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Or Hadash: A Reconstructionist Congregation  
Kol Nidrei 5772

In the year 1168, the Crusader King Amalric I, who had ruled the Kingdom of Jerusalem since 1163, attempted to fortify his position and head off a mounting threat from the Egyptian vizier Shawar by attacking the Egyptian city of Bilbeis. There he massacred many captives and enslaved even more. Survivors from the prominent Jewish community of Bilbeis were held hostage by Amalric in an attempt to raise badly needed funds for his military campaigns. More than seven hundred years later a treasure trove of old Jewish documents were found in the Cairo Genizah, including a letter from 1170 personally signed by the great medieval rabbi Maimonides requesting that all Jewish communities raise funds to help ransom these captives. In the letter, Maimonides stressed the obligation of *pidyon shvuyim*, the mitzvah of redeeming captives, stating that this responsibility is so important that it takes precedence over any other purpose to which a Jewish community might put its resources and urging every community to send funds to secure the captives' swift release.

The mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim* is discussed at length in the Talmud, where it is described as a '*mitzvah rabba*,' a great mitzvah. The Talmud underscores its point by relating stories of Jews taken prisoner by opportunistic Roman officials looking for high payouts. Jews, it seems, were particularly vulnerable to being captured and held for ransom, first because they frequently travelled through territories controlled by other peoples and second, because the premium Jews placed on redeeming captives assured the captor's price would more likely than not be met. Strikingly, even while emphasizing the central importance of this mitzvah the Talmud at the same time includes a pointed warning against paying excessive ransoms for fear that the high payoffs would create even more incentive for unscrupulous criminals to kidnap Jews. It is a sign of how overpowering is the desire to see captives safely returned to their homes and their families, however, that through the years many Jewish communities created legal loopholes to circumvent the Talmud's guidelines and instead meet the kidnapers' exorbitant demands.

Nor, tragically, is this problem of redeeming captives an old one. All of us have been following the case of Josh Fattal, Shane Bauer, and Sarah Shourd, three Americans taken into Iranian custody in July 2009 after accidentally wandering across the unmarked border from Iraqi Kurdistan. Many in this community have a direct connection with the Fattal family – Josh grew up in Elkins Park and attended Rodeph Shalom and Cheltenham High School – and our synagogue engaged in a letter-writing campaign on his behalf when the three were first captured. As you know, Sarah was released last September and Josh and Shane were released from an Iranian prison just last month. To secure their release, Iran was paid nearly \$500,000 'bail' for each of the prisoners – although let's not kid ourselves, the real term for the payout is 'ransom.' While we might not normally think of *pidyon shvuyim* as a moral obligation we would encounter as American Jews in the twenty-first century, here was a case that unfolded before our very eyes.

*Pidyon shvuyim* is also constantly and tragically relevant in Israel because of the reprehensible Palestinian tactic of kidnapping Israeli soldiers for use as bargaining chips to exchange for prisoners convicted of crimes against Israeli civilians. There are any number of such cases, including Israel's exchange in 2006 of five militants for the *remains* of Israeli soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, both captured in Lebanon and held by Hezbollah. The case that is currently gripping – and paralyzing – Israel is also agonizingly familiar to many of us: Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit, who was stationed inside Israel and was kidnapped by Hamas militants in a cross-border raid in June 2006, then smuggled into Gaza where he has been held for more than five years. Everywhere in Israel you see signs and bumper stickers calling for Shalit's release and yellow ribbons such as this fly from car antennas, motorcycle handlebars, backpacks, and baby carriages protesting his ongoing captivity. Negotiations for his release

are moving ahead slowly and the most recent deal under discussion is to exchange Shalit for more than 1000 Palestinian prisoners – an exchange that surely evokes the Talmud’s warning about paying excessive prices to redeem captives and gives pause even to Israelis who wish to see him safely returned right away. This Yom Kippur marks Shalit’s sixth in captivity.

I mention this because our time in Israel and the flurry of recent news around the hikers’ long-awaited release has made me think a lot about what it means to be a captive. The Hebrew word for captive *‘sh’vi’* – which we hear in the phrase *pidyon shvuyim* – speaks of course to subjugation and confinement as in the prophet Jeremiah’s words: *“oy l’cha Moav...ki lukchu vanehca b’shevi, uv’notecha b’shivya”* – “Woe to you, O Moav, for your sons are carried off as captives and your daughters into captivity.” But *‘sh’vi’* also speaks to indignation and humiliation, as we read in Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept as we thought of Zion... For our captors” – *“shoveinu”* – asked us there for song, our tormentors for amusement [to humiliate us].”

A captive is someone who is not free, whose very physical existence is constrained and directed by others. When I think of a captive, when I think of someone like Gilad Shalit, part of what is so painful for me isn’t just the fear, abuse, and indignity that he has undergone and continues to undergo, although these would certainly be more than enough. I am struck as well by the fundamental insecurity, the *uncertainty* that comes with being held captive, of not knowing what the future may hold nor of having any hope of influencing it, and how this lack of control, this uncertainty, extends not only to the captive himself but also to his family and all those who love him: they too are held captive by his jailers, confined in a cell of anxiety and desperation that binds them tight. And even beyond this, with the loss of freedom comes the loss of *possibility*, the loss of an open and meaningful reality that might have been, if the captive’s freedom had not been so completely destroyed. When I think of the hikers, I think of three young people who lived not only in terror and uncertainty about their fate but who also were robbed of what they *could* have done during the time they were confined. They were cheated out of two years of their lives: of birthday celebrations with their families, of friendships, of laughter, of self-discovery, of all the growth and meaning with which they could have infused those years which, looking in from the outside, strikes me in some ways as one of the most cruel aspects of captivity: the loss of potential, the loss of what could have been. Captivity, in its essence, isn’t just about being held in a particular place; it is also about the places – both literal and figurative – to which you are prevented from going because you are not free.

The same obstacles, the same holding back applies not only to literal *shivyah*, literal captivity, but to metaphorical captivity as well. This is the case not of someone who is physically held by his captors, but who is bound instead by his own limitations and by his own misdeeds. This is the sense, for example, in which Jeremiah denounces those in his own time who worshipped idols, castigating with a combination of mockery and pity: “They” – the idolaters – “are both dull and foolish, their doctrine is but delusion. It is a piece of wood, silver beaten flat... the work of a craftsman and a goldsmith’s hands.” The idol worshippers are captive to a false understanding they have created and to which they have enslaved themselves. In other words, we can become captives when our mistakes and false assumptions, our habits and ego drive us to act in ways that limit us, that cut us off from the world – that bind us. This is the bondage which Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan describes in his landmark 1942 haggadah: “Men can be enslaved in more ways than one. Men can be enslaved to themselves. When they let emotion sway them to their hurt, when they permit harmful habits to tyrannize over them— they are slaves. When laziness or cowardice keeps them from doing what they know to be the right, when ignorance blinds them so that, like Samson, they can only turn round and round in meaningless drudgery—they are slaves.”

This evening I say: we are all slaves, we are all captives. Not, thank God, in the sense of Gilad Shalit or Josh Fattal, but in the sense that all of us are bound by our ingrained habits, our bad judgment, our weakness, and our pride. All of us – and I am certainly no exception – have made decisions, done

things in the past year that have hurt others and hurt ourselves. We have deluded ourselves, spun out fantasies, told lies – perhaps at times while convincing ourselves we act with the very best of intentions – but now we are trapped by these mistakes... bound, held hostage, seemingly with no way out. Like a captive we are not in control of our own lives. If we have done a thorough and honest soul searching in these days since Rosh ha-Shanah, we realize how far we have fallen short of the values to which we aspire, the ideals which we hold up for ourselves. We may feel guilt we may feel shame, we may feel a closing *in*, and a closing *off* of options that comes with being trapped, with being captive. We may feel a lack of certainty about what the future holds since deceptions and hurtful actions can come back to haunt us when we least expect it. And, while this isn't a word we use very often in Jewish settings, we may feel trapped by sin: by the recognition of our brokenness, limitation, and imperfection.

This is a hard thing to acknowledge, a hard place to be: who would ever want to be a captive? And yet unless we admit the things we have done wrong – to ourselves and to others we have harmed – we will *remain* trapped in a cell fashioned from our own deceptions, habits, weakness, and fears. The purpose of this season is to make us confront our shortcomings, to give us the encouragement *and* the urgency to jolt us out of the complacency that causes us to accept and even enable the shackles that bind us, the bars that hold us back from becoming the people we should be, the people we *ought* to be. In the words of our Yom Kippur liturgy, “*Sarnu memitzvotecha umemishpotecha ha-tovim*” – “We have turned away from Your mitzvot and from Your righteous laws as if it did not matter to us. And You are just, whatever comes upon us for what You do is truth and we have done much wrong.” The same theme is picked up in the Haftarah reading for Yom Kippur, from the Book of Jonah: Jonah is literally confined in the belly of the great fish God sends and is forced to go to the city of Nineveh against his will. But the physical confinement both flows from and points to Jonah's spiritual confinement: unable or unwilling to see the people of Nineveh be spared the consequences of their wrong actions, Jonah tries to run away from God's command and would sooner see himself dead than the people of Nineveh forgiven. Jonah is trapped, held hostage to his rejection of forgiveness for the people of Nineveh, that very forgiveness which, ironically, is the key to both Nineveh's liberation and his own.

This is the same assurance held out to us by Yom Kippur: to be freed from the sins and limitations that bind us. On Yom Kippur, we are promised that forgiveness for our wrongdoings is attainable, that the bars that imprison us and the chains that hold us can in fact be broken. As we read in Psalms, “*Min ha-metzar karati Yah, annani ba-merchavyah*” – “I called out to you, God, from the narrow place, the place of confinement, and You answered me bringing great release.” Whether we truly merit it or not, Yom Kippur offers us *release* from our prison of shame and remorse and gives us the possibility of truly starting the year anew. Through the combination of our own sincere *vidui* (confession) and *teshuvah* (repentance) on the one hand and God's *mechilah* (forgiveness) on the other we can be freed from our spiritual captivity and enter back into the fullness and freedom of life. In the words of the Selichot liturgy: “Gentle God, You are reluctant to grow angry, rightly are You called a God of mercy. You have shown the path of *teshuvah*, of return to You. May You remember the abundance of your mercy and loving kindness, today and every day, for the seed of those who love you.”

Forgiveness is hard, make no mistake. It's not something that comes naturally to us: forgiving others or ourselves. This is why Jewish tradition teaches that Divine forgiveness is different from human forgiveness, truly wiping clean the slate with no lingering hurts or resentments. This forgiveness is a gift and it is freedom: a reopening of paths and possibilities that were blocked, of being able to stand renewed before God and the ones we love. So indispensable is this forgiveness that we speak of it as being one of the chief attributes that characterizes God. We call God, “*Eloha selichot*”, God of forgiveness, and every time we say the *amidah* we proclaim God as the one who is “*somech noflim, rofeh cholim, umatir asurim*” – who supports the downfallen, heals the sick, and releases the captive. This central daily prayer, then, directly connects God's mercy and forgiveness with freedom from captivity: not only the literal captivity of a Gilad Shalit but also the spiritual captivity that binds and

constrains us on a daily basis. When God forgives, God frees us from the limitations and imperfections that come with being human and allows us to begin anew.

The midrash tells us that for us to become holy we need to follow God's example, as it says in our Torah reading for tomorrow afternoon, "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy." What does this mean? the Talmud asks. Just as God clothes the naked, so we should clothe the naked. Just as God comforts mourners so we should comfort mourners. Just as God supports the downfallen, so we should lift up the downfallen; just as God releases the captive so we should release the captive. Fulfilling our obligation to release the captive finds its expression in the mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim*, of helping to free all those in unlawful captivity, just as Maimonides did in Egypt more than eight centuries ago. But I would argue it also means practicing to the best of our human abilities the Godly attribute of forgiveness, of striving on this Yom Kippur to let go of the accumulated hurts, slights, and insults from those who have wronged us in the past year. For in truth these resentments, when we hold them close to our heart, bind us just as surely as they bind the people who have harmed us and are now themselves prisoners of their own regret and remorse. Through our misdeeds and theirs we have all become captives, which is why the *amidah* we have just completed concludes with the following challenging aspiration: "Master of the World, I now forgive all who have angered me or sinned against me whether through my body or my possessions, my honor or anything that is mine, whether by accident or by intention, knowingly or unknowingly, by word or by deed. Let no one be punished on my account." Let no one be punished, let no one be captive: only through the Divine gift of forgiveness can we truly break the shackles – those of our own and those of others; cast off the fetters that hold us captive to the past, so we may truly move ahead, unbound, into the future.