SHVER TSU ZAYN A YID - IT'S HARD TO BE A JEW
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This week and this war has been one of many hard truths:

1. Antisemitism is not a thing of the past, my grandfather, who grew up orthodox, retained the knowledge but largely set aside the corresponding practice was right when, a few days after I came home from Jewish summer camp wearing a yarmulka he cautioned me not to were it in public. He said he worried for my safety, that Jew hatred was real. I dismissed his worry. I was an invincible teen, a proud Jew and the holocaust at that time was 40 years ago, the

world was different; people don’t really hate the Jews anymore. I’ve since learned he was right, I was naive.

2. As I have said before, my faith in my multi faith partnership and collaborations has been shaken if not shattered. I’ve stopped waiting for the phone calls and the emails from the non-Jewish faith community. The few that I have gotten are appreciated, some are even heartfelt, but none have been enough to make me feel any less alone. That's the nature of my sense of utter despair and its also the nature of their empathy for everyone but Jews.

This week I learned what it really means to live the Jewish value of doing whatever it takes to save a human life, Pikuach Nefesh. I have thrown that term around since I learned it in Hebrew school. We engage in moral thought experiments with our teens over what you would risk to save the life of another. This week the thought experiments became real, when presented with an impossible choice to redeem the hostages, the answer was immediate and self evident, there was no choice at all, of course we need to make any deal, no matter how painful, and disastrous politically, maybe militarily it may be for Israel - *ayn briyah* as we say in hebrew, we have no choice, if we can bring them home, any of them home alive, we must.

Israel has made prisoner exchanges before but this is fundamentally different, those were for soldiers who were charged with risking their lives if need be to defend the people and the nation. This was an exchange for those the nation and the soldiers were unable to protect for civilians, for children, for mothers, grandmothers.

As Israeli columnist Naday Eyal wrote for the Hebrew language news site YNet:
“But the price [of this deal] was set on October 7th at 6:30 am. If you don't protect hundreds of citizens from kidnapping, and you don't protect against murder, you end up with bad choices.

Solidarity isn't expressed in easy moments, but in difficult ones. The most fundamental value of a country is the protection of its citizens."

That's the why Israel's army is called the Israel DEFENSE Forces, to defend against something so improbable but sadly living in the neighborhood they do, not unimaginable as what Hamas did on Oct 7.

Judaism and Jewish law are clear: the obligation to redeem the captives *"pidyon shvuyim"* appears in the books of Leviticus and Nehemiah, as well as in the Talmud, Shulhan Arukh and writings of Maimonides.

"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 citizens. It acted because it values life.

Israel once traded 1,027 Palestinian prisoners to get back one of their own.

Another time they traded 1,150 prisoners to get back three of their own.

They did it because of a deep awareness that national cohesion is essential to national survival.

They did it because Israeli parents share a common emotional bond; the imprisonment of one of their children touches them all.

That every person is created in the image of God and therefore bears inestimable and unassailable value.

Israel's enemies have said that this makes Israel weak, they have proudly proclaimed that they will win the war with Israel because Israel values life and Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad values death. And indeed the images of Hamas supporters dancing in the streets as the terrorists murdered our children and families and paraded the hostages through the streets of Gaza made me burn with anger and a desire

for revenge. But to not redeem the captives, to not bring them home, even some of them 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.

But I do know this, that Israel cared for its children as though they were my own. It was a mitzvah and in the midst of my unbearable sadness it makes me proud.

This is not about sentimentality. Taking into account such considerations, of returning citizens, does not make Israel weak, but strong.

Anyone who thinks “strategically" or “coldly” without consideration for the children, their families, their mothers, the elderly who built the country and are now in the hands of monsters—is utterly disconnected from Israeli society, the Israeli social contract, and the Jewish value of protecting human life. that which makes us different from our enemies.

And I want to say this to those that accuse Israel of not valuing all human life equally of not valuing the lives of innocent civilians, of children in Gaza. You’re wrong. Israel does not want to kill civilians, it does not target civilians; its war, its awful, innocent people are being killed by Israeli bombs and I mourn every death. Its horrible, and if the life of my own extended

family were not in immediate jeopardy, if the enemy had not sworn that they would do Oct 7 again and again and again it would be unbearable. But they have and so we must. Israel must do the thing that they least want to do, ayn briah - they have no choice, because we have seen what happens when they do not defend their citizens.

I hope the world will see it, I hope they will see the difference between fighting to defend and protect life and fighting to take human life and to take hostages. I am under no illusion that they will, blinded by moral relativism and by a myopic calculation that sees only power imbalance and victimhood on the side of those who seek our utter destruction as a nation and

a people. I don't need them to see it, I need us to see who we are, I need us, Israel, the Jewish people to see the incredibly painful choice and high price we are paying to bring them home and to see that we pay the price without reservation and we make the choice without hesitation because that is what it means to value life that is the value of that Jewish value.

I have learned many hard truths over these seven weeks of war; the greatest truth of all is found in the old yiddish proverb, *Shver tsu zayn a yid* it's hard to be a Jew. But I guess like those same proverbial writers of proverbs also say, if it was easy everyone would do it. So maybe that is why there are so few Jews, and

today in the midst of my sorrow and pain, I am so proud to be a Jew.