Last update - 13:47 26/06/2009

HAARETZ.com

Bringing Gilad home - A look at the Shalit family's struggle

By Uri Tuval

Tags: Hamas, Gilad Shalit

The vociferous argument that erupted last week in the protest tent near the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem was broken off by the sound applause: Noam Shalit had arrived.

"Can I help with something?" he asked the 30 people present. The argument renewed - about whether there was a point to demonstrating in front of the Red Cross' offices in favor of the release of Noam's son, kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit. Noam Shalit waited patiently until even the most heated speakers remembered that they were there to hear what he had to say. But the quiet voice of this mild-mannered man was drowned out by the buses on the street and the loud music blaring from cars.

"Speak up, we can't hear you," someone said.

"That's a problem," Shalit replied.

"The Shalits from Mitzpeh Hila are probably the easiest family of a prisoner that the government could deal with," a person close to the campaign said. "The family is doing all it can, but there are many things it is not doing and which cannot be done if Noam objects."

No objective observers have seen Corporal Gilad Shalit since he was abducted three years and one day ago (June 25, 2006), from an army post just inside Israel on the border of the Gaza Strip. In March, an exceptionally intensive effort by the family to pressure then-prime minister Ehud Olmert to bring Gilad back before the end of Olmert's term ended in disappointment. The Prime Minister's Bureau claimed that the protesters were making Hamas ratchet up its demands and were thus torpedoing the negotiations.

In the meantime, the Olmert government has been succeeded by a more hawkish government and Hamas is apparently not softening its demands. The negotiations for Gilad's release have resumed only now, after a three-month hiatus.

"A new government has taken office, and it was only natural that our activity fell off," explains Noam Shalit, who met last week with 30 out of a total of 400 volunteers who have manned the protest tent nonstop for the past nine months.

Shalit has decided to give Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu breathing space to "acquaint himself with the subject" and to set a target date for Gilad's return, says Shimshon Liebman, a resident of Mitzpeh Hila and a leader in the campaign to free Gilad.

"The target date is between Noam and the prime minister, but in my opinion the only real target date is tomorrow," Liebman says. "I told Noam that a parent has to act from the gut, without target dates and schedules. Gilad has to be brought back tomorrow. But I respect his [Noam's] opinion and have committed myself to this from day one of my activity. We are definitely conciliatory toward the new government."

"What does 'acquainting himself with the subject' mean?" the campaign source asks. "Just like you don't ask for days of grace in retaliating for terrorist attacks, you can't take time-outs from the negotiations. Most of the relevant office-holders are continuing in their posts - the defense minister, the head of the Mossad [intelligence agency], the chief of staff - so who needs to acquaint himself with anything?

"We saw in previous struggles over captives that the influence wielded by the family and a no-holds-barred approach toward the decision makers are crucial," he adds. "The Shalit family is of a different stripe, but in Israeli society it is important to remember that even if an orphan is taken captive, the government and society's task remains the same: to rally in his cause, even if he has no parents. Activists must not give the government a time-out. The government must not be allowed to buy time at a low cost."

"No one prepares a family for dealing with a son who falls captive, and it took the Shalit family time to get its act together," Liebman says. "The family has very specific behavior patterns. They are more closed, less inclined to display emotions in public, and they operate rationally. They don't whine, 'Give me back my boy.' The public campaign needs to focus on the prime minister. All the activity has to focus on him. We have to stand next to his home, go with him everywhere, remind him of Gilad all the time."

Liebman believes the state is to blame for the tragic situation in which families are forced to be violent and complain in order to bring back soldiers whom the state itself sent into battle.

"I intend to persuade youngsters that before you are drafted, go into the streets, shout, do unconventional things," he says. "The 'army of Gilad's buddies' is very important for that goal. I am not judging the family, but the state."

And if Noam refuses?

Liebman: "I haven't heard him objecting to that." In an earlier conversation he said, "If a social movement were to arise today and say that Gilad has become a symbol for army service, and we will fight in our way, I would welcome that. I would be happy about that regardless of the Shalit campaign. If I did not make a commitment to the family, I would head that movement."

Noam Shalit rejects the allegation that his relatively calm approach signals the government that it has time to act. "We are not giving them time. We gave them a target date, which I cannot make public. We put it to Benjamin Netanyahu, and I hope he has passed it on to the operative echelons," he says.

"Every company, every organization works with target dates. It is not abnormal. What happens if the CEO does not meet the target set by the board of directors? Do you know who the prime minister's board of directors is? He will have to explain to the public why he did not meet the goal."

Isn't that a recipe for disappointment? Netanyahu will explain why he didn't succeed and the public will believe there is no solution. What will you do then?

Shalit: "I don't want to speculate what will happen if."

Your associates at the campaign headquarters say your approach is overly conciliatory.

"From the outset people said we were too gentle and were not the kind of people who turn over tables. But we have to be very cautious in our considerations."

'Why so long?'

In a gathering two weeks ago in Kfar Shmaryahu, an affluent Tel Aviv suburb, Noam Shalit described his plans through the Jewish holidays in mid-September.

"I thought I wasn't hearing right," says one of the activists, a former POW in Syria. "I hesitated, but then I said to Noam, 'The day will come and Gilad will return home and ask: Dad, why did it take so long? And you will reply: For half a year we were in shock, the government fudged us for another year, and another half a year went by with other things. But after that? Will you have an answer for him?' Noam replied: 'You are talking from the gut and I am talking from the head.' I couldn't believe it."

Oren Shtang, 35, from Tel Aviv, was the driving force behind the "Waiting for Gilad in the Square" group, which held a vigil from July 2008 until March 2009 in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square.

"After four months of activity, we - a hard core of no more than six to eight people - succeeded in bringing 12,000 people to the 'Asking for Forgiveness from Gilad' event. There was nothing complicated about it. But we felt that there was a glass ceiling in terms of cooperation from the campaign headquarters and the family. I don't envy Noam, but in my opinion, the claim that nothing can be done without the family's authorization is a mistake," he says.

Yair Geller, CEO of Geller-Nissim, an ad agency, agrees that the activity should take a different direction.

"Quiet doesn't work with the Israeli public. Agreeing to give the government time is wrong. I pity Noam Shalit, who is trying to be a diplomat. That kind of declaration undermines everyone who can be loud and aggressive, without which the government

will not conduct negotiations."

Shalit declined to say what he would do if the activists take matters into their own hands: "There were initiatives like that in the past, and we are trying to give them direction. In general, I don't answer hypothetical questions. If that occurs, we will consider what to do."

The campaign staff is now trying to figure out how to reactivate the struggle after the March failure.

"Olmert floored us," Liebman says. "We ran a 'Help!' campaign, we harped on emotions, and the people and the media were with us. On the day after the deal fell through, we did not slide back to point zero, but beneath it."

Activists say it is now harder to recruit people and that passersby are less willing to accept bumper stickers. Nissim Douek, founder and CEO of Unik, a PR firm that specializes in political and social campaigns, says the pressure exerted in March was a mistake.

"He gave Olmert a deadline, as though only he were obliged to bring Gilad back," Douek explains. "And the moment the deadline passed, that meant the new prime minister has time."

He adds, "Instead of turning Gilad into a uniting symbol, they should have harped on the price of releasing terrorists. They would have discovered that the public was with them. Noam could have pounded on the table."

Tami Shinkman, CEO of Rimon-Cohen-Shinkman, a private consulting firm that is providing free media advice to the Shalit family, says, "Before the end of the Olmert term we knew from surveys, which we published, that we had almost sweeping public support for Gilad's return in exchange for prisoners 'with blood on their hands,' and that Olmert was a leader committed to bringing him back. We had to concentrate on the media."

Many view the activity by the Goldwasser family, whose son's body was held by Hezbollah, as an example of how to pressure the government effectively. Miki Goldwasser, Ehud's mother, relates that immediately after her son was abducted, along with Eldad Regev, she understood that "no one will do it in your place. And the price was also clear: personal exposure. The goal was to make sure that the decision-makers would not go to sleep without thinking about Udi and Eldad. The problem is that every group needs a leader, and our family was a bit more charismatic. Karnit [Ehud's widow] captured the world."

She adds, "I know what Aviva [Shalit's mother] is going through, and if she doesn't have the strength, I am ready to take it on myself. I even suggested that, but they have their way."

High marks in protest school

Consultant Shinkman maintains that the Shalit family's character has not been

detrimental to their struggle, but admits that they do not always cooperate easily.

"If the family could have avoided the media completely, they would have done so," she explains. "They don't like the exposure and they don't understand the language of the media."

Every publication of a photograph of Gilad involves an argument, she says: "The family directs me. It's the same with commercial clients. I can advise, argue, quarrel, get mad, but in the end I take a step back, because there is a manager who is supposed to know what the risks are. I don't know everything and I don't know what kind of material Noam is exposed to."

Shalit: "Many of the activists want a more militant approach. I listen and I try to weigh their views, given the considerations. It's complex. Not everyone knows the situation and knows what's possible. The strategic aspiration, I admit, is to achieve the broadest possible public support, because the public is the prime minister's board of directors. That support is meant to induce the decision makers to make a decision before it is too late."

Isn't that a heavy burden on the family?

"Do I have a choice? It's a war of no choice as far as I am concerned. At one stage we took on a full-time campaign head to concentrate the activity and bear the burden. There are no recipes for activity of this kind. It's not something you learn at the university."

In fact, it can be learned at the university, where experts in public protest activity give the Shalit family high marks. Prof. Tamar Harmann, the dean of academic studies at the Open University and an authority in political protest movements, explains, "It is difficult to maintain a public protest for so many years, and I think he [Noam Shalit] is doing it in a marvelously engineered way, in contrast to other protests."

Some activists were disappointed that the Shalit family left the tent at the end of Olmert's tenure, but Harmann says, "If they had remained in Jerusalem another four weeks, no one would have bothered with them. A physical protest loses its effectiveness."

Similarly, Dr. Eitan Alimi, of the political science department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, believes that "Gilad Shalit has penetrated the public consciousness deeply. I also see a totally professional media strategy: restraint, balanced judgment, getting the message across clearly without arousing antagonism, exploiting timely opportunities. Thanks to his style, Noam is able to get many people to follow him.

Harmann says, "In contrast to the prevailing opinion, most massive public protests do not succeed in changing policy. An example is the 'orange' struggle [against the Gaza disengagement]. If the state is determined, it doesn't work."

Contrary to the view of the activists and the campaign's leaders, Harmann explains, "the Israeli protest culture does not involve turning over tables. That is where the

orange struggle [against disengagement from Gaza] lost its legitimacy. The family, too, will lose support if they start turning over tables. They cannot do more than they have done until now."

Gil Samsonov, a former strategic adviser to Netanyahu, sounds a note that could trigger a counter-protest: "The Shalit campaign was very successful - the fact is, the price of the deal rose to insane heights. At that price, I am amazed Israelis aren't abducted every day."

He believes the family has behaved wisely, but "if they cross the line, they will lose the sympathy and the commitment of the decision makers. The abduction did not happen on Netanyahu's watch, and that is a huge difference."

Pressuring Netanyahu will not work, adds Samsonov, "because he has a reply: 'We already agreed to a high price, so let the other side show flexibility.'" At the same time, he adds, a successful campaign raises the price and undercuts national resilience: "Forgoing everything, with no red lines, is a matter of weakness. It is because this raises the price that I will not agree to advise a campaign on behalf of abductees."

Former MK Yehuda Ben Meir, now a research fellow with the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, agrees: "The prime minister must on no account make a decision of this kind under public pressure."

Ben Meir accuses the Shalit campaign staff of deliberate and emotional media manipulation. "That manipulation will prompt the prime minister to take account of public opinion, which supports a deal at any price for one soldier, instead of [looking at] the national interest, which is to prevent future abductions. I understand that the family is pressing - but a social movement? What is the logic of that?"

Ben Meir notes that previous deals were more dependent on specific players, notably Yitzhak Rabin (the defense minister in the deal with Ahmed Jibril's organization) and Ariel Sharon (the prime minister who oversaw the return of Elhanan Tennenbaum and of the bodies of the soldiers kidnapped at Har Dov in 2000), who viewed the return of a soldier as a supreme value. According to a recent survey by Ben Meir's institute, "only" 38 percent of the public favors bringing back a soldier at any price. Another 19 percent support releasing terrorists with blood on their hands in such a deal, but not extremely dangerous ones. "At the moment, there is no public majority for a deal at any price," he says.

At the heart of this equation, with its plethora of variables - the situation of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government's decision-making abilities, the readiness of the Israeli public to make a deal, the pressure exerted by the activists, the risk of losing support and/or public interest, and above all the plight of the family - one man looms: Noam Shalit. In the meantime, his son, now 22, continues to be held in Hamas captivity without anyone seeing him.

http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1095893.html