

Mutual Responsibility & Redeeming the Captives:

פְּדִיּוֹן שְׂבוּיִים

The Jewish Imperative

Source Sheet

**Maimonides wrote: 'There is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives'.
Why is this so? What precedents do we have in Jewish history- from
the bible until today? What is difficult about this mitzvah?**

Areivut: Mutual Responsibility

The first act of redeeming a captive in the Bible was performed by none other than Abraham, the first Hebrew (in Genesis 13). Though he and his nephew, Lot, had parted ways, when Abraham learns that Lot had been taken captive in a war, he does not hesitate and storms out to free Lot.

A few generations later Judah senses that Benjamin is about to be taken captive by the Egyptian vizier (Joseph) and he offers an impassioned plea and says that he will redeem Benjamin with himself (!) so that Benjamin may return to Jacob, their father.

It is Judah's words first uttered to his father as a commitment and later in the court of Egypt when he makes good on his commitment that echo within us generations later. Judah declares:

אֲנֹכִי אֶעֱרֹבֶנּוּ מִיָּדֵי תִבְקָשׁוֹ

"I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible"

Genesis 43:9

The consequence that Judah accepts upon himself is very straightforward: Benjamin will come back even if my life depends on it!

Generations later the sages of the Midrash, and the Talmud describe the value of:

"כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה"

"All Jews are responsible for each other"

Safrah, Bechukotai, 7:5

This value was born with Abraham and Judah. This value stood at the core of the Israeli operation in Entebbe in 1976. This maxim has been used in endless contexts to appeal to the Jewish people to act on behalf of its brothers and sisters. Still, the cry to this core value of *areivut* - shared responsibility, strikes a chord most profoundly with the mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim*, freeing captives, touching on the very core of our Jewish existence.

The Exodus Story

As we consider the Jewish imperative of *pidyon shvuyim* we must begin with the greatest redemption story told in the Western world: the Exodus of the Israelite slaves from Egypt. This story, which spans half of the book of Exodus, has been an inspiration for Jews and non-Jews throughout history. Even as the Hebrews were leaving Egypt they were already commanded to enact various rituals that would ensure that this story be told for generations to come. The Torah enumerates over thirty times that the people must recall their experiences in slavery as well as their freedom and must keep them as a guide in future generations when dealing with [the poor, the indentured servant, the observance of the Sabbath](#) and much more.

The value of mutual responsibility starts from our most foundational experiences and demands that we act within our community and people, driven by this value. In this spirit, the Passover Seder indeed has become perhaps the most enduring Jewish practice and each year families gather together to celebrate this event.

- ***Have you participated in a Seder where they do not only tell of the ancient story but also find relevance and areivut - mutual responsibility - in modern events? Please share from those experiences.***

The Passover story is the clarion call to the Jewish people to take responsibility for our brothers and sisters who are held in captivity. As recently as the 20th century, the cry of [“Let My People Go”](#) was heard as Jews rallied on behalf of the Jewish people who sought to emigrate from the Former Soviet Union to Israel. Of course, this inspiration is not limited only to Jews- this same verse served as [a mantra for enslaved Africans](#) in the United States resisting slavery.

- ***Perhaps some of the learners here were involved in the movement on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Share an anecdote or emotion from those days.***

Pidyon Shvuyim: Redeeming Captives

Throughout the generations the *mitzvah* of *pidyon shvuyim* became the “gold standard” in national responsibility.

The following sources have served as inspiration for Jewish communities throughout the ages to act on behalf of captured Jews.

The Talmud shares this story:

Ifera Hurmiz, the mother of King Shapur, king of Persia, sent a purse full of dinars to Rav Yosef. She said to him: Let the money be used for a great mitzvah. Rav Yosef sat and considered the question: What did Ifera Hurmiz mean that it should be used for a great mitzvah? Abaye said to him: From what Rav Shmuel bar Yehuda taught... redeeming captives is a great mitzvah.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Batra, 8a

The Talmud continues and explains that the suffering of the captive is the worst fate any human can suffer and therefore this indeed is “ranked” as a great mitzvah.

Later Rabbis who codified Jewish law followed suit:

Maimonides does not mince words in his description of this mitzvah:

The redemption of captives receives priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. There is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives. For a captive is among those who are hungry, thirsty, and unclothed and he is in mortal peril. If someone pays no attention to his redemption, they violate the negative commandments: "Do not harden your heart or close your hand" (Deuteronomy 15:7); "Do not stand by when the blood of your neighbor is in danger" (Leviticus 19:16); and "He shall not oppress him with exhausting work in your presence" (Leviticus 25:53). And has negated the observance of the positive commandments: "You shall certainly open up your hand to him" (Deuteronomy 15:8); "And your brother shall live with you" (Deuteronomy 19:18); "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18); "Save those who are taken for death" (Proverbs 24:11) and many other decrees of this nature. There is no mitzvah as great as the redemption of captives.

Maimonides, Laws of Gifts for the Poor, Chapter 8, 10

Rabbi Joseph Karo quotes Maimonides words and adds even further:

Every moment that one delays unnecessarily the ransoming of a captive, it is as if he were to shed blood.

Rabbi Joseph Karo, Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 252:3

- *Some of us are well aware of the debates that rightly are held in federations, community centers, synagogues and the like, to determine budgets and balance community needs. Imagine Maimonides barging into such a meeting demanding of the leaders to realign their focus on one immediate mitzvah - free the captives! Imagine the response of some of the (surprised...) individuals.*

While we hold certain values as dear and important, they may easily contradict other values and needs. The Talmud and even Maimonides debate whether there are limitations on this mitzvah and what they are.

The Talmud prescribed that the community need not pour their entire savings into the mitzvah of redeeming captives, and likewise the community must take into account that paying too steep of a price may entice the captors to continue seizing captives. Even still the Talmud tells of Rabbi Yehoshua who heard of a Jewish child prodigy held captive by the Romans and he exclaimed that he would pay any price whatsoever to ensure his release. Likewise the Talmud teaches that while a community may think twice as to using all of its funds on this mitzvah, an individual may pay whatever ransom necessary to free their loved ones.

For more in depth, individual study, listen to the [Pardes podcast series](#) on *Pidyon Shvuyim* which raises many of the sources, questions and debates we have discussed and delves more deeply into the sources.