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Human rights groups should advocate for Schalit

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Unless there is a last-minute breakthrough, Israelis will be pouring a fifth cup at the Passover seder for Gilad Schalit, the young soldier kidnapped by Hamas in June 2006. Schalit, like the Soviet Jews who were held in the Gulag before the collapse of the Soviet Union, represents the antithesis of the freedom celebrated at the seder and reminds the rest of us of the obligation to fight for those whose freedom is denied.



As the outsized calendar next to the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem marking the days of Schalit's captivity reached 1,000, Israelis debated the price of his release. Everyone identified with him and his family, and they agonized over the difficult decisions.

Israelis focusing on the plight of the individual urged the government to accept the demands by Hamas to release hundreds of terrorists. They argued that the country has a moral obligation to bring back the soldiers that were sent to protect the country, regardless of the risk. And by the same token, soldiers and their families needed to know that the country would do what was necessary if they were captured.

But others – including families of terror victims – warned that by releasing Palestinians responsible for the Park Hotel attack on seder night in Netanya in 2002, as well as Sbarro's pizzeria in 2001 in Jerusalem, and numerous bus bombings, Israel would be inviting more terror. The perpetrators of the next wave would know that after they were caught, there would be more kidnappings to free them. Previous experience shows that many of the released terrorists return to commit or prepare more attacks (the same is true for Al Qaeda captives freed from the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba).

Ehud Olmert, who was prime minister at the time of Schalit's capture, was widely expected to accept the costs and agree to the release of the terrorists demanded by Hamas in his last days in office. Negotiators went to Cairo for talks, but – to the surprise of many – Olmert told the nation that the price was too high, and the future dangers too great.

This stance may also have caught Hamas leaders off guard. They apparently counted on a continuing Israeli policy of disproportionate exchanges for prisoners of war, and, most recently, in the case of the bodies of soldiers killed and kidnapped by Hezbollah. As a result, they continue to hold Schalit after more than 1,000 days.

At the same time, and in contrast to the public demonstrations inside Israel, there was a growing recognition of the ringing silence regarding Schalit on the part of the human rights network. In the face of this gross violation of the most basic rights, as well as the Geneva conventions, the organizations that claim to promote international morality, including officials of the United Nations Human Rights Council, have failed to do anything on Schalit's behalf.

Similarly, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch – which have active branches and major donors in Toronto – have remained silent on this central Palestinian violation of international law. This contrasts with the flood of anti-Israel condemnations and campaigns, particularly regarding Gaza. And the same is true for Israeli organizations, such as B'tselem, that claim a human rights mandate, as well as the numerous political groups funded by the New Israel Fund.

It was only after this damning silence became a public issue and source of embarrassment that minimal efforts began to be made. Instead of a long-overdue action alert, Amnesty issued a laconic and immorally "balanced" statement, putting the kidnappers and the victim in the same basket, in a news story headlined: "Detainees used

as bargaining chips by both sides in Israel/Gaza conflict.” And Human Rights Watch continued to ignore the issue.

To free Schalit and to deter further kidnappings by Hezbollah, Hamas or other terror groups, the international guardians of human rights must re-examine their behaviour and biases. Those who claim to act in the name of morality have the obligation to lead this fight, including for Israelis unable to celebrate freedom again this year.

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