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Rabbi Donald Kunstadt
"Find Meaning in Your Life."

Nine years ago on March 9, 2002 I was in Jerusalem for the annual meeting of the central conference of American rabbis. It was Saturday night. This was an extremely difficult time in Israel as it was the height of the intifada. It was dangerous simply to go to a restaurant for fear of a suicide bomber entering. However it was the last night of the conference and a colleague and I chose to walk to dinner at a downtown restaurant in Jerusalem.

It was 10:30 PM as we were walking home to our hotel and just as we crossed a major intersection we heard a huge explosion. Within a minute or two we heard sirens converging towards an area one half block from where we were standing. We immediately knew a terrorist attack had occurred and we promptly continued to the security of our hotel. That night we would learn through the media that a Palestinian suicide bomber had entered Café Moment coffee shop with a powerful explosive device hidden underneath his clothes. The force of the blast had completely destroyed the restaurant, immediately killing 11 civilians and injuring 54 people, 10 of them severely.

Recently you might have heard that Sgt. Gilad Shalit, a young Israeli soldier who had been kidnapped almost 6 years ago by Hamas was released in exchange for 1027 prisoners, most of whom were terrorists. Among those released was a terrorist who in 1989 seized the steering wheel of the bus, forcing it into a ravine and killing 16 people. Also released was a terrorist who was one of the planners of the suicide attacks at the Park Hotel in Netanya, the Tel Aviv Dolphinarium and Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem in which 66 people died.

In Israel there has been strong solidarity behind the release of this young man. It is difficult for us to imagine what Sgt. Shalit must have gone through being held prisoner for almost 6 years, and we can feel great pain for not only his suffering, but for his family. The great scholar Maimonides wrote in the 12th century, "There is no greater good deed than redeeming captives." We can also understand however, how families who suffered at the hands of the terrorists now released to perhaps cause more terror, might not feel gratified at the news of the prisoners now free.

Though there can be no clear-cut right answer to the terrible dilemma of a hostage taking, perhaps there is a message here for us in our personal lives. Every life is infinitely valuable in Jewish tradition. We can use this incident as an opportunity to appraise the meaning of our own lives and their value to the world around us. We can ask ourselves what are we doing for society in the God-given years and days we have to improve our city, state and great country? Are we squandering our lives or are we making them infinitely precious? Few of us take the time to address this question. Now is a most appropriate time.