

Everybody's Son

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THE MOST SENSIBLE – I almost wrote “the only sensible” – sentence uttered this week sprang from the lips of a 5-year old boy.

After the prisoner swap, one of those smart-aleck TV reporters asked him: “Why did we release 1027 Arabs for one Israeli soldier?” He expected, of course, the usual answer: because one Israeli is worth a thousand Arabs.

The little boy replied: “Because we caught many of them and they caught only one.”

FOR MORE than a week, the whole of Israel was in a state of intoxication. Gilad Shalit indeed ruled the country (Shalit means “ruler”). His pictures were plastered all over the place like those of Comrade Kim in North Korea.

It was one of those rare moments, when Israelis could be proud of themselves. Few countries, if any, would have been prepared to exchange 1027 prisoners for one. In most places, including the USA, it would have been politically impossible for a leader to make such a decision.

In a way it is a continuation of the Jewish ghetto tradition. The “Redemption of Prisoners” is a sacred religious duty, born of the circumstances of a persecuted and scattered community. If a Jew from Marseilles was captured by Muslim corsairs to be sold on the market of Alexandria, it was the duty of Jews in Cairo to pay the ransom and “redeem” him.

As the ancient saying goes: “All Israel are guarantors for each other”.

Israelis could (and did) look in the mirror and say “aren't we wonderful?”

IMMEDIATELY AFTER the Oslo agreement, Gush Shalom, the peace movement to which I belong, proposed releasing all Palestinian prisoners at once. They are prisoners-of-war, we said, and when the fighting ends, PoWs are sent home. This would transmit a powerful human message of peace to every Palestinian town and village. We organized a joint demonstration with the late Jerusalemite Arab leader, Feisal Hussein, in front of Jeneid prison near Nablus. More than ten thousand Palestinians and Israelis took part.

But Israel has never recognized these Palestinians as prisoners-of-war. They are considered common criminals, only worse.

This week, the released prisoners were never referred to as “Palestinian fighters”, or “militants” or just “Palestinians”. Every single newspaper and TV program, from the elitist Haaretz to the most primitive tabloid, referred to them exclusively as “murderers”, or, for good measure, “vile murderers”.

One of the worst tyrannies on earth is the tyranny of words. Once a word becomes entrenched, it directs thought and action. As the Bible has it: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). Releasing a thousand enemy fighters is one thing, releasing a thousand vile murderers is something

else.

Some of these prisoners have assisted suicide bombers in killing a lot of people. Some have committed really atrocious acts – like the pretty young Palestinian woman who used the internet to lure a love-sick Israeli boy of 15 into a trap, where he was riddled with bullets. But others were sentenced to life for belonging to an “illegal organization” and possessing arms, or for throwing an ineffectual home made bomb at a bus hurting nobody.

Almost all of them were convicted by military courts. As has been said, military courts have the same relation to real courts as military music does to real music.

All of these prisoners, in Israeli parlance, have “blood on their hands”. But which of us Israelis has no blood on his hands? Sure, a young woman soldier remotely controlling a drone that kills a Palestinian suspect and his entire family has no sticky blood on her hands. Neither has a pilot who drops a bomb on a residential neighborhood and feels only “a slight bump on the wing”, as a former Chief of Staff put it. (A Palestinian once told me: “Give me a tank or a fighter plane, and I shall give up terrorism immediately.”)

The main argument against the swap was that, according to Security Service statistics, 15% of prisoners thus released become active “terrorists” again. Perhaps. But the majority of them become active supporters of peace. Practically all of my Palestinian friends are former prisoners, some of whom were behind bars for 12 years and more. They learned Hebrew in prison, became acquainted with Israeli life by watching television and even began to admire some aspects of Israel, such as our parliamentary democracy. Most prisoners just want to go home, settle down and found a family.

But during the endless hours of waiting for Gilad's return, all our TV stations showed scenes of the killings in which the prisoners-to-be-released had been involved, such as the young woman who drove a bomber to his destination. It was a continuous tirade of hatred. Our warm admiration for our own virtue was mingled with the chilling feeling that we are again the victims, compelled to release vile murderers who are going to try and kill us again.

Yet all these prisoners fervently believed that they had served their people in its struggle for liberation. Like the famous song: “Shoot me as an Irish soldier / Do not hang me like a dog / For I fought for Ireland's freedom. . .” Nelson Mandela, it should be remembered, was an active terrorist who languished in prison for 28 years because he refused to sign a statement condemning terrorism.

Israelis (probably like most peoples) are quite unable to put themselves into the shoes of their adversaries. This makes it practically impossible to pursue an intelligent policy, particularly on this issue.

HOW WAS Binyamin Netanyahu brought to bend?

The hero of the campaign is Noam Shalit, the father. An introverted person, withdrawn and shy of publicity, he came out and fought for his son every single day during these five years and four months. So did the mother. They literally saved his life. They succeeded in raising a mass movement without precedent in the annals of the state.

It helped that Gilad looks like everybody's son. He is a shy young man with an engaging smile that could be seen on each of the stills and videos from before the capture. He was youngish looking, thin and unassuming. Five years later, this week, he still looked the same, only very pale.

If our intelligence services had been able to locate him, they would have undoubtedly tried to liberate him by force. This could well have been his death sentence, as happened so often in the past. The fact that they could not find him, despite their hundreds of agents in the Gaza Strip, is a remarkable achievement for Hamas. It explains why he was kept in strict isolation and was not allowed to meet anyone.

Israelis were relieved to discover, on his release, that he seemed to be in good condition, healthy and alert. From the few sentences he voiced on his way in Egypt, he had been provided with radio and TV and knew about his parents' efforts.

From the moment he set foot on Israeli soil, almost nothing about the way he was treated was allowed to come out. Where was he kept? How was the food? Did his captors talk with him? What did he think about them? Did he learn Arabic? Up to now, not a word about that, probably because it might throw some positive light on Hamas. He will certainly be thoroughly briefed before being allowed to speak.

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS repeatedly asked me this week whether the deal had opened the way to a new peace process. As far as the public mood is concerned, the very opposite is true.

The same journalists asked me if Binyamin Netanyahu had not been disturbed by the fact that the swap was bound to strengthen Hamas and deal a grievous blow to Mahmoud Abbas. They were flabbergasted by my answer: that this was one of its main purposes, if not the main one.

The master stroke was a stroke against Abbas.

Abbas' moves in the UN have profoundly disturbed our right-wing government. Even if the only practical outcome is a resolution of the General Assembly to recognize the State of Palestine as an observer state, it will be a major step towards a real Palestinian state.

This government, like all our governments since the foundation of Israel – only more so – is dead set against Palestinian statehood. It would put an end to the dream of a Greater Israel

up to the Jordan River, compel us to give back a great chunk of the Land-God-Promised-Us and evacuate scores of settlements.

For Netanyahu and Co. this is the real danger. Hamas poses no danger at all. What can they do? Launch a few rockets, kill a few people – so what? In no year has "terrorism" killed as many as half the people dying on our roads. Israel can deal with that. The Hamas regime would probably not be running the Gaza Strip in the first place if Israel had not cut the Strip off from the West Bank, contrary to its solemn undertaking in Oslo to create four safe passages. None was ever opened.

That, by the way, also explains the timing. Why did Netanyahu agree now to something he has violently opposed all his life? Because Abbas, the featherless chicken, has suddenly turned into an eagle.

On the day of the swap, Abbas made a speech. It sounded rather flat. For the average Palestinian, the case was quite simple: Abbas, with all his Israeli and American friends, has got no one released for years. Hamas, using force, has released more than a thousand, including Fatah members. Ergo: "Israel understands only the language of force".

THE VAST majority of Israelis supported the deal, though convinced that the vile murderers will try again to kill us.

Never were the lines of division as clear as this time: some 25% opposed it. These included all the extreme right-wing, all the settlers and almost all the national-religious. All the others – the huge camp of the center and left, the secular, liberal and moderate religious – supported it.

This is the Israeli mainstream on which the hopes for the future are resting. If Netanyahu had proposed a peace agreement with the Palestinians this week, and if he had been supported by the chiefs of the army, the Mossad and the Security Service (as he was this week), the same majority would have supported him.

As for the prisoners – another 4000 are still held in Israeli prisons, and this number is liable to grow again. The opponents of the deal are quite right in saying that it will provide Palestinian organizations with a strong incentive to renew their efforts to capture Israeli soldiers in order to get more prisoners released.

If all of Israel is drunk with emotion because one boy has been returned to his family – what about 4000 families on the other side? Unfortunately, ordinary Israelis don't put the question this way. They have got used to seeing the Palestinian prisoners only as bargaining chips.

How to thwart the efforts to capture more soldiers? There is only one alternative: to open a credible way to have them released by agreement.

Such as by peace, if you can excuse the expression.