

An Entebbe moment

This week's dramatic hostage rescue and 1976

• By AMY NEUSTEIN

This past weekend, on the heels of the devastating stalemate in the hostage negotiation talks with Hamas, Israeli security forces freed two hostages who were being held in the southern Gazan city of Rafah. I was suddenly brought back to a pivotal moment from long ago, where I had an overwhelming sense of ethnic pride for Israel's superior intelligence and military prowess.

It was 1976. An Air France plane carrying 248 passengers from Tel Aviv to Paris would be, without any warning, hijacked by the PLO during a stopover in Athens. The flight was immediately diverted to Libya and then to Uganda, where it landed at Entebbe International Airport.

The situation was tense. The terrorists' demands were unreasonable (asking for the release of 40 Palestinian and affiliated militants imprisoned in Israel as well as the release of 13 prisoners in four other countries) for it would have placed Israel's security at high risk.

The Entebbe Airport holding the hostages was surrounded by 100 Ugandan soldiers with guns drawn, ready to shoot anyone attempting to free the Israeli travelers. "Operation Thunderbolt," colloquially known as the "Entebbe raid" or "Operation Entebbe" – later codenamed "Operation Yonatan" after the tragic loss of Netanyahu's brother, "Yoni," the only fatality in the rescue mission – was a stunning success.

A year later, the Hollywood film *Operation Thunderbolt* would capture the dramatic rescue of the Israeli hostages, and in 1978 was among the nominees for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. The valor, courage, and fearlessness shown by Israeli commanders and Mossad agents in their successful raid on the Entebbe Airport became emblazoned in my mind and forever imprinted in my Jewish identity.

I WAS REMINDED of Israel's military tour de force in Entebbe when I read of the recent rescue of hostages Fernando

Marman, 60, and Luis Har, 70, from a Rafah apartment. The reuniting of the hostages with their families and community members brought elation and joy to them.

But perhaps even greater, this military feat gave an "energy boost" to Israelis and to Jews throughout the Diaspora. This is so because after the mayhem of October 7 and the ensuing months of torment over the unknown fate of the hostages captured during the Hamas rampage in southern Israel, one could finally grab onto a small but symbolic handle. Why is this important?

In the Jewish tradition, we often celebrate small "handles of victory" in our eternal struggle against our enemies who are intent on our destruction. One need not look further than Hanukkah, the celebration of the rededication of the Second Temple after the Maccabees successfully reclaimed Jerusalem in their defeat of the Seleucid Empire.

Lighting the hanukkiah symbolizes how a minuscule amount of oil left in the Holy Temple after it was recklessly destroyed by the Greeks was able to miraculously last for eight days. What this teaches us is that small modicums of success should embolden us to pursue greater goals with courage and conviction.

The news of the rescue of Marman and Har struck me for another reason. They are both dual citizens of Israel and Argentina. Immediately, I recalled the small, but significant, gesture of Javier Milei, Argentina's president, who just days before had visited Israel and announced plans to move its embassy to Jerusalem. In recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, this small but noteworthy gesture bolstered Israel's nationalism and pride.

The Forward published a JTA story that said: "The embassy move would make Argentina the sixth country, and only the second major country, to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem." The story was accompanied by an unforgettable photo whose caption read: "Argentina's President Javier Milei, right, cries with Rabbi Shimon Axel Wahnish during

a visit to the Western Wall on February 6, 2024." The simpatico captured in this photo, though an ephemeral expression of emotion, was invaluable. That is because it showed Argentina's deep camaraderie for Israel during the stress and bedlam of war.

Wahnish, Argentina's newly appointed ambassador to Israel, standing side-by-side with Argentina's president, was a brief though significant event. Both men drew from the deepest emotions of their souls as they were overtaken by the significance of standing at the Western Wall in a show of solidarity with Israel.

This small gesture resonated among Israelis and Jews throughout the world. It gave hope where there was otherwise desolation and despair. The rescue of the Israeli captives, both dual citizens of Israel and Argentina, is undoubtedly minuscule in the context of the 134 remaining Israelis held in bondage by Hamas and their terrorist affiliates. The families of the hostages suffer a fate that knows no surcease from sorrow. Every moment is agonizing. They cannot even escape in their sleep, as their nightmares are unbearable.

Yet, the release of two of the Israelis held captive in Gaza since the October 7 massacre represents hope for their families, friends, and members of their community. It is an emotion we embrace as a momentary elation before we return to the anguishing reality that there are remaining hostages, IDF service members sacrificing their lives on the front lines, and many, many displaced Israelis whose lives have been torn asunder by having to flee their towns besieged by the Hamas invaders more than four months ago.

We embrace the miraculous release of Marman and Har as our "Entebbe moment," and we add this recent victory to the annals of Jewish history!

The writer is the author/editor of 16 academic books. One of them, Speaker Recognition: Law Enforcement and Counterterrorism, published by Springer, has been used to train FBI agents in the United States. She resides in Fort Lee, New Jersey.