

Rabbi Alexis Berk  
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### Iran Around and Around

A few weeks ago, we rabbis and cantors were all gathered at a New Orleans Jewish clergy council meeting, firming up some details about upcoming events and sharing some general collegiality. And, the conversation turned to sermons. One member of the council boldly just went ahead and asked: is *anyone* speaking about the Iran deal this high holy days? Heads started shaking – no, definitely not. Every rabbi, for once, agreed. Every rabbi but this one. I said I was going to talk about it. *You?* Surprise. Why would you go there?, they asked. You’re going to make everyone mad, they warned. Good pep talk.

“We are on the verge of fratricide in the Jewish community and it has to stop.” This is a quote from just a few weeks ago, spoken by Greg Rosenbaum, chairman of the National Jewish Democratic Council. The bitterness of the debate on the Iran deal is being called epic. Intra-Jewish name calling and accusations have reached such a pitch that we’ve created for ourselves a secondary problem – a profound problem within our own global Jewish community. Point is, a lot of people are already mad. I was thinking more in terms of thoughtful conversation. I believe in us.

This summer, after much fearful anticipation, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action responding to Iran’s Nuclear Program was released. It was very clear from that day on that the Jewish community would react and respond. We would have to. The risks to Israel – and the world – are too consequential, and the anxiety too high; there would be absolutely no way to remain silent. And, as we all know, we will not remain silent ever – not any more. We pledge that as a people. We don’t accept the idea of standing by. We’ve been through too much to wait and see. We’ve tried that, and we wound up in death camps and gas chambers. Yep; I just said that. We’d love nothing more than to have the human luxury to extend the political benefit of the doubt. But, we are not slow learners and we know our history. This approach just scares us way too much.

So, we do what we know how to do. We get serious right away and mount pressure. We lift our voices and our laptop covers and get on it. I receive daily emails from AIPAC – American Israel Public Affairs Committee. These daily communications organize our activism. They motivate our collective to take up against this agreement, for we will not have a repeat of Jewish slaughter, and that’s what’s on the line here. Any other understanding of the gravity of this, as they convey it, is a careless naïveté that we can ill afford. Three main points AIPAC makes:

1. In [poll](#) after [poll](#), the American public overwhelmingly opposes this deal.
2. The vast [majority](#) of the organized American Jewish community, including the [Anti-Defamation League](#), the [American Jewish Committee](#) and numerous Jewish federations ... across the United States, as well as [hundreds of rabbis](#) across all major Jewish denominations, all oppose this deal.
3. Beyond the Jewish community, prominent leaders from the Christian, Hispanic, African-American, veteran and LGBT communities have been outspoken in opposition to this deal.

Every day, I file AIPAC's emails in a special folder. And, I feel a little terrified. I am unsettled by their pleas. And, their statements are very strong in opposition of this agreement.

But, this is not the only voice in the Jewish mix – AIPAC's approach is one Jewish voice in a cacophony of others. I was walking along Magazine Street recently and I passed a Subaru plastered with bumper stickers including this one: "I'm already against the next war." A few weeks ago, the political and rabbinic arms of the Reform movement – both U.S. and Israeli – offered a joint statement with a much more liberal message. I will share some of it with you. You may like it better than AIPAC's approach. You may not. All of your thoughts and feelings, fears and frustrations fit under this dome. Remember that, okay?

Here is an excerpt from the Reform Movement's statement: "Our tradition teaches us never to wage war without first seeking vigorously the possibility of peace (Deut. 20:10). In that spirit, we applaud the diplomatic efforts of the Obama administration to keep Iran from acquiring or developing nuclear weapons. We thank President Obama for his commitment to diplomacy, and we express our gratitude to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu for keeping the world focused on the danger posed by Iran. [The statement goes on to say:] The end product of the Administration's diplomatic efforts is challenging to analyze. Some argue that it offers the most promising path forward to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state. Others argue that while the agreement has serious flaws, the consequences of rejecting it create far more perils and damage than implementing it would. Still others argue that it does not do enough to prevent and/or contain the danger that a nuclear Iran would pose. We recognize that these arguments have merit: The [plan] does present a way forward, there are real dangers to rejecting it, and it **does not** foreclose Iran's ability to become a nuclear weapons threshold state.

The Reform Movement is large and diverse. Within the Movement, reasonable people - patriotic Americans and passionate Zionists - have expressed different and valid positions on this agreement, articulating the many arguments made by others as well.

We offer these thoughts with the words of the prophet Isaiah (2:4) echoing in our hearts and in our minds: 'They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.'"<sup>1</sup>

Various statements of position on the Iran Agreement are easy to find. They're everywhere. On Tuesday July 14, 2015, in the early afternoon, the Iran Agreement was revealed. By, Shabbat eve, three days later, Friday night July 17, 2015, several of you arrived at services expecting that I might speak on this topic. "I thought it would be the sermon tonight," someone very respectfully offered at the oneg. "I came to hear what you were going to say," he softly admitted. With such an eventful week in the news, surely it would have been a good time to speak from this pulpit with an opinion. Understandable.

But, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the non-denominational Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, expresses concern with the pervasive practice of "speaking out quickly and firmly on public policy issues."<sup>2</sup> He notes that in the month of July alone, "all the major rabbinic bodies in America – Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox – have issued release after release on issues as disparate as the murders in Charleston, the

<sup>1</sup> <http://ccarnet.org/about-us/news-and-events/reform-movement-response-iran-deal/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/on-jewish-leadership-in-a-time-of-crisis/>

Supreme Court gay marriage ruling, the MK David Azoulay controversy in Israel, and now – and most prominently – the agreement with Iran.”<sup>3</sup> At first read, one can think: yes, how imperative, how responsible. Don’t we need to express support or opposition, depending on circumstance? Isn’t that the definition of spiritual and communal engagement? But, Kurtzer makes some nuanced, compelling points that are so relevant to the Iran/Israel issues.

He writes: “I am concerned about the speed of response that is now thought to be standard for Jewish communal organizations to issue their definitive statement. ... This is born of a fear of flat-footedness, and the anxiety that if you are not ‘out front’ on an issue, then you are behind; or worse, that the failure to respond quickly – especially in this era of sound-bites – reflects a lack of relevancy in a fast-moving culture. ...

Still, [he continues] there is something deeply disconcerting about the expectation we have created for our organizations to react this quickly, and especially relating to issues as complex as this one. [Dr. Kurtzer boldly asserts:] I personally believe that a hastily reached decision on an issue with multiple sides, by organizations which mean to represent a wide swath of the community, actually undermines the very credibility of such a position ...

[He goes on] I wish we would ... cultivate the different and vastly superior value ... of being *metunim ba’din*, circumspect in grave matters of law. Exercising caution and responding a little more slowly is not a sign of being asleep at the job; it actually shows a greater reverence for the complexity of the work....”<sup>4</sup>

These issues are terribly complex. And, as with many concerns around Israel and the incendiary Middle East, we get jammed in. We feel that there are no easy answers and no clear solutions, and yet we can’t just shrug. The consequences are too dire. And, so, we go around and around. And, we manage to get plenty more frustrated in the process. In his pivotal book, *My Promised Land*, Israeli journalist Ari Shavit articulates his agony about the intractability of it all – the total impossibility of any virtuous or effective political options in the Middle East. He writes, in crude, unforgettable terms: “I am haunted by the notion that we hold them by the balls and they hold us by the throat. We squeeze and they squeeze back. We are trapped by them and they are trapped by us.”<sup>5</sup> I know you cannot unsee that vulgar imagery; for that, I apologize. It’s just the truest thing I’ve ever heard.

So, this brings us to the question you now must be itching to ask. What do we do with this? **For me, in the current climate, the essence of the concern is this: do we have the freedom to be thoughtful, or uncertain? Do we have the courage to be circumspect? Or, is that an indulgence set aside in this world for the safe and unthreatened?** What if we just don’t know what the future holds with regard to the Iran Agreement or the safety of the State of Israel? Or the world? What if we can’t predict whether diplomacy – or a direct hit – is the effective strategy for our desired peaceful outcome? *What if we can’t actually know?*

“In the mid-1980s, a University of Arizona surgery professor, Marlys H. Witte, proposed teaching a class entitled ‘Introduction to Medical and Other Ignorance.’ Her

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land*, p. 236.

idea was not well received; at one foundation, an official told her he would rather resign than support a class on ignorance.

Dr. Witte was urged to alter the name of the course, but she wouldn't budge. Far too often, she believed, teachers fail to emphasize how much about a given topic is unknown. 'Textbooks spend 8 to 10 pages on pancreatic cancer,' she said some years later, 'without ever telling the student that we just don't know very much about it.' She wanted her students to recognize the limits of knowledge and to appreciate that questions often deserve as much attention as answers. Eventually, the American Medical Association funded the class, which students would fondly remember as 'Ignorance 101.'

... in recent years scholars have made a convincing case that focusing on uncertainty can foster latent curiosity, while emphasizing clarity can convey a warped understanding of knowledge....

People tend to think of not knowing as something to be wiped out or overcome, as if ignorance were simply the absence of knowledge. But answers don't merely resolve questions; they provoke new ones...<sup>6</sup>

I haven't met anyone who likes the Iran deal. Not too many fully understand it. No one thinks it's a panacea. We are not certain and we are not comfortable. No one knows what the future will bring and no one feels secure about this. So, you see, in this case not knowing is not the absence of knowledge – not knowing is the absence of certainty. There is a difference.

Given that, it is not an admirable display of erudition and perception to vilify those making thorny diplomatic choices. It is not a valiant display of principles to demonize those whose conciliatory approach aims to avoid triggering more violence.

And also, it is not an admirable display of pacifism to delegitimize the very real threats to tranquility that the Iran nuclear realities bestow. It is not a valiant display of aspirational harmony to assert that nation shall not *ever* lift up sword against nation, nor study war *any* more.

In a recent discussion of this prickly, fearsome topic, my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Jonathan Blake reminded me of this beautiful Talmudic passage. The passage, this version taught by Rabbi David Hartman, depicts the rival academies of Hillel and Shammai sharply disagreeing on matters of Jewish law. "If the Torah is given by a single God," it asks, "then how can there exist such differing interpretations?" "Make yourself a heart of many rooms," answered the Rabbis, "and bring into it the words of the house of Shammai and the words of the house of Hillel."<sup>7</sup> In other words, Hartman explained, a Jew must become a "person in whom different opinions can reside together in the very depths of your soul... a... person who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty."<sup>8</sup> Like the storied mansions on St. Charles Avenue just outside these doors, we cherish a heart with many rooms. We fill our heart of many rooms with curiosity, respectful disagreement, agony, and love.

This Iran deal looks like it will pass. And no one knows the future. And, no one likes not knowing. *Unetane tokef*, a central prayer of Rosh Hashanah addresses this wildly uncomfortable space we occupy. Our new machzor offers this magnificent

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/24/opinion/the-case-for-teaching-ignorance.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/24/opinion/the-case-for-teaching-ignorance.html?_r=0)

<sup>7</sup> *Tosefta*, *Sotah* 7:12.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms*, p. 21.

translation we will pray momentarily, to guide our courage to be thoughtful and humble, scared yet thriving, and most importantly, alive:

“The New Year is like a trailhead – opening wide before us;....

We contemplate [this] New Year, and this we know:

Some of us will live and some of us will die.

Some will die young and some very old.

Some by water and some by fire.

Some by sword and some by beast.

Some by hunger and some by thirst....

Some of us will feel at ease; some will be restless.

Some will have peace of mind; some will have strife.

Some will be tranquil; some will be tormented. ....

Even so –[the prayer continues]

The way we act,

The way we speak,

The way we meet God’s image in ourselves and in others –

These things have great power to make our lives matter.

Therefore,

Let us make whole the broken shards, ...

Let dreams give birth to justice and goodness.

God of holiness, God of hope,

Let us glimpse Your truth, as we attach our hopes to Yours.”<sup>9</sup>

Knowledge is not a synonym for certainty. And, certainty is not our definition of faith.

Not in Judaism. So open yourself a heart with many rooms. We are Jews. We can do this well. I believe in us.

Shanah tovah.

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<sup>9</sup> *Mishkan Hanefesh, Rosh Hashanah*, p. 179.