

The Importance of Fallen Hostages

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Dozens of hostages held in Gaza are reported to be dead and their families have been notified.

Should we still advocate for the return of the deceased hostages with the same urgency as for the hostages who are presumed alive? Should we continue to count them as hostages, since they are not living?

Yes to both questions. 100% yes. There are 3 reasons why.

First, the human body is sacred, even after death.

In many belief systems and practices, the deceased must be laid to rest in a place of peace. Whether individual hostages and family members are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or secular, a common idea in all belief systems is that humans are created with innate goodness (e.g. "in the image of G-d"). The person felt pleasure, labored, and loved. That innate goodness of their life persists after death. To honor the life that existed, the body must be treated with respect and accorded final rites.

Second, until the body is redeemed, the family remains in a cruel limbo.

How can I find peace when my loved one is not at rest? The deceased has not been honored with a final rite of passage. There is no moment to say goodbye. Grief and despair are prolonged. Mourning is delayed. Until the body is put to rest, the mourner cannot begin healing.

In Judaism, tradition teaches us to bury our dead quickly – the next day if possible – so the body can return to the earth and so we can know that we attended with love and care to our family member.

From our earliest days, respectful burial of our loved ones has been an important obligation and also an opportunity for family healing. When Sarah died, "Abraham mourned for her and wept. Then he rose and said to his neighboring Hittites, 'sell me a burial site so I can bury my dead.'" (Genesis 23:20). Years later, his sons Isaac and Ishmael, long estranged, reunited to bury their father Abraham (Genesis 25:9). These time-honored practices continue to the present.

Third, acceptance may not be possible.

In the famous book "On Death and Dying" by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the 5th and final stage of grief is "acceptance." But for some family members, second-hand notification of death may not be adequate. They may be haunted by the idea that their loved one is alive until they see the physical body. Without that certainty, they hold on to a thread of hope.

*For the dignity due to the fallen and for the comfort of those who mourn them,
we continue to pray and advocate for their swift return.*