Israelis wanted it to be. This isn't the way it was supposed to be. They wanted to welcome the children home again. In Haifa, Eldad Regev's brother, Ofer began his eulogy with the yearning of a song by Israeli Rock Star, Shalom Hanoch. "A strange man, your enemy, exactly like you. You know he doesn't want to die exactly like you." Ofer went on to say, "You know, those days we lived in a world where we had believed that our enemy was like us. We thought we could speak to people who also wanted to raise a child, grow a flower, love their girlfriends exactly like us. But, the enemies proved that they are not like us. But still we need to keep on trying." Ofer said through his tears, "I am proud of my country that fought along with me to bring you back. Proud of every citizen who thought of you, Eldad as his brother. I am proud to belong to those who love and not to those who hate."

The nation of Israel, the Jewish people were in national mourning day and Wednesday and Thursday. The President of Israel, the Prime Minister of Israel, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff embraced the families. They acted as agents of an entire nation. The whole nation sat shivah that night.

In Beirut, at the same time, Samir Kuntar, the man who smashed the head of a two year old, Yael, was given a heroes welcome and a platform to speak. He said he waits to perform terror again! Arab leaders including Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas sent their best wishes to the murderer's family. Thousands and thousands of people cheered and danced in the street as he entered the stadium where he received a welcome with balloons and fireworks and guns saluting, this brutal cold-blooded killer. Ofer 's correct. We are not like our enemies. We are not like any other culture in the world.

Why did we do it? What does it mean for a country to negotiate for the return of two dead bodies in exchange for 198 brutal murdering terrorists? I believe the whole issue goes right to the heart of the ethics of the Jewish people. The fundamental obligation that was first expressed by David Ben Gurion to the mothers of soldiers who were sent to war, "You will always know where your sons are. They will never be left behind." It sticks in the psyche of every single soldier who fights knowing that he will not be left behind. So we see now, there's a nation acting like family...not according to the real politics of a

nation...perhaps not even in the nation's best interest! But in the interest of the Jewish family.

Someone once said that there are no good deals, only essential ones and non-essential ones. The question, of course, is what future impact will this deal have?

Will there only be more kidnappings? Will it facilitate the enemy's decision to kill the captured, knowing that Israel will even negotiate for a corpse?

We considered prisoner exchanges in the past. After the Six Day War Israel exchanged six thousand enemy prisoners for four Israelis.

After the Yom Kippur War, we exchanged eight thousand four hundred soldiers for two hundred and ninety-four.

In November 1983, we exchanged eighty-three for twenty five hundred.

In 1985, we exchanged one thousand one hundred fifty enemy prisoners of war, terrorists, for three Israelis.

How do we understand this? Are we so naïve? Where is our strength? Where is our mettle? Where is our power?

How should we understand this?

The story of ransoming captives does not begin with the Modern State of Israel.

In the Mishnah, from the year 200, we read that we are not supposed to ransom captives for more than their value. The reason given in the Mishnah is *mipnai tikkun olam*. When we think of Tikkun Olam, we think of this concept of the things that we do to make the world a little bit of better place. We think of social action or environmental advocacy, but Tikkun Olam has a different meaning in the Mishnah there. It is about the things that we do to allow the world to continue in some kind of a normal course. It is not about changing the world in order to perfect it, but it is about keeping the world going as we know it.

The Rabbis during the time of the Talmud told us not to pay excessively because it could bankrupt a family or, maybe this is even more important, it will encourage more kidnapping. The Talmud in later authorities listed exceptions to this. They say that a husband is allowed to pay to ten times the normal amount for ransom of his wife the first time. What is a normal amount of ransom? What we must realize is the fact that these laws are in our texts speaks to a reality that our people knew. Capturing Jews for money has been part of our world for thousands of years. There was common knowledge about how Jews would respond when a member of their community was captured. So, we see the anguish of ransoming captives is not something that is new. Sadly, through our

literature there is an indication that Jews have always experienced kidnapping and have dealt with all the issues that are presented

The Rambam refers to it as a mitzvah rabba, a great mitzvah, pidyon shivuyim, redeeming the captives. It was found in the Genizah in Cairo, the repository of ancient texts and letters and receipts, that Jews will do whatever they can to free captives even when it lead to more captivity, astronomical sums were often given up to save individuals. Really, not a question.

Shlomo Luria, in the 16th Century, said "Turkish Jews paid more than they should because they couldn't stand the thought that loved ones were in captivity." In modern times, we have witness the phenomenon. Before the raid of Entebbe Ovadia Yosef, the leading Halachic legal scholar, he said, "While the behavior of the captives is certain, the behavior of those who take captives is uncertain and therefore," he said "you have to pay a lot."

The Former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Goren, gives all the reasons why we should not redeem captives. "Redeeming the captives," he said, "Will encourage the act to continue, paying for captives will never go away and yet, in his heart he knows that you have to do it." "Soldiers," Goren wrote, "are given a mission and therefore, it is an implied contract."

Israeli and world Jewry debated what to do before the deal was settled this past summer. It is a question that is full of moral anguish. The fact that we have volumes of literature testifies to our moral sensitivity. Every Jew who is taken becomes the responsibility of the entire Jewish community, the Jewish family, in this case, the State of Israel.

So, we have a principle, even a law. And the law indicates that we don't ransom when it's too costly. And this maybe true in a nation, it maybe true in the army, but what about our family? Our children? What happens when your kids are kidnapped? Is any price too high?

So we in our history. How often rabbis spoke about redeeming captives and, how they realized that a Jew taken captive is going to be mistreated. Yet, there are certain things different now, something we haven't known in 2000 years. We have never been able to negotiate as we do now. Now we have an army. We no longer are helpless in the face of enemies. No, not at all. Not like we used to be. And so in our times, not only have we seen the redemption of individual Jews, but entire communities have been redeemed! Because of the State of Israel we have witnessed and participated in miraculous redemption of total populations from the former Soviet Union in the 60s, 70s, 80s and an Ethiopian population. Who would have believed that after 2000 years of homelessness and weakness, who would have believed that we would have the capacity to redeem not just individuals, but to redeem an entire population? And we've seen it twice!

In spite of the legal weight of legal opinion not to pay too much, the Israel Cabinet voted overwhelmingly and the population of Israel was overwhelmingly in support of the

release. There were many, many thinkers, many political people, even parents of soldiers, strategic thinkers and individuals, supporters of Israel and lovers of Israel who believe that the price was too high, that new victims will ultimately pay the price. It doesn't work as a good will gesture to our enemies. They have done this in the past they will do it again and no goodwill has come forth from it.

Remember Dr. David Appelbaum, the head of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Sha'arei Tzedek Medical Center in Jerusalem. He and his twenty year old daughter, Nava, were murdered by a suicide bomber on September 9, 2003 at Café Hillel on Emek Refain Street. Nava was going to be married the next day. The murderer, Ramez Sali Abu Salin, from Ramallah, was freed from an Israeli prison less than a year earlier. He was rearrested a few months later, released again and seven months later he was sent by Hamas command to commit the terrorist attack in the heart of Jerusalem.

The famous, Marwan Bar Gudi, serving five life sentences in Israel for five acts of murder was arrested for the first time in 1976 for hostile activity. He was freed in a prisoner exchange and then he was arrested again by Israel in the first Intifada. He was expelled to Jordan. He was permitted to return after Oslo Agreement in 1994. He became the leader of the Tanzin, which is responsible for terrorist attacks against Israel. Many carried out under the name of the El Achsa Martyr Brigades.

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was arrested in 1983 after guns were seized in his home sentenced to thirteen years in prison. He was freed in 1985 in a prisoner exchange. In 1989, he ordered the killing of Palestinian's suspected of collaboration of IDF. He subsequently commanded the kidnapping and murder of two more Israeli soldiers. He was given a life sentence. He was freed in 1997. He was released again in a prisoner exchange and after his release, he resumed preaching violence.

The list goes on and on. Suicide murderers, terrorists who were released in prisoner exchanges only to go back and kill more people. Why did we exchange 198 prisons for two dead bodies?

My friend and teacher, Donniel Hartman, said we were wrong. He said, "This continues to expose us. But I, he said, we choose to be exposed. I am honored at being exposed. At the end of the day as a citizen of Israel, with my own children serving in the Army, I feel our greatest strength is the love and commitment of our citizens to this country, a deep conviction that this country cares for us and that it sees every human life as having significance." Donniel wrote, "We built our country in the Middle East, but we are not of the Middle East. We are different. We negotiate with an enemy with different moral standards. We shouldn't be wary to pay too high of a price to celebrate the opportunity to emphasize our values, our cares, our loyalties. The loyalties we have for each other and our country and the loyalty this country shows for us."

My friends, we're different. Israel is different. And if Israel lived by the same rules as other nation, we would have to ask ourselves, is it worth all we struggle and all that is sacrificed for.

Zacharti lach chesed nuriachi, "I remember the kindness from your youth," we read the words of Jeremiah today. It is God speaking to the people Israel saying that I will never forget you. You will return to your land. I will never forget you, you will return. God speaks to us often as a parent to a child. That's a love that is indescribable. It is a love that maybe the essence of living our life, a Jewish life. We don't send our sons to war knowing they'll be killed. That's not what we do...we send our sons to war hoping they'll survive.

How fascinating it is that our past and present always come together when we engage in the conversation about ethical decision making and values. The defining moment that separates the ancient Hebrew people from the nations around them is when God tells Abraham not to sacrifice his son. This changed the course of human history. God's will becomes manifest in our psyche... *u'vachrtem b'chayim*...Choose life. And all the readings...we do emphasize the preciousness of the life of every individual and that's internalized by every Jew, every Jewish family. No wonder Ben Gurion assured the mothers of Israel. We won't leave your sons behind. And this was at the heart of Golda Meir's response to the question: "When will war cease?" And she said "When our neighbors love their children more than they hate us!"

Our families exist because of the great commitments we show to each other. I see that here all the time. I see people in tremendous straits who say to me that in the end they know that all they have is their families, the love of a husband and a wife, the love of a mother for her children and the father for his children. That's what motivated this prisoner exchange. It wasn't about reason. It wasn't about military strategy or warfare. It was about the pain of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, a young bride. It was about two widows who could never resume normal lives unless they could bury their husbands and a nation, no a big family, that supported this so they could breathe again one day. Although they will suffer forever, their tragic losses, they know that they are cared for by their people. We are a family.

We sit here as one big family with values that are rooted in the essential goodness and the essential holiness that exists in each one of us.

This past year there was a HBO special entitled, "To Die in Jerusalem." It was a story about Rachel Cohen, the mother of an Israeli girl who died in a suicide bombing attack who wanted to meet the mother of the Palestinian girl who was the bomber, who also died. She believed the connection; the one on one connection between two mothers who lost their daughters could be cathartic for both of them and maybe, just maybe begin to change their world. She believed that from their pain could come some healing. What was truly tragic in the documentary as it followed the attempts to get these two women to get together was that the Palestinian woman could never give up her attachment to the movement, to the ideology, to her narrative. She would not allow herself to see the Israeli mother, as a mother. And it proves Golda's words true. I think that this maybe what it may all come down to.

The story of the Haftarah today is the story of the love of a mother for her child and her child's wellbeing. The Torah readings are about the love of parents for children. We are here because of our parents, because of the love of our parents. Sure we're here as individuals, and some of our own life experiences have us alone...but we are also here with our families...the memories and the hopes for our families for tomorrow.

I will never forget a number of years ago I had two appointments on the same day from couples in the congregation who wanted to speak to me about their children. I may have shared this once before. One appointment was from a couple whose child was about to inter-marry and they came to speak to me about their disappointments and their fears. The second couple whose child had married a man who was from a very religious community, ultra-Orthodox. The lifestyle that they had chosen came with an exclusion of their Conservative Jewish parents. They wouldn't eat in their home, not even specially prepared things. They wouldn't even sleep on their beds for whatever silly reason. I remember them saying to me, "We would have been happier if our child married a Gentile." What I realized at that moment is that both of these are family stories. It is about keeping family together to preserve those bonds of responsibility, the connection and love and to preserve the culture and values that we hold so dear. That is so very important.

One of my heroes in this world is Chaim Peri. Many of you know him and understand why. Chaim Peri was the Director of the Yemin Orde Youth Village in Northern Israel, not far from Haifa. Chaim Peri has taken care of thousands and thousands of children as the Director of this village and as an educator. He has done so well, because he has created a village which is a model throughout the world as to how to deal with orphans and children from distressed families. He treats them all as part of the family. In that family they grow up to learn that they have real responsibilities. They grow up to learn that they have real boundaries to their behavior. They grow up and they learn that there is a place that they call home and a place where they will always be loved and cared for unconditionally. It's not an orphanage. It's a place where they can always come back, come home to.

That's what Israel did. They were telling the Regev's and the Goldwasser's that they love unconditionally their children.

We have to work very hard to sustain our people, to sustain our nation. It takes a lot of effort. It takes a lot of strength. It takes a lot of political power. It takes a lot of money and we have to do all of those things. We do it because it is so important that there be a nation that reflects the values that come from these stories and from our narrative.

As the Arabs in Lebanon were celebrating the return of killers in the crude, offensive way possible, the nation of Israel welcomed two black coffins, soldiers stood at attention and they cried. The bodies were transported into Israeli trucks and they were driven into Israel. Thousands of people lined the roads on the way to the cemeteries. Karnit Goldwasser and the rest of the Goldwasser's gave extraordinary eulogies and we were witnesses to a country that is about love and life and the celebration of both. Danny

Gordis said we did the right thing. We gave Karnit Goldwasser her life back. We gave Udi and Eldar the burial they deserved. We gave parents some certainty and with it the hope that maybe, maybe they too can start to live again even after the searing pain that will never subside. Most importantly, we showed the next generations of kids who will go off to defend this place. It is not a country about calculus, but it is about the soul. What it is to love and show them that we will get them back no matter what.

That's the story. But, it is not the end of the story. No, the story continues with us and our loved ones. The world that we give to our children starts with our families and the values that we live, what we do with our children on Friday night and the messages we teach them about tzeddakah. It's about how we treat our loved ones, the honor and care and respect we give to our parents and the elderly. It's about a culture that values learning and understanding and wisdom. It's about a people who love their children so much that we say we will never leave you behind.

I have seen a lot of stuff in my fifteen years at B'nai Torah. Good things and bad things. I have seen tragedies and great joys, but nothing has brought me to fulfillment as watching your children grow as my children have grown. Watching the love and pride that you have for your children and your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren. Our families are part of a bigger family, and our big family has something to teach this world...if you love your children then you'll do anything for them and you will never leave them behind.

Maybe, just maybe, Israel did the wrong thing...but I don't think so. No...I am so proud to be a part of a people who, in spite of it all...choose to love over hate.

This was the biggest story of the Jewish people this year. It is the essential reflection of our values and the meaning we wish to pass on L'Dor VaDor.

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