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April 22, 2011

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

Kenneth Lasson

As we continue celebrating the season of freedom - perhaps the most symbolic of all Jewish holidays, for Passover above all contemplates the meaning of redemption, liberation from the shackles of bondage - we should not forget that two of our people remain locked away from their families and the world. We know one is alive but barely surviving the harsh conditions of imprisonment. The other may be neither alive nor well.

For Jonathan J. Pollard, the American serving a life sentence for disclosing classified information to Israel, each Passover is a poignant reminder of the 25 years he has already been confined to a federal penitentiary. He suffers from a variety of ailments, at least one of which recently threatened his life.

For Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held incommunicado since his capture almost five years ago by Hamas, the renewal of spring reflects an even bleaker situation. He has not been heard from since October of 2009, when Israel - in return for releasing 20 female Palestinian prisoners - received a video message from him.

The truth is, we don't even know if Shalit is alive. His captors, openly defying both international law and the Geneva Conventions, flatly refuse all requests from the International Committee of the Red Cross for visits to determine his health and welfare - this, from the group that consistently seeks global support for its humanitarian efforts on behalf of its people in Gaza and the "occupied territories." By now we should be accustomed to Hamas' exquisite hypocrisy, part and parcel of its eternal campaign to demonize Israel. It recites a long litany of abuses by the Jewish state - oft alleged but never proven violations of international law and human rights. Yet even when the falsehood of such Big Lies is amply demonstrated - the "killing" of Muhammad al Dura, the "massacre" at Jenin, the "indiscriminate" violence against "civilians" in the Goldstone Report - Israel remains globally vilified.

Last year we heard a symphony of sympathetic bleats about the flotilla that ran an Israeli blockade of Gaza ostensibly to bring relief to the suffering masses. Yet the complete sealing off of Shalit is barely mentioned in the world press. Who has protested the flagrant flouting of international law by Hamas, one of whose deputies told an Arabic daily, "Shalit may have been wounded, and he may not have been. The subject no longer interests us. We are not interested in his well-being at all. ..."? Palestinians from Gaza fire rockets into Israel and then press for a cease-fire, yet there is virtually no outcry against Hamas' equally outrageous cold and repeated refusals to allow the Red Cross to visit a prisoner of war, no public challenge to the Papal Nuncio to Israel being unable to secure his release through the Catholic Church's Gaza-based parish, no expression of frustration that Egyptian mediators were similarly unsuccessful.

To the contrary, the world wants to reward this terrorist organization with a state of its own.

Israel pays national homage to the concept of pidyon shivuyim (redemption of captives), as instructed in Leviticus 19:16 (“You shall not stand idly by the blood of your brother”). Indeed, as early as 1957, Israel returned 5,000 POWs to Egypt for one Israeli pilot, and as late as 2008 Israel exchanged an untold number of living Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners for the dead bodies of two soldiers kidnapped by Hezbollah militants.

Meanwhile, negotiations to offer a flicker of hope that Shalit would be released have been lost amidst the greater turmoil that is today’s Middle East. As Yelena Bonner has asked of her human rights colleagues, “Why doesn’t the fate of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit trouble you in the same way as does the fate of the Guantanamo prisoners?” In Pollard’s case, little note is taken of the flurry of petitions from some very important people - among them Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, John McCain, Michael Huckabee and Elie Wiesel - calling on President Obama to commute the sentence to time already served. Not even Pollard himself argues his innocence - only about the severity and disparity of his punishment; the average term given to those convicted of the same offense is two to four years.

The sad modern-day irony is that an ailing Pollard must yet again celebrate this season of hope still gazing out upon the flowers of spring through the iron bars of a sweltering prison cell, and that Gilad Shalit, if still alive, may be doing the same.

It is up to us to keep the faith that neither of them will be forgotten, and to hope that they will not be passed over for yet another year.

Kenneth Lasson, a law professor at the University of Baltimore, is a frequent contributor to the BALTIMORE JEWISH TIMES.

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