

The Iran Deal: Liberal Dilemmas

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I have struggled over this sermon more than any of my hundreds of others.

The first thing that vexed me was whether to speak about Iran at all. Why is it relevant to this setting? Isn't it more suitable to a public lecture or a debate? I concluded that it is just not proper to ignore the 20 year grind on Iran that is coming to a head – literally - this week. It weighs heavy on so many of us - rightly so.

Having concluded that I needed to speak about it, I struggled over what to say. What could I add to the cascading cacophony already expressed? Anyone can go online and read to their heart's desire both learned - and unlearned - views. You can study the opinions of military experts, nuclear scientists, politicians, international relations specialists. You can peruse partisan prosecution of politically proper positions – people who will tell you with such impressive certainty that a Democrat must support this; a Republican must support that; a liberal must believe this; a conservative must believe that. They are so sure of themselves; what remarkable confidence.

If you want, you can even probe the prognostications of spiritual leaders, whose knowledge of nuclear physics is – well... let's put it this way: When I was introduced to physics on the first day of ninth grade – that was enough for me to rule out certain career choices. I knew then and there that I would never be a nuclear inspector. My take on fellow clergy is that they had similar experiences.

I am mindful that many in our synagogue are activists. We align on both sides of the political divide and on both sides of the Iranian issue. It is a testament to us and to the Jewish community, and is in the best traditions of the Jewish people. Jewish teachings propel us towards activism. The rabbis are emphatic: “Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the community and does not, is held responsible for the transgressions of the community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the world and does not, is held responsible for the transgressions of the world.” (Shabbat 54b)

But it is easier to state a principle than to apply a principle. We differ on policy. It is not only legitimate – it should be expected, honored and celebrated. It would be worrying if we all had the same opinion. That would be inconsistent with the diversity we cherish, and would be an offense against Jewish nature! Whenever the rabbis felt that an unhealthy conformity was spreading, they purposely picked a fight – just to get an argument going.

My views on the Iran deal are no better and no worse than your views. I have no special knowledge or unique insight unavailable to you. I do not have sufficient scientific expertise to assess whether the inspection regime is sound. You don't either. And many of the inspection provisions are secret – even the Administration doesn't know them all.

This deal – at best – is a close call. No one should feel too comfortable. Anyone who tells you that it is a slam dunk for them is either fooling you or fooling themselves.

Let me focus on two aspects of the deal that are especially critical for the Jewish community:

I. Iran

I am a liberal. We live in one of the most liberal neighborhoods in the country. I want to support this deal.

Liberals believe that people can change. We believe that countries can change; that even enemies can overcome conflict and learn to live together. History is replete with positive examples, including two peace accords that Israel signed with Muslim Arab neighbors.

Liberals are impatient with slow progress. We believe in the potential of rapid change. We are willing to break from conventional wisdom and established positions. We often adapt tradition, viewing the past not only as a source of empowerment, but a potential prison that could entrap us in false thinking. We believe in break-through diplomacy that can change the world for the better. We are optimistic in nature, and tend to emphasize potential benefits more than risks.

My understanding of Jewish values is that the repair of society is at the core of our faith. Judaism insisted on freedom, justice, righteousness, social morality, and the prevention and ultimate elimination of war. I am not a pacifist but I believe in peace. We are commanded to pursue peace and I take that command seriously.

And therefore, I am drawn to this agreement and identify deeply with its goals and aspirations. At the heart of the agreement is a classically liberal assumption.

The unstated wager of the Western powers is that by 2025 or 2030 Iran will change. Iran will open up to international influence. From the West and from the East, business interests will pour into Iran, flooding the country with commercial initiatives that will bring more money, more opportunity and more openness to the Iranian people, who will not want to return to pariah status. Iran will build a more prosperous and more diverse economy, and the wealth will be spread amongst many more people, thus creating a disincentive to build a bomb.

Perhaps. What do you think? It might work out this way, and if it does, it will be good for everyone. Experts tell us most Iranians, unlike their leadership and hard-line supporters, are broadly educated, Western-leaning, entrepreneurial, industrious and inclined to peaceful coexistence. Before the revolution Israel and Iran were allies. How nice to envision that it might happen again one day.

But it is a high-risk high-stakes gamble. It is equally plausible, if not more so, that most of the wealth will go into the pockets of a regime that will continue to harbor anti-Western and anti-Semitic passions, and will continue to suppress its own population – and will continue to work towards nuclear weapons capacity. Iran has never abandoned its nuclear ambitions. If it had,

how – despite decades of sanctions and covert efforts to thwart its progress – would they be where they are – two months away from enough fissile material to build a bomb?

The Iranian regime is not led by peace-loving moderates who represent the best traditions of Persian hospitality. The Iranian regime is anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, intolerant, misogynistic, fundamentalist and expansionist. No liberal should be complacent about such an anti-liberal regime. With all due respect to bloviating bloggers, prognosticating pundits, and cerebral celebrities – listen to the people in the region who know Iran best and who have the most at stake.

Even if the deal works precisely as its architects predict, Iran will still be a menace for years to come. Once the agreement goes into effect, it must still be a liberal project to thwart the illiberal ambitions of Iran. Israel and Iran do not simply disagree on policies. Iranian leaders believe Israel to be a foreign and illegitimate presence in the Middle East, a region they seek to dominate. And they will have billions more to pursue these goals. If Jewish history has taught us anything, it is to take seriously those who threaten to kill you.

The Iran deal might still be the best alternative, but even its strongest supporters acknowledge that Iran will be more empowered, tens of billions of dollars flowing into its coffers. In the short term it is this that worries many even more than the longer-term nuclear threat. It worries the Administration too, which is why – in order to counter the increased conventional threat – we will be providing more – and more sophisticated - arms to our allies, including Israel.

Even after years of tough sanctions, Iran has taken control of four Arab capitals (Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Sana). Even after years of tough sanctions, Iran is encircling Israel, to the north, arming Hezbollah with a hundred thousand rockets; to the south, resupplying Hamas after two devastating rounds of fighting; to the east, encroaching on the Golan Heights, once the quietest border in the Middle East.

There is a huge gamble at the heart of the agreement. At the expiration of many of its provisions - in 10-15 years – a sanctions-liberated Iran will be free to develop a new generation of nuclear hardware that will make the production of nuclear weapons much easier than today. It is not only a question of Iran cheating on the deal - but the deal, itself, sanctions Iranian nuclear capabilities. It leaves in place an advanced nuclear infrastructure – monitored – perhaps well – but still there.

Iran says that it is only interested in civilian nuclear power; that it has no intention to develop nuclear weapons, and that such weapons are forbidden by Islam. Perhaps. What do you think? We liberals tend to believe – we want to believe – that our opponents are like us: more good than bad, more trustworthy than dishonest: that when they give their word, they mean it. We are often right.

But it is hard, then, to explain how we have come this far. Why would an oil-rich nation, with the fourth largest oil reserves in the world and the second largest natural gas reserves need civilian nuclear power in the first place? Why would it endure decades of sanctions, pour

billions of dollars into a secret nuclear project, and risk military attack on its facilities if it had no intention to weaponize nuclear technology?

And some pundits prognosticate that even if Iran had a bomb, they would never be so irrational as to use it. Perhaps. What do you think? We liberals tend to believe – we want to believe – that our opponents are like us: rational, reasonable and violence averse. But it is easier to be sanguine about this prospect from a columnist's office in New York than a prime minister's office in Jerusalem.

Even the pursuit of nuclear weapons carries the risk of nuclear proliferation in the most volatile region in the world. Iran's neighbors hint that they might feel compelled to acquire nuclear weapons of their own.

Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East would eventually imperil the West, because sooner or later someone might get their hands on a bomb – and then – the next 9/11 in New York – or the next 7/7 in London – could be unconventional: Pandora's nuclear box, shut tightly seventy years ago last month, after Nagasaki, would be pried open, and the most dangerous evils of the world released into the atmosphere once again. The current refugee crisis proves that if we ignore the Middle East the Middle East will come to us. As Europe's failure to stop the Syrian war has brought the Syrian war to Europe, so our failure to prevent nuclear proliferation will bring nuclear proliferation to us. Would a terrorist group hesitate to use nuclear weapons if it could? What do you think?

I do not discount the possibility that Iran will change. It is possible. I do not discount the possibility that the inspection regime will unfold more or less as designed. Many nuclear experts insist that it will and that any cheating will be detected easily and rapidly.

But I do not discount the capacity of evil people to harbor evil intentions and perpetrate evil deeds. I do not believe that extremism has passed from the world and that everyone is a liberal like me, raised and educated in the principles of Jefferson, Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, and steeped in the atmosphere of moderation and vigorous intellectual pluralism that Judaism encourages. I do not underestimate my inability to fully grasp the mindset of religious fervor, and thus, I do not discount the possibility that I am unable to fully assess the intentions of the other side, unwisely and mistakenly assuming their honesty, integrity and capacity.

I believe it to be a distortion of liberal values to accommodate, minimize, overlook or excuse assaults on human dignity and freedom. There is nothing progressive about rationalizing barbarism. There is nothing progressive in explaining away the murderous threats of those sworn to kill. There is nothing progressive in ruling out force to prevent the spread of destructive ideologies. There is nothing progressive about discounting the religious fervor of the religiously fervent. There is nothing progressive about distrusting Israel more than the dark forces that seek to destroy her. There is nothing progressive about anti-Zionism. And there is nothing progressive about anti-Semitism parading as anti-Zionism.

II. American Jews and Israel

We have gone overboard in our debate, don't you think? Our rhetoric is a bit overheated, no?

George Orwell wrote: "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought...the invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases can be prevented [only] if one is constantly on guard against them. Every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain."

The language of this debate has corrupted thought. It is as if portions of our brain have been anaesthetized. The issue is not are you a war-monger or a peace maker. It is shameful to have formulated and perpetuated a perception that if you are against this deal you want war, and if you are for this deal you want peace. It is precisely the increased prospects of war that lead many to oppose the deal. They don't want war, and therefore note that, in their opinion, this deal makes war more likely. It is beyond the pale to equate opponents of the deal with Iranian hardliners chanting "Death to America." They accused Churchill of being a war monger too.

At the same time, to accuse the proponents of the deal of anti-Semitism, or that they don't care if Jews are led once again to the gas chambers, is, also, reprehensible. We are better than that. To equate the deal's advocates with Chamberlain and Vienna with Munich – is also beyond the pale. To accuse Jews supporting the deal that they betray Israel is as noxious as accusing Jews opposing the deal that they betray America.

Jews are on different sides of the issue. Jewish officials are on different sides. Jewish activists are on different sides. Rabbis are on different sides. And it is not only the Jews: both the efforts to promote and defeat the deal are broadly supported and well-funded across the country. So the deal might be good; it might not be good. Don't hurl the ready-made phrases "war-monger" or "peace maker." They are beneath us and anaesthetize our communal brain. Recognize that like anything in life – there are strengths and weaknesses, trade-offs, uncertainties and risks.

We need to tone down the rhetoric. We cannot, in the course of legitimate disagreements today, alienate the very people we need tomorrow. We cannot allow Israel to become a partisan issue. If support for Israel becomes largely confined to one political party we will regret it for decades to come. That would be a strategic threat of the highest order. The Israeli government, too, must do some serious soul-searching and take responsibility for its own contributions to the erosion of Israel's standing in progressive circles and political parties.

We have many difficult days ahead – even if everything works out precisely as the agreement intends – and nothing in life works out precisely as we intend. We will need to work hard tomorrow to heal the wounds of today; reducing tensions, correcting mistakes and reuniting with our many friends in the United States to protect and strengthen Israel.

We are entitled to be interested in Israel. We are entitled to promote Israel's welfare. We are entitled to feel a special connection with the Jewish state. We are entitled to lobby our government. We are entitled to support political leaders who agree with us and seek to defeat those who do not. Accusations of disloyalty directed at Jewish officials and the Jewish

community are the most pernicious of all of the corrupted language of this debate. We must be constantly on guard against them.

We should be loyal to Israel. Israel constitutes the greatest collective achievement of the Jewish people in two millennia. We should be supportive of Israel – a plucky 21st century democracy surrounded by medieval barbarism. We should be protective of Israel, the most stable and pro-American outpost in a violent and chaotic anti-American region. We should be proud of Israel, a marvel of modern ingenuity and innovation. What the Jews can do if only given half a chance! Israel is a liberal project that restores freedom, dignity and self-determination to the Jewish people. Israel is an island of liberal democracy within a sea of anti-liberal autocracies supported by illiberal hypocrisies.

That accusations of disloyalty come not only from the right but also from the left is a betrayal of all that we hold dear and have fought for decades to uphold. With their own breath they resurrect the spirit of McCarthy. They have become unmoored from the great principles they say they affirm, adrift in a sea of confusion.

When we speak of loyalty, what we mean is not that you must always agree with me about our country's interests. What we mean, is that you stay true to your conscience, consistent with the spirit of liberty that makes this country exceptional.

What is truly disloyal to America is the effort to silence people and cut off debate by imposing some kind of patriotism test. We have always lived to regret that. We have lived to regret suspecting Japanese Americans of disloyalty. We have lived to regret suspecting African Americans of disloyalty. They were right to insist that it was the country that was betraying its ideals, not they who were betraying the country. We have lived to regret mistaking unity with uniformity and consensus with conformity.

If you support the Iran deal because, in part, you believe it is good for Israel – good for you. If you oppose the Iran deal because, in part, you believe it is not good for Israel – good for you. It is entirely legitimate and natural to take the well being of Israel into account. What would be unnatural for American Jews is not to take Israel into account.

And there is nothing disloyal or illiberal about our commitment to Jewish life and to Jewish continuity. Jews do not have to disappear from the world in order to prove our liberal bona fides. We do not have to abandon particularism to prove our commitment to universalism. Is the era of Jewish distinctiveness over? That's it: our work is done? We have completed our historical task?

We gave the world monotheism out of which also emerged Christianity and Islam. We asserted the philosophy of the Jews – liberty, dignity, social justice, decency, a yearning for peace, the rule of law – and that's it – the world is now repaired – messianic times have arrived. Hallelujah! We are done; we can pack our bags and bring this long historical run to a close, content that the world no longer needs the Jewish people because Jewish values have triumphed so conclusively.

Really: America is the New Zion and Charleston – or New York, or Washington – or London, or Paris, or Brussels, or Strasburg, or The Hague - is the New Jerusalem? Such fine aspirations for the world, if only it wasn't our world.

As the Holocaust is mentioned frequently in this debate, I have reflected on our synagogue mission to Eastern Europe this summer. It is such an important experience; I urge you to do this trip – and do it, not on your own, but with us. Speak with those who have participated and you will hear how deeply it affected them.

More than a million people a year visit Auschwitz. Each of them responds differently. I can't stop thinking about Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz. He was the most prolific mass murderer in the history of humanity. He was the first to mechanize murder so proficiently. In prison after the War, he wrote, with pride, about the technology of death that he oversaw. He considered it a great achievement, an outstanding professional accomplishment. The Fuhrer commanded to kill off the Jews, and Hoess killed more of them than anyone had before.

Apparently, Hoess never murdered any of the prisoners with his own hand. He was not the brutal sadist that we often picture when thinking of Nazis. By all accounts, he was an attentive family man. He loved his five children and they loved him. He took the time to spend weekends and afternoons on family outings.

At the edge of the camp there is a locked gate, beyond which stands the Hoess family home. The mansion abuts Auschwitz. The contrast is incomprehensible. On this side - is the cruelest evil, suffering, slavery and depravity ever devised by the human creature. Over the fence – a football field away - within the grasp of your hand – is freedom and normalcy: tranquility, a happy family, an attentive father, a loving mother, laughter, gaiety, joy: hearth and home. Hoess lived with his family within eyeshot of the gas chamber. Hedwig, his wife, testified that these years were the best and most comfortable years of their lives. Hoess made no attempt to move his family away. To the contrary, even after he was promoted and transferred to Berlin, he kept his family in the mansion. They didn't want to move to Berlin since their lives were so comfortable in Auschwitz. The children later described how their mother insisted they wash the strawberries they picked in the garden because they were covered with dust. It was the dust of human beings.

We are able to tolerate in ourselves sharp contrasts and rationalize inexcusable contradictions: Tranquility for my family – on the grounds of Auschwitz; a family man who thought nothing of annihilating millions of other families. It is not only that some of us are basically good and some of us are basically bad. It is that within all of us is good and bad. Hoess was a human being, not some kind of fictional monster with sub-human or super-human attributes. It is why he was so terrifying. He was human. If he did it; if he thought it, that is, ipso facto, proof that it is within the realm of human possibility.

The contrast between good and evil; the ability of the human creature to be humane and barbaric at the same time in the same person; our ability to wall off atrocity, preventing the stench from invading our happy corner - these are mysteries of the highest order. And because we can never truly understand human beings, we can never devise a policy that is so flawless, so secure, and so air-tight that the outcomes we seek are guaranteed. We should be less sure of ourselves and

more modest in our confidence to control the future. Inaction, however, is also not an option. As Cato the Elder said: “Never is a man as active as when he does nothing.”

And there is another contrast in Auschwitz that jarred me to my core. From inside the camp, behind the locked gate, you notice movement on the grounds of the Hoess mansion. There was a car in the back yard. The garden was manicured. The house looks lived-in.

It turns out that there is a family living there: a normal family – living by the gates of hell – in the monster’s mansion - undeterred by the history of the place or even the million visitors a year who probe the depths of evil emanating from their house. The current occupants explain that this was a Polish house; the Nazis expelled the family that lived there and Hoess moved his family in. After the War, that original family reclaimed their home, eventually selling the property to the ancestors of the current occupants. It is a Polish house, they say, not a Nazi house.

My point is not to moralize or cast judgment on the family. My point is that we distance ourselves from other people’s concerns. It is just the way we are. A Polish family can live normally in the most abnormal place. They can find peace and quiet in a house of horrors and not be terrified by the contrast. They may be good people – I assume they are. I assume they sympathize with the Jews – and others - murdered at their doorstep seven decades ago. But it does not deter them from establishing a normal existence on the grounds of Auschwitz!

My point is that no one is going to care about the future of the Jews more than the Jews. It is just the way of the world. No one is going to hurt our hurt or dream our dream more than us.

This is how we should evaluate issues that affect the future of the Jewish people and the well-being of the Jewish state: Not to ignore the other dimensions, but to consider the Jewish dimensions as well.

And if we reach differing conclusions, let us at least assume the other’s good faith and good intentions. And once the debate ends, let us reconstitute, reunite and re-embrace for the sake of tomorrow’s struggles.

Kol Yisrael areivin zeh ba’zeh – say the Rabbis: All Jews are responsible one for the other.

To abandon this is to abandon all.