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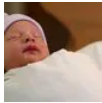
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Natalie Raanan and mother Judith Tai Raanan speak on the phone with President Joe Biden from Jerusalem on Oct. 2023, after being held hostage and later released by Hamas. (United States embassy in Jerusalem)

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Judith and Natalie Raanan, a mother and daughter from Evanston who had been hostages of terrorist group Hamas since Oct. 7, have been released, according to the Israeli and United States governments.

“I feel very, very good,” Uri Raanan, Natalie’s father and Judith’s ex-husband, told the Tribune Friday afternoon. “I’m going to sleep tonight. I spoke with my daughter, she’s feeling good, she looks good.”

Natalie, 17, and Judith, 59, were taken hostage by Hamas, which controls the Gaza strip, during a coordinated attack on Oct. 7. They had been visiting relatives at Nahal Oz in southern Israel when Hamas operatives entered the kibbutz during a surprise attack on the region, Ben Raanan, Natalie’s brother and Judith’s stepson, told the Tribune.

Natalie’s family members had last heard from her the morning of Oct. 7, U.S. time, he said.

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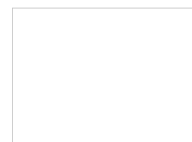
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Uri Raanan said he spoke with Natalie and Judith by phone Friday afternoon as they reunited with family in central Israel. He said he asked Natalie if she had been hurt, “but she looks good and everything is good.”

Natalie is set to come home to Evanston next week, her father said. The first thing he will do when she returns is “hug her and kiss her, of course.”



Uri Raanan said he also spoke with President Joe Biden and Gov. J.B. Pritzker Friday afternoon. Both men were “very, very caring,” he said.

“I thanked the president for his efforts and told him I appreciate it,” Raanan said.

As news of their release began to spread early Friday, Uri Raanan kept his emotions close to his chest, waiting for the Israeli Defense Forces to confirm Judith and Natalie’s safety firsthand.

“I’m waiting for my daughter,” he said.

Uri Raanan, father of Natalie Raanan and ex-husband of Judith Raanan, speaks outside his home in Bannockburn Oct. 20, 2023, to express his emotions after Natalie and Judith were released by Hamas. (Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune)

Their release was confirmed later that afternoon by the Israeli and U.S. governments.

“Judith and Natalie are in Israel, where a team from the United States embassy will meet with them shortly,” Matthew Miller, spokesperson for the U.S.

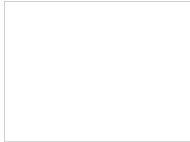
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Department of State, said at a Friday afternoon news conference.

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“We’re very anxious to be able to reunite them with their loved ones,” Miller said. “We welcome their release; we share in the relief that their families, friends and loved ones are feeling.”

[[Brother of Evanston teen held hostage by Hamas speaks on hope for a safe return: ‘We are a peaceful family’](#)]

Illinois Democrat Rep. Jan Schakowsky was one of the first state leaders to share the news of Judith and Natalie Raanans’ release with constituents.

“They are currently in good hands with the Red Cross, but I cannot wait to welcome them back home,” Schakowsky wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Schakowsky said she is sending her constituents love and strength.

Pritzker released a statement that he is “incredibly relieved” that Judith and Natalie have been released. The pair are now receiving medical attention, he said.

“I cannot wait to welcome them back home after demonstrating immense strength and bravery in the face of unthinkable terror,” Pritzker said in the statement. “We must continue to advocate and pray for the safe return of those still held by Hamas.”

Chabad Director of Media Motti Seligson wrote on X that the pair had been released through Egypt.

Natalie was born near Chicago but spent most of the first decade of her life in Israel with mom Judith, her family said. They moved back to the U.S. and Natalie graduated from Deerfield High School in the spring.

She had hopes of going into fashion design, interior decorating or tattooing, her brother told the Tribune earlier this week.

“She’s not a politician or a soldier,” Ben Raanan had said of his sister. “She is an artist.”

Natalie had traveled in Italy to celebrate her high school graduation before heading to Israel with her mother, her brother said.

Judith was born in Israel and often goes by her Hebrew name, Yehudit, or Yehudit bat Tamar, which means daughter of Tamar. She works in Evanston as

an aesthetician and has also worked as a life coach.

“Judith is a very kind of spiritual person who loves people,” Ben Raanan said.

Rabbi Meir Hecht of Evanston Chabad called the news of Judith and Natalie’s release “overwhelming.” Both Judith and Natalie are active in the Chabad community, he said, and have always been kind and generous to other congregants.

“Judith was always excited to be part of the congregation and spiritual activities. A very spiritual woman, like I said, an artist,” Hecht said. “She and Natalie are both such kind spirits and such kind souls. People that would never harm someone else. To know that they were harmed in such a way, it adds to the pain so much more painfully and so much deeper.”

Evanston residents held onto pain and worry quietly during the nearly two weeks the mother and daughter were held hostage, not wanting to jeopardize release efforts, Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss said.

“I think there’s a really strong pent-up desire in the community to express solidarity and love,” Biss said. “Everyone was holding out hope, but I know that everyone’s minds, we’re going to dark places. To see that they’re safe, being treated and are going to come home and we’re going to see them here in Evanston is a source of unbelievable joy and relief, but also a reminder that there is hope in this world.”

At the news conference, Miller said 10 Americans were still unaccounted for in Gaza. Some are being held hostage by Hamas, along with around 200 other people from multiple countries.

Securing release for hostages remains a top priority for the Biden administration, Miller said. Biden and Department of State representatives met with Israeli families of hostages last week.

“It is impossible to adequately put into words the agony they’re feeling of not knowing the fate of their loved ones, worrying relentlessly about them, for their safety, for their security, for their well-being,” Miller said. “No family anywhere should have to experience this torture.”

At Friday’s news conference, Miller thanked the Qatari government for its role in negotiating the pair’s release. Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida said Qatari

mediation efforts contributed to Hamas' decision to release Judith and Natalie, [Reuters reported](#) Friday.

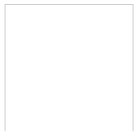
"In this instance, we very much appreciate their assistance," Miller said.

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin said he was "incredibly relieved" to hear about the release of Natalie and Judith.

"I pray for their health and safe return to their family," Durbin wrote on X, and called for the release of the remaining hostages.

In a statement, U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth called Judith and Natalie's release "an undeniable relief — not only for those of us who've been working for their release but for their family, friends and all their loved ones who can breathe a little easier today."

Duckworth called for Hamas to allow medical aid to come to hostages still in captivity, noting that the condition of many others remain unknown.



Afternoon Briefing

Weekdays

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"This is — and should be — a day of celebration for them, but I know there are still so many families going through the unimaginable anguish of worrying about the fate of their loved ones still being held hostage and my heart goes out to them today," Duckworth said.

Rabbi Meir Hecht speaks in reaction to reports of hostages Judith Raanan and her daughter Natalie, of Evanston, being released by Hamas on Oct. 20, 2023. (Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune)

Ben Raanan had shared a plea with the Tribune Wednesday for Hamas to release proof of Natalie and Judith's well-being. The terrorist group released its first video footage of a hostage, 21-year-old Mia Schem, on Tuesday.

Abu Ubaida, a spokesman for Hamas' armed wing, said they released the citizens "for humanitarian reasons, and to prove to the American people and the world

that the claims made by (President Joe) Biden and his fascist administration are false and baseless,” Reuters [reported](#).

Reuters also reported that Hamas said more than 20 hostages have been killed by Israeli airstrikes, with 50 more held by armed enclaves throughout the area.

Chicago Tribune’s Chloe Hilles and Alexandra Hulvalchick contributed.

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