

Jonathan Pollard: A Modern-Day Joseph

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Rome and, while there, we organized a private tour of the Vatican. Little did I know that other than entering the epicenter of Catholicism and all the history (and art) that goes with it, I'd be taking a step back nearly 2,000 years in Jewish history.

While on our tour, we were taken into a room that's off the beaten path, containing an exhibit of ancient stone tablets. At first, I thought, "seen one ancient stone tablet, seen them all."

But these stones took me back 2,000 years to when Jewish slaves were being brought to Rome from Judea (Israel), and made me witness to a biblical tradition in practice then and still relevant today. These tablets were contracts of sale of Jewish slaves to other Jewish residents/citizens of Rome. It was explained this was the proactive effort of Jews in Rome to redeem these captured slaves, to buy their freedom.

Throughout Jewish history, going back to Genesis 14:14-16, it has been a biblical imperative to redeem captives. This doesn't refer to an average criminal held for his crime, but to one held unjustly. This makes it a religious duty to bring about the release of a fellow Jew captured by slave dealers or robbers, or imprisoned unjustly by the authorities.

Before my eyes, these ancient contracts bore witness to that obligation and our history.

I had my own personal experience redeeming captives in my day as well. In the 1980s, I was deeply involved in the struggle to free Jews in the Soviet Union, a modern enslavement of my people with historical and biblical precedent. You can see more by [clicking here](#).

Like many things in Jewish life, there's a debate over how and when to exercise this obligation. There's the story of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg who was taken captive and held for ransom, but who famously instructed his community not to pay the ransom because to do so would put other Jewish lives at risk in the future.

There's a modern debate over releasing Arab terrorists in exchange for Israeli prisoners, something that happens too often and opens vast wounds of the survivors and families of victims of the terrorists being released. There's also the notion that by releasing Arab terrorists, one makes the taking of other Jewish captives in the future more profitable.

I was reminded of this recently when Jonathan Pollard, a former U.S. Navy analyst, was released on parole after 30 years in prison. He is not completely free yet, and many limitations are being placed on his life including reportedly the prevention from travel, strict curfew and prohibition to use the Internet. But this is the beginning of the righting of a huge injustice and should be celebrated.

Pollard was arrested as a spy for Israel. He admitted to this and passing along U.S. intelligence to Israeli sources particularly about the threat then of Iraq's nuclear program. He entered a plea bargain with U.S. authorities, which the government violated after then Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger provided the court a document that remains secret allegedly attesting to the damage Pollard did to U.S. security. That his lawyers with the highest security clearance have not had the right to see these secret charges submitted after the plea bargain makes the process all the more suspect and unjust.

Despite his plea agreement, Pollard was sentenced to life, an unprecedented term for any spy even from a hostile country, and all the more so from an ally. One might say allies should not spy on one another—but let's be real, this happens all the

time. Nevertheless, Pollard's case was one of a man being arrested as a spy, but being held to a different standard, his rights repeatedly violated, and sentenced as a Jew.

He's been a political pawn ever since, with successive U.S. presidents holding out clemency or a pardon as a carrot on a stick to coax Israel into a peace negotiation under U.S. terms.

Many people have rallied around Pollard, fighting for his freedom for decades. Many American Jews have shunned Pollard because of the discomfort of being accused of dual loyalty.

At the time he was arrested, I was finishing college, and the CIA and NSA somehow tapped me to consider a career at these important federal agencies. But Pollard's case weighed heavily on me at the time.

After several collective interviews I decided these were not jobs for a nice Jewish boy, that I didn't want to be put in a situation of conflict of interest, and I didn't want to be in a case of being a federal employee looked at with suspicion as a Jew and under a separate microscope. So one day, I just didn't show up for the next interview or aptitude test, and my unborn career in a U.S. intelligence agency ended.

Though my personal activism relating to freeing Jonathan Pollard was virtually nothing compared to that of Soviet Jews, fortunately a dedicated group of others worked relentlessly and never gave up. In recent years a growing number of former U.S. military, diplomatic, and intelligence officials came to Pollard's aid by declaring that his sentence was unjust and it was long overdue that he be released.

Fortunately, this week, Jonathan Pollard was able to spend his first Shabbat and his first weekend outside prison in three decades.

When I lived in the U.S., I was with friends and sat in

synagogue next to one of the people who will go down in my history book at epitomizing the imperative of redeeming captives. He is one of Pollard's attorneys who has spent years working on his behalf to make this milestone possible. Also noteworthy, he worked pro bono. He never took a dime. Over the years, we spoke about Pollard and his case often. I sympathized and admired his perseverance.

After I helped get my adopted family free from the Soviet Union, my rabbi's wife was elated and asked what blessing we make on fulfilling this biblical mandate. Jewish tradition is that we make a blessing after an action related to most such commandments and even acts of nature, to remind us that nothing happens without God's fingerprint.

So we seek to affirm this and glorify Him through such acknowledgement. Neither of us knew what blessing I should make. So she checked into it. It turns out, when it comes to redeeming captives, there is no blessing because we are not to derive personal benefit from others' tragedies.

Such is the case of my friend and the many others who worked tirelessly on behalf of Jonathan Pollard, not for personal recognition, not for profit, but just for good. Today, they can hang their hats on having helped redeem one captive, a person held in prison for decades because he is a Jew and was used as a political pawn.

God knows they did it, and that's good enough. But as I wrote my friend before Pollard's release, he should pour himself an extra full glass of wine and toast himself because he embodies a Jewish tradition going back thousands of years, literally etched in stone in a side room in the Vatican. {eoa}

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