

THE NESIYA INSTITUTE
Passover Study Guide
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GILAD SHALIT:
REDEMPTION AND PEOPLEHOOD



כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה
All of Israel is responsible for one another.
– *Talmud Shavuot 39a*



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Sources for Reflection

A RED LINE

We greatly desire, await, and pray for the return of Gilad Shalit, and stand by the family, which is going through a difficult period and drawn out psychological abuse by the terrorist organizations.

Nonetheless, we plead with you beseechingly, as those who will be sent out tomorrow to the battlefield, and who may, God forbid, face similar dilemmas, not to agree to release despicable murderers, some of whom may return to take up arms against innocent civilians, and who even declare this openly...

[F]rom our point of view, maximal efforts to return a soldier taken captive by the enemy must include a clear red line, dictated rationally and intelligently by the security interests of the State of Israel and of the nation of Israel in its land.

– Letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu from students in pre-army preparatory programs, November 25 2009

WE ARE NO LESS DEVOTED TO THEM

[W]e need to be able to ask our sons and daughters to wage a war in which their own children might well also have to fight. We can ask that of them only if they know that if the unthinkable should happen, we will never rest until they are home. That is the great irony of the Shalit case. On many levels, it makes no strategic sense. But with the conflict likely to persist, and with our sons and daughters asked to make extraordinary sacrifices to keep us safe, they need to know that we are no less devoted to them than they are to us. And on that level, the trade makes all the sense in the world.

– Daniel Gordis, "A Strategically Senseless Swap", NY Times, Nov. 23, 2009

NO GREATER MITZVAH

There is no greater mitzvah than redeeming captives.

– Maimonides, *Hilbot Matanot Aniyim* 8:10

TANTAMOUNT TO MURDER

Every moment that one delays in freeing captives, in cases where it is possible to expedite their freedom, is considered to be tantamount to murder.

– *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 252:3

A PRICE TOO HIGH

We do not redeem captives for an amount greater than their economic value because of Tikkun Olam [to protect the general good] and we do not help captives escape because of Tikkun Olam.

– *Mishnah Gittin* 4:6

EVEN THE GREATEST RABBI

I heard about Rabbi Meir of Rotenberg who was imprisoned in the tower at Ensisheim a number of years. The minister demanded from the communities an exorbitant sum. The communities wanted to redeem him, but he did not let them, saying "it is forbidden to redeem captives for more than their value." I was surprised by this, since he was a great scholar – he had no equal in his generation in terms of torah and chasidut, so it would have been appropriate to redeem him for any amount in the world... He clearly thought that if they redeemed him, they would then need to worry lest all of the ministers do likewise to all of the great scholars of that generation in order to acquire exorbitant sums of money – such that all the money in the Diaspora would not be enough to redeem them, and Israel would lose their knowledge of the Torah.

– R. Shlomo Luria, *Yam Shel Shlomo, Gittin* 4:66

OVERCOMING OUR FEARS

The lives of our soldiers have never been measured by what they "equal," but by their value. This knowledge, with which soldiers went out to battle, was always the source of the IDF's strength. Israeli soldiers are prepared to risk their lives for the State, knowing that if, God forbid, they are taken captive, or are wounded in battle, the entire State will not rest until it brings them home.

We understand the fear that Israel's willingness to release many prisoners for the return of one Israeli soldier may be interpreted by the Hamas as weakness. But the expression of envy in the Arab world after the return of the bodies of Eldad Regev and Udi Goldwasser, regarding the way Israel had done everything to bring them home, presents a different truth: Blessed is the nation that stands up for its sons. Blessed is the government that overcomes all its fears and brings its sons, whom it has sent out to battle, back home.

– Letter from Israeli Novelists and Poets to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, September 9, 2008

ALL OF ISRAEL IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, who lived in Tsfat at the time of the Ar"i, explained the meaning of the phrase "*kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*" – "all Israel is responsible for one another": "*arevim* – responsible" from the language of "*meoravim* – mixed" – a mixture or mixing of souls. Each person has a piece of the soul of the other... This is the foundation of all foundations – to recognize that all Israel is one soul.

– R. Shlomo Aviner

The Nesiya Commentary

What can the debate over the redemption of captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and different responses to it, teach us about creating a shared vision of Jewish peoplehood?

On this Passover Eve, the duration of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit's captivity by Hamas in Gaza will be 1,373 days – three years and nine months. The Israeli government has been in protracted indirect negotiations with Hamas in attempts to secure his release. Hamas has demanded that in order to free him, Israel must release over a thousand Palestinian prisoners in exchange, including hundreds who were directly involved in terrorist activities.

The essence of Jewish peoplehood is rooted in the struggle for redemption. On Passover the shared memory of redemption is supposed to strengthen our sense of peoplehood. The Mishnah tells us that "in every generation, each person is obligated to see himself as if he went out of Egypt." This experience is meant to instill in us deep gratitude for all that was done for us, and allow us to savor our experiences as a redeemed people. But our response to the story of redemption should not end with gratitude. As a people who experienced redemption, we can also wonder how we can become redeemers ourselves. How can our redemption from slavery motivate us to bring redemption elsewhere? How can our own freedom become a means to bring freedom to others?

The Talmud calls the redemption of captives, *pidyon shvuyim*, a "great commandment" because it relieves the greatest human suffering. Captivity is described as the worst of human fates, worse than famine or war. To relieve this suffering is seen as the most fundamental act of human kindness. Maimonides states that redeeming captives embodies the most essential form of kindness – the saving of a life – and severely criticizes those who "hide their eyes from the suffering of the captive." He was keenly aware that because a captive's suffering is hidden from view his situation is much more dangerous, and emphasizes that despite the captive's physical absence our responsibility for his welfare has never been greater.

In light of the importance of redeeming captives in Jewish tradition, one might be surprised to discover that the Rabbis set a limit on the resources expended to gain a prisoner's freedom. Even more surprising is their reason: "because of *tikkun olam*" – "fixing of the world." The Mishnah states, "We do not redeem captives for an amount greater than their economic value because of *tikkun olam*." The Talmud comments that *tikkun olam* may be understood in two ways. First, paying exorbitant amounts to free captives may put the community under financial pressure it cannot bear. Second, "overpaying" may encourage kidnappers to take more captives.

The Rabbis were deeply aware of the morally complex tension between the needs of the individual and communal wellbeing, both in financial and security terms. How much should a community sacrifice for one of its members? How can a community expect sacrifice and commitment from its members if it does not help individuals in their weakest and neediest moments? At the same time, at what point do the legitimate needs of the many clearly outweigh the need of the one?

This same controversy is at the heart of the painful debate about Gilad Shalit: how high a price should the community pay to free this Jewish captive? This issue is both profoundly emotional and extremely practical. It not only arouses great passion but cuts across the usual political and religious lines. Both sides in the debate justify their point of view on the basis of the greater good for Israeli society and the Jewish people.

On one side of the debate are those who feel that the cost of releasing terrorists is too great, both in terms of the potential harm that the released terrorists may cause in the future, and because of the lives sacrificed to capture these terrorists in the first place. For example, hundreds of young people who are about to enter the military, despite knowing that they could one day also be taken captive, sent letters pleading that the government draw a clear red line prioritizing the security of Israel as a nation over the freedom of one captive soldier.

On the other side are those who assert that Gilad Shalit should be brought back at almost any cost. They argue that Israel's responsibility is to do everything in her power to bring back her soldiers, even if this

includes releasing prisoners who may return to terrorist activity. According to this view, Israel can not send soldiers out to battle without the foundational promise that if they fall captive, she will do everything possible to bring them home. A letter from a group of novelists and poets eloquently conveyed this perspective when it stated, "Blessed is the government that overcomes all its fears and brings its sons, whom it has sent out to battle, back home." According to some, saving the life of Gilad Shalit would be a supreme act of fearless love for the Jewish people, which would demonstrate to ourselves and the world an ultimate respect for the sacredness of one life, which shouldn't be compromised by future concerns.

What can the controversy over Gilad Shalit, and the different responses to it, teach us about Jewish peoplehood? Seeing ourselves as redeemers requires us to feel responsible for one another. How can we strengthen our sense of responsibility for other Jews?

We believe the story of Gilad Shalit – and the complex debate it has sparked – should be an important part of our Passover questioning. While only a few of us may have the ability to directly influence the process of securing Shalit's redemption, our willingness to feel personally affected by, think about and discuss the problem may in and of itself teach us to act on behalf of others.

The Talmud teaches "*kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*" – "all Israel is responsible for one another." Rabbi Moshe Cordovero interpreted the word "*arevim*/responsible," to be derived from "*meoravim*/mixed." He interpreted this to refer to a mixture of souls, and taught that every person has a piece of the soul of the other. He taught that we need to repeatedly study this fundamental axiom of existence – as if we need to combat our natural tendency to feel disconnected from others.

According to this understanding, until Gilad Shalit is released from captivity, our souls will not be completely free. At the same time, if the cost of Gilad Shalit's release is that others are taken captive or more people are wounded or killed by freed terrorists, then part of our soul will be killed as well. How much risk are we willing to take on, and what fears of the future are we willing to face together? These too are impossible questions which can strengthen our sense of connection to other Jews.

As professionals devoted to the future contributions of Jewish young people, we believe in the infinite value of one life and the ultimate potential for that life to be both unique and life-giving. All of us may be intertwined with each other, but we need to work on acting this way, even when it may be uncomfortable or challenging to do so. Gilad Shalit's life should inspire us to think more deeply about our willingness and ability to share responsibility for other Jews.

Suggested Discussion Questions for Your Passover Seder

1. Imagine that you are an Israeli teenager about to begin your IDF service. Knowing that you or one of your friends might be involved in capturing terrorists, or might one day be taken captive by the enemy, what policy would you want the Israeli government to follow with Gilad Shalit?

What if you were the parent of a teenager about to be enlisted? What if you were a parent whose child had died in combat while apprehending one of the terrorist prisoners the Israeli government is thinking of releasing?

2. Share a story about a time when you felt a sense of shared purpose with other Jews, or a time when you did not – or both.
3. What does it mean to see yourself as a redeemer, someone who works for the freedom and welfare of others? What motivates your need to contribute to others' freedom? How does the need and opportunity to help others affect your personal freedom – does it challenge it or make it greater?