Reports: Newly freed hostages were abused, now suffer malnutrition, heart disorders

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/reports-newly-freed-hostages-were-abused-now-suffer-malnutrition-heart-disorders/>

The three latest hostages who were released from Gaza after 491 days of captivity are suffering from severe physical and mental deterioration, including malnutrition, decreased muscle mass, heart disorders, and prolonged infection, according to health officials quoted by Hebrew media on Sunday.

Outlets also shared initial testimony from the three, citing conversations in which their family members said that the former hostages all endured physical and psychological abuse during their captivity.

Or Levy, Ohad Ben Ami and Eli Sharabi were [released](https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaunt-and-frail-hostages-eli-sharabi-or-levy-and-ohad-ben-ami-freed-after-16-months/) by the Hamas terror group Saturday looking gaunt and unsteady on their feet, 16 months after they were kidnapped from Kibbutz Be’eri and the Nova music festival in the October 7, 2023, onslaught.

Health officials quoted by the Ynet news site noted that some injuries after prolonged exposure to harsh conditions are not immediately visible.

Levy and Sharabi were being treated at Sheba Medical Center, while Ben Ami was admitted to Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center.

Sheba director Yael Nir-Frankel said the consequences of “491 long days in captivity are evident on the two returnees… To hold people in captivity for so long means a deterioration of their condition.”

Reacting to difficult images of the three men returning to Israel, families of hostages and thousands of supporters around the country [took to the streets](https://www.timesofisrael.com/hostage-families-call-for-all-in-one-release-after-3-captives-return-emaciated/?utm_source=article_hpsidebar&utm_medium=desktop_site&utm_campaign=these-are-the-17-hostages-yet-to-be-returned-in-phase-one-of-gaza-ceasefire) demanding that the government see the ongoing deal with Hamas through to its latter stages to ensure the release of all those still held captive in Gaza.

According to Channel 12 news, the former captives were often given only a quarter of a pita per day to eat, and there were periods when they were only allowed to relieve themselves twice a day, at specific times.

The television outlet reported that Levy, 34, was held with other hostages for the entirety of his captivity in Gaza, mainly in the terror group’s tunnels.

He showered only every few months and was barefoot for 491 days, wearing shoes for the first time on Saturday morning, according to the report.

Levy was not sure until Saturday that his [wife Eynav](https://www.timesofisrael.com/eynav-levy-32-mom-of-toddler-who-loved-to-dance/) was killed on October 7, 2023, when Hamas terrorists attacked the Nova music festival near Kibbutz Re’im. Their now 3-year-old son Almog has been with his grandparents since Levy was kidnapped and his wife killed.

According to the report, Levy heard from one of his Hamas guards that his brother Michael was campaigning for his release when he spoke at the UN last year.

He lost some 20 kilograms (44 pounds) during his 16 months in captivity, though the hostages were given more food in recent days in an attempt to improve their health before their release, Channel 12 reported.

Levy, along with Sharabi, 52, and Ben Ami, 56, appeared extremely thin, frail and unsteady on his feet as the three were handed over to the Red Cross at a Hamas ceremony in Gaza on Saturday morning.

Separately, a hostage freed during the past few weeks has reportedly since testified that they were kept chained in an airless tunnel by their captors, unable to stand or walk, for almost the entire period they were held hostage.

The family of the hostage asked that they not be identified, Channel 12 reported on Sunday, using both male and female terminology to relay their testimony as not to provide any details as to their identity. The outlet described the testimony as among the gravest to be heard from any of the freed hostages to date.

The TV network quoted the hostage as saying that for more than 15 months, “the terrorists kept me in chains inside a tunnel. The tunnel was dark and airless… I could not walk or stand,” they said. “Only close to my release did the terrorists remove the chains, and I learned to walk again.”

Sixteen Israeli hostages have been freed so far under the ceasefire deal which went into effect last week: four female civilians, five female IDF soldiers and seven male civilians. In addition, five Thai hostages were released late last month outside the framework of the deal with Israel.

On Saturday evening, Prof. Gil Fire, deputy director of the Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center where Ohad Ben Ami is being treated, said the former hostage was suffering severe malnourishment.

Ben Ami lost a “significant amount of his body weight,” Fire said, “and we are prepared to address the additional health consequences of prolonged captivity under terrible conditions.”

He noted that Ben Ami was “strong spirited and inspiring, and accompanied by a strong family,” who he said would “help us in the coming stages” of the former hostage’s recovery.

“We’re doing everything possible to enable Ohad and his family to get through these exciting but difficult moments,” he said, adding that the returned hostages’ conditions “reminds us of the urgency” of the quick return of the other hostages still in Gaza.

Ben Ami’s sister-in-law, Ayelet Hakim, told Radio 103FM on Sunday morning that she “really didn’t recognize him” when she first saw images of him being released the previous day.

“It was terrible,” said said. “I knew what all three of them looked like in theory, if you can call it that, and I didn’t really recognize Ohad. But I knew it was him because of his character, not because I recognized him.”

“It was a real shock to see him get out of the car [in Gaza] like that. Everyone around me shouted, ‘It’s Ohad, it’s Ohad,’ and I tried to understand if I was really seeing Ohad in front of me,” she said.

“It was hard to see him so thin and pale and really you can see that he is someone who hasn’t been fed, hasn’t eaten properly for a whole year and four months,” she says.

Hakim’s sister, Ben Ami’s wife Raz, was freed during the November 2023 truce.

At Sheba Medical Center, where Levy and Sharabi were receiving care, hospital director Yael Frenkel Nir said on Sunday that the former hostages had returned from Gaza in “poor” medical condition.

“The consequences of 491 long days in captivity are evident on the two returnees who arrived today and their medical condition is poor. This is the fourth time in the current framework that we have received returnees and the situation is more serious this time,” she told reporters.

Channel 12 quoted officials at the hospital as saying the freed hostages’ state of health raises “profound and serious concerns” regarding those still held in captivity.

In the first official Health Ministry update after initial medical checks in the hours following their release on Saturday evening, representative Dr. Hagar Mizrahi said in a press conference from Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center that the three were suffering from severe malnutrition and lost significant body weight during their 491 days in captivity.

“These are difficult scenes,” she said, though doctors were also “excited to see them walking on their own two feet, upright and lucid.”

Mizrahi, the head of the General Medicine Division at the Health Ministry, said that staff was also treating the families of released hostages, many of whom were so busy fighting for their loved ones’ release that they didn’t have time to care for themselves over the past 16 months.

The returned hostages and their families will receive a wide range of therapies designed to address both their physical and emotional needs, she said.

Amid the initial reports on the released hostages’ poor health conditions, senior officials in the defense establishment reportedly denounced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after he expressed outrage and threatened Hamas over the emaciated condition of the three former captives.

“What did he expect?” Channel 12 quoted one source saying. “It should have come as no surprise to him. The prime minister is familiar with the intelligence material and the medical opinions. The more time that passes, the more the releases are going to become difficult in terms of the hostages’ appearance. [His comments] are aimed at his political base, because these are pictures [of the gaunt, weak hostages] that harm him politically, but there’s nothing substantive behind them.”

In response, an unnamed source close to Netanyahu said that Israel was not previously aware that Hamas was deliberately starving the hostages.

Another [17 Israeli hostages](https://www.timesofisrael.com/these-are-the-17-hostages-yet-to-be-returned-in-phase-one-of-gaza-ceasefire/) are slated to be released in the initial stage of the ongoing truce deal with Hamas, of whom the terror group has said eight are dead.

Hamas has so far released 21 hostages — civilians, soldiers, and Thai nationals — during the ceasefire that began in January. The terror group freed 105 civilians during a weeklong truce in late November 2023, and four hostages were released before that.

Eight hostages have been rescued by troops alive, and the bodies of 40 hostages have also been recovered, including three mistakenly killed by the Israeli military as they tried to escape their captors.

Hamas is also holding two Israeli civilians who entered the Strip in 2014 and 2015, as well as the body of an IDF soldier who was killed in 2014. The body of another IDF soldier, also killed in 2014, was recovered from Gaza in January.