

## HANDOUT A: PIDYON SHEVUYIM

### QUESTIONS FOR HANDOUT A :

Maimonides said that "there is no greater mitzvah than Pidyon Shevuyim".

*Do you agree or disagree? Why?*

*To what lengths did people go to redeem captives at the time the text was written? What about today?*

*Is there a limit to the measures taken to free someone taken captive (or a hostage)? What would that limit be?*

*What is the relationship between Pidyon Shevuyim and Tzedakah (righteousness) or Gemilut Chassadim (acts of loving kindness)?*

*What do you think you can do to fulfill the mitzvah of Pidyon Shevuyim?*

### PIDYON SHEVUYIM:

The Jewish doctrine commanding us to redeem captives.

(The following text was taken from "Redeeming Captives – Pidyon Shevuyim, Tzorchei Tzibur: Community and Responsibility." New York: United Synagogue Youth Department.) Printed with permission of USY.

Maimonides, a great medieval scholar, wrote these rules for the redemption of captives in his compilation of Jewish law called the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Gifts for the Poor, 8:10,11).

*Pidyon Shevuyim takes precedence over supporting the poor or clothing them. There is no greater mitzvah than Pidyon Shevuyim, for the problems of the captive include the problems of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and [s/he] who is in mortal danger. [One] who ignores the need to redeem captives transgresses the following [commandments]:*

*"Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy kinsman"  
(Deuteronomy 15:7)*

*"Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16)*

*"You shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight" (Leviticus 25:53)*

*"You shall surely open your hand to him" (Deuteronomy 15:8)*

*"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18)*

*"Rescue those who are drawn to death" (Proverbs 24:11)*

*and many other injunctions like these.*

*But there is no mitzvah greater than Pidyon Shevuyim.*

*Inhabitants of a town who have raised funds to build a synagogue but who see that performing another mitzvah requires the money they have collected, should donate the money toward that mitzvah. If they purchased stones and beams (for*

*building the synagogue) they should not sell them in order to perform another mitzvah except Pidyon Shevuyim. Even if they have brought the stones (to the building site) and laid their foundation, and if they have carved the beams, and prepared everything for the building they may sell all the materials for Pidyon Shevuyim. But if they have completed the building, they need not sell the synagogue, but must raise more money (for Pidyon Shevuyim) from the community.  
(based on Talmud Bava Batra 3b)*

The laws pertaining to ransoming captives are codified in the SHULCHAN ARUCH (Code of Jewish Law) in a chapter all to themselves. See, Yoreh Dei'ah, Chapter 252: The Laws of Ransoming Captives and how the ransom is to be effected:

*Ransoming Captives takes precedence over feeding and clothing the poor, and no mitzvah is as great as ransoming captives. Therefore, any money which is collected, even for a religious purpose, may be diverted to ransom captives even if it is raised for the purpose of building a synagogue....*

In a note to the statement (cited above) in Talmud Baba Batra (8b), that, "Ransoming captives is a great mitzvah," the Tosafot (rabbinic commentators) said that even a Sefer Torah can be sold for this purpose!

## HANDOUT B - PIDYON SHEVUYIM: RANSOMING CAPTIVES

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### QUESTIONS FOR HANDOUT B AND C :

*In your own words, why is Pidyon Shevuyim "a religious duty of great importance?"*

*Traditionally, the mitzvah of helping captives was called "ransoming captives." Why do you think we call it ransom?*

*Could this mitzvah still be called "ransoming captives" today? Why or why not?*

*Would only money constitute a ransom today?*

*Would a prisoner exchange qualify as a modern-day ransom?*

*In your opinion, is a prisoner exchange an appropriate tool to free captives? Why or why not?*

*Do you think a new name for this mitzvah is required? If so, suggest one.*

*How might your involvement in this mitzvah make your life more meaningful?*

### BACKGROUND

Ransoming captives has been a real, if unfortunate, part of Jewish history from its beginning down to the present time. Jewish existence, particularly in the Diaspora, has always been precarious and Jews were often at the mercy of enemies and rogues who quickly discovered that their Jewish captives were better held for ransom than executed.

The following is a brief historical survey of the practice of ransoming captives in Jewish history, accompanied by several selected sources on the subject drawn from some of the major compendia of Jewish law.

### IN THE BIBLE

The earliest incident concerning captives involves Abraham's heroic efforts to rescue his nephew, Lot, who was captured during a battle between the Mesopotamian and Canaanite kings:

*"When Abraham heard that his kinsman had been captured, he gathered up his disciples and householders, three hundred and eighteen in number, and pursued them to Dan."*

*(Genesis 14:14)*

Later, during the first Temple period, the northern (Israelite) kingdom took 200,000 captives in a war against the southern (Judean) kingdom. The prophet, Oded, rebuked them as follows:

*"Now, then, listen to me, and send back the captives you have taken from your kinsmen, for the wrath of the LORD is upon you."  
(2 Chronicles 28:11)*

## SECOND TEMPLE, MISHNAH AND TALMUD

During the wars with the Greeks, Jewish captives were ransomed by the Hasmonean kings (1 Maccabees 3:41, 10:33). When that monarchy ended, individual Jewish communities were left to fend for themselves in dealing with their brethren who fell captive during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, the Great Rebellion of 68-70, and during the failed Bar Kochba Rebellion.

The Talmud and Midrash tell numerous stories about the sages (primarily of Israel but also of Babylonia) who engaged in ransoming captives, acting as communal agents and traveling (often great distances) at the expense of charitable funds which were established, expressly, for this purpose. These funds were either part of the general, communal charitable fund (Kupat Tzedakah), or were earmarked for ransoming captives (Baba Kama 117b mentions an ARNAK SHEL PIDYON SHEVUYIM). Contributions to these funds consisted of both voluntary donations as well as individual assessments.

## A TALMUDIC DISCUSSION

A Mishnah (Gittin 4:6) stipulates:

*"Captives may not be ransomed in excess of their actual worth, on account of the protection of the society (Mipnei Tikkun Olam)."*

The Talmud (Gittin 45a) offers two explanations of that protection.

- 1) *To spare the community the burden of excessive ransom which could lead to its impoverishment (Duchka de-Tzibbura);*
- 2) *In order not to give the captors an incentive to take the new captives and increase their ransom (Delo Ligrebu ve-Laitu Tefay).*

A practical difference between these two explanations would present itself if an individual were to offer to pay the entire ransom. The concern over burdening the community would not apply, yet the fear of increased captures is not alleviated. The implication is clear, nevertheless, that ransoming captives is first and foremost a communal responsibility, and both the Mishnah and the Talmud accurately reflect the

precarious conditions of Jewish life in Israel and Babylonia during their respective eras.

## IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Jews were perceived as a distinctly separate group during the Middle Ages. Often as a result, Jews were at a high risk of capture either by armies or by pirates. Christians, Muslims and pagans, alike, took Jewish prisoners and held them for a ransom which they knew would be forthcoming from the nearest Jewish community.

Two particular instances involving captives are worth mentioning:

### ***A. The Four Captives***

In a history of the Jews through his own time, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Da'ud, an 11th century Spanish Jew, tells a tale of four sages who were taken captive by pirates and ransomed by several Mediterranean Jewish communities. While the historicity of this entire episode is highly doubtful, the details of the capture and ransom are consistent with those times. Furthermore, the universal acceptance of the story during the Middle Ages (as accounting for the spread of Jewish scholarship throughout Egypt, North Africa, and Muslim Spain) emphasizes the frequency with which similar episodes actually occurred.

### ***B. Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg***

In 1286, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, who was the most outstanding sage of his generation, was taken captive by the German king, Rudolph, and held for a ransom of 20,000 marks, an astronomical sum in those days. In spite of German Jewry's willingness to raise the ransom, Rabbi Meir- basing himself on the Mishnah already cited above--refused to be ransomed under such conditions and he died in captivity seven years later.

## HANDOUT C: PIDYON SHEVUYIM

### PIDYON SHEVUYIM:

The Jewish doctrine commanding us to redeem captives. (The following information was taken from "Redeeming Captives – Pidyon Shevuyim," Tzorchei Tzibur: Community and Responsibility. New York: United Synagogue Youth Department.)

*Rava asked Rabbah b. Mari:*

*"From where is the maxim of the Rabbis derived that the redemption of captives is a religious duty of great importance?" - He replied: "From the verse, 'And it shall come to pass if they ask you, "Where shall we go forth," then you shall tell them, "Thus said the Lord: Such as are for death, to death, and such as are for the sword, to the sword, and such as are for famine, to the famine, and such as are for captivity, to captivity"' Jeremiah 15:2)."*

*[Commenting on this] R. Yochanan said, "Each punishment mentioned in this verse is more severe than the one before.... Captivity is harder than all, because it includes the sufferings of all." (Talmud Baba Batra 8a-8b)*

## HANDOUT D: TIKKUN OLAM

### QUESTIONS FOR HANDOUT D:

*How does Rabbi Kushner's reading, "Repairing the World" make you feel?*

*Does it give you a sense of responsibility for others, both Jews and non-Jews?*

*Can you make a difference in the world?*

*Does being Jewish make you feel a sense of responsibility for taking action or repairing the world? Could it?*

*How can the mitzvah of Tikkun Olam be applied today and in our lives?*

TIKKUN OLAM is the tradition to pursue the "Repair of the World." A powerful and moving introduction to this concept is Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's "Repairing the World," found in his "The Book of Miracles: A Young Person's Guide to Jewish Spirituality," New York: UAHC Press. pp. 47-50.

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*In sixteenth-century Tzfat, Rabbi Isaac Luria observed that in his world, like ours, many things seemed to be wrong. People suffered from hunger, disease, hatred, and war. "How could God allow such terrible things to happen?" wondered Luria. "Perhaps," he suggested, "it is because God needs our help." He explained his answer with a mystical story.*

*When first setting out to make the world, God planned to pour a Holy Light into everything in order to make it real. God prepared vessels to contain the Holy Light. But something went wrong. The light was so bright that the vessels burst, shattering into millions of broken pieces like dishes dropped in the floor. The Hebrew phrase which Luria used for this "breaking the vessels" is SH'VIRAT HA-KEILIM.*

*Our world is a mess because it is filled with broken fragments. When people fight and hurt one another, they allow the world to remain shattered. The same can be said of people who have pantries filled with food and let others starve. According to Luria, we live in a cosmic heap of broken pieces, and God cannot repair it alone.*

*That is why God created us and gave us freedom of choice. We are free to do whatever we please with our world. We can allow things to remain broken or, as Luria urged, we can try to repair the mess. Luria's phrase for "repairing the world" is TIKKUN OLAM.*

*As Jews, our most important task in life is to find what is broken in our world and repair it. The commandments in the Torah instruct us, not only on how to live as Jews, but on how to mend creation.*

*At the very beginning of the Book of Genesis (2:15) we read that God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and told them not to eat from the tree of knowledge. God also told them that it was their job to care for the garden and to protect it.*

*The stories in the Torah tell not only of what happened long ago but also of what happens in each generation. The stories happen over and over again in the life of each person. The Garden of Eden is our world, and we are Adam and Eve. When God says, "Take care of the garden and protect it," God is saying, "Take care of your world and protect it."*

*According to one midrash, God showed Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden and said, "I have made the whole thing for you, so please take good care of it. If you wreck it, there will be no one else to repair it other than you" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13).*

*When you see something that is broken, fix it.*

*When you find something that is lost, return it.*

*When you see something that needs to be done, do it.*

*In that way, you will take care of your world and repair creation. If all the people in the world were to do so, our world would truly be a Garden of Eden, the way God meant it to be. If everything broken could be repaired, then everyone and everything would fit together like the pieces of one gigantic jigsaw puzzle.*

*But, for people to begin the great task of repairing creation, they must first take responsibility.*

## PART 2: TIKKUN OLAM

The following quotes are taken from:

Pirkei Avot - Chapters of the Fathers.

Gates of Prayer: Central Conference of American Rabbis. Reprinted with permission of the CCAR.

*Hillel:*

*"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" (1.14)*

*Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel:*

*"The world is sustained by three things: truth, by justice, and by peace." (1.18)*

*Hillel:*

*"In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you must strive to be human!" (2.6)*

*Rabbi Tarfon:*

*"You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it." (2.21)*

*Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa:*

*"Those who bring serenity to others please God; but those who do not bring serenity to others do not please God." (3.13)*

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*"Whoever destroys one life is considered by the Torah as if he destroyed the entire world, and whoever saves one life is considered by the Torah as if he saved an entire world." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 5:5)*

*"Hate evil, love good, and establish justice..." (Amos 5:15)*

*"You must not hesitate to save a person from danger." (Leviticus 19:16)*

## HANDOUT E: ZIONISM

### Questions for Handout E:

*What do you feel, if anything, when you sing or hear Hatikvah?*

*Discuss how you think Israeli and American Jews understand Hatikvah - do they have similar or different views?*

*Has the "hope" referred to in the song been fulfilled?*

*Does the "hope" in Hatikvah apply to Israel's MIA's? If so, how? [When referring to being a "free people," can this mean that Israelis will truly be free when they are free from war? Discuss.*

*What is your responsibility to fellow Jews - the Jewish People? Is that different from your responsibility to other people?*

*What is a Zionist - why is concern for the Israeli MIA's a Jewish / Zionist issue? Is it also, or only, a humanitarian issue?*

The questions are taken from "Hatikvah: Exploring the Meaning of Hatikvah to American Jews."

HATIKVAH is generally recognized as Israel's national anthem, as well as the national anthem of the Jewish People. Thus, as a text, Hatikvah relates to the theme of every Jew being responsible for one another (Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh BaZeh).

Kol od baleivav penima	So long as still within our breasts
nefesh yehudi homiya Ul'fatei mizrach kadima, ayin letziyon tzofiya.	The Jewish heart beats true, So long as still towards the East, To Zion looks the Jew,
Od lo avda tikvateinu, Hatikva bat shnot alpaiyim, lih'yot am chofshi be'artzeinu, b'erez tziyon virushalayim.	So long our hopes are not yet lost - Two thousand years we cherish them - To live in freedom in our land, The land of Zion and Jerusalem.