



Redeeming Captives/Pidyon Shivuyim

Sources/Guiding Questions

1. From the Torah

Vayikra 19:16

לֹא תֵלֵךְ רֹכֵל בְּעַמֶּיךָ, לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ: אֲנִי, ה'

You should not go up and down as a talebearer among your people; **neither should you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor**: I am the LORD

Vayikra 19:18

לֹא תִקֹּם וְלֹא תִטּוֹר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ, וְאֶהְבֶּתָ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹתָ: אֲנִי, ה'

You should not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, **but you should love your neighbor as yourself**: I am the LORD

-
- What differences do you see between the bold sections in the two sources?
 - How does one fulfill each of the commandments in bold? This can be based on past learning you have done, or your own thoughts when reading the *pesukim*.
 - Which of these, if any, would seem relevant to the discussion of redeeming captives, and why? What would you need to do (for redeeming captives) based on these commandments?



2. From the Jewish Legal Codes

Talmud Sanhedrin 37a:

וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא
He who saves one life in Israel the Torah considers it as if he saved an entire world

- What do you think this means? Why is one life considered like an entire world?
- How is this relevant to the discussion of redeeming captives?

Rambam Mishneh Torah: Laws of Gifts to the Poor 8:10

פדיון שבויים, קודם לפרנסת עניים ולכסותן; ואין לך מצוה רבה כמו פדיון שבויים: שהשבוי הרי הוא בכלל הרעבים והצמאים, ובכלל הערומים; ועומד בסכנת נפשות. והמעלים עיניו מפדיונו--הרי זה עובר על "לא תאמץ את לבבך, ולא תקפוץ את ידך" ועל "לא תעמוד על דם רעידך" ועל "לא ירדנו בפרך, לעיניך"; וביטל מצות "פתוח תפתח את ידך" ומצות "וחי אחיך, עימך" "ואהבת לרעידך כמוך" ו"הצל, לקוחים למוות" והרבה דברים כאלו. **ואין לך מצוה רבה כפדיון שבויים**

The ransoming of captives has precedence over the feeding and clothing of the poor. Indeed there is no religious duty more meritorious than the ransoming of captives, for not only is the captive included in the generality of the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked, but his very life is in jeopardy. He who turns his eyes away from ransoming him, transgresses the commandments "You should not harden your heart, nor shut your hand," "Neither should you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor," and "He should not rule with rigor over him in your sight." Moreover, he nullifies the commandments "you should surely open your hand unto him." "That your brother may live with you," "You should love your neighbor as yourself," "Deliver them that are drawn unto death," and many other admonitions like these. **To sum up, there is no religious duty greater than the ransoming of captives.**

- Why do you think these laws are discussed in the section about the laws of gifts to the poor?
 - How does Rambam use the above verses in his analysis of the mitzvah of redeeming captives?
 - Do you agree with Rambam that “there is no religious duty greater than the ransoming of captives?” Why or why not?
-

Rambam Mishneh Torah: Laws of Gifts to the Poor 8:12

אין פודין את השבויים ביתר על דמיהן מפני תקון העולם, שלא יהיו האויבים רודפין אחריהם לשבותם. ואין מבריחין את השבויים מפני תקון העולם, שלא יהיו האויבים מכבידין עליהן את העול ומרבים בשמירתן

We do not redeem captives for more than their worth (for exorbitant amounts) because of Tikkun HaOlam, so that [our] enemies will not pursue people to kidnap them. And we do not assist captives in escaping because of Tikkun HaOlam, so that enemies will not oppress captives harshly and be very strict when guarding them.

- How might redeeming captives for exorbitant amounts cause our enemies to kidnap people?
- How do you think you can figure out what is considered “more than their worth” or “exorbitant” when it comes to the amount for redeeming a captive? Can you actually put a price on someone’s freedom?
- Do you think it makes a difference if there are hundreds of captives?
- Notice the use of the phrase Tikkun Olam here. Where else have you seen that phrase? How else is it used? How do you think that concept fits into the discussion of captives?

Other commentators have added the insight that the above ruling does not apply in cases where the captive’s life is in danger. In such a case, the community would need to go to any lengths to redeem the captives.

- Are there ever captive situations where the captives are not in danger?
- Do you think there should be a limit to the price paid for redeeming captives? Why or why not?

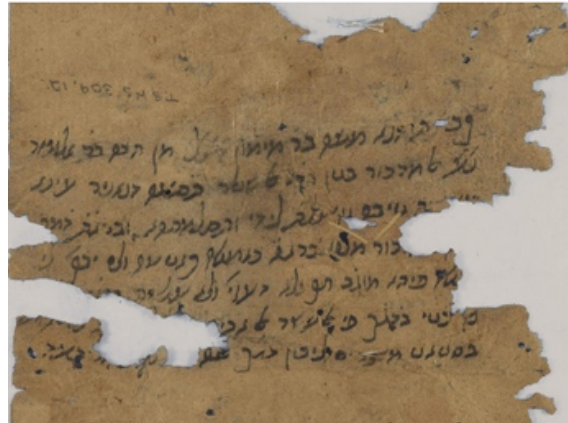


3. From History

Middles Ages:

1. From the Cairo Geniza-

Letters were found written by Rambam to Jewish communities asking them to raise funds to redeem captives. There were also receipts found for funds to redeem captives. You can learn more about this [here](#).



Letter to communities from Rambam asking for funds to redeem captives- found in Cairo Geniza.

2. Rabbi Meir ben Baruch, better known as Maharam of Rothenburg, was the head of German Jewry in the last half of the 13th century. As conditions worsened for the Jews in Germany, many sought to escape the brutal pogroms and draconian taxation by fleeing to Eretz Yisrael. Emperor Rudolf I, fearing the loss of Jewish gold, declared the Jews his personal property and, in 1286, forbade them to leave Germany. Maharam opposed the emperor and attempted to escape the country with his family. But a Jew who had left the religion informed upon him and he was imprisoned by Rudolf in the castle of Ensisheim. The emperor demanded an exorbitant amount of money before he would free Maharam.

German Jewry, including his star student Rav Asher Ben Yechiel (the Rosh) was prepared to pay the enormous sum of 23,000 talents of silver for his release. But Maharam himself forbade the exchange, arguing that it would only serve to encourage more kidnappings and extortion within vulnerable Jewish communities. Maharam languished in prison for seven years until he died in 1293; his body was not released for burial until 14 years later, when it was redeemed by a wealthy Jew.

4. Modern Times

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the topic of redeeming captives has changed, but not disappeared. Our enemies still use kidnapping to extort the Jewish world, but rather than seeking money, the captives are used in political/military negotiations. The

IDF upholds the Jewish value of life which dictates that they do not leave any soldiers behind, and will even go to extreme lengths to retrieve bodies of fallen soldiers for proper burial. Here is a chart detailing some of the hefty prices Israel has paid to redeem captives:

| Event | Released to Israel | Released by Israel |
|------------------|---|--|
| Six Day War | 11 IDF soldiers, 3 soldiers bodies, 1 civilian body | 6,000 Egyptian/Syrian soldiers |
| War of Attrition | 3 soldiers | 46 Syrian soldiers |
| Yom Kippur War | 242 soldiers | 8,400 Egyptian soldiers |
| April 1975 | 39 soldiers' bodies | 92 Egyptian security prisoners |
| March 1979 | 1 soldier | 76 Lebanese terrorists |
| November 1983 | 6 soldiers | 4,500 soldiers; 99 security prisoners |
| June 1984 | 3 soldiers, 3 civilians, 5 soldiers bodies | 291 soldiers, 13 civilians, 74 bodies |
| May 1985 | 3 soldiers | 1,150 Palestinian prisoners |
| September 1991 | 1 soldier's body | 2 Palestinian terrorists |
| July 1996 | 2 soldiers' bodies | 123 terrorists bodies |
| January 2004 | 3 soldiers' bodies, 1 civilian | 430 Palestinian prisoners, 60 terrorist bodies |
| July 2008 | 2 soldiers' bodies | 6 Lebanese terrorists, 200 bodies |
| October 2011 | 1 soldier (Gilad Shalit) | 1027 Palestinian prisoners |

Following the Shalit exchange of 2011, the Israeli government passed a law in 2014 to limit the extent of negotiations for captives. This was after more than 60 of the prisoners released in the Shalit exchange were re-arrested for terrorist activities.



5. Now/ 2023

The current situation is different in many ways. There are over 200 hostages being held in enemy territory, and the majority of them are civilians—elderly, women, children, even babies. Additionally, a significant number of the hostages are foreign nationals who have citizenship from countries other than Israel.

- After having learned through traditional Jewish sources as well as looking at some of the modern examples of redeeming captives, what do you think are some of the factors at play as Israel considers the different courses of action?

Take Action!

One way of coping during times of crisis is to take action! Whether that means collecting money, sharing letters of support, or getting involved politically, etc., you may find great comfort in taking action.

Refer to your teacher for a list of ideas, or come up with your own!