

Everyone's Son

In opposing the mass release of terrorists in exchange for Gilad Shalit's freedom, I felt as if I was betraying my own son

By [Yossi Klein Halevi](#) | October 12, 2011 9:30 AM



For the last five years I have tried not to think of Gilad Shalit. I avoided the newspaper photographs of his first months as an Israel Defense Forces draftee, a boy playing soldier in an ill-fitting uniform. Sometimes, despite myself, I'd imagine him in a Gaza cellar, bound, perhaps wired with explosives to thwart a rescue attempt. And then I would force myself to turn away.

I tried not to think of Gilad because I felt guilty. Not only was I doing nothing to help the campaign to free him, I opposed its implicit demand that the Israeli government release as many terrorists as it takes to bring him home. Israel has no death penalty, and now we would lose the deterrence of prison: If the deal went through, any potential terrorist would know it was just a matter of time before he'd be freed in the next deal for the next kidnapped Israeli.

But the argument could never be so neatly resolved. Each side was affirming a profound Jewish value: ransom the kidnapped, resist blackmail. And so any position one took was undermined by

angst. What would you do, campaign activists challenged opponents, if he were your son? “He’s everyone’s son,” sang rocker Aviv Gefen.



One day I passed a rally for Gilad in a park in downtown Jerusalem. Several counter-demonstrators were holding signs opposing surrender to terrorism. “I happen to agree with you,” I said to one of them. “But don’t you feel uneasy protesting against the Shalit family?”

“We’re not protesting against the Shalit family,” he replied. “We’re protesting to save future victims of freed terrorists. Those victims don’t have names yet. But they could be my son or your son.”

Every debate over Gilad ended at the same point: your son.

We never referred to him as “Shalit,” always “Gilad.” The Gilad dilemma set our parental responsibilities against our responsibilities as Israelis—one protective instinct against another. The prime minister’s job is to resist emotional pressure and ensure the nation’s security; a father’s job is to try to save his son, regardless of the consequences.

And so I tried, too, not to think of Gilad’s extraordinary parents, Noam and Aviva. Even when denouncing the government they spoke quietly, incapable of indignity. The best of Israel, as we say here, reminding ourselves that the best of Israel is the best of anywhere.

For more than a year the Shalits have lived in a tent near the prime minister’s office. When I walked nearby I would avoid the protest encampment, ashamed to be opposing the campaign. This past Israeli Independence Day, though, I saw a crowd gathered around the tent, and wandered over. “GILAD IS STILL ALIVE,” banners reminded: It’s not too late to save him. Inside the tent, Noam and Aviva were sitting with family and friends, singing the old Zionist songs. I wanted to shake Noam’s hand, tell him to be strong, but I resisted the urge. I didn’t deserve the privilege of comforting him.

I wanted to tell Noam what we shared. As it happens, my son served in the same tank unit as Gilad, two years after he was kidnapped. I wanted to tell Noam that that was the real reason I couldn’t bear thinking about his family. That in opposing the mass release of terrorists for Gilad, it was my son I was betraying.

Now, inevitably, the government has given in to the emotional pressure. Inevitably, because we all knew it would—must—end this way. A few months ago, as part of its psychological war against the Israeli public, Hamas released an animated film depicting Gilad as an elderly gray-haired man, still a prisoner in Gaza. No image tormented us more.

Still, there are few celebrations here today. Even those who supported the campaign to free Gilad must be sobered by the erosion of Israeli deterrence. And those who opposed the campaign are grieving for Gilad's lost years. All of us share the same unspoken fear: In what condition will he be returned to us? What have these years done to him?

Hamas leaders are boasting of victory. If so, it is a victory of shame. Hamas is celebrating the release of symbols of "resistance," not of human beings. Hamas' victory is an expression of the Arab crisis. The Arab world's challenge is to shift from a culture that sanctifies honor to a culture that sanctifies dignity. Honor is about pride; dignity is about human value. Hamas may have upheld its honor; but Israel affirmed the dignity of a solitary human life.

In recent months the campaign to free Gilad demanded that the government worsen conditions for convicted terrorists in Israeli jails, to psychologically pressure the Palestinian public. So long as Gilad was being held incommunicado, activists argued, Palestinian families should be barred from visiting their imprisoned sons. While Gilad's youth was wasting away, terrorists shouldn't be allowed to study for college degrees.

The government promised to oblige. But as it turned out, there were legal complications. A newspaper article the other day noted the results of the government's get-tough policy: Imprisoned terrorists would no longer be provided with the Middle Eastern delicacy of stuffed vegetables.

How is it possible, Israelis ask themselves, that so-called progressives around the world champion Hamas and Hezbollah against the Jewish state? Perhaps it's because we're too complicated, too messy: a democracy that is also an occupier, a consumerist society living under a permanent death sentence. Perhaps those pure progressives fear a contagion of Israeli ambivalence.

For all my anxieties about the deal, I feel no ambivalence at this moment, only gratitude and relief. Gratitude that I live in a country whose hard leaders cannot resist the emotional pressure of a soldier's parents. And relief that I no longer have to choose between the well-being of my country and the well-being of my son.

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