

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Pinhas, we read about a narrative wrought with moral ambiguity. Pinhas killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman because their shameless immorality and flagrant violation of the law in plain sight of Moses and the people. Pinhas, with zeal for God's law, kills them on the spot. The Torah itself seems to approve of Pinhas' actions, reporting that his zeal turned back God's wrath. Following the incident, God makes a pact of peace – a "brit shalom" – with Pinhas. But the post-biblical commentators are less favorable to Pinhas. Even the Masoretes who established the scribal transcription of the Torah may have been expressing their ambivalence when – in recording the phrase "brit shalom" they wrote the word "shalom" with a broken "vav." As you know, if any other letter of the scroll is incomplete, the entire scroll is invalid. Perhaps they were trying to tell us that justice carried out extra-judicially is fundamentally flawed. The Talmud is equally ambivalent about Pinhas's vigilantism. Tractate Sanhedrin (82a) states that if Pinhas had asked a rabbinic court if it is permitted to kill Zimri and Kozbi, the court would have told him, "the law may permit it, but we do not enforce that law!" In other words, Pinhas may have been "right" but nonetheless, he acted incorrectly.

Have you ever faced a really difficult decision in your life? Have you ever confronted a question with no clear answer? Sooner or later we all face these difficult choices. The hard decisions in life are rarely choices between good and evil. Discerning between good and evil is often a clear choice. The really difficult choices occur when we try to decide between multiple competing goods... and even more difficult is the choice between multiple bad options.

This week Israel carried out a controversial agreement with the Lebanese Hezbollah terrorist group. You may remember that on 12 July 2006, in a cross-border raid - Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers - Sgt Major Ehud (Udi) Goldwasser (Ehud ben Malka) and 1st Sergeant Eldad Regev. Their capture – in which 3 other soldiers were killed - sparked the second Lebanon war. 5 more were killed in a failed rescue attempt.

For two years, the Goldwasser and Regev families, as well as the Israeli public at large has been struck with grief and reserved hope – wondering if the two young men were alive. Israeli public officials repeatedly vowed to "bring the boys home" at any cost. This week, Israel paid that price. Israel struck a deal with the head of Hezbollah for the return of Goldwasser and Regev in exchange for 5 Hezbollah terrorists, one of whom, Samir Kuntar (may his name be blotted out), had been convicted of the brutal murder of 3 Israelis including a policeman and his 4 year-old daughter. Along with the 5 terrorists, Israeli repatriated the bodies of about 200 other Lebanese and Palestinian militants captured by Israel. Up until the last minute, the families of Goldwasser and Regev, along with the Israeli public, held out hope that the men would be returned alive. Those hopes were dashed when Hezbollah produced two coffins.

In the aftermath of the exchange, we are left with questions:
Was it correct to exchange dead soldiers for live terrorists?
Will this deal encourage more kidnappings in the future?

Will Kuntar strike again, as he has already vowed?
Should we retrieve the bodies of fallen soldiers at any cost?
If we don't, are we showing disrespect to them and their families by allowing their bodies to be desecrated?
Is it right for Israel to withhold the return of the bodies of dead captured enemies?

And there are competing interests at work... how do we show respect and care for the families of soldiers missing in action? How can we help them find comfort if their sons are never returned? Should public officials make promises and promote hope when their own military intelligence would indicate against it?

These moral ambiguities will remain, and I doubt this will be the last time we will be asking these questions. It certainly isn't the last time Israel has made difficult decisions such as this. Over the past several decades, Israel has exchanged thousands of Arab combatants in exchange for a handful of captured Israelis.

What do these contradictions say about us as a people? This week when Israel's president, Shimon Peres visited the family of Ehud Goldwasser, he was asked by a reporter to respond to the fact that Hezbollah was celebrating by giving Kuntar a hero's welcome. Peres answered, "I am proud to be part of a people with higher morals" adding "there are people on the other side whose god is the god of terror. This is not our god, these are not our morals." Shimon Peres' sentiments are evidenced by the overwhelming response of the Israeli public as they mourn alongside the slain soldiers' families. I don't know what the right strategic decision was about making the exchange in the first place, but I do know that our community's response is the appropriate Jewish response – today we mourn with the families of the fallen and pray that God – the healer of broken hearts – grants them comfort.

But, what comes next? What should Israel do following this terrible event. Perhaps we can glean something from our Torah portion. Immediately following the incident of rebellion and Pinhas's zealous response, we have an abrupt shift in the narrative. Chapter 26 recounts in great detail a census of the people taken by Moses and Eleazar the priest.

197ב וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַמִּגְדָּה ב
110 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֱלֶזָּר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן לֵאמֹר
210 שָׂא אֶת-רֹאשׁ כָּל-עַדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכֹּהֵן עֹשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעֲלָה לְבַיִת אֲבֹתָם כָּל-יִצְחָק צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

“And it was after the plague was over, the Lord said to Moses and to Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, ‘take up a head-count of the whole Isrealite community...’”

How is it that we can have such an abrupt shift in the narrative? We go from the drama and tension of Pinhas to the most mundane of undertakings. Today's Torah readers will tell you how tedious it is to read out all the tongue-twisting names of the tribal leaders and their descendants. But perhaps the Torah is telling us something about how we should respond to morally difficult situations. Ostensibly, this census is a preparation for the settlement of the land of Israel and the enlistment of soldiers for the defense of the nation. But, the commentators point out that the Torah links this census directly to the preceding tragedy when it states, “וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַמִּגְדָּה”, “and it was after the rebellion...” Rashi envisions God counting the Israelites after the plague of Baal-Peor as an act of love, “like a shepherd numbering his flock after wolves have attacked it.” (see

Humash Etz Hayim). The phrase used for the census may also give us a hint: rather than saying “count the people of Israel” or some other similar phrase, the Torah says:

שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עַדַּת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

...literally, lift up the head of the entire community of the children of Israel. How is Israel lifted back up by taking a census? Perhaps the Torah is telling us that when the tragedy has come to a close, when the period of prescribed mourning is over, it is time to take stock... time to take an inventory, to examine ourselves closely... a time to assess.

Soon the Israeli public and its leaders will need to reassess and learn from the Goldwasser/Regev tragedy. Indeed, Israel has little time to waste. Right now, Israeli leaders are negotiating with Hamas for the release of Sergeant Gilad Shalit, who was captured in Gaza just days before Goldwasser and Regev. Israel has confirmation that Shalit is still alive, but Hamas is demanding a long list of hundreds of prisoners in exchange for Gilad Shalit. We pray that Israel’s leaders will act with wisdom in securing his return home.

Today, our thoughts and prayers are with the families of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev as well as the families of other Israeli MIA. On this sad occasion, the Masorti Movement in Israel has issued the following prayer that I would like to read for you today:
{recite the prayer}

The people of Israel mourns her fallen soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev;

Father of the orphans and Judge of widows, give strength, we pray to the mourners in the families of Goldwasser and Regev that in this day of their sorrow they be comforted from Heaven by You, Master of Comforts. Your people Israel has fulfilled the great mitzvah of Redemption of Prisoners at a painful and saddening cost. May it be Your pleasure that the reward of this mitzvah be that Eldad and Ehud rest in peace. You who release the imprisoned, strengthen the resolve of those who govern in our Holy Land that in wisdom and determination they bring about the release of Gilad Shalit from his dank prison and his wretched jail.

God in heaven, fulfill speedily in our time the biblical verse: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy." And yet another verse: "Then shall each person sit beneath his vine and his fig tree with none to make him afraid, for the mouth of the God of Arms has said it. May this be Your pleasure and let us respond Amen.

May the memories of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev serve as a blessing to us all. I wish you a Shabbat Shalom – a Shabbat of Peace.