

My friends, I once read a book called *Weekends At Bellevue*, in which a psychiatrist told stories of her interactions with people in the emergency room at New York's Bellevue Hospital. One of her jobs was deciding whom to admit and whom not to admit. One rule of thumb she learned is that if someone insisted he was crazy and wanted to stay, he probably wasn't. Someone who insisted he was not crazy and wanted to leave probably should not leave. Evidently, those who think they might be crazy usually are not. I find comfort in that this week, because never have I felt so schizophrenic.

A Bat Mitzvah student arrived for her lesson this week very excited. She said, "You know that guy you always talk about?" Actually, I did not know who she meant, so she went on, "The soldier they captured. They're letting him go." In total disbelief, we went to my computer and confirmed that she was right. After five years in captivity, Gilad Shalit is being released. I cannot tell you how overjoyed I was. I couldn't get over it. I was beside myself.

I thought back to some time I spent in Camp Ramah in Georgia when two other soldiers who had been captured were returned to Israel from the West Bank. Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, may they rest in peace, were returned to Israel in a prisoner exchange. They came home as body parts. We held a memorial service at Ramah that day, and while I do not think there was a dry eye in the camp, I remember watching my friend, Rabbi Allan Lehmann, as he literally sobbed. He did not know either of those men personally. But he sobbed, and this week I thought that this time, Allan would not have to sob over Gilad Shalit, and in fact, he almost certainly won't.

I'm sure all of us were delighted by the news that Gilad was coming home. Imagine how his family must feel. They literally set up camp outside Prime Minister Netanyahu's home so that anyone who visited or even passed by would be reminded that their son was still imprisoned in Gaza. They left nothing untried in the attempt to free their son. They went to heads of state, to the UN, they went to the President of the United States. Now, thank God, their son should be back with them next week. My cup overflows with joy.

At the same time, I have felt stupid and embarrassed. When Josh Fattal and Shane Bauer were imprisoned in Iran, I called them "America's Gilad Shalit." When they were released, I realized how stupid it was to do that. The comparison was superficial and vapid. I admit that during their captivity, I did wonder what they were doing hiking in that part of the world, but I never voiced the question because it felt like blaming the victims. It turned out that they are anti-American activists who chose to live in Syria. They blamed American policy for their capture and thanked people like Hugo Chavez and Noam Chomsky for their support. They made clear that they think Iran is a more just society than America. And I compared them to a young man who wore the uniform of his country's army with honor, trying to defend his homeland against those who want to see it destroyed, including the oppressive nation that Bauer and Fattal glorified—their own captors in Iran. I can think of two Yiddish words that mean the same thing and that have found their way into the American lexicon because people don't know what they literally mean. Because we do know what they mean, I cannot and will not speak them from the pulpit, but anyone who thought I was one or both when I made that comparison, you were right.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For those who do not know the words and want to be told what they are, email me at RabbiSendrow@ShaareyTefilla.org

As if feeling overjoyed, stupid, and ashamed of myself is not a complex enough emotional cocktail, let's top it off with a stiff dose of dread. Over one thousand prisoners will be exchanged for Gilad Shalit. Many were serving life sentences, which means they are guilty of murder. Blood drips from their hands. They will sign a card promising not to return to terrorism. I make the following offer in all seriousness: if anyone knows of a good reason to take that pledge as anything but a lie, not speculation but hard evidence why we should believe that pledge, please come up to the pulpit. You have something far more insightful to say than I do, and I'll gladly sit down and listen.

Part of my internal conflict is that I draw my values from Judaism, and Judaism is clear on this topic. It is required of us to rescue captives, the mitzvah of *pidyon sh'vuyim*. It is also forbidden that we pay too high a price to redeem a captive, because by doing so, we save one captive but endanger countless others by showing that this is a crime that does indeed pay.

I cannot imagine there is a rabbi in the world who is not telling the story of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg tonight. 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.

He was imprisoned for many years. The only humane condition that he was given was that once a month he was allowed a visitor. And so Jews would turn to him and ask him questions of Jewish Law while he was in prison, as they had done before. They gave their questions to the appointed visitor, who delivered them, and then a month later, when the visitor returned, Rabbi Meir would give him his decisions on these questions of Jewish law. Working from his cell, and without the help of his books, Rabbi Meir answered complex questions of Jewish law that came to him from many corners of the Jewish world during those years of his imprisonment. And during those years, he also wrote poems and prayers of great beauty, some of which are included in the High Holy Day Prayerbook, and which are recited to this day.

When Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg died, the Jewish people of his community finally broke with his decision and they paid money so they could redeem his body and give it a proper burial.

Will the prisoner exchange encourage the capture of more Israelis? Hamas has already assured the world that it will. Perhaps the single biggest reason that Israel agreed to this exchange is something that I have not seen mentioned by any news account. This is purely my own speculation. But I cannot help but wonder if Israel agreed to the exchange because the security fence that was so controversial has been extraordinarily effective. It has reduced terrorist attacks to near elimination. Perhaps Israeli leaders have concluded that they can redeem Gilad and still keep Israelis safe. I hope to God that this will prove to be true.

So: feeling elated and joyful, stupid and embarrassed, and full of dread is quite a mixture, is it not? I want to add one more emotion, the reason for which will likely surprise you. It's gratitude—gratitude that I am not Benjamin Netanyahu. Gratitude that I am not the Prime Minister of Israel. Gratitude that I am not an MK. Gratitude that I have the luxury of putting all these conflicting realities before you and then being able to say that I just don't know what the right answer is. Gratitude that I am not the only Conservative rabbi who feels torn and unsure of what to say to his/her congregation tonight. Gratitude that at the end of the day, I did not have to make the heart-wrenching choice of a thumbs up or thumbs down vote. Because I say to you tonight with total candor, I don't know what the right choice would have been. Neither does the vast majority of 700-800 Conservative rabbis who are active on Ravnet. A very few thought the right choice was clear. The rest responded to them that they could only be so clear by ignoring the reality of the other side of the question. And so, my friends, I, who am so passionate about clarity, have none to offer tonight. And I hope that you leave here tonight as torn as I am. If you are not, I have not done my job well enough on one side of the coin or the other.

Let me conclude with the following. It is Sukkot. The three parts of the lulav, and also the etrog, are compared to parts of the body. The palm branch, the lulav itself without the willows and myrtle, represent the spine. The etrog represents the heart. On Sukkot, we put the two together when we *bentsch lulav*. The decision before the Israeli government required them to split the two. But the only way to separate a person's heart and spine is by tearing the person in two. If that's how you feel tonight, my friends, all I can say is welcome to the club.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Since writing this sermon, I believe I am more clear on the issue. An article on that will appear on my blog at [www.RabbiBen.org](http://www.RabbiBen.org).