

Topic

פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים (<i>Pidyon Shevuyim</i>)	Redeeming Captives
חֲבֵרֻתָא (<i>Havruta</i>)	Learning Partner
מִשְׁנָה (<i>Mishnah</i>)	Collection of rabbinic teachings, primarily legal, redacted in the 3 rd century
גְּמָרָא (<i>Gemara</i>)	Collection of rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah
תַּלְמוּד (<i>Talmud</i>)	The Mishnah and the Gemara together

Relevant Vocabulary

Challenge and Response, Torah & Text

Grade Level(s)

7th – 12th

Big Ideas

The principles discussed in traditional Jewish wisdom can help shed light on how to deal with important contemporary issues.

Redeeming captives has both personal and communal ramifications which are not always in harmony.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Begin to understand the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim*
2. Understand the Talmudic arguments behind redeeming prisoners
3. Debate the merits of redeeming prisoners in contemporary situations

Materials / Technology Needed

- Text sheets (included at the end of this document)
- Movie clip of a captor demanding ransom. An example can be found [here](#).

Save You, Save Me

- News stories about prisoner exchanges. Some examples include:
 - [Gilad Shalit](#)
 - [Brittney Griner](#)
 - [Nigerian Kidnappings](#)
- [Article](#) presenting different rabbinic opinions about the Gilad Shalit exchange

Background

Capturing people for financial or political means is an age-old ploy. Whether it is trying to get one's own people back or just trying to make a profit, keeping people captive is used to put pressure on individuals and governments to get what the capturer wants.

The Talmud is of different minds when it comes to redeeming captives. On the one hand, redeeming captives is referred to as a great mitzvah ([Bava Batra 8b](#)). In fact, it is such a great mitzvah that the 12th – 13th century commentary *Tosefot* points out that redeeming captives is one of three mitzvot for which a *Sefer Torah* can be sold. On the other hand, the Mishnah declares that we do not redeem captives for more than they are worth and we do not help them escape ([Mishnah Gittin 4:6](#)). The reasons for the rabbinic concern about redeeming captives stems from two concerns: that paying too much could impoverish a community or that paying could encourage the capture of more prisoners ([Tractate Gittin 45a](#)). The commentator Rashi indicates that the difference matters in the case of a wealthy person who wants to redeem a captive relative since there would be no financial burden on the community (but it would still be problematic if the issue is the possibility of more people being taken captive).

Later commentators tried to resolve the issue of how much is too much to pay to redeem captives and when one might be able to pay more than the accepted value for a captive. Delving into the various nuances of each commentator is beyond the scope of this activity. However, learners will have the opportunity to consider the various aspects of the issues that the commentators took into consideration.

It should be pointed out that there are many opinions on each side of just what is an appropriate cost to redeem captives. In medieval times, the Maharam of Rotenberg was said to not allow his community to pay for his release from captivity because he deemed the price to be too high. In more modern times, there was great debate in Israel about the appropriateness of the Gilad Shalit exchange both because of concern that Israel was giving up too much and also because it might encourage future kidnappings.

Note that this activity asks learners to consider real-world situations and reflect on how they would handle the redemption of captives in exchange for human or monetary capital. A few situations are suggested in the Materials section; but other situations can be selected based on the what learners are interested in and can handle.

Description of Activities

1. Show the movie clip.
2. Discuss:
 - a. Would you pay the ransom? Why?
 - b. What positive consequences could come from paying the ransom?
 - c. What negative consequences could come from paying the ransom?
3. Divide learners into *havruta* pairs and hand out text sheets.
4. Learners read the texts from the Talmud to each other and answer the questions on the sheets.
5. As a class, learners discuss the major points of their *havruta* discussions.
6. Present a contemporary case study about prisoner exchanges. Discuss as a group the merits of redeeming the captives based on the texts.
7. Present examples of rabbinic decisions about *pidyon shevuyim* (see Background).
Discuss:
 - a. Why did the rabbis decide what they decided?
 - b. Why do you think it is so difficult for the rabbis to agree about the outcome of cases of *pidyon shevuyim*?

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Learners use their preferred method of communication to represent their own opinions about how to redeem captives.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners research commentary connected to the main texts covered in this activity and, based on their findings, write their own legal opinion about when captives should or should not be redeemed.

With your *havruta* (learning partner), read these texts out loud to each other. As you read, think about what values you learn from the texts and what questions you have about them. Discuss your thoughts and also discuss the questions that follow each text.

Tractate Bava Batra 8b	בבא בתרא ח:
Redeeming captives is a great mitzvah.	פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִם מִצְוָה רַבָּה הִיא.

- What do you think it means that redeeming captives is a great mitzvah?
- Some authorities state that redeeming captives is one of only three things for which a *Sefer Torah* can be sold. Why do you think it has such a lofty status? What makes it so important?

Tractate Gittin 45a	מסכת גיטין מה
Mishnah: We don't redeem captives for more than they are worth	מִתְנִי' אֵין פּוֹדִין אֶת הַשְּׁבוּיִין יִתֵּר עַל כְּדֵי דְמִיָּהוּ,
because of <i>tikkun ha'olam</i> .	מִפְּנֵי תִיקוּן הָעוֹלָם.
And we don't help captives to flee because of <i>tikkun ha'olam</i> .	וְאֵין מְבָרִיחִין אֶת הַשְּׁבוּיִין, מִפְּנֵי תִיקוּן הָעוֹלָם
Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Because of the betterment of the [remaining] captives [i.e. if some captives escape, the captives who remain will be treated worse].	רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר: מִפְּנֵי תִקְנַת הַשְּׁבוּיִין.
Gemara: They [the Sages] brought up a difficulty: With regard to [the phrase] "because of <i>tikkun ha'olam</i> " [what does the Mishnah mean when it says that]?	גַּמְ' אֵיבַעֲיָא לְהוּ: הָאֵי "מִפְּנֵי תִיקוּן הָעוֹלָם" —

Is it because of [financial] hardship on the community	מִשּׁוּם דִּוְחָקָא דְצָבוּרָא הוּא,
or perhaps because they will not seize and bring additional [captives]?	אוּ דִּלְמָא מִשּׁוּם דְּלֹא לְגָרְבוּ וְלִיִּיתוּ טְפִי?

- The Mishnah says not to redeem captives for more than they are worth. How do you place a value on a captive? What constitutes too much? Who decides how much a captive is worth?
- According to the Gemara, what are the two possible reasons for not paying more than the worth of a captive?
- What is the difference between a community paying a ransom and an individual paying a ransom? Why would it matter who foots the bill? Would it matter if the community were wealthy?
- How might the parameters change if the captors were asking for their own prisoners in return?
- How would you feel if a family member were taken captive and the government refused to negotiate with the captors? What would you do or say if someone told you that you had to help pay for someone's release?
- Does it matter under what circumstances someone was captured? What if the person was kidnapped from their secure home? What if they were captured while traveling for pleasure in a dangerous country? What if they were on a humanitarian mission to a war-torn country?
- The Gemara does not resolve whether the reason not to pay too much is financial hardship or concern about more people being taken captive. Which is the more compelling reason to you? Explain your reasoning.