

Redeeming Captives and Saving Lives

Among the 613 biblical commandments to which Jews are obliged, one is especially personal and unique—for two reasons.

Pidyon Shvuyim means redeeming captives. Jews are biblically obligated to redeem captives, under all circumstances, though there are many rabbinic commentaries as to how and at what cost, lest paying a price that's too high would incentivize further kidnapping and hostage taking.

In ancient Rome, it was common for Rome's Jewish community to buy Jewish slaves following the destruction of the Second Temple. Stone tablets serving as the receipts for these "sales" are on display at the Vatican today.

Not knowing the biblical mandate, one might find this an interesting sociological curiosity. But understanding the biblical mandate, it was clear that Jews living in the early diaspora were separated from the Land of Israel, but not from Jewish tradition.

In my life, having been involved to free Jews in captivity from the former Soviet Union, not only did I have the privilege to participate and have a direct hand at freeing one particular family in 1987, but I also learned about our tradition by living it.

When my adopted family was freed, I recall a deep conversation about what blessing we make to thank God for this positive outcome. I learned something that I had never considered: while we are no less obliged to free captives, there is no blessing to be recited as we do for so many other biblical obligations, because it's not appropriate for us who are free to benefit from the captivity of those who are not. This lesson has stayed with me ever since.

Sadly, another case of Jews held captive is playing out in Israel today with three teenage Israeli boys being held by Palestinian Arab terrorists likely connected to Hamas. I don't need to reiterate the current events, but am happy to share and provide sources for information should you like.

Israelis are united in prayer for the return of the three boys, now two weeks in captivity. It's unthinkable that they would be kidnapped like this because they were Jewish, and it's unimaginable how their parents and friends and relatives are going on day to day. But they are, and their public statements have provided strength and comfort to the greater public that should be providing them the strength and comfort. Many have written about and observed how this represents Israel's indomitable spirit, and the endless prayers and acts of kindness this is inspiring are awesome.

While there are distressing exceptions, many Arab Israelis are affirming their solidarity with Israel, noting that we are all Israeli, and the boys must come home. Sadly, underscoring this fact this week, Muhammad Karaka, a teenage Israeli Arab, was killed by Syrian missile fire across the border.

This week, Jews read from the Torah, Numbers 19:1-22:1. Highlighted in the Torah portion is the unusual and paradoxical commandment regarding the red heifer. Simply, one who is ritually impure can become ritually clean through the ashes of an unblemished cow.

But those involved in the sacrifice, the burning, and collection of the ashes of the cow become ritually impure. This scripture weighs on me this week as a parallel situation exists in Israel being united in spirit but because of a situation that's unthinkable. We are stronger because of the threats against us.

Through email and social media, I have been blessed to receive many notes of support for Israel at this time. Many have asked

what they can do. My answer is simple: pray, and join us in acts of charity and kindness to strengthen Israel.

Last week, I brought an American guest to donate blood in Jerusalem to express his solidarity. We learned that there was an especially great need for blood now because military units that would typically be donating blood now have canceled their participation in the event that they are needed for something more urgent. Another paradox: As the situation escalates, and many predict may become even more violent and even deadly, the soldiers charged with protecting us may need blood, but their own military units are presently prohibited from donating.

We have seen Israelis step up and respond to SMS requests to donate. Hopefully there won't be a need, but we have to be prepared.

That's where you can help. If you're in Israel or know people who are in Israel, please be in touch and make time to donate blood in person. There's no more direct and meaningful way to help save the lives of all Israelis, no matter what the need. But outside Israel, you can help financially to sponsor individual units of blood through Heart to Heart's virtual blood donation program.

Just \$100 can sponsor one unit of blood that can save three lives. Israel's national blood center needs more blood, and financial resources, to be prepared, under any circumstance.

I have launched an initiative to get at least 400 churches (100 for each of our boys) to sow into Heart to Heart by donating at least \$472-\$118 for each of the three boys being held hostage, and for the teenage Israeli Arab boy who was killed by Syrian missile fire on the Golan Heights. That \$118 comes from \$100 to sponsor one unit of blood, and \$18, the number that represents the Hebrew word, Chai, (חַי) which means life.

You can give life to Israel and we will collectively send your

support and blessing to the families of the four teenage boys, so they know that you and your ministry stand with them at this critical time.

Please send checks payable to Heart to Heart to Heart to Heart, 352 Seventh Ave., Suite 400, New York, NY, 10001, or go to our web site .

May our prayers and deeds merit the speedy and safe return of the three kidnapped boys, and provide comfort to the family of Muhammad Karaka.

Jonathan Feldstein is the director of Heart to Heart, a unique virtual blood donation program to bless Israel and save lives in Israel. Born and educated in the U.S., Feldstein emigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for Charisma's Standing With Israel. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.