BRING THEM HOME

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In 1966 at not yet the height of the Vietnam War Pete Seeger wrote a song as only Pete Seeger could. It truly needed no lyrics just a title to convey its message, though of course lyrics it had. The song was called "Bring Them Home" and it was a plaintive and urgent appeal to the politicians and generals to whom our nation's mother and fathers had entrusted their sons. It said simply but urgently – "Bring them home".

If you love this land of the free
Bring'm home, bring'm home
Bring'm back from overseas
Bring'm home, bring'm home

They want to test the grand theory
Bring'm home, bring'm home
With the blood of you and me
Bring'm home, bring'm home

We'll give no more brave young lives

Bring'm home, bring'm home

For the gleam in someone's eyes

Bring'm home, bring'm home

The song is buried deep in my iPod – in a collection of 60's folk tunes that I nearly forgot I owned – but last week as I rode a bus down from the Golan Heights in northern Israel to our hotel in Tel Aviv it made a fitting and appropriate soundtrack for the sense of yearning in the country. Everywhere you looked on the streets of Israel were posters with pictures of Eldad Regev, Ehud Goldwasser (z"l), Gilad Shalit and Ron Arad – the posters proclaimed the same plaintive message, "Free the captives – bring them home".

We sitting here in the United States – lovers of Israel that we are - may think Israel paid too high a price. To exchange four terrorists, one a notorious and unrepentant murder and the remains of 199 Hezbollah fighters for what they later learned were the remains of its fallen sons. But to think that is a luxury of distance and proximity that Israel does not enjoy. We can sit at our dinner tables and debate – as Israel has debated - the geo-political ramifications of negotiating with terrorists, we can argue correctly that it diminishes Israel's strategic deterrent and it may even inspire like minded operations in the future. But we know in our own lives that love

trumps reason, morality must take precedence over practicality. And so I want to try and explain why Israel did what it did – because it is important that we understand it – it is a window into the Israeli soul and to be honest it is I think a glowing example of something that is missing in our American conscience.

Israel is a young nation, just 60 years old this year; it has been fighting a war for its very survival since the day of its creation by UN Charter in 1948. If you go to Har Herzl the National Military Cemetery in Jerusalem, as our Temple Judea Trip just did you will see that the graves of its fallen soldiers are arranged by conflict; The War of Independence here, The Sinai War there, The Six Day War, the Yom Kippur War, the first Lebanon War, the Second Lebanon War. Sixty Years and more than 6 wars – but in point of fact it is not six distinct wars, but rather one long war with a rotating cast of enemies – the one constant is Israel's brave young men; fathers and sons are buried in sight of each other, brothers next to each other. Some families have lost one of every generation in each conflict. The wars of Israel don't end, not yet at least, they only pause.

For sixty years Israeli parents have sent their sons and daughters proudly, willingly into the hands of the IDF – The Israeli Defense Forces. Military service is an obligation of every Israeli beginning at age 18. Girls serve for two years and

boys for three and then continue as reservists till age 35. It has been called by many the glue that holds Israeli society together.

Imagine it for a moment, everyone (with a few exceptions) goes through the same training, the same experience, the same service. Some serve in combat units, some in supporting roles – some are good at it and others deeply challenged – but everybody serves. It is the great equalizer of the society. In a nation of Jewish mothers (and fathers) they serve on one condition – that the army will care for there kids as a parent would care for his own child. They will not risk there lives unnecessarily, senselessly and should they fall in battle or into enemy hands the nation promises they will bring them home. It is no empty slogan, it is not even a folk song, in Israel the only way the system works, the only way mothers and fathers will give there sons, is if they know that the people into whose hands they entrust them will care for them as though they were there own children and indeed because everyone serves – more often than not that is in fact the case. The commanders and politicians are ordering there own sons and daughters, neighbors and classmates into harms way.

And so it was of little surprise two years ago that when Eldad and Udi were capture in a cross boarder raid by Hezbollah – whose expressed purpose was to capture Israeli soldiers as bargaining chips for a hostage swap that Israel went to

war to bring them home. When someone comes into your house and kidnaps your children – you stop at nothing to get them back. To the average Israeli, Eldad and Udi were everyone children – because they could quite literally have been any one of there children.

"There is no mitzvah greater than freeing hostages," writes the 12-century rabbi Maimonides, "for hostages are starving and thirsty and naked and their lives are in danger." Jewish tradition considers a hostage situation as the most serious of all; someone who hesitates even one hour to free a hostage is considered to have spilt his blood. Money earmarked for charity or building a synagogue may be used to free a hostage. One may even sell a Torah scroll to pay the ransom to bring them home.

Why is this? Because Judaism values life over all else. I don't know enough about the other religions of the world to know if that makes us unique amongst the nations, but I do know that it makes me proud, it confirms to me that were I not born Jewish I would choose to be Jewish for that reason alone among many other reasons as well.

The Talmudic principles at play here are complex and refer to a time when hostages were taken for financial ransom not political gain and certainly there are exceptions to the basic rule. For example you may not redeem a hostage if in

doing so you put the community in a certainty of greater danger. But the fundamental premise remains unchanged – freeing the captive, restoring to that person life, freedom and security is the greatest mitzvah in our tradition.

But Israel did not act only out of an adherence with Jewish Law – it acted out of something more universal – but sadly all too uncommon in our world today. It acted out of a fundamental moral commitment to its children. It acted because it values life.

Israel's enemies have said that this makes Israel weak, Nassrallah – who gave the order for the raid that ultimately, took Eldad and Udi's lives proudly proclaimed that Hezbollah would win the war with Israel because Israel values life and Hezbollah values death. And indeed the images of Hezbollah supporters dancing in the streets as the terrorists were returned and Israeli families wept made me burn with anger and a desire for revenge – there will be time for that. But to not redeem the captives, to not bring Udi and Eldad home would have been to have lost something more than a war, it would have been to have lost our humanity, our Jewishness. Maybe that makes it harder to fight a war with terrorists, maybe that makes us more vulnerable to attack and exploitation – no one ever said morality is the easy way; it's not easy being Jewish. But I do know this, that Israel cared for its

fallen soldier as though they were my own sons was the right thing was the right thing, and moral and Jewish thing. It was a mitzvah and it makes me so proud!

I hope the world will see it, I am under no illusion that they will, blinded by moral relativism and polarized as we are into hawks and doves. But if the world could get past that, if the leaders of this country on both sides of the aisle could see the example set by this tiny nation, just 60 years old then they would learn something about the real meaning of Support Our Troops. In this moment Israel is as it was intended to be, God and by its Zionist founders, it is an *or l'goyim* a light unto the nations, a shining example of how nations and leaders must value life, respect life, protect life – our politicians and pundits may not see it, but we should and we should be so very proud.