HOWARD JACOBSON

The Unremitting Responsibility

Ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy…

IN JUNE 2006, a young Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was captured by Palestinian militants and abducted to the Gaza Strip. Five years later, he was returned to Israel in exchange for the release of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. Among the released was Yahya Sinwar, mastermind of the October 7 massacre. But that's an irony for another time. As is the question of what new atrocities might follow from the more recent exchange of prisoners for hostages. Yahya Sinwar is said to have read nothing but Jewish books in the time he was incarcerated. If the massacre is anything to go by, his studies were more the scholasticism of opportunism and contempt than a labor of love. By the time Sinwar was released, there was said to be no weakness in the Jewish psyche in which he wasn't versed, not least the willingness of Jews to pay any price to get their own people returned.

How to describe that weakness, if weakness it is, has exercised the minds of commentators on both sides of the conflict. Jews have been immemorially accused of driving hard bargains. So why are we such soft touches when it comes to swapping prisoners for hostages? Do we love our own to the point of recklessness? Or is this to misdescribe what is in reality spiritual arrogance? Do we compute the value of Jewish life on a different scale from the one we use to compute the value of the lives of non-Jews?

Shortly after the release of Shalit in 2011, the late Deborah Orr, a well-regarded journalist for *The Guardian*, put the following gloss on the swap of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for one Israeli soldier:

> The deal is widely viewed as a victory for Hamas. . . . Conversely, it is being seen by some as a sign of weakness in Israel's rightwing prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.
>
> All this, I fear, is simply an indication of how inured the world has become to the obscene idea that Israeli lives are more important than Palestinian lives.

"Obscene" that we should think so contemptibly of Israelis? Or "obscene" of Israelis to think so contemptibly of Palestinians?

As her argument proceeded, it became clear that Orr meant the latter. Of the Palestinians, she said, "There is something abject in their eagerness to accept a transfer that tacitly acknowledges what so many Zionists believe — that the lives of the chosen are of hugely greater consequence than those of their unfortunate neighbours."

There is nothing new about upending Jewishness to make its sanctity show as self-importance and its virtues show as vices, but this version of topsy-turvydom is especially odious. At a stroke, the exorbitant price that militants had set for the release of a hostage they had held for five years, with little word of his well-being, was reconfig-

ured as Israel's gesture of contempt, the final proof of its disdain for non-Jewish lives. For this preposterous scenario to have even a shred of plausibility, the infantilized Palestinians must be painted as having no role in the framing of the deal beyond an eager and abject acceptance of its terms, and the Jews must be returned to the desert of Deuteronomy where God called them His treasured possession. Holy in their own eyes as a consequence, Jews became the model of moral heinousness for ever after.

I knew Deborah Orr. I worked with her briefly at *The Independent* before the sirens of *The Guardian* whistled her over. Her piece was a mystery to me because while it bore all the marks of classic antisemitism with a screw loose, she had never, in the time I'd known her, shown any predisposition to antisemitic views beyond a bit of de rigueur anti-Zionism. In fairness to her and *The Guardian*, the piece from which I've quoted came with a later footnote and apology acknowledging that the use of the word *chosen* was "inconsistent with Guardian guidelines." But the apology felt grudging, and the piece was not withdrawn.

Views similar to Orr's have since resurfaced as the negotiations for the return of the October 7 hostages have stuttered along. Yet again, on talk radio and the like, Israel's acceptance of Hamas's bloated terms is adduced as proof that it considers itself a chosen people and holds the lives of others in contempt. If this fantasy won't go away (somehow despite *The Guardian*'s footnote), it can only be because retaining it is too useful in justifying Jew-hate. Who, after all, can ever love a person who believes he is better than you because God told him so?

It was in my senior years at grammar school that my Gentile friends began quizzing me about "the chosen people." Hitherto, they had

wanted to see my tail. I showed them in the shower. Look — all gone! Then they wondered why we were so good at making money. I told them my father was a taxi driver and showed them my frayed cuffs and collar. Chosenness came next but bore more the aspect of theological curiosity and was, for that reason, harder to refute. How did we know that God chose us? How did it make us feel? Did we look down on non-Jews? "No, only on you" was my preferred response.

The real answer was that we didn't think about it much, and when we did, we made the joke later attributed to Tevye, and wished that God in His wisdom had either kept His preference to Himself or chosen someone else.

But I had private thoughts on the subject. I was, in ways I thought significant but couldn't explain, unlike my Gentile friends. I wasn't amused when one of my contemporaries turned on a timid teacher, abused him, threatened him, and stormed out jeering. The class erupted, yelling, cheering, thumping desks. A teacher had been belittled and one of our number had belittled him. I shrank into myself, embarrassed for the teacher, upset by the atmosphere of rebellious disrespect, and bewildered by what I felt. I knew why I wanted to cry, but I didn't know why others didn't feel the same. Or rather I did, but was unsure what to make of the reason I gave myself, which was that I was Jewish and they weren't. Did I feel superior on that account? How could I? I lacked my schoolmates' robustness. I lacked their gift for life. I was put together differently, and if, in my gloomiest moments of inadequacy, I comforted myself with thinking that I must have been put together out of finer material, is that really surprising? To turn feeling different into feeling special is a survival strategy. When the common consolations are denied you, what is more natural than to think yourself marked out to live a life beyond the common?

Did I believe myself to be "of hugely greater consequence" than the boys who had cheeked the teacher and the boys who'd cheered them on? How could I? In the race of life, they were still the winners. I had to find another language for success, that was all. Whether or not I'd been chosen by God was the furthest thing from my mind. But if it turned out He liked my vocabulary, that was something.

Once, on a hot summer Sunday evening in Manchester, a street fight broke out between two drunken men, fathers of my friends. I lived in a respectable working-class area. Maybe 15 percent Jewish, where people owned their own modest terrace houses and grew stocks and geraniums in their front gardens. We played cricket and tennis in the street. If a ball broke somebody's window, we were shouted at; otherwise, it was quiet. The fight generated more excitement than I'd ever seen in the street. The combatants were stripped to their undershirts, and they laid into each other with their fists. Blood flew about. One or two women screamed from doorways for them to stop. Others gathered round and cheered, indifferent to the result, just roused by the sight of men in vests and the sound of bones breaking. My Gentile friends, too, bayed for blood and laughed. And I? Yes, I backed off and stifled tears. Eventually I ran home.

Too Jewish again? Well, that was what it felt like. I was deficient in blood lust and felt no kinship with those who weren't. But I didn't flee only to escape my own faint heart. I found the brutish spectacle just as unbearable for what it said of the combatants and those who thought it entertaining. I'd read in heder about Moses coming down from the mountain and seeing the children of Israel dancing around the golden calf. I understood his rage. This was why we needed Commandments.

Is it possible to wear shrinking as a badge of pride? Perhaps. I upset easily — okay? But it was more a badge of solace than of chosenness. No self-respecting God would have chosen me for shrinking well. It was some time later, when I was teaching at an undistinguished college and failing to write the novels I had always wanted to write, that shrinking turned to shame and feeling special became more a hindrance than a help. I had not made the best of being different. I had failed to honor the obligations imposed on me by my Jewish upbringing and education. What exactly was expected of me, I didn't know. What promises I had failed to keep, I didn't know. But I held myself guilty of betraying a silent covenant.

Somewhere — at home, in shul (though I rarely went), in my reading of the Old Testament, in books by contemporary Jewish writers, and in conversations with my Jewish friends — I had picked up the idea that to be Jewish was to live a life of exemplary seriousness and purpose. Had I been a socialist, as several of my Jewish friends were, I'd have deployed my Jewish fervor to make a fairer society. Had I been religious, I'd have summoned eloquence to trumpet the magnificence of God's creation. But I was devout after my fashion. I revered the word. To be a Jewish man of letters meant to find in art the higher purpose in whose name the God of Deuteronomy had shown me favor. I too, no less than any rabbi, honored the Act of Creation. And if that necessitated beating myself up as one uncreative year followed another, what did I expect? A compliment from God is a burden from which no serious Jew has a right to expect relief.

Something like that, my dear Deborah, is what being a favorite entails. Forget the gross libel that Jews prize their lives above others. I prized my life above no one's except my own, the life I'd allowed mine to become — unfulfilled, lazy, self-doubting, disinclined.

Believe me: To be treasured, by one's family or by God, is to take on the unremitting responsibility to live a life of worth and meaning. Nothing more. ✳

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