

Let My People Go: The Plight of Israeli Hostages in Gaza

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How will this Passover be different from all other Passovers? On all other Passovers, we celebrate our people's freedom; in 5784, we ask how we can celebrate while Israeli hostages are still held captive by terrorists in Gaza. On all other Passovers, we reduce our cups of joy by ten drops for the plagues upon Egypt; in 5784, we count all the ways our cups are diminished: Over twelve hundred murdered by terrorists, six hundred-plus citizen-soldiers killed and many more wounded in battle, over one hundred thousand Israelis driven from their homes; tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians killed in Gaza, with survivors suffering famine, an unfathomable humanitarian crisis. On all other Passovers, מרור, a bitter herb, symbolizes long-ago suffering, and salt water represents tears shed by our ancestors; in 5784, the bitterness is in the news every day, and the tears are our own. On all other Passovers, we are encouraged to recline at the Seder table; in 5784, we will be on the edge of our seats, frightful about when and where the next bomb will drop—literally.

When I lead a Seder, I am faithful to the *Haggadah*. Yes, I pick and choose, skipping plenty—I'm not one to keep my guests past midnight. I typically disregard Seder supplements—documents distributed by Jewish organizations, enabling us to keep our Seder “relevant,” responding to present-day situations in which God's children are suffering and in need of redemption. I do find ways of doing that at Seder each year, often through questions, and I'll do that again in my own way at home and at our Congregational Seder. This year, though, I also need a Seder supplement. We all do, which is why we distributed one in Wednesday's Temple eblast. We cannot celebrate our freedom without acknowledging people who are not free—this year, including our own people. Thankfully, skilled liturgists and poets have prepared prayers, readings, and rituals to bring the hostages and all who are suffering to our Seder tables.

I am reminded of the Anne Frank Tree at the Clinton Center, which memorializes not only the Holocaust, but Arkansas injustices, too: the Indian Removal Act, Japanese interment, and the Little Rock Nine. At the dedication, a Temple leader asked me, “Isn't the Holocaust enough?” The answer is of course yes—and for Passover, the Exodus is “enough.” The Anne Frank Foundation, though, imposed a condition for giving us the tree: We had to include local oppression! The Foundation was right. If we still live in a world where people are enslaved, whatever form that slavery takes, and we do live in such a world, then

Passover cannot be only a celebration. It must also rouse us to action on behalf of those who remain in bondage. If people face discrimination, hatred, and oppression because of who they are—particularly but not only if that’s because they are Jews—then our Holocaust remembrance must both honor victims and call us to action.

Among the many horrific images of October 7, the one that terrorized me most was that of an elderly woman, whisked off to Gaza in the clutches of her terrorist captors. What would become of her and the dozens of others taken hostage?

More than six months have passed since Hamas and other terrorists took over two hundred fifty hostages—Israeli Jews, Bedouins, and foreign guest workers among them. More than one hundred were released during a brief ceasefire at the end of November. Yesterday, NBC reported that “Israel says that more than 130 hostages remain, and about a quarter of those are believed dead.” That same report confessed that “it remains unclear exactly how many of the captives are still alive in Gaza... The uncertainty has caused anguish among the families of [the hostages] and undermined international efforts to negotiate a cease-fire deal and the release of at least some of the hostages... A proposed cease-fire formula calls for Hamas to free 40 hostages who are women, children or sick and elderly men... But Hamas so far has been unable to confirm that it has identified 40 hostages who meet that criteria.”ⁱ

Terrifying.

Our Israeli Reform Movement has consistently insisted that freeing the hostages must be Israel’s top priority in this moment. Israeli Reform rabbis have taught the traditional Jewish texts to back up that priority, including words of Maimonides, “You have no greater מצוה, no higher religious obligation, than freeing captives.”ⁱⁱ Alongside tens of thousands of others, hostage families and Israeli Reform Movement leaders have taken to the streets, every Saturday night, week after week, to demand that the government place freeing hostages at the top of its agenda. They are very skeptical. President Biden has demonstrated infinitely more concern for hostage release than has Prime Minister Netanyahu—for example, meeting with hostage families sooner and more frequently, and speaking of their plight regularly. That concern is bipartisan in the United States and ought not be controversial in Israel; but hostage families have increasingly felt compelled to join protests calling for new elections, for a government that will seek the hostages’ freedom, a call now officially joined by the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

My friend, Rabbi Oded Mazor, spoke last month about what “the day after” would mean to him and members of his community, Congregation Kol HaNeshamah in Jerusalem. Here’s an excerpt:

“Thinking about the day after, I’m ... thinking about the manager of Kol HaNeshamah, Anna. Her cousin is Karina Arayev. She’s one of the women soldiers kidnapped from the Nachal Oz base on October 7. For many, many, many, many awful weeks, Anna’s uncle and aunt, Karina’s parents, and the whole family, which is a rather small family of Ukrainian Jews, didn’t know anything about Karina and her situation. Three weeks ago, Hamas released a short film with three women talking. One of them was Karina. That’s the first time that they received any message, if we can call it that. When Anna is thinking about היום אחרי, the day after, there is no יום אחרי, day after without Karina coming home. Karina’s parents, Anna’s aunt and uncle, told her that very explicitly: If she doesn’t come home, there is no day after. We try as a community to be there with Anna and her family the whole time through. When we say ‘the whole time through,’ it means that, weeks ago, too many weeks ago, when the first groups of hostages were released, every time a group of hostages came back home and Karina was not amongst them, we were rejoicing with the families who received their loved ones back home; but we were in pain with Anna’s family, with Karina’s family, and the families of all the hostages who are still waiting and have no idea—and had no idea, until the first group of people came off the Hamas vehicle, and still have no idea.”ⁱⁱⁱ

They still have no idea. But that does not mean that they have lost hope. Nor may we lose hope. We will open the door for Elijah and to the possibility of a better day ahead, opening the door to our responsibility to be God’s partners in making it so. We must keep the hostages’ plight at the forefront of American leaders’ agenda, urging them to continue calling on the Israeli government to do the same.

October 7 was Shabbat and Atzeret-Simchat Torah, the day every year when we begin praising God as משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם, the One who causes wind to blow and rain to fall. This Shabbat is the last when we will utter those words for this year. Israel’s rainy season, which began when the hostages were taken, now ends. At Passover, we celebrate new beginnings, for the natural world and for our people, liberated from Egyptian bondage. We turn to Song of Songs, the Bible’s springtime love poetry. Most years, we do so in celebration of renewal. This year, we sing these words as a prayer: Let the winter of war and destruction and captivity end. Let springtime bring new life. Arise, our beloved hostages, and come away—come home—to new life, to freedom, and to peace.

Amen.

ⁱ Dan De Luce, Peter Alexander, Monica Alba and Anna Schechter, “The number of hostages still alive in Gaza is a mystery, officials say,” *NBC News*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/number-hostages-still-alive-gaza-remains-mystery-officials-say-rcna148294#>.

ⁱⁱ Mishnah Torah, Gifts to the Poor 8:10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Oded Mazor, “Israel, on the Day After,” *Ravblog*, April 4, 2024, a transcription of a speech delivered at the Central Conference of American Rabbis Convention, Philadelphia, March 12, 2024, <https://ravblog.ccarnet.org/2024/04/rabbi-oded-mazor-israel-the-day-after/>.