

# Paranoia or Opportunity?

*What will be our response to the hostage crisis in Texas.*

## **United in Paranoia**

Over the past week, two articles, in two major newspapers, were published regarding the terrorist incident in Texas.

The two newspapers represent two political extremes: the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. They usually do not agree on anything, but here, miraculously, both articles prophesied the same exact thing.

They write that as a result of the hostage crisis in Texas, Jews are afraid to go to synagogue or to any Jewish institutions. They go so far as to define those who do visit synagogues as exceptionally courageous.

That's interesting.

Last December in Michigan, a 15-year-old boy entered a school and shot dead three students and wounded eight. It was the latest in a series of dozens of school shootings, spanning from Florida to Connecticut.

Dozens of children have been tragically killed and injured. Does anyone think that sending their child to school is an act of courage? Let's see them keep their children home and homeschool them. That's real courage! Everyone continues to send off their children every morning to schools which have far

less security than Jewish institutions.

In my opinion, the Jews who wrote those two articles have jumped into unnecessary paranoia. Had they come to synagogue last Shabbat, they would have met many Jews who do not view themselves as courageous; they just did what they do every Shabbat — they went to synagogue.

However, this terrorist attack in Texas with its “four captives” and their miraculous survival is certainly a matter of Divine Providence. That being the case, we need to derive a lesson from the story; it’s important that something positive come as a result.

## **The Original Four Captives**

There is a story about four captives which took place more than a thousand years ago, around the year 990.

A delegation of four great rabbis boarded a ship in the southern Italian port of Bari on a mission to other countries to raise money for the Jewish communities of Sura, Babylon, where they lived.

In the middle of their journey, their boat was captured by a Spanish pirate ship that sailed under the flag of the governor of Córdoba, Spain.

It was a total disaster. One the rabbis was accompanied by his wife and son; the captain made advances on his wife, and she ended up jumping into the sea to escape him.

When the ship arrived at the port of Alexandria in Egypt, the

captives were put up for sale.

Now, the commandment to redeem captives is considered one of the most important mitzvos; our sages say that captivity is worse than death since the captive is in life threatening danger at every moment, and therefore this mitzvah is an absolute priority.

The community in Egypt heard that Jewish captives were for sale. This wasn't uncommon; pirates knew that Jewish captives would fetch a decent price in Jewish communities. However, the Jews of Alexandria didn't know that these were important rabbis; the rabbis hid their identity knowing their price would rise exponentially if their captors knew who they were.

The Jewish community decided to redeem one of the four, Rabbi Shmarya ben Elchanan.

The ship continued its journey along the shores of Africa and reached the city of Kairouan in Tunisia, which was a large Jewish center at the time. There, the community redeemed Rabbi Chushiel (the father of Rabeinu Chananel).

The ship then traveled to Spain. In Córdoba, Rabbi Moshe and his son Rabbi Chanoch were redeemed. The exact location of the fourth center where the fourth sage was redeemed is unknown.

Within a short period of time, the people in those Jewish communities came to recognize that the "captives" in their midst were great scholars, and they were all appointed to leadership positions. In gratitude to the communities for

redeeming them and saving their lives, these sages chose to remain in those communities, establish yeshivas, and spread Torah among the locals.

The best-known story is about Rabbi Moshe. After he was redeemed in Córdoba, he continued to behave like an ordinary person and no one knew about his greatness.

One time, he sat in a Talmud lesson given by the local rabbi, Rabbi Natan, when he realized that the rabbi had misunderstood the text. After the lesson, the “poor captive” approached the rabbi and commented on the error, teaching him the correct interpretation.

The rabbi immediately recognized Rabbi Moshe’s scholarship and declared to the community that he would be retiring as the city rabbi because the “captive” was far more scholarly than him — instructing them to appoint Rabbi Moshe in his stead. Indeed, Rabbi Moshe became very popular and successful.

This story happened at a time when the Jewish community of Babylon was at its peak, but within a short period of time, it began to wane. On the other hand, this was the period when the new Jewish communities in North Africa, Spain, and Europe began to flourish through these four Rabbis.

This story expresses how G-d orchestrates the world through Divine providence. Before Babylonian Jewry lost its luster, G-d had already planted the seeds for the other Jewish communities to flourish. (Sichot Lanoar vol. 2 pg. 79).

## Day or Night

In 1927, the previous Rebbe was imprisoned in a Soviet jail for about three weeks. In his memoirs of his imprisonment, he writes that his cell didn't have a clock, and the small window in the room was blocked from sunlight. The only indications of day or night were the prison announcements; when they would announce that it was time to get up, you knew it was morning, and when they served the various meals, you could estimate the approximate time of day.

Then he quotes a Midrash which brings us to this week's Parshah, Mishpatim.

At the very end of the parsha, the Torah returns to the story of the giving of the Torah which we read last week.

After G-d gave the Ten Commandments, our parsha says, G-d says to Moses, "Come up to Me on the mountain, be there, and I will give you the stone tablets." Moses parted from the children of Israel, and then, "Moses came in the cloud, and went up to the mountain, and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights."

With that, the Torah portion ends.

The previous Rebbe, when he describes how he didn't know whether it was day or night, quotes the Midrash which says, "And how did Moses on Mount Sinai know when it was day and night? When he heard the angels say 'Kadosh,' he knew it was day, and when he heard them say 'Baruch,' he knew it was night."

What does this mean?

Every day, we say together in prayer the words, “kadosh kadosh kadosh.” We are actually repeating the words with which the angels praise G-d every day. The Midrash says that during the day, the angels praise G-d with “Kadosh,” while at night they say, “Baruch kevod...”. That’s how Moshe Rabbeinu knew when it was day and when it was night.

The Rebbe said the following about his father-in-law’s mention of the Midrash:

“Sitting in prison, not knowing whether it was day or night, reminded him that even Moshe Rabbeinu, while he was on the mountain, did not know when it was day and when it was night” (Toras Menachem vol. 57 pg. 77).

The Rebbe’s point is that even when a person is in the most difficult situation, he can remember that G-d runs the world — and then, even in prison, it’s up to him how to look at the situation. He can feel as if he is on Mount Sinai; he knows that even there, within the prison walls, he has a mission and purpose.

Perhaps those journalists are right. Maybe it takes courage and tenacity to come to the synagogue. But the story of the four modern day captives who miraculously survived the attack on the synagogue will not discourage Jews from coming to synagogue; rather, it will encourage them to come. When Jews are challenged, they feel more combative and competitive — and they strengthen their Judaism.