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Agam Berger, the Hostage Who Kept the Sabbath

She has profound parallels in the ancient history of the Jewish people.

By Meir Soloveichik

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Agam Berger waves to the crowd as she is handed over to the Red Cross in Gaza City, Jan. 30. PHOTO: MOHAMMED HAJJAR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Thus goes a familiar story in the history of the Jewish people: A Jew, kidnapped from the Holy Land and taken to enemy territory, refuses to eat whatever nonkosher food is provided to him. So Scripture informs us of Daniel, who found himself in the court of Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon. Daniel refused to “defile” himself with the forbidden food of the king and requested that he be allowed to subsist on seeds.

Hundreds of years after the destruction of Jerusalem, a similar scene would repeat itself. Josephus informs us of Jerusalem priests taken captive to Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero. There, in that thoroughly pagan city, the Jews who were meant to minister in the Temple “were not unmindful of piety towards God, even under their afflictions, but supported themselves with figs and nuts.”

These tales aren’t merely ancient history. As Agam Berger, 20, was freed from Hamas’s clutches in Gaza last week, fellow hostages who had made it home before her revealed astounding details about her time in captivity. According to Israeli news reports, Ms. Berger’s parents were informed that she had refrained from engaging in any activities on Saturday that would violate the Sabbath. Thus when “Hamas terrorists ordered Agam to cook food . . . she steadfastly refused.” Another hostage, Liri Albag, 20, reportedly described how Ms. Berger refrained from eating nonkosher meat throughout her time in captivity, which doubtless involved enormous sacrifice.

Others instantly noted the parallels between Ms. Berger's case and those that came before. Yet the contemporary tale is, in a sense, even more astounding than the ancient ones. Daniel's faith inspired admiration among members of the Babylonian court. God made him an object of "loving kindness and mercy before the minister" of Nebuchadnezzar. This, too, obtained in Rome hundreds of years later. The plight of the priests evoked compassion from the most unlikely and surprising of people, Nero's wife, the Empress Poppaea, who helped ensure their release. These Jews sacrificed for their faith, but the lands of their captivity featured astonishing instances of empathy.

The same can't be said of Gaza, where Ms. Berger was held in cruel captivity. It is, by all accounts, a society soaked with Jew-hate. Ms. Albag told her father that she encountered derision, and a total lack of sympathy, from every person with whom she came into contact: "I sat with children 8 and 4 who were cursing 'the Jews.'" On the day Ms. Berger was released, the world witnessed a seething mob of Gazans surrounding and deriding her as she was transferred to the Red Cross. Elsewhere in Gaza, another hostage, Gadi Moses, 80, received the same treatment. It is breathtaking to imagine a young woman refusing the order of terrorist thugs on her Sabbath, as well as proudly and steadfastly keeping kosher in such circumstances.

It is with this in mind that her name becomes all the more striking. *Agam* is Hebrew for a small pool in the desert. Psalm 114 describes the wonders of God, who "turned the rock into water," *agam*, "the flint into a fountain." Remarkably, as Yeshiva University's Rabbi Daniel Feldman noted, Jews around the world recited this psalm as part of their liturgy on Jan. 30, the day Ms. Berger was released.

Her testimony offers a magnificent metaphor. For religious Jews, the story of modern Israel is one of Jewish courage, as well as an unfolding providential plan of which they are a part. This was precisely the message Ms. Berger delivered to her people on attaining freedom. As an Israel Defense Forces helicopter brought her home, she held aloft a white board, on which she had written a series of Hebrew phrases: "In the path of faith I have chosen / and on the path of faith I have returned. Thank you to all of the people of Israel, and to the heroic soldiers of the IDF / There is no one like you in the world."

A rabbinic maxim about the Bible declares that "the actions of the ancestors are a sign to their descendants." To be a Jew is to see scripture, the seemingly archaic past, as prologue: a belief that the wonders and valor that were made manifest millennia ago can find its spiritual and political parallels in our own age. The past 16 months have been difficult for Israel and Jews around the world, but they have also been filled with wonder: namely, that the heroes of the Bible live among us again.

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