

INSIGHTS

A Case Study in Resilience: Lessons from Israeli Hostages

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on five publicly available hostage accounts involving four Israeli women and one Israeli man held between 54 and 484 days in Gaza following the October 7, 2023 attacks, this practice-oriented case study highlights resilience strategies described as supporting endurance under extreme captivity. As a case study, it does not involve statistical sampling, designed experiments, or outcome evaluation; yet case studies can be suggestive, instructive, and enlightening. This case study uses selected testimonies to clarify mechanisms of meaning, connection, spirituality, and agency relevant to leader development. Across the accounts, a sense of self-transcendent purpose—meaning derived from commitment to values, faith, relationships, or responsibilities beyond one’s self-interest—appears repeatedly, expressed through spirituality and social connection and described as helping preserve a sense of personal agency. These strategies resonate with established psychological research and align with the U.S. Army’s Holistic Health and Fitness framework, particularly its emphasis on spiritual readiness as a foundation for resilience.

Keywords: resilience, hostage captivity, meaning-making, spiritual readiness, leader development, coping strategies

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Introduction

Resilience—the capacity to withstand adversity, adapt, and recover—is essential for military readiness and leadership (Department of the Army, 2019; Masten, 2001). Soldiers face isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, and danger (Bartone, 2006). Resilience to cope with these challenges requires emotional regulation (Preece et al., 2025), positive thinking (Carver and Scheier, 1985), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and social support (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Purpose, faith, and prosocial behavior are well-established contributors to resilience—principles reflected in the Army’s Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) emphasis on spiritual readiness (U.S. Army, n.d.).

On October 7, 2023, militants from Hamas and allied groups launched a brutal, coordinated assault on southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people. Approximately 250 individuals were abducted and taken hostage into Gaza—the vast majority of them civilians, including children and older adults.¹ Over the subsequent months, hostage outcomes unfolded through a combination of negotiated exchanges and military operations (Reuters, 2024, 2025). Some hostages returned alive, while others were later confirmed dead, with some remains recovered subsequently (Reuters, 2025, 2026). This practice-oriented case study presents five accounts, based on publicly available firsthand and secondhand testimonies, of Israeli hostages kidnapped on October 7, 2023, and held in Gaza. Their experiences are used here to illuminate resilience-relevant mechanisms under extreme adversity, not to draw causal conclusions about outcomes.

1. Counts vary slightly across authoritative sources. Major reporting commonly cites 251 people taken hostage into Gaza on October 7, 2023, whereas the UN Commission of Inquiry documented “at least 252” people abducted to Gaza as hostages; minor discrepancies reflect differing classification rules and evolving identifications (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, 2024; The Associated Press, 2025).

Scope and Approach

This article uses the term *case study* in an illustrative, practice-oriented sense. The cases are presented as exemplars drawn from publicly available survivor accounts to illuminate resilience-relevant themes under coercive captivity. They were selected because they contain relatively detailed, publicly documented descriptions of coping under captivity and include enough narrative material to illustrate recurring resilience-relevant themes. The aim is interpretive and practice-facing—connecting real-world testimonies to established resilience research and to the Army’s H2F framework—rather than empirical (i.e., it does not claim systematic sampling, prevalence estimates, or causal evaluation of coping strategies). Quotations are presented as reported in the cited sources (including published translations where applicable).

Importantly, the accounts are used to illuminate resilience-relevant themes, not to imply that survival or recovery is determined primarily by individual mindset, meaning-making, or spiritual grounding.

Case 1: Sapir Cohen

Sapir Cohen was 28 when she and her boyfriend were kidnapped by Hamas terrorists on October 7. She spent 55 days in captivity. In later accounts, she described how her spiritual coping began in the weeks before October 7, when she was drawn to recite Psalm 27 in an attempt to manage anxiety. In the tunnels of Gaza, she turned to this practice. She described harsh conditions, but emphasized focusing on small opportunities to make a difference. She recounted bringing strength to an older man—who was paralyzed from the waist down—telling him that he had to make it out alive. When a young girl was scared going into the tunnels, she lightheartedly referred to the tunnels as the “number one attraction in Gaza,” bringing a smile to the girl’s face. It was then she realized that even in this terrible situation, she could choose to make the situation a little bit better.

Even without formal authority, Sapir exercised influence through compassion, perspective, and purpose, uplifting those around her. Sapir reflected “I felt that all my life, I hadn’t done something truly meaningful ... And then I realized—even in captivity, I could be the most meaningful person in that room. I just had to choose it” (Levy, 2025).

Case 2: Moran Stela Yanai

Moran Stela Yanai, 40 years old, was at the Nova festival (Supernova Sukkot Gathering) selling jewelry when, after nearly escaping twice, she broke her leg and was taken hostage. Dragged by 13 terrorists and beaten, she found herself in Gaza, with the city celebrating around her. She spent 54 days in captivity. Under constant threat of sexual and physical abuse, she described how she told herself, “This is my war. And if I break, he wins.” Almost every day, she felt like she would die—whether from bombings around her, or guns pointed at her for crying (ITV News, 2024). Moran describes how at her lowest point, when she was starving and angry and not sure how to go on, she heard a Hebrew prayer on the radio, which inspired her to continue to look for other signs of hope, whether it was half a pita, a bucket of water to wash her face, or even recalling a beautiful memory. “It was amazing how many signs of hope I could find in a windowless, dark room when I searched for them” (Gutfreund, 2024). She focused on being grateful for life, realizing that any second it could be taken away. Moran also spent days teaching a fellow captive the prayer she knew by heart from lighting Shabbat candles (M. S. Yanai, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

Case 3: Emily Damari

Emily Damari, a British-Israeli 28-year-old, was born and raised in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. On October 7, after being shot in her left hand, she was kidnapped and spent 471 days in Gaza. In later accounts, Emily described repeatedly questioning her captors (e.g., asking how tunnels were built and how much money they made) until she was told she was

forbidden to ask questions. During at least some of her time in tunnels, she described being held in small cages with several other hostages at a time. She recalled that the floors of the cages were sandy, wet, and crawling with cockroaches. “They let you go to the bathroom once or twice a day – you have a hole in the ground. It stinks ... they would hide food from us and tell us we were never leaving Gaza” (Human Rights Voices, 2025). She also described periods when six hostages were crammed into a cage, making it difficult to lie down and limiting visibility. Across accounts, Emily emphasized standing up for other hostages and improving morale. She described how during a lice outbreak in the tunnels, she held a lice competition, entertaining her fellow captives. “Even at the hardest moment, I didn’t look down. I always looked up. I didn’t let the terrorists have the satisfaction of seeing me break. They have not broken me” (Fox News Digital Staff, 2025; JNS Staff, 2025).

Case 4: Agam Berger

Agam Berger (19 years old at the time) was serving as an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) observation soldier at the Nahal Oz military base, near the Gaza border, when she was captured. After 482 days of captivity, Agam Berger was freed. Agam was particularly known for having braided the hair of the other captives—an act that became public when younger captives were released before her with their hair braided (All Israel News Staff, 2025). One of those earlier released captives later called Agam’s father to wish him a happy birthday on behalf of his captive daughter, a detail that further underscores how peers described Agam—as someone focused on others. Other hostages also highlighted Agam’s focus on helping others, describing her as a source of strength and support. Agam also remained steadfast in her faith—refusing to light a fire on Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) and praying regularly. When she was picked up by the Israeli military helicopter, after reports described deprivation, abuse, and intimidation during captivity (Cuddy, 2025), she was handed a whiteboard. On it, she wrote a message to the people of Israel. Her message was “I chose the path of faith, and in the path

of faith I returned.” Her resilience was also reflected in her stated intention only days after her release that she wanted to return to military service (Litvak, 2025).

Case 5: Keith Siegel

Keith Siegel, an American-Israeli hostage freed after 484 days, was 65 years old and weighed 110 pounds upon his release. After his release, he said, “I was starved and I was tortured, both physically and emotionally. When the war intensified, the terrorists who helped me treated me even worse than usual. They kicked me, spat on me, and held me with no water, no light and no air to breathe” (Soriano and Doba, 2025). In a recent Instagram video, he described how he began reciting a couple of simple Hebrew prayers—one of them he learned from television while he was in Gaza. His brother described how he searched every day for something to be grateful for, using simple orientation and gratitude prompts (e.g., noting the day, who he was with, and thanking God for food). Keith spent a cumulative six months of his captivity alone, his brother said, adding that the last two months of his captivity were spent entirely alone. During this time, he reportedly had conversations in his imagination with his family. His family recounted, “When they forbade him to speak, which happened all the time, he would tell himself he would talk to Aviva, to the children, to the nephews, nieces, cousins, to all of us. That’s how he stayed grounded” (Maariv Online Staff, 2025).

Lessons Learned

Across these accounts, a common theme is the power of having self-transcendent purpose in adverse conditions. Self-transcendent purpose is a sense of meaning grounded in commitment to goals, values, or responsibilities that extend beyond one’s own self-interest (Frankl, 2006). Acting on self-transcendent purpose means serving a cause, vocation, or value system rather than inward psychological fulfillment (Maslow, 1971). By directing attention and resources outside of their brutal conditions, the hostages appeared better able to retain a sense of agency. Finding or making meaning appeared to support the hostages’ resilience. Agam grounded herself in

faith; Moran framed her endurance as a form of resistance—“If I break, he wins”; Sapir reframed captivity as an opportunity to become “the most meaningful person in the room.” The experiences of other hostages, whose accounts are not detailed here, show similar patterns. For example, Eli Sharabi, who survived more than 491 days in captivity, has spoken about anchoring himself—despite starvation, isolation, and torture—to a singular mission: to stay alive to see his family again (tragically, he returned to find that his wife and children were murdered) (Sharabi, 2025a, 2025b). His account reinforces that when individuals connect suffering to a larger meaning, identity, or responsibility, they may be better able to maintain psychological coherence under extreme stress (Frankl, 2006; Masten, 2001). These accounts are consistent with Army leadership doctrine emphasizing that purpose—whether grounded in values, faith, family, or responsibility—is a stabilizing force that strengthens persistence and adaptive functioning under hardship (Department of the Army, 2019). In the cases described above, purpose was often inspired by focusing on others (social connection) or by spirituality.

Social Connection

A central pattern across survivors’ accounts was the role of connection—both real and imagined—in buffering the psychological strain of captivity. Even when physical freedom and autonomy were stripped away, hostages sought ways to preserve relational bonds, social identity, and a sense of belonging. Connection, in varied forms, helped regulate fear, maintain coherence, and interrupt the isolation that captivity was designed to produce.

Many hostages coped by directing attention toward others. Sapir’s encouragement of a paralyzed older captive and her attempts to ease a child’s anxiety reflect prosocial coping known to buffer stress (Raposa et al., 2016). Agam braided children’s hair, maintaining dignity and routine amid chaos. Aviva Siegel, the wife of Keith Siegel and also taken hostage, recounted how Liri Albag and Agam Berger cheered up Keith during a particularly dark time.

Agam Berger responded that Keith often cheered them up (60 Minutes, 2025). Humor was employed to uplift others. For example, Sapir referred to the tunnels as “the number one attraction in Gaza” and Emily held a lice competition. Humor and prosocial behavior may help shift attention away from fear and despair, anchor individuals to roles beyond “victim,” and build community.

Keith’s imagined conversations with family members illustrate the resilience-enhancing effect of perceived connection. Remembering their social connections, through inner dialogues, religious rituals, or visualizing loved ones, was a coping strategy for many hostages. For example, one hostage, Omer Shem-Tov described how on Fridays, he could feel the warmth of his mother’s Shabbat candles being lit (at his home) (Israel National News, 2025). Whether real or imagined, humans can draw on relational bonds to sustain hope and emotional stability in adverse conditions.

Spirituality

For many, faith and spiritual practice can provide purpose in life. So too, in the horrors of captivity, faith appears in these accounts to have helped strengthen resilience. Agam described choosing “the path of faith,” grounding herself in religious observance even when it required bold acts such as refusing to light a fire on the Shabbat or praying under guard. Sapir repeatedly recited Psalm 27, a ritual she had begun before October 7, using its familiar words to regulate fear and remind herself of God’s presence in the tunnels. Keith used gratitude statements to help him regulate his emotions. Moran drew strength from a brief Hebrew prayer she heard on a captor’s radio—an unexpected spiritual signal that helped her hold on during her lowest moment. She also described actively searching for “signs of hope.” Eli Sharabi talked about how the captives he was with attempted to keep a Shabbat ritual together saving a little pita for the Shabbat bread (Sharabi, 2025a), and Omer Shem-Tov described how faith sustained him (Israel National

News, 2025). Spirituality here wasn’t always about a theological certainty; for many, it was about a rhythm, a relationship, or a reminder of identity, consistent with research showing that religious coping can restore meaning, reduce isolation, and fortify perseverance under extreme stress (Pargament, 1997; Schwalm et al., 2022).

Preserving Agency

Captivity can create conditions ripe for moral injury, a deep distress that can come from committing or witnessing actions that violate one’s fundamental moral beliefs. In captivity, the helplessness, forced compliance, degradation, and the erosion of personal agency can increase the risk of moral injury (Litz et al., 2009). In these accounts, self-transcendent purpose is described as a way of preserving personal agency. Viktor Frankl wrote that “everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances” (Frankl, 2006). Several survivors echoed this insight, describing moments when they feared they would lose their moral compass or sense of self. Resilience here took the form of refusal—not necessarily the ability to resist physically, but the refusal to surrender internally. Emily refused to “look down”; Moran defined collapsing as “letting him win.” Faith, helping others, and thinking of those at home fighting for them, were all ways to preserve agency.

Stories from captives throughout history include similar resilience strategies being employed, with a focus on self-transcendent purpose. For example, the Turkish prisoners during the Korean War are noted for their resilience, maintaining morale by staying unified and socially connected (A News, 2024). Navy Vice Admiral James Stockdale, who spent seven years in Hoa Lo Prison in Vietnam, focused on his leadership, organizing a system of communication and expectations for prisoner behavior codified by the acronym “Back US” which included “Unity over

Self” (U.S. Naval Academy Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership, n.d.). This helped socially connect the captives, as well as helped give them a sense of purpose and agency. At the same prison, Navy Lieutenant Porter Halyburton credits his survival to recognizing he could retain agency with his attitude, echoing Frankl’s quote above. He looked for meaning and signs of God, whether it was a ray of sunshine or a green leaf poking in through the shutter, and maintained social connection by writing poems and songs for his family and praying with captives (Johnson, 2024). Louis Zamperini, an Army Air Force Second Lieutenant held as a prisoner of war by the Japanese in World War II credits his faith, hope of seeing family, and seeking opportunities to influence his environment for the better as supporting his resilience (Houston, 2020).

In Army H2F doctrine, one pillar of health is spiritual readiness, which is the ability to “endure and overcome” adversity through beliefs, values, and purpose that guide actions under pressure (Department of the Army, 2020). The hostages’ accounts suggest the importance of focusing on self-transcendent purpose. The Army deliberately seeks to develop capacities for resilience long before soldiers encounter hardship by cultivating character, reinforcing shared purpose, supporting ethical decision-making, and fostering cohesive, service-oriented teams (Department of the Army, 2019). Preparing for future challenges, therefore, is not only about anticipating external threats but about cultivating the internal capacities—a sense of purpose, growth orientation, connection, and personal agency—that enable individuals to endure when circumstances exceed their control (Department of the Army, 2020).

Implications for Leader Development

These accounts offer practical insights that fit the themes above and the Army’s focus on spiritual readiness within H2F.

1) Help people build a “why” that holds under pressure.

Across the accounts, the survivors describe holding on by focusing on faith, family, duty, or a clear inner determination (e.g., “if I break, he wins”).

2) Support spiritual readiness through concrete practices.

In these accounts, spiritual readiness often shows up through simple, repeatable practices—prayer or Psalms for some, Shabbat observance when possible, and gratitude routines. Leader development can highlight that concrete practices can help people stay grounded under stress, without prescribing any particular practice.

3) Train to notice “choice points” and make small choices for agency.

Survivors describe small, repeatable choices—directing attention from despair to optimism, using self-talk, keeping simple routines, looking for “signs of hope,” and small acts of caring for others. Training can help people practice noticing these moments and taking the next constructive action under stress.

4) Use connection to build morale.

Connection helped people endure: mutual support, small caregiving acts, and even imagined conversations with loved ones when isolated. Several accounts describe humor and small acts of service (e.g., braiding hair, simple competitions) as ways to support dignity and morale—without denying hardship.

5) Keep resilience talk realistic.

Resilience does not guarantee survival. The goal is to help people endure and keep integrity, while staying honest about what no one can control. These accounts illustrate constructive coping under coercive captivity, but they should not be read as implying that those who were killed or traumatized lacked purpose, faith, or inner strength. In deliberate brutality, many outcomes

remain outside individual control; leader development should teach resilience with humility about those limits.

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