

“A New Beginning – Gilad Shalit”
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I have been blessed to travel to Israel many times in recent years. Each time I travel there, I find something new. Last winter's find during our SPICE Seniors Trip was a very cool internet bar near the hotel where most of our Congregational trips stay. I can have a glass of wine or a latte for the same price as the internet fee in my hotel room and then enjoy free internet. Even more unusual for Jerusalem, is the fact that it is open on Friday nights. In most of my decades of Israel memories, everything in Jerusalem was closed on Shabbat. The times they are changing.

Each night that I'd walk the two blocks from the hotel to the internet café, I'd pass the Prime Minister's official residence. Outside, almost across from the café, was a tent that Gilad Shalit's parents had put up. Beside the tent was a huge sign posting the days he had been held in captivity. Inside were his parents. Supporters stopped by daily, if not hourly, in solidarity with their vigil to bring him home safely.

For several years, Gilad's parents stayed in that tent as a continual reminder to the leader of Israel that one of his country's sons, one of our sons, was held captive.

Over time, the tent, like a sukkah, expanded. A kitchen was installed. A real floor was put in. Insulation was added for the winter. The numbers out front capturing the days he was held in captivity continued to increase. Yet on day one thousand nine hundred and thirty four, things changed. It was announced that a prisoner exchange had been agreed upon between the Israeli government and Hamas.

On this past Tuesday, October 18, Gilad Shalit was released. For those of who watched You Tube videos of him coming home, it was emotional. Five years after being abducted by Hamas terrorists who had tunneled under the border between Israel and Gaza, a gaunt and pale 25 year old Gilad Shalit, still with a boyish smile on his face, came home. As he de-boarded a military aircraft, Prime Minister Netanyahu hugged him like a son. His father hugged him as his son. Five years of dreaming of that embrace... a wish, a dream, a hope, a striving, a longing fulfilled.

This past week, the Shalit Jerusalem sukkah of vigil was emptied and dismantled and the family went home.

And then a new small and quiet protest emerged across the street right beside my favorite internet café. There are just a couple of small signs held up by families of victims from earlier Israeli tragedies. These signs tug at our conscience. One says “At any price? Hamas will pay that price.” Another remarked, “Do not free terrorists.”

Why does world Jewry care so deeply about Gilad Shalit? We care so deeply because in Israel every son serves between the ages of 18 and 21 and every daughter between 18 and 20. Gilad could be any son of Israel. He could be our son.

We care so deeply because redeeming the captive, or *pidyon shavuyim* in Hebrew, is one of the highest mitzvot of Judaism. It is an imperative.

We care so deeply because we felt for Gilad’s pain. About being held captive, Elie Wiesel, the great Holocaust survivor wrote about Shalit: “To the hostage, time itself is torture. It becomes an enemy. Filled with uncertainty, his time is different from ours. His waiting is not like ours. His minutes are longer than ours.”

We care so deeply because all of us could imagine Gilad Shalit wondering whether his life would be one of waiting in silence.

It was not only adults who followed this case so closely. Our children and youth were well aware of Shalit’s reality.

On Wednesday, as a part of Religious School worship, we celebrated his freedom.

In creating a service centered on Gilad’s return home, we shared a You Tube video of 11 year olds in the Bronx reading a short story that Gilad wrote when he that very same age.

It was the story of a small and gentle fish who was swimming in the peaceful ocean when he saw a shark that wanted to devour him.

The smaller fish called to him, “Why do you want to devour me? We can play together.”

The two fish played hide and seek till the sun went down.

Yet when the shark told his mom about the day he had playing with the fish, she said, “That fish is an animal we eat, don’t play with it.”

At the home of the fish the same thing happened. When the fish told its mother that it played with the shark, the fish’s mother responded, “That shark is the animal that devoured your father and brother. Don’t play with that animal.”

The next day in the middle of the ocean neither the fish nor shark were there. They didn't meet for many days, weeks, and months.

Then one day they met. Each one immediately ran back to his mother and once again they didn't meet for days, weeks, and months.

After a whole year passed, the shark went out for a nice swim and so did the fish. For a third time, they met and then the shark said: "You are my enemy, but maybe we can make peace?"

The little fish said, "ok."

They played secretly for days, weeks and months, until one day the shark and fish went to the fish's mother and spoke together with her. Then they did the same thing with the shark's mother; and from that same day the sharks and the fish live in peace.

Gilad Shalit authored that story. He had a childhood view of a world in which sharks and fish, Palestinians and Israelis could make peace.

Gilad Shalit has been a part of my own kids' lives. Alec and Max, ages 9 and 11, have grown up for the past several years, knowing that Gilad was in captivity. In recent years, at their summer camp, Camp Coleman, they took part in a service to pray for him.

When my boys got in the car last week after school and I told them about Gilad's impending release, Alec's first question was, "How many prisoners did they trade him for?"

Max, too, was distressed that those who murdered could be released. At their young age, they were already struggling in their minds whether it was worth the price. Obviously it is a question that cannot be answered.

One thousand and twenty seven prisoners will be released in the exchange among them, Nasser Yataima, convicted for planning a suicide bombing that left 30 dead and 140 wounded during a Passover Seder in Netanya in 2002. Husam Badran, responsible for the 2001 bombing of a Tel Aviv night club, across from the hotel where we stay in Tel Aviv, where there is a memorial marker for the 21 who died there. I stop and read the names each and every visit as I walk along the Mediterranean. Badran was also responsible for the bombing at Matza Restaurant in Haifa where 14 were murdered.

And this is not the first time Israel has exchanged prisoners at a great cost. Dating back 54 years, Israel has freed 13,509 prisoners in exchange for winning the release of a total of 16 soldiers. That is an average of well over 800 for each one.

It is not just us and our kids. It is the world watching and wondering. Will this lead to a new beginning or will it bring back old behaviors? Will this bring about new paths to dialogue and making peace or old ways of taking lives?

According to Uri Avnery, chair of Gush Shalom, the Israeli Human Rights Organization: “In recent days the media was full of demagogic assertions that 'undoubtedly' prisoners released now would resume taking part in violent acts against Israel. This is definitely not pre-ordained, and to a considerable degree it depends on us, too. Indeed, if we continue to insist on not achieving peace... then the conflict would continue and mutual bloodshed would go on – whether or not we release prisoners. But if we manage to pass onward from an agreement on prisoner exchange for a peace agreement between the State of Israel and the State of Palestine, it might be possible to make the release of prisoners, carried out today, as part of building trust between the two peoples. Let us not forget that many Palestinians prisoners learned Hebrew in prison, and they know Israel better than almost any other group among Palestinians. Many prisoners who were freed after the Oslo Agreements became known among their people as outstanding adherents of peace.”

It is on this Shabbat that we read of new beginnings. It is on this Shabbat that Gilad Shalit gets a new beginning. He starts his first Shabbat of freedom as we read from the Torah about the potential that new beginnings hold for light rather than darkness, for the oneness of humanity rather than divisions among peoples, for peace rather than strife. That was God’s intention in creation.

Gilad’s saga was one that captivated us all -- adults, kids, citizens the whole globe over. This Shabbat represents a new beginning. Let us pray...

- For Gilad, that he can recover from the traumas he has known.
- For Israel, that the exchange will lead to positive paths toward peace rather than the backsliding into trembling with fear of terror.
- for the Palestinians, that minds and hearts of reason will prevail and a homeland for them can be negotiated and attained.
- for the world, to know a more peaceful presence emanating from Israel, the center of the Middle East and the center of so many of our lives. Amen.