

The Israeli Refuse of Terrorists has Lowered Standards

Walking from the Embarcadero to First Street one day last week, a Jewish functionary was stopped three times to be asked: "Why did the Israelis release those terrorists?"

The questions all carried an undertone of puzzlement and distress. At the time, the direct question could only be answered speculatively. The most positive possible answer—without any evidence to back it up—was that this exchange represented some preface to a peace initiative. The most ~~queasy~~ queasy-making possible answer was that the exchange was designed to legitimate the ultimate ~~release~~ release of the Jewish terrorists, and remove some of that pressure from the politicians. There was no evidence for that either.

However, the answer most often given was that the ~~release~~ exchange was just a matter of Jewish compassion and morality. Some ~~people~~ even said that, after all, the terrorists were just people who believed in the morality of their own actions.

So, the morality of the situation became its most interesting part—bringing to mind, ~~somewhere~~ somewhere between the Embarcadero and First Street, a couple of pertinent French quotations. The French have a way with words even when they are wrong, which is usually.

François Noel Babeuf, a well-known French revolutionary of the late 18th century, said to the masses: "Cut without pity the throats of the tyrants, the patricians ... all the immoral beings who might oppose our common happiness."

That was one of the earliest statements of modern terrorism: We kill in order to save lives ... we terrorize in order to end terror ... we do bad things in order to bring good things ... we do it only for the "common happiness" of the people.

It was another French personage, an actress known simply as Rachel, who, a few years after Babeuf, publicly said quite the opposite: "A straight line is the shortest in morals as in geometry." Perhaps she was just trying to burnish her own image, which actresses needed to do in those days, but neither her remark nor Babeuf's serves us well in the political arena.

"A straight line" often fails to work. When the British and French capitulated to Hitler at Munich "for peace," they only made it more certain that twelve million people would later die in war. Sometimes violence is the moral course, in protecting ourselves and others against more violence. The Jewish tradition is explicit on that point.

So, then, was Babeuf right? Are terrorists right? Well, in the course of history, some of them probably are right. It depends on the object and the nature of their terrorism. If a powerless majority is oppressed by an armed minority and cannot negotiate, terrorism against that armed oppression may be the only moral alternative.

That is not a fine point but a crucial one. If the PLO movement had entertained the idea of negotiating around the reality of Israel's existence, it might have helped move the Palestinians towards a political solution of the dilemma in that area. But the terrorists rejected negotiation to begin with, chose violence as a first alternative and the obliteration of the Israelis as an unbending objective. For those reasons, their terrorism has no moral base. It is important to point that out constantly because, like Babeuf, they continue to commit their acts in the name of political morality. And some people believe them.

But how do you deal with the kind of terrorists who have no peaceful objectives, no interest in negotiations? Since you cannot deal with them, you can only crush them and contain them. There is no other alternative. But modern terrorists and potent groups are difficult to crush and contain. With the millions of words that have been written about anti-terrorism, only one basic principle has emerged: Do not capitulate to them in any instance; that will only increase terrorism. There is also the matter of trying to punish their sponsors, but no one has figured out quite how to do that.

~~Some American officials and commentators talking about the American...  
Rachel who said that the... the guns... the... not  
capitulate to the...:~~

It is clear what the heartbreaking considerations were that moved Israel to release so many terrorists in return for some Israeli soldiers. But was it, finally as Rachel might have called it, a moral action? Will more rather than fewer lives be lost as a result? Probably.