

The "Day After" - What ordinary Israelis think about the Gilad Shalit Deal.

On June 25th, 2006 at 5:40 in the morning, terrorists from the Hamas and Popular Resistance Committees terror organizations infiltrated into Israel through a tunnel originating from the Rafah area, passing under the security fence to the area between the Kerem Shalom and Sufa crossings. The terrorists, operating under cover of mortar and anti-tank fire from within the Gaza Strip, attacked an armored personnel carrier, an IDF tank and a watchtower. An IDF officer and a soldier were killed, a soldier was abducted, and four others were wounded, IDF forces returned fire, killing at least two terrorists. The abducted soldier was Sargent Gilad Shalit.

On October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011 my wife and I, ourselves Israelis living in Canada for over 40 years landed in Israel to spend the next academic year as "Students Abroad" at Tel-Aviv University. We landed at just about the exact time that Sargent Gilad Shalit disembarked from an IDF helicopter on Israeli soil ending almost 5 and a half years of captivity as part of what has been dubbed the "Shalit Deal". Few in Israel remember a greater outbreak of euphoric jubilation and spontaneous outburst of national pride. All of Israel was glued to their television sets, even the driver inside the taxi that drove us to our rented Tel-Aviv apartment. Yet with all the jubilation and genuine relief to see Gilad Shalit coming home, one could sense a hint of ambivalence, apprehension if not downright criticism of the handling by the Israeli government of the "Shalit Deal". Throughout the evening and night, as were to be expected, the story practically saturated the airwaves on radio, television and social media. By morning – the "Day After" as we were walking down the street and on the beach front of Tel-Aviv it became apparent that ordinary everyday people felt a need to talk about the "Shalit Deal". So, I stopped and asked them. It was amazing, albeit probably characteristic to Israelis, as to how pre-disposed they were toward expressing their personal feelings and opinions. I am certain that no equivalent Canadian sample of ordinary citizens would have been that open and direct. Moreover, some thoughtful, candid, constructive and quite original thoughts were expressed. It restored my faith in the value of democracy where ordinary citizens are free to open up to a stranger, albeit properly introduced, their inner feelings and beliefs. I was asking people as to their personal feelings and opinions about the Shalit Deal, what they thought the future holds for Gilad Shalit as a person and what if any are the key lessons to be learned by Israel from the Shalit Deal?

Before I introduce you to my uninhibited audience let me try to identify the common themes that emerged from this fascinating experience. First and foremost everyone, including the harshest critics of the Shalit Deal was genuinely happy and elated to see Gilad Shalit come home. Similarly, without exception they shared in the pain of the Shalit family that finally came to an end and their respect and admiration of Gilad Shalit as a person was unanimous. This was mainly a result of his brief interview with the Egyptian TV, when under extremely stressful conditions he demonstrated extraordinary courage and intelligence. The only other common theme was that for specific, sometimes opposing reasons, the Shalit Deal should and could have been handled better and the Israeli establishment (e.g., government, armed forces, the judiciary) is to be blamed. That is where the consensus ended. Of a dozen people interviewed no two were similar let alone identical. This is Israel for you.

Zvi who admits to being “80 plus”, a retired diamond dealer, feels that the Shalit Deal should have been consummated many years ago. That Israel should have returned as many if not all of the Palestinian prisoners long ago. “What do we need them for?” He says. The cost of their imprisonment in Israel is huge and is not worth it especially under conditions consistent with the Israeli standards of treating prisoners. You would think that Zvi is a moderate but he concludes: “The only deterrent for Palestinian terrorists is the death penalty. They must know that if they are not killed in action they will be killed by the court of justice as befits terrorists and murderers.”

Schmoolik, 32 a lifeguard (not on duty when interviewed) served in one of the elite combat units of the IDF and will be looking for a job when the beach season is over, does not hesitate: “The system (IDF) sent him on a mission the system must return him from captivity”. “The price, the terms and the timing are not for me to decide but someone better be ready to decide” he added. As of Shalit’s future, he hopes he becomes a superstar and gets all the exposure, fame and fortune he well deserves. “All the more to him” he says. As to lessons learned he feels that a process or protocol underpinned by law must be defined so that both parties understand what is and what is not negotiable. “Don’t ask me for specifics” he says “it’s not my job.”

Cory 25 a U.S citizen is a graphic designer and has been working in many countries. She is very quick to offer her Israeli boyfriend for the interview but is willing to offer her opinion. “The return of Shalit was essential to boost the morale of the IDF”. Youngsters joining the army must know that if they fall into the hands of the enemy, they will be looked after” she says without hesitation. As to Gilad Shalit she thinks that he deserves to capitalize on his now iconic profile in the absence of a job or a career. She offers an interesting point of view in saying that it does not bode well for the Palestinians that one Israeli soldier is worth over a thousand Palestinians. “Are Israelis worth more than Palestinians?” she ponders.

Efraim looks 50 but admits to being over 60, an independent businessman. He pulls no punches. “There has to be a pre-defined price tag for exchange of prisoners” he says “In the absence of such price tag everything is negotiable and the advantage goes to the Hamas as any Israeli prime minister is more likely to succumb to popular demand and public opinion” he adds. A declared “right winger” he opposes the death penalty for terrorists as they do not value life as do Israelis and are bound to retaliate for each execution by harming a disproportionate number of innocent Israelis. He predicts that Gilad Shalit is destined to have a hard life. Notwithstanding the obvious he would have to live with the notion that more than a 1000 murderers were set free to secure his release and that many of them are liable to perpetrate new terrorist attacks. “Life sentence without the possibility of release or pardon should be legislated” so that the release of certain terrorists cannot by the law of the land be subject to negotiations. He believes that now that Gilad Shalit is back home more people who did not dare speaking against the Shalit Deal while he was in captivity are going to step forward and speak their mind.

Moshe 76 a dance-choreograph, is highly critical of Bibi Netanyahu and his government. “Why are we flexing our muscles and looking for fights with everybody” he says citing incidents with Turkish diplomats, exaggerating the Iranian nuclear threat and others. “Why are we not diverting some of our

defense budget towards education and affordable housing?” You can tell that he is an artist. “There is no high price to pay for his return” he says. “A thousand or two thousands what’s the difference?” He is in awe of Gilad Shalit having seen him being interviewed on Egyptian TV (few others have mentioned it) and agrees with the Egyptian author who referred to Gilad Shalit as a “godly” figure. He predicts that he will fade into a humble life but hopes he’ll write a book about his life in captivity”. “People need to know and understand” he says.

Ahmed, 35 introduces himself as a Palestinian Arab living in Tel-Aviv is open but reserved. “I am happy that he is back I understand why everybody is happy” he says. “It is not for me to comment on what is going to happen to Gilad Shalit or what Israel should or should not do in similar situations”. “All I want is to live in peace, make a good living and stop this fighting.” He added.

Sheba a retired Human Resource Manager at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is conflicted. She admits that if it were to be her son she would probably do exactly what the Shalit family and its supporters did. Objectively she feels that by releasing more than a thousand convicted terrorists, indicating that no price is too high, Israel placed every IDF soldier in a highly vulnerable position. We signaled that we are willing to pay any price and just as surely a higher price may be demanded in the future. We strengthened the Hamas resolve to continue the “armed struggle”.

Ami a retired IDF senior officer is concerned that Israel put itself in an untenable position demonstrating weakness in its inability to cope with a national debate that in his mind was a “relatively simple thing”.

Ronen a forty something professional IDF officer is disappointed with the series of what he describes as “exposed weaknesses of the IDF and its senior commanders’ decision making ability” This trend he maintains extends from the Second Lebanon war of 2006 through the Gaza “Cast Lead” campaign of 2009 and to this day. “The Shalit Deal is no exception”. He refers to internal bickering, organizational politics and political interference as key factors. He believes that Israel in general and the IDF in particular must be far more determined and decisive. “We depend on it” he reminds me and everybody for that matter.

There you have it. As Moshe said “everyone has an opinion but nobody is right and nobody is wrong except that the whole thing requires serious national soul searching and come up with decisive solutions”. In my opinion he pretty well summed it up.