

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/rescue-israeli-hostages-but-at-what-cost-8b44eb77>

OPINION

COMMENTARY | HOUSES OF WORSHIP

[Follow](#)

Rescue Israeli Hostages, but at What Cost?

The issue won't be aided by slogans that ignore the long-term risks of such deals.

By Shlomo Brody

May 30, 2024 at 4:52 pm ET

Modiin, Israel

“You dogs, we will step on you.” So said a Hamas terrorist in front of five female Israeli soldiers taken hostage on Oct. 7. The young women, visibly beaten, stare in horror. They've been told they've become sex slaves.

This video, shared last week by the Hostages Families Forum, is now several months old. Hostages, since released, said they saw some of the women in captivity. Are they still alive? Pregnant? The clip has reignited a debate among Israelis: How should the state rescue its citizens?

The Jewish state is familiar with this dilemma. Israel's mantra has long been straightforward: “The state must do everything.” A new slogan, drawn from the Talmud, has been plastered on banners across the country: “Redeeming captives is a great *mitzvah*,” or biblical commandment. The original line had a twofold logic: Conscripted soldiers will put themselves in danger only if they know the state will make similar sacrifices for them. The state, moreover, has a moral obligation to protect its people. The new slogan adds a religious refrain: God wants us to bring the hostages home—now. But at any cost?

The Talmudic sages described captivity as a living hell, marked by starvation,

bareness and loneliness. Rabbi Joseph Karo, a prominent 16th-century scholar, ruled that any unnecessary delays in redeeming captives is equivalent to shedding their blood.

The same sages, however, placed restrictions on how much the community could spend on redeeming captives, who were typically sold on the slave market. Overspending would exhaust communal resources. Once word got out that Jews overpay for their own, marauders would be given an incentive to kidnap more. Efforts to free captives must have limits. Good governance—or *tikkun olam*, repairing the world—means making a priority of national needs.

Jewish scholars have for centuries debated the circumstances under which these limitations could be waived. What if the captive's life was clearly in danger, or if the subjects were communal figures? Does the thinking change if family members use their own money to retrieve their loved ones? In practice, the community usually paid for captives' release, even at exorbitant cost. Countless Jews were killed in pogroms and inquisitions. If the community could save one life, it did.

Though Jews still suffer from vicious attacks and kidnappings, the situation has changed. The Jewish people now have a powerful army to protect or rescue them. The price to be paid isn't in cash but in a political capitulation that entails cease-fires and releasing murderers.

Israel knows from experience that the prisoners it releases haven't been rehabilitated. In 1985 it released 1,150 prisoners to redeem three Israel Defense Forces soldiers held by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. At least 114 of those prisoners—including Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin—later re-engaged or conspired in terrorism. Israel in 2004 let around 400 prisoners go, including Lebanese operative Mustafa Dirani, in exchange for an Israeli citizen held in Lebanon. At least 35 Israelis were later killed by those freed terrorists.

The 2011 deal to free Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit released 1,027 prisoners, many of whom had received life sentences for murdering Israelis. According to a recent Israeli newspaper report, a significant percentage have returned to terror, including Hamas

leader Yahya Sinwar. As the Journal reported, a week after his release in 2011, Mr. Sinwar said the best option for freeing imprisoned terrorists is to kidnap more Israeli soldiers.

A utilitarian calculation indicates these deals have harmed Israeli security and led to more murders and kidnappings. Does Jewish law call for bringing captives home at all costs? Tikkun olam would suggest not. Sovereignty means that Israel must focus on long-term strategic considerations. The international community ought to treat the situation similarly, pressing only for a hostage release and cease-fire. Releasing terrorists merely begets more violence.

Opinion polls nevertheless indicate that Israelis are divided on the question. A majority support a lopsided swap to redeem the living hostages and to return the dead for burial. Why? Some doubtless imagine what they'd want if they or their loved ones were captured. Israel is a small country. Millions of people know hostages' families personally. Others think Israel has a primary moral obligation to bring home those it failed to protect. Some simply reason the state needs to save those in danger and that it can work out the risks of doing so at a later date.

Perhaps they're right. National solidarity will suffer if Israel fails to bring hostages home alive. Is that enough to counter the long-term security risks? Perhaps not.

One thing is certain: The issue is complex and sloganeering doesn't make it less so. Jewish thought provides essential guideposts for thinking about this dilemma. Israelis ought to pray that their leaders have the acumen to apply it wisely—for only God knows what's right.

Rabbi Brody is executive director of Ematai and author of "Ethics of Our Fighters: A Jewish View on War and Morality."