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A Wound Ripped Raw

By Leonard Fein

Who is Samir Kuntar, and why should we care?

Kuntar is the Lebanese prisoner in an Israeli jail of whom Hezbollah's Sheik Hassan Nasrallah spoke in his triumphant speech on the occasion of the puzzling prisoner exchange between his group and Israel last week. Nasrallah promised that the next prisoner whose release he will seek is the Lebanese killer, Samir Kuntar, and that if it proves necessary in order to achieve his release, Hezbollah will kidnap more Israeli soldiers.

So some questions, specific and general:

Why is Kuntar in an Israeli jail to begin with? In 1979, along with others, Samir Kuntar made his way to Nahariya, a town on the Mediterranean not far from the Lebanese border, and there he broke into the apartment of Dani and Smadar Haran. They took Dani and his 5-year-old daughter, Anat, to the beach, where they shot and killed Dani and smashed Anat's head on the rocks, killing her. Smadar and the Harans' 2-year-old, Yael, hid in the closet in their apartment, and there, Smadar, for fear the terrorists were still in the house, sought to smother her daughter's cries. In the end, her daughter fell silent, dead from suffocation.

All Israel became wrapped up in the story, the awful story. Smadar's mother had come to Israel from Poland after the Holocaust; she had lost her entire family. All the old nightmares rekindled, the fear triumphant.

I had a friend once, a survivor herself, a woman of Dutch origin. When we met, in 1955, she was still having nightmares of her time in Bergen-Belsen. By 1960 or so, the nightmares had faded. She was married, had two children, and was at peace, more or less, in her garden

apartment in Chicago. But there, one day, in the presence of her children, an intruder raped her, and the nightmares were reborn. We lost touch soon thereafter, so I do not know whether the nightmares persist, and if they do, whether they persist on their own or because of still more reminders, still newer traumas.

But my friend was not raped as a Jew. She was a random victim, whereas Smadar's family was random only up to a point. Her husband and her two daughters were chosen from a defined population, and the definition of that population was Jewish.

Some would say the definition is Israeli. In this context, that is a distinction without a difference, the more so since what the event immediately evoked was, of course, the Holocaust itself. Among the many instances called to mind by little Yael's asphyxiation, the most immediate is related in a religious responsum published in 1961. Its author was Rabbi Shimon Efrati, who actually succeeded my own grandfather as the rabbi of Bendery (in present-day Moldova), where he married my cousin, and later, before moving to Israel, became rabbi of the postwar Warsaw community. It was there the question was put to him: Under what circumstances, if any, must a Jew hiding from the Germans in a ghetto bunker repent for inadvertently smothering a crying infant in order to avoid detection?

I do not here review Rabbi Efrati's lengthy discourse. (It is available in English in "Rabbinic Responses of the Holocaust Era," Schocken Books, 1985.) Mostly, we keep our terrors stored away, lest they cripple us completely. Smadar married, brought forth a new daughter; we laugh and love, mourn and cheer, we live. But within us, there is the cripple, contained.

One cannot dismiss Sheik Nasrallah's intentions. He is a capable man, and knows both the mechanics of kidnapping and the value of precedent. So the day may come when Samir Kuntar goes free.

Some breathing space, please. There are those who say that "anti-Zionism" is not necessarily antisemitism. They are right, of course. But neither are the two mutually exclusive. Today, we may adapt the old line: An anti-Zionist becomes an antisemite when he hates Israel more than is absolutely necessary.

The truth is that it is not necessary, not even in fact if you are a Palestinian, to hate Israel at all. It is possible to be vehemently critical of Ariel Sharon, indeed of Israeli policy over the years, without coming to hate Zionism, just as it is possible to be furious with the policies of the Bush administration without coming to spell America with a “k.”

But surely we, the Jews, can be indulged if not forgiven if in our unhealed trauma we tend to conflate the two, to read Eichmann into the perverted readiness of the suicide bombers to sow terror and death, to shed the blood of infants, to read Goebbels into the throngs on Arab streets who celebrate such victories. Our post-traumatic stress disorder might have healed had the traumas stayed tidily stored in our past. Heaven help us, the traumas are ongoing.

It is futile to ask what it was that possessed Ariel Sharon to agree to the prisoner exchange. We can no more answer that question than we can answer the question of whether Sharon means peace or intends permanent war, whether he is malevolent or merely confused, whether he is who he was or is who we would vastly prefer him to be. Nor can any political conclusions be derived from our smothered infants or their dismembered parents. Doves, hawks, everyone has his or her impeccable logic.

But it is not futile to ask how we will feel, must feel, if Samir Kuntar one day walks free, the old wound once again ripped raw.