

PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS



Toward the end of our interviews, I asked each of the men to reflect on the lessons he had learned from captivity or on what remained of the experience. It was surprising for me, again, to find great diversity in the men's responses and the variety of moods expressed at this request to summarize the experience in its totality.

MENACHEM

I won't say that I was left with the feeling of being a hero. Throughout my captivity I felt like a defeated Israeli soldier. I have seen many times how our country gives every returned POW the sense that he is a national hero, how we are ready to pay almost anything for the exchange of a prisoner, but I disagree with this approach. A pilot who had to abandon his plane probably had no other choice; he couldn't fight to the bitter end, even if that's what he was taught in the IDF. A pilot is attached to his machine and when it's hit he may either escape the machine, or die with it. Not one of us had been taught to die rather than be caught alive. Despite these rational assumptions, I ask myself again and again: What is the meaning of captivity? You went out to fight the Egyptians, and lost. There are several degrees of defeat: one can return the plane without accomplishing the mission; one can lose the

plane but return to Israeli territory; one can abandon the plane and fall into enemy hands. So in what sense is a captured pilot a hero? After all, he went on a mission and failed.

In the second stage, after the return home, a POW is entitled to feedback about his conduct in prison, especially during interrogations. There are two poles to this dimension—one is either a hero or a traitor. I believe that only rarely does one reach one of these poles, although I know a pilot, formerly a POW in Syria, who exhibited impeccable behavior and perhaps deserves to be called a hero. When he stepped up to the podium at a recent Air Force event, the whole audience gave him a standing ovation. On the other end, I know of some men who behaved in an unforgivable manner, yet nobody placed charges against them; they were just quietly expelled from the Air Force.

Between these two poles, one finds the middle way, where the norms are not well defined. I couldn't evaluate my own behavior, but when my debriefing was done, I knew that I had done what was expected of me. I knew that I had tried to be as wise as possible, always on the alert, and didn't let myself divulge any important state secrets easily. I'm rather glad this was also the opinion of the authorities about my conduct three and a half years later.

I saw a TV program in which Rami and another POW from Syria made it look as if being taken captive was great and made them better people. I'm sure they didn't mean it, and I'd explain the matter a little differently. Once you're doomed to captivity, you can take advantage of the situation if you create the right conditions within the framework. I felt I was immunized by the experience, but I can't tell you exactly against what. It was a remarkable experience, from which I gained some wisdom that others may not have gained. In addition—and it may sound somewhat cynical to you—society compensates the POW in several ways. But I repeat: all these outcomes are not worth the price I paid; I had a wife and children and a fascinating job, and the fact that they were out of my reach was horrible.

During my captivity I developed a new attitude toward war. I discovered what a colossal waste it is. You can acknowledge this after paying a personal price like we did. I remember the night in Egypt when I heard that the Yom Kippur War had ended with

3,400 casualties. I couldn't restrain myself. The courtyard was locked for the night and I had nowhere to hide. I went to my bed and cried like a baby. It was awful.

The Lebanon War was even worse, because it wasn't forced on us. There, too, we wasted almost a thousand lives, isn't it terrible? Now that I have paid the price of three and a half years of my life, I have an entirely different attitude toward these facts.

I got to know myself better in captivity. I'm resentful of people who are dependent on me, so I didn't want to become a source of support in our group. I dislike being in the company of men, and that's exactly what I had to do for such a long period. Since my captivity, I find it hard to stand noise; even music sounds noisy to me. Moreover, since my captivity I'm a restless man. I notice that some people have an easier time with themselves. . . . Who knows, I might have been this way anyway, even if I hadn't been captured.

YITZHAK

Today, when I look at my life, it seems to me that prior to my captivity I was a sensitive man, while during that time I had to close the lid over my feelings. This went on until about three years ago, when I met Lea, my third wife. I had never cried since my captivity, even when I experienced great disasters. I could sit in a corner, read a book, and weep a little, but never for real people or events. I could realize what was happening to people around me, but the moment I let it affect me, I felt as if I were weak. The night I heard a man murdered during interrogation next to my cell, I experienced a state of shock. I had only been in captivity ten days then. Afterwards I closed myself off to all feelings and stayed like that for a long time after my liberation.

I think that mentally I grew in captivity. I got to know myself. When much later on people helped me open up, I discovered that I had known myself all along from my captivity, but that for years I didn't allow myself to see anything positive in that period of my life. I profited in terms of my education as well. I learned subjects I would have never been exposed to otherwise, and I read a lot. But I still view this period as a waste.

My captivity entirely changed the course of my life. Had I not

been captured, I'd still be married to Michal, we would have had another child, and I'd be living as an Air Force pilot in Israel, and not as a professional pilot in the U.S. I have no reason to assume that my life would have been any different. Instead, I got married twice more, I had two more daughters, and I acquired a place among the top professional pilots in the entire world.

Without my captivity I wouldn't have gained the emotional maturity I now have. I would have stayed in the same place. The Air Force was like a hot-house, in which I was exempt from making any decisions and assured of automatic promotion and companionship. Suddenly this whole route was interrupted, and I had to exert effort. At the test pilots' school, I had to apply myself academically for three years like I had never done before. Now I'm learning how to put effort into my relationships as well. I am building an entirely different kind of marriage for myself, and restarting my relationships with my daughters.

One of the most positive things I gained in captivity was my friendship with Rami. A few years ago people staged Rami's life story as a surprise for him, and I attended too. Rami said at the time that some brothers are from your family, and some brothers come as a gift, like us. It's really true.

AMNON

For years after my captivity I refused to talk about it. When asked, I'd say that I was bored of repeating my story. But it was an excuse. I understood people who had survived the Holocaust and couldn't describe what they had lived through. I repressed the memories inside me, locked them in, and threw the key away. A few years ago I started to write a little, and my experiences suddenly surfaced. I also began to talk more about that period, and I discovered that by saying it bored me I had been cheating myself for many years. I still say that when I grow up, I'll write my story from a unique perspective.

Today I think that during captivity I lived another incarnation, so to speak, and I have to make an effort to remember what had happened to me. Clearly it was a big breakdown in my life. In my education, my captivity provided me with the opportunity to close some gaps. I read a lot, and it had a good influence on me. Had I

not been captured, I would never have become a reader. The prison reality made a student out of me, and later on I almost completed graduate school. I acquired tools for learning that serve me to this day.

I emerged from my captivity somewhat frail, but also stronger. There are some events that upset me easily—like an abrupt noise, or sudden footsteps when everything is quiet. It probably reminds me of the wardens coming to get me for an interrogation. On the other hand, I have acquired some toughness, and I may be less scared than others in certain circumstances, like when I'm stopped for a traffic violation. I say—so what, this is a Jewish policeman, after all! As long as I'm alive, that's the main thing. Being alive keeps me high all the time, and I don't need drugs to reach that effect.

I think that we were all thrown into jail like into a cauldron. We entered it dirty and emerged clean and purified. Now I'm more sensitive to the needs of others. Often it's problematic; I tend to give in since I see more easily the other's point of view. I take others into consideration too much. It's the outcome of the deep family-like relationship we developed in jail, where I learned to live in a group and to be able to read the cues of other people.

Among the main things that came out of my captivity, there's my immense need for freedom. I can live in a framework, but it's not easy. I have many conflicts about this matter, because it's hard to maintain one's freedom in a family. During the first years after my release I suffered from restlessness; I tried my luck in several places, here and abroad. I was floating and couldn't settle into any kind of routine. I think that people didn't notice my turmoil and therefore I wasn't offered any help, which might have been good at the time.

AMOS

Today, more than fourteen years after my release, I'd say that captivity was no more than three and a half years of my life, and it doesn't amount to much; when I reach eighty, its weight will be even less. The interrogations lasted much less time, and in spite of their intense effect, they're nothing but a small point in my life. I

PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS

can't evaluate the effect of captivity on my life, but I guess the more I live, the slighter its effect.

It's possible that captivity changed my order of priorities, and I gained a somewhat new perspective on life. I realized one lives only once and has to enjoy life to the utmost. Before my captivity I had always been busy flying and fighting wars, and I disregarded my need for amusement and relaxation. My whole world consisted of the Air Force and Dalia. During my captivity I comprehended that I have to see the world and not miss any experience, since a passing year would never return. I have no interest in material things; I don't mind the old furniture in our bedroom, but I want to travel and enjoy my life.

One of the things I retained from my captivity was a sort of attachment to Amnon. He's become like a relative, and as much as you don't choose your relatives, I can't say I selected him because of his traits. We simply have this relationship. Presently we also own a business together. As to the other ex-POWs, we see each other occasionally, but our deep attachment is a matter of the past.

DAVID

I think that each one of us still has a load on his mind. I can't explain my own load, whether it's the result of the long time or the beatings, or perhaps the bitterness I accumulated because of the way I was received back here. I was left with mistrust toward people. I haven't found a proper occupation and have changed jobs many times. I can't be locked in an office, because I have to work in the open, and I can't find the right job for me. I haven't married either, despite the fact that I once even mailed out invitations to my wedding. Others have been married and divorced; perhaps it's the result of captivity. I look at myself in the mirror and say, "You're not actually injured," but when I have to make decisions something is blocking me. Perhaps I needed counseling right after our return.

My reserve unit was changed a couple of times, too. It's hard for me to get used to a new group of people every time. My adjustment to new people is really difficult. When I serve in the reserves in the occupied territories and come upon a demonstration, I don't

PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS

wait for a rock to hit me but fire to hit them first, in spite of the strict orders against it. I escaped death once, and I don't want to risk it again.

Outwardly I look okay, but there's something people don't notice. Sometimes I'm unable to be by myself and I do anything I can to be with others constantly. I often spend the night with one of my brothers, and not in my own home. I don't know how to define my condition, but I blame the establishment and the discrimination I experienced for it. The discrimination I began to feel in prison cannot be forgiven or erased. The ones who acted against me were perhaps unaware of their deeds, but I suffered from the experience just the same. Since my captivity I have often been hurt again, and I have lost my strength to go on struggling. I'm sure others also carry scars from their captivity. Perhaps this book is going to spread my message around and this will make me feel better.

BENNY

I got a great deal out of my period of captivity. I gained an education for myself. Before, I had had only two years of evening high school. In prison I improved my English and math, things that I doubt whether I would have done otherwise. It may sound horrible, but my time in captivity helped me a lot in life. I learned a lot and gained life experiences. Today I can cope with any problem that may come up, as difficult as it may be. After overcoming what happened to me, I know that I can overcome anything at all, and I'll never give in to difficulties. Furthermore, I have learned how to live in a group. It's not easy to live with nine men in a closed room. It could be a recipe for a successful marriage. I know how to calm down my wife and children and behave tolerantly even when they are pretty upset. Before my captivity, I had been a violent, stubborn character, and now I'm different.

AVI

When I reflect on how much I could have accomplished during those four years, I see that I could have done much more; but if I was doomed to be detained, and I evaluate what I did gain from

it, I see that I have accumulated information and improved my social skills considerably. I acquired a good knowledge of English, which I couldn't have done otherwise. My level of English was higher than Yardi's, who had studied in the university all those years! I also made progress in my studies toward a degree in engineering, which I had planned to obtain. The experience of living daily with nine men, the organization of our time and space, became a significant lesson for life. Just recently I heard about three couples who had returned from a week-long yacht cruise, and they told me how awful it was to be stuck with each other for so long. . . .

Each one of us absorbed a lot from the others, and we all matured as a result. It was illuminating to be exposed to a wide variety of opinions on every subject and to listen to the life stories of each of the men. Although we were careful not to expose our intimate life, many barriers came down in time.

In spite of this, I see my four years in captivity as wasted, unnecessary, and unheroic. I would have been able to learn the same lesson elsewhere or to live without it. I feel no nostalgia about the group or the period, and I rarely give it a thought. I never leaf through my letters or our diary. I don't feel driven to share my experience and its conclusions, as some of my friends do.

On the other hand, I'm upset by the fact that the army didn't make use of our experience. They debriefed us, for sure, but I don't know whether they put any of the information to use. I was under the impression that nobody wanted to draw the proper conclusions from my experience, despite the fact that it was up-to-date and quite important.

I have never recovered from the unprofessional reception we were given in Israel, even though a lot of studies exist in the world on this subject. They thought that once they had thrown us into deep water, we'd have to swim. This was a mistake, however.

It may sound absurd, but our long captivity cured us of the shock of being captured. We had time to process the event and we returned home more grounded and balanced. This is mainly because we had enough time to recover from the trauma of the failure of falling into enemy hands. By building ourselves up during the long captivity, our sense of failure was abated somehow.

PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS

We had enough leisure time to analyze and work through the trauma. Each of us found a personal direction for development—whether building with matches or a high school diploma. One painted, another raised birds—and thus we found ourselves anew and got back some of what had been lost with the trauma of being captured. This was the result of our lifestyle in captivity.

This interval provided me with the resources for my struggle with the Air Force later on, and led me to make the right decisions. I couldn't be influenced easily, like my neighbor who got killed right after his return from captivity. I didn't give in to pressure, not even to blackmail. I knew very well what was good or bad for me, and I didn't need permission from the Air Force for that. I used to be different before my captivity: I needed Air Force approval for everything, I was dependent on it, as if it were my family. I wanted to be loved by everyone. After captivity, I liberated myself from this Air Force environment, which can be so suffocating in its warmth.

I rarely paint nowadays, less than I'd like to. And I still haven't completed my college education, in spite of the fact that the Air Force promised me a fellowship. I will use it perhaps in the future, when Yardi completes her Ph.D.

DAN

I regret to this very day that the lesson from our experience was not taken seriously by the system. Nobody wanted to learn from it. I know a lot about captivity, how to prepare yourself for a certain defense line, how not to talk too much at home while some soldiers are in prison; but when I offered my conclusions to the military authorities, they advised me to write a book. I didn't want to write a book no one would read. I regret to say that nobody has learned the lesson that could be learned from our experience.

On the personal level, I keep asking myself whether these four years in prison had made a better or worse person out of me. It's hard to say. I'm a square, in my kids' jargon. I stick to the old norms. I dislike changes. A man with an earring still makes me angry. I regret many of the changes introduced in the kibbutz way of life, such as having the children sleep in their family's apart-

PERSONAL CONCLUSIONS

ment. Perhaps I find it harder to change than others do. Could this be the outcome of my captivity? When I'm asked to tell the story of my captivity I stress the friendship and mutual support, which guaranteed our sanity. I feel that I myself have become more tolerant and accepting of others, but I don't know if this is related to my experience in Egypt.

What I do know is that my experience in captivity contributed to my sense of self-respect. I don't talk about it in public, but I tell myself that I passed my test honorably, and as such I have also honored the country. I did not retain any guilty feelings; not that I think anyone has to reward me for that, but the kibbutz could have made my life somewhat easier after what I had been through. It's not that heroic to be captured, but if the choice is between that and dying, the first is sometimes more difficult to take. We had all fought to the last moment before we allowed ourselves to be captured, and to return sane like we did is also quite an achievement.

I believe that had I not been captured I wouldn't have gone into social work. My captivity made me a more tolerant and understanding man.

Rehabilitation is an endless process. I get up every morning with sharp pains in my ankle and go to work. This struggle is going to be with me for life. The main thing is that I emerged in peace with myself and with my environment.

MOTTI

My captivity taught me how to live with others; I used to be selfish before. But basically I have tried to erase this period out of my mind. I have no nightmares, and I have no dreams about captivity. It was a hard time, especially the torture, and I wonder how I managed to tell you all I did. I also find it hard to remember anything that happened prior to my captivity. Ten months after my return I got married, and this started an entirely new chapter in my life.

I believe that in prison I became more aware of my limitations and began to cope with them in a healthy manner. Today I have many more friends, I know how to get along with people, and they enjoy coming and talking to me. I think that I took after Rami. He

is a perfect human being, and he was our teacher. He built us all in the proper way. I have never said it to him, but living with a man like him in one room for three years proved to be an experience for a lifetime. It's perhaps worthwhile to have been taken captive just for that.

RAMI

I think we took advantage of our conditions in captivity as much as possible. It's easy for me to say, since I was one of the two foci of our existence. The biggest thing we've learned from captivity is that from every starting point, one has the possibility of climbing up or falling down, and it's a matter of choice which it will be. One may draw something good from any condition, and once you discover that, you can be happy or unhappy with what you've got. I give credit to the guys for discovering this truth when they were in such a difficult situation as imprisonment, at the very bottom.

For the first time in my life, I had enough time in jail for thinking and for reading important books, which taught me a great deal. I learned that a man determines how he feels under different circumstances. You have no control of the facts, naturally, but you have control over your attitude toward them. This principle worked for me in jail and seems to be working for people everywhere.

Before I was taken prisoner, I never had time to reflect on these things, but apparently they somehow had been part of my understanding, and that's why I could apply them so fast once I found them expounded clearly in the books I read. This sense, that a man is the master of his feelings, that he's the one who produces them, has been with me since I was fifteen and could understand the world. My father, who I have always remembered as the person who brought light to our home, was killed in a car accident when I was twelve. Mother stayed with seven children in the kibbutz. I was her sixth child and grew up quite alone, and at fifteen I was able to see things I could formulate only at thirty. Up until my captivity, I had run away from thinking toward doing. I never had the leisure, security and environment to sit still and find out what was I thinking. If I hadn't been captured, it might never have happened.

I think that a person who grows up in a warm, normal family doesn't discover this truth so easily. Since I was hurt as a child, and again in captivity, I could do it. I told myself, this is your field, go play your game. That was the difference between me and the others. That's why I found it easier to cope with our conditions. Feelings like rage, frustration, or helplessness, questions like, "Why me?" don't exist for me. That's why I coped well with my life in captivity, and my behavior helped the others too. The more I read and reflected, the better formulated my philosophy. There is no doubt in my mind that this was the most important lesson I drew from the experience. But I made some additional gains—like learning to stand on my hands, for example.

I discovered that becoming a leader was completely natural for me. What's the criterion for leadership? The ability to cope with conditions that others find hard. Anyone can make a salad, but the one who can negotiate fairly with the prison commander under stress, when everyone else is scared stiff, gets others to listen to him. It became clear very fast that I function better than others under stress, perhaps because I'm less open to feelings. I had similar experiences frequently afterwards, on trips or in the army. When the system is stuck with a problem, I come out as someone to be followed. I can say confidently what's to be done, and once I start acting, the others follow along. This is because of the complete confidence I convey in whatever I'm doing—until it proves to be wrong. When that happens, it's not too difficult for me to admit I'm wrong and offer a different course of action with the same confidence. It may be this opportunity for leadership that compensated me for my longing and suffering during my imprisonment.

On the other hand, I'm aware of my limitations. The horizon of my emotional life is pretty narrow. When I need to cope with strong emotions, I tend to block them and pass on to action. These repressed emotions have not disturbed me so far. Possibly every leader has to isolate his inner personality and protect it from vulnerability. He does it by building an inner cave that's inaccessible. This way he can function, while frustration, disappointment, or despair stay out of his experience. I myself can withdraw into my inner cave, and when I do I make fun of myself there, but I'm still pleased with it.

My behavior has been formed over time, but my captivity intensified the learning process. It's true that my traits prevent me from becoming really close to others (and I don't regret it), with the exception of Nurit, who is part of my inner world. However, I emerged from captivity well equipped with tools to communicate with others, especially on a one-on-one level. Today I can form a direct, open contact with anyone. I feel comfortable among strangers, because I can open all my channels and discover very quickly the wires that may provide a connection. Before my captivity I was introverted and inhibited; today I'm not. But I dislike big groups, I dislike starting things that I know I won't be able to finish. I'm not prepared to throw myself away when I'm not sure of the consequences.

I don't think that I developed any new traits in jail; old characteristics that had lain dormant became more pronounced and legitimate. The main thing is that I know myself much better and I don't need excuses anymore. What's no less important is that I was opened up to warm human contacts. I can get more excited now, I can even cry sometimes. Within my limits—which I dictate—I can be happier and sadder than before. After spending time as a family at the Sinai base, I developed a more profound relationship with Nurit and the children, and I'm thankful for it.