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Israel's Lost Son: Masculinity and Race in the Gilad Shalit's Affair¹

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Introduction

On the day that the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was released and returned to Israel after five years of captivity, posters across the country welcomed home the nation's "lost son," a title bestowed upon him by public relations experts hired by Shalit's family. Live coverage of his release received record ratings. Activists, with the help of experts, advanced a sophisticated campaign to secure Shalit's return, which included national and international rallies, enlistment of celebrities, and wide scale diplomatic efforts, emphasizing Shalit as the son of all Israelis.² According to surveys conducted at the time, 80 percent of Israelis supported the prisoner exchange deal that led to Shalit's freedom.³ The staging of the return of Israel's lost son speaks volumes about the ways Israelis want to see themselves and how they view the country's military body as a site of national agency.⁴

Using the Shalit Affair as a pivotal event, I examine Israeli society's preoccupation with, and exhaustion from, ideologies of war, the military, and a heroic form of masculinity. I utilize three methodological frameworks to reveal how intense interest in the construction of masculinity (as choreographed in Israeli Army training manuals and the media) produces a

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² In March 2009, Shalit's family built a non-violent protest tent outside the Prime Minister's official residence in Jerusalem. The tent was frequented by thousands of Israelis every month, including the president, local celebrities, foreign dignitaries and diplomats, and members of the Israeli parliament (Knesset). See Nir Wolf's "An Inside Look at the PR Campaign that Brought Shalit Home." In *Israel Today*, October 19, 2011: 4.

³ More precisely, 74 percent of male respondents supported the deal, while 19 percent opposed it. Among female respondents, 86 percent supported it, and only 5 percent were against it. See "Poll: 79% of Israelis Support Shalit's Deal." In *Yedioth Ahronoth* [The Latest News], October 17, 2011.

⁴ Consider the following History of prisoner exchange: In November 1983, 4,600 Arab detainees were released in return for six Israeli soldiers. In the summer of 1985, 1,150 Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners were exchanged for three Israeli captives. In January 2004, in a deal with the Lebanese government and the Hezbollah, Israel released 436 Palestinian and other Arab prisoners and the bodies of 59 Lebanese fighters in exchange for a captured Israeli businessman (ranked as a colonel in the reserve) and the bodies of three soldiers abducted in 2000. In July 2008, in return for releasing five men (Lebanese militant Samir Kantar and four Hezbollah prisoners), along with the bodies of more than a dozen Hezbollah fighters, Israel recovered from Hezbollah the bodies of two Israeli soldiers, who had been captured in The Second Lebanon War in 2006. Most recently, in October 2011, Israel swapped 25 jailed Egyptians for an alleged Israeli spy,⁴ who had been detained in Egypt five months earlier. This repeated scenario of exchange exemplifies the value of the body in the conflict between the two sides.

complex sense of military fatigue.⁵ I first conduct a historical reading of Israeli theories of embodied masculinity and I investigate the spread of these codes from the army to Israeli social, cultural and political life. Such an approach lays the groundwork for an analysis of the release of Gilad Shalit in October 2011. I read the Israeli soldier-civilian body as a contested site that challenges, resists, and advances existing concepts of masculinity and nationality. Through an investigation of individual and social agency in the embodiment of ideologies, this presentation questions the role of nationalism in the staging of Shalit's heroism, and in performing a sense of Israeli national exclusiveness and moral superiority.

Choreographing Martyrdom

On October 18, after five years in captivity, Israeli Sergeant. Gilad Shalit, was transferred from Gaza into Egyptian custody at the Kerem Shalom crossing on the Egyptian-Gaza-Israeli border. In his early interview on Egyptian TV, which angered many Israelis because of the Egyptian interviewer's unsympathetic approach, Shalit appeared exhausted and unfocused, often failing to answer questions put to him. Unlike interviews he would have in the future with the Israeli media, in this interview Shalit expressed his hope that his release would contribute to a future peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

In the early morning hours of the same day, Israel's lost son arrived by helicopter at Tel Nof Airbase in central Israel, a free man. As the wide doors of the helicopter opened, it became apparent that Shalit had changed his clothing: he was now dressed in the dark olive-green uniform of the Israeli Defense Force. Shalit, an emblematic example of the soldier citizen, had returned as the property of the Israeli nation and its army. Loud cheers were heard in multiple community centers across Israel. Israeli banks suspended operations to watch the televised arrival. In front of a large screen in Shalit's hometown of Mitzpe Hila, thousands of supporters

⁵ This amnesia – and here we have not an Israeli but a more common phenomenon that at its core in a sense of privilege—is likely to be a symptom of exhaustion from the ongoing state of war with the Palestinian government. On the one hand, “exhaustion” could suggest resistance to the continuing state of conflict, including the brutality and injustice that follow each act of war. On the other hand, this war fatigue might indicate the effectiveness of an ultimate docility, where the civilian population is automated like most regimented soldiers, and where obedience and dependence on the superior powers of the nation and the arbitrary decisions of its politicians dominate the body and mind of the Israeli soldier-civilian society.

held their breath. The first person to welcome Shalit home was the “father” of the nation, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Dressed in a black suit, Netanyahu rushed to greet Shalit. Shalit saluted the Prime Minister, then the two men shook hands. In this all-male gathering, which also included chief negotiator David Meidan and Israeli Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, the absence of Shalit’s own parents was striking. It was only after a few more minutes of chat and an embrace with Netanyahu that Shalit went to meet his parents. However, it was only Shalit’s father who was there to welcome his son.

Netanyahu’s pledge to the Shalit family “to bring their son [and brother] home” had been fulfilled. Later, during the press conference, Netanyahu highlighted his personal involvement and agency in freeing Shalit and minimized “as much as possible the danger for the citizens of Israel.”⁶ Here is another instance of instilling in Israeli citizens the idea that they must be constantly on guard and ready for battle. Emphasizing the staging of Shalit as the national body, Netanyahu used a pluralizing discourse in his conclusion of the press conference: “We are all blessed today with the return of Gilad home . . . Our sons have returned to our borders . . . The people of Israel are alive.”⁷ The metonymic movement from *Gilad* – one son – to many *sons* and then to the rest of *the people of Israel* demonstrates the production of the national body that Shalit embodied. But this rhetoric also highlights the kind of political impulse at work in conflating individual bodies with national identity, and in emphasizing the role of masculinity in veiling moments of national disjunction.

The media representation of Shalit also reveals the shift in the relationship of the soldier’s body to the power of the nation-state. In addition it demonstrates how the soldier’s masculinity and heroism are constructions that can be adapted to various political and national pressures. Given his fragile physical condition, Shalit’s appearance contradicts old ideas of the “Sabra” citizen-soldier: the Israeli native who could work the land as well as the machine gun, known for his *hutzpa*, sexual appeal, and a “remarkable display of human perseverance and stamina” (Bar-Khama, Shoenfeld, & Shuman 1980:20). Nevertheless, the media treated him as a hero and celebrity. Like terrorism, Shalit’s “heroism” quickly became a consumption item, a “political spectacle,” and a commodity of commercial and political authority (Nandy 1995: 23).

⁶ For more information about the press conference after the release of Shalit see Ben Quinn’s “Gilad Shalit freed in exchange for Palestinian prisoners.” In *The Guardian*, October 18, 2011.

⁷ Ibid.

Local and international politicians rushed to meet and greet him. One week after his release, the Israeli President, Shimon Peres, visited the Shalit family at their home in Mitzpe Hila. Shalit still looked exhausted and undernourished at this televised meeting. He did not speak much, but mostly nodded to words of the President. Peres praised Shalit for his “powerful spirit” that allowed him to survive his long captivity. Shalit answered with another nod, making an effort to smile.⁸ “The whole nation came together for the cause of your return with love and dedication,” Peres continued. Shalit, however, remained silent, and his gaze unreadable.⁹ Peres concluded: “Your homecoming is an exceptional personal and national occurrence. . . . I came to express my pride and the nation’s pride on your ability to deal with the tough conditions of captivity.”¹⁰ Peres’ words helped transform Shalit into a national icon.

But Shalit was not only used by the state of Israel to represent its ideal of the national body, he also had international uses. In the War on Terror, Shalit represented a Middle East democracy and a staunch ally of the West. On December 12, 2011 the heroic status of Shalit reached new heights when, during a meeting with Gianni Alemanno the mayor of Rome,¹¹ the latter informed reporters that he would seek to nominate Shalit for the Nobel Peace Prize.¹² On February 8, 2012, Shalit and his family met with the French President Nicolas Sarkozy at the presidential palace in Paris. Sarkozy hailed Shalit for his “determination” and “dignity in the face of the ordeal.”¹³ Later, at an annual dinner held by the French-Jewish community, Sarkozy expressed his anger at Shalit’s Hamas captors, “Shame on those who did that. . . . No idea, no ideology, no situation can justify what was done to Gilad Shalit.”¹⁴ Shalit was then praised for his skills at surviving his long captivity. The question remains, however, on which elements does Shalit’s heroism depend on and what does this heroism entail from the personal and national perspectives?

⁸ See Jack Khoury’s “Peres Drops by Shalit Home as Gilad Continues his Slow Return to Normalcy.” In *Haaretz*, October 25, 2011: 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Not for nothing was Gianni Alemanno, the Mayor of Rome, invited to Shalit’s home, by Silvan Shalom, Israeli parliament member, and the country’s senior Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Regional Development and the development of the Negev and the Galilee. In 2008, while Shalit was still in captivity, Alemanno had declared Shalit an honorary citizen of Rome. One could view the invitation as gratitude for the additional publicity that helped keep Shalit’s cause visible and Shalit alive.

¹² See David Braha’s “Rome’s Mayor Meets Shalit in Mitzpe Hila.” In *Yediot Ahronot*, December 12, 2011.

¹³ See Scott Sayare’s “France: Shalit Meets with Sarkozy.” In *The New York Times*, February 9, 2012; Associated Press Report “Nicolas Sarkozy Meets Freed Israeli Soldier Gilad Shalit.” In *The Telegraph*, February 10, 2012.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Clearly, like the 1,027 Palestinian prisoners and more than 4,000 Palestinian detainees that to this day remain in Israeli facilities, Shalit suffered while imprisoned. His thinness was a clear result of malnutrition and lack of daylight. However, I argue that Shalit became a hero and national celebrity primarily because of his docility, which affirms the powers of the nation and the dependency of its citizens on the national apparatus. In that sense, the media attention Shalit received during his captivity and since his release must be regarded as another tool of “community building” and homogenizing the national body.¹⁵ This Israeli national body is constructed to stand in contrast to, or more precisely, in a moral and physical clash with, an essentialized Palestinian body, designated primarily as terrorist and lacking moral values.

A sort of Conclusion: Exhaustion and the Terror of Imagination

On October 11, 2011, with the mediation of Egyptian security and intelligence representatives, Israeli and Hamas officials declared that they had reached a deal for the release of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who was captured in 2006. This disproportionate exchange was a direct result of the sentimental staging of Shalit as a comparatively helpless individual by his Hamas captors, the Israeli and international media, and the PR firm hired by Shalit’s family. But the performance of passivity and Israel’s sense of national agency also have a deep political resonance in Israel’s collective imagination. Hence, the idea of the helplessness of the soldier’s body must be seen in relation to the strategic disciplining of Israel’s population as citizen-soldiers. And, of course, even though Shalit’s sense of helplessness and passivity could be construed as feminine, there seem to be an enormous investment the nation’s citizen and the world about Israel’s “national masculinity” (ability to cope and overcome with difficulties).

Shalit’s body represents compliance with the authority of the Israeli state and thus docility and passivity: a strategic body. Here, I draw on Michel de Certeau’s notions of “tactic” and “strategy” (de Certeau 1988) to complicate questions of docility. Shalit’s condition represents a radical symbiosis of “strategy” and “tactic.”¹⁶ For de Certeau, tactic is an alternative

¹⁵ See Appadurai 1996: 6.

¹⁶ By invoking the idea of strategy, De Certeau confronts and complicates Foucault’s idea of discipline. His analysis of Foucault’s power construction includes a definition of strategy as the disciplinary framework that has been determined and constructed by “will and power” in the social realm, while corporeal practices become gradually encoded and habitualized. De Certeau defines strategy as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships

to the encoded the disciplined, and daily habituated practices. Shalit's heroism depends on his performance. Rather than he himself embodying or initiating a tactical move, the Israeli government, Hamas, or the PR campaign his parents are using Shalit strategically, demonstrating his "lack of power," while, at the same time, it also advances and postulates national power and domination (38). I am referring here to the destabilization of an asymmetrical power relationships. One in which the Israeli state, as a sovereign nation, can apparently protect and rescue its citizens, which the Palestinians, being denied nationhood, cannot, yet the Palestinians secured the freedom of more than 1,000 people while the Israelis secured the freedom of one. My interest is in another aspect of the same point: the ways the Israeli government, in Shalit's case, deployed the heroic passivity of the soldier's body to keep the civilian citizens inactive. But in order to appreciate the significance of "managing" the Israeli collective imagination by mobilizing their support and thus ensuring their docility, we must first review the events that led to the swap deal.

The summer of 2011 was unlike any other in the history of the Middle East. Masses marched in the streets in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Israel against their regimes and governments. For Hamas, the "Arab Spring" that jeopardized the future of Syrian President Bashar Assad also pressured the organization's leaders in Damascus. In Israel, domestic protests questioned the Israeli government and social structure.

On September 4, 2011, a month prior to the deal that resulted in Shalit's release, Israel experienced unprecedented domestic unrest. The "march of one million," part of the global Occupy Movement that began the U.S with Occupy Wall Street movement in response to the ongoing global recession, was Israel's biggest ever demonstration, with about 430,000 citizens taking part in rallies across the country.¹⁷ According to local polls, the movement and its rallies had the support of about 90 percent of the Israeli population. This historical demonstration followed 50 days of protests demanding social justice and a lower cost of living. Israeli media speculated whether a new social or political movement could transform Israeli politics for the next generation. According to interviews with David Meidan, former *Mossad* agent and the chief

that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (1988: 35-6).

¹⁷ According to the Israeli police the largest march took place in Tel Aviv, where up to 300,000 took part. In Jerusalem 50,000 protested and in Haifa 40,000 marched. Israel's population is 7.7 million.

Israeli negotiator of the prisoner exchange,¹⁸ the “ Israeli social protest movement was a factor in the swap deal.”¹⁹ It seems that the protest narrative was significantly altered by the prisoners’ exchange, which veiled a narrative of docility, and the Israeli government’s interest in maintaining order in the nation-state. Indeed, the front-page stories in Israel and across the world on Wednesday, October 12, 2011, changed the tone in the country. Now, with the arrival of the soldier-hero, a national unity (and exceptionalism) was back on track. But amidst such global, regional, and domestic unrest, it is difficult not to see the irony in celebrating a passive hero. On Tuesday, January 22, Israeli voters will participate in the Election for the 19th Israeli parliament (Knesset). Just a year ago, thousands of Israelis swamped the streets of Tel Aviv, protesting the economic and national policies of the Israeli Government. These demonstrations demanding a change in Israel’s policy, appear today largely irrelevant in public discourse.

Finally, more signs of denial that follow war fatigue resurfaced recently with the projection two films that critically depict the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict: Dror Moreh’s “The Gatekeepers” and Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi’s “5 Broken Cameras.” While the two films have garnered much deserved acclaim for their critique of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—to the extent that in Moreh’s film, the head of the Mossad, Abraham Shalom, compares Israel’s occupation of Palestine to Nazi Germany’s military campaign—these films have not swayed public opinion regarding the agenda of Israeli politicians (regardless of their political stance and party affiliation). Although the films are discussed in Israeli media in relation to “Israeli pride,” this “pride” has not ignited a sustained reexamination of Israel’s actions in the national and international arenas. What makes this war fatigue a serious matter—and with these remarks I will conclude—is the history of denials that dominates this Election campaign. After the coming election, perhaps another set of confrontations await Israeli society to face and cope with their untamed sense of superiority and the devastating atrophy of this imagination.

¹⁸ See David Meidan’s lecture “Secrets Behind the Shalit Deal.” In *Ha’aretz Daily*, July 24, 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*