



A Strange Arithmetic

The stories of the Patriarchs in Genesis are essentially family stories, and every year at Rosh HaShanah we are faced with the ultimate challenge to any family unit: the proposed sacrifice of a child, of a son – in fact, in this case, two sons. The first one, Ishmael, Abraham must banish to the desert, which is to almost certain death. The second he must slaughter with his own hand. The fact that both children survive is no thanks to Abraham.

And of course, since the creation of the State of Israel, these stories have taken on an added significance, an added urgency. The very existence of that country relies on our willingness to sacrifice our sons in battle, and it relies on *their* willingness to be that sacrifice. This is a fraught and perilous status quo, and we've evolved some strange ways of dealing with it.

This past June marked the fourth anniversary of the capture of Gilad Shalit, and in Israel we've witnessed an amazing phenomenon: the transfiguration of a shy, anonymous nineteen year-old into a national icon. Through no choice or merit of his own, he has become the Chosen Son. His captivity overshadows even the deaths of his comrades. They are merely dead – he has become a currency.

This isn't a talk about politics. What fascinates me is the psychology, the collective act of will that enables an entire people to at least *seem* genuinely convinced that the freedom of one Israeli soldier is worth, not just the freedom, but the lives of thousands of Palestinians. Among other things, this involves un-imagining those people as human beings. It's both awesome and awful, and it's utterly absurd. But it works. And it's one of the keys to our survival as a nation.

We all know that the life of one person, if you love them enough, can sometimes seem worth more than the lives of everyone else, yourself included. But to project that feeling onto a total stranger, because he is a member of your tribe, while it may be the ultimate act of solidarity, somehow harks back to a way of thinking, that the West would like to believe it has outgrown.

It isn't the first time we've done this; Gilad Shalit is not the first, and he probably won't be the last of our sons to be captured. The ghost of Ron Arad, lost in 1973, still haunts the Israeli psyche. But I tremble also for the young man who comes home to a hero's welcome and a life he no longer recognizes.

History, unfortunately, does repeat itself, especially in the Middle East. The Song of Deborah in the Book of Judges is a very ancient poem that celebrates an Israelite victory over the Canaanites. Near the end, it suddenly switches perspective, and imagines the mother of Sisera, the Canaanite commander so neatly murdered by Yael with her tent peg. She's sitting at her window, waiting for her son to arrive laden with the spoils of war, not knowing that he's already dead. This found its way into a poem that I wrote some years ago, which is also about the strange arithmetic of war.

It's called

Diplomatic Exchanges

Bodies at the border
In diplomatic bags
Waiting politely to go home

Eleven of ours
For one of yours

How many bones make five?

And Sisera's mother
Still at her window
Watches them come
With the light in her eyes

Slowly shifting the corpse
On her heart
So that they can take it from her
Now
And bury it at last.