

Gilad Sha'ar, 16 years old, Naftali Frenkel 16 years old, Eyal Yifrach, 19 all three were kidnapped nine days ago: three yeshiva boys studying in the West Bank, their lives literally hanging by a thread. All over Israel at this very minute, the IDF, the Shin Bet and thousands of soldiers, volunteers, mothers, fathers are scouring the land - looking, hoping, praying.

Yesterday President Shimon Peres met with the boys' families offering them prayers and comfort from the State of Israel. The remarkably composed mother of Naftali Frankel, Rachel, surrounded by parents of all three boys and their brothers and sisters spoke to the people of Israel and she said:

“I believe wholeheartedly that they [the boys] will return, but whatever happens, remember God does not work for us. Do not forget, even if God forbid, something happens. I believe they will come back but if not, please be united. Be united.”

Can we imagine the agony of these Israeli parents? Can we fathom what they are going through right now?

In another part of the world, 276 girls were kidnapped in Nigeria by the Islamist Boko Haram. A few weeks later, 11 more girls were abducted. This

past week, after five years in captivity, the US struck a deal with the Taliban to free US soldier Bowe Bergdahl. And now, our three Jewish teenage boys are missing.

From the safety and security of the US, kidnappings seem unreal. But for many of us, it hits a little closer to home, a little closer to family, when it happens within our family, our Jewish community.

The rabbis tell us to save a life is to save the world. We remember the saga of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier, who after more than 1,900 days of captivity in Gaza, was delivered back to his family in 2011. Can we imagine what he suffered? What his family suffered? As we hung on every shred of hope?

Israel balances the Jewish value of saving a life with all of the geo-political issues facing a modern state. But the Israeli democratic enterprise is more than that. For millennia, the issue of redeeming the captive, *pidyon shvuyim* has percolated through Jewish life. Like saving a life, redeeming the captive has a primary place in the canon of Jewish values.

On one hand, the Talmud tells us that redeeming captives is a great mitzvah – a *mitzvah rabbah*. However, the Mishnah tells us:

אין פודין את השבויים יותר על כדי דמיהן

Captives must not be redeemed for more than their value, and must not be helped to escape, for the good of the community. This is really

astonishing, isn't it? The Mishnah, compiled more than 1800 years ago seems to have anticipated the painful conundrum we now face: Is negotiating with terrorists to release a kidnapped victim giving in to terrorism?

There is a fascinating account of a 13th century rabbi by the name of Meir ben Barukh of Rothenberg. He witnessed the public burning of the Talmud at the hands of Pope Gregory IX, spoke out against it as well as the excessive taxation exacted upon the Jews. In his attempt to flee Germany, he was captured, delivered to the king and put in prison. The Jewish community raised an unheard ransom of 23,000 pounds of silver to save him.

But Rabbi Meir said, "No": this would only encourage further kidnapping and extortion. He spent the last seven years of his life in prison. His end was tragic, but the scourge of kidnapping stopped.

So what should we do?

Many of us are uncomfortable right now. We read reports of 329 arrests, 1,000 buildings damaged, one Palestinian killed, 30 injured, and three soldiers wounded. The world press and many in Israel raise the issue of "What do you expect? It is occupied land. They shouldn't be there. We shouldn't be there." We ask: "Where is Europe's response to this tragedy? Where is the outcry from the international community?"

The RAMBAM, one of the great sages in Jewish tradition says: Redeeming captives receives priority over providing the poor with food and clothing. There is no greater mitzvah because the captive is thirsty, he is without clothing, she is in life-threatening danger.

We would so like things to be clean, to be different. But things are very complex and are not likely to ease soon.

In Israel, various points of view and arguments are openly and avidly articulated. The left says it is about the settlers and the collapse of the peace talks. The right says it's about sovereignty, terrorism, anti-Semitism, the demonization of the Jews and the futility of pursuing peace. The center says that we have lost the ability to engage in civil discourse, to act together, and coalesce around a viable democracy.

Today is Shabbat. We have seen a beautiful young lady Olivia become Bat Mitzvah and lead us in inspiring prayer. We feel the painful juxtaposition of trauma and joy that we face as a community. But this is our holiest day of the week. Rather than confront the difficult decisions that may be required, we reflect on Naftali's mother's words:

“I believe wholeheartedly that they [the boys] will return, but whatever happens, remember God does not work for us. Do not forget, even if God

forbid, something happens. I believe they will come back but if not, please be united. Be united.”

And so let us end with a prayer that was sent to Jews all over the world for this Shabbat by the remarkable rabbi and my colleague Tamar Elad Applebaum of Tzion in Jerusalem. Please stand if you are able . . . as we read together:

God of Israel,
Beneficent sovereign of all Creation,
enable us now
to have true faith
and to pray and to call out to You
with plea after plea,
so that our cry might rise
to the very Gates of Mercy,
to Mercy itself.
And all reality shall be turned around
so that relief, rescue, and life
may be the lot of those young men,
Ya'akov Naftali ben Rahel (Frenkel),
Gil-ad Micha'el ben Bat-Galim (Shaar)
and Eyal ben Iris Teshura (Yifrach).
Act on their behalf, Lord,

Kidnapping and a Prayer – a sermon by Rabbi Susan Leider, Congregation Kol Shofar
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take up their cause without delay,

and may You grant them life and blessing forevermore.

So may it be Your will, and let us say: Amen.