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## Shalit, For Example

I AM composing these lines while looking through the window at the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea, and thinking about the young man who is being held not far from this sea, a few dozen kilometers from here.

Can Gilad Shalit look out on the same sea through his window? Does he even have a window? How is he? How is he being treated?

He has been in captivity for four years and one day today, with no end in sight.

Gilad Shalit has become a living symbol – a symbol of Israeli reality, of the inability of our leaders to make decisions, of their moral and political cowardice, of their inability to analyze a situation and draw conclusions.

IF THERE had been an opportunity to free Shalit through military action, the Israeli government would have seized it eagerly.

So much is obvious, because the Israeli public always prefers solving a problem by force than doing anything that might be interpreted as weakness. The rescue of the hostages at Entebbe in 1976 is considered one of the most glorious exploits in the history of Israel, even though there was only a hair's breadth between success and failure. It was a gamble with the lives of the 105 hostages and the soldiers, and it was successful.

In other cases, though, the gamble did not succeed. Not in Munich in 1972, when they gambled with the lives of the athletes, and lost. Not in Ma'alot in 1974, when they gambled with the lives of the schoolchildren, and lost. Not in the attempt to free the captured soldier Nachschon Wachsmann in 1994, when they gambled with his life, and lost.

If there had been any chance of freeing Shalit by force, they would have risked his life, and probably lost. Fortunately for him, there has been no such chance. So far.

Actually, this is quite remarkable. Our security services have hundreds of secret collaborators in the Gaza Strip, in addition to high tech surveillance. Yet it seems that no reliable information about Shalit's whereabouts has been obtained.

How has Hamas succeeded in this? Among other measures, by not allowing any contact with the captive – no meetings with the International Red Cross or foreign dignitaries, just two short videos, almost no letters. They simply cannot be pressurized. They refuse all requests of this nature.

This problem could possibly be overcome if our government had been ready to give assurances that no attempt would be made to free him by force, in return

for a Hamas undertaking to let him meet with the Red Cross. To be credible, such an undertaking would probably need a guarantee by a third party, such as the US.

Absent such an arrangement, all the sanctimonious speeches by foreign statesmen about "letting the Red Cross meet with the soldier" are just so many empty words.

NO LESS hypocritical are the demands of foreign personalities to "free the kidnapped soldier".

Such demands are music to the Israeli ear, but completely disregard the fact that the subject has to be an exchange of prisoners.

Gilad Shalit is alive and breathing, a young man whose fate arouses strong human emotions. But so are the Palestinian prisoners. They are alive and breathing, and their fate, too, arouses strong human emotions. They include young people, whose lives are being wasted in prison. They include political leaders, who are being punished for simply belonging to one or another organization. They include people who, in Israeli parlance, "have blood on their hands", and who, in Palestinian parlance, are national heroes who have sacrificed their own freedom for their people's liberation.

The price demanded by Hamas may seem exorbitant – a thousand for one. But Israel has already paid such a price for other prisoners in the past, and that has become the standard ratio. Hamas could not accept less without losing face.

The thousand Palestinian prisoners have families – fathers, mothers, husbands, wives and children, brothers and sisters. Exactly like Gilad Shalit. They, too, cry out, demand, exert pressure. Hamas cannot ignore them.

THE WHOLE affair is shocking evidence of the inability of our government – both the previous and the present one – to take decisions and even to think logically.

Hamas already fixed the price four years ago, according to past precedents. Their demand has not changed since then.

From the first moment, there was a need to make a decision.

No doubt, such an agreement would strengthen Hamas. It would underline its legitimacy as an important Palestinian factor. It would be seen as confirming the mantra that "Israel understands only the language of force".

Therefore, it comes down to a simple question: Yes or No?

Yes means a blow to Mahmoud Abbas, whose conciliatory ways have not led to the release of one single important Palestinian prisoner. (The US has vetoed any such agreement, since it would strengthen Hamas, which it designates as a “terrorist organization”, and weaken Abbas, whom the Americans consider as their man.)

NO means life-imprisonment for Shalit, with perpetual danger to his life.

For four years now, our leaders have been unable to decide, much as they are unable to decide upon any other important matter concerning our future. (For example: Two states or one apartheid state? Peace or settlements? Making a peace agreement with Abbas or negotiating with Hamas?)

IN ORDER to wriggle out of the necessity to make a decision, various tricks have been employed. Among others, the assertion that the purpose of the Gaza blockade was to free Shalit.

That was from the beginning a mendacious pretext. The blockade was imposed in order to compel the Gaza population to overthrow the regime of Hamas, which had won the Palestinian elections. The Shalit connection served only for spin.

Now the blockade has been partially lifted. That is a huge victory for the aid flotilla – a victory the planners of the flotilla did not dare to hope for in their wildest dreams. As a result of the stupid decision to attack the Turkish ship, international pressure made this step unavoidable.

Among other pretexts, the government declared that “anyhow the blockade did not help in freeing Shalit”.

Shalit’s parents cried out. They really believed that there was a connection between the blockade and the fate of their son. But it is obvious that, when deciding to give in to international pressure and lift the blockade partially, Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak did not even think about Shalit.

I stress the word “partially”. True, it is a huge victory for all those of us who said from the beginning that the blockade was immoral, illegal and unwise. The decision to let everything into the Strip except arms constitutes a big change.

But the main problem in Gaza is poverty induced by unemployment. Practically all enterprises in the Gaza Strip have been shut down by the blockade. Not only could they not obtain raw materials, but, no less

important, they could not export their products to the West Bank, Israel or the world at large. It seems that this situation has not changed. Even if the remaining enterprises receive raw materials now, they cannot export their products – textiles, fruit, flowers and all the rest. Israeli suppliers will now make millions selling their wares in the Gaza Strip, but the Gazans will not be able to sell their products in Israel.

Anyhow, this does not concern the fate of Shalit.

THE SHALIT family is in terrible distress. One can understand them, but sympathy does not prohibit disagreement.

They are wrong when they object to the lifting of the blockade. They are wrong when they demand that Hamas prisoners in Israel not be allowed family visits. (And not only because the families residing in Gaza are not allowed into Israel anyhow.)

One cannot have it both ways. When Noam Shalit, the father, demands that a thousand Hamas prisoners be released to free his son – he cannot at the same time take part in persecuting Hamas prisoners. He cannot demand humane treatment for his son – and at the same time justify the inhumane treatment of the Gaza population. This double standard bewilders the public and undermines the campaign for freeing Gilad.

The message must be simple, clear and straightforward, and addressed to Binyamin Netanyahu: to make the decision to implement the prisoner swap at once. Gilad will return home, and all Israelis will be jubilant. The Palestinian prisoners will also return to their homes, and there, too, everyone will be jubilant.

THE INABILITY of Netanyahu to make decisions and stand behind them reveals the full extent of his incompetence as a leader.

Instead, we have a specialist in marketing (which happens to be his original profession), a person who wakes up in the morning with polls and goes to sleep at night with polls. The pollsters tell him that freeing Gilad Shalit would be popular in Israel, but freeing the Palestinians would be unpopular. At night, in bed, he agonizes about it: Which would be better? How many votes would be gained, how many votes would be lost?

That is frightening. If he cannot make a straightforward decision about the fate of Shalit, how can he make decisions about the problems that affect the fate of all of us, not for one year but for generations to come?