

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5776

From the Place We are Right:
Iran, the Jewish Community, & Healthy Dialogue

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The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

This week, the United States Congress is debating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program, known as "The Iran Deal." It was signed in Vienna on July 14 by the United States along with China, France, Russia, Britain, Germany, and the European Union. The deal essentially incapacitates Iran's ability to make a nuclear bomb in the next 15 years in exchange for lifting of economic sanctions that have devastated the Iranian economy. Because of the ways the Senate rules work, there are not enough votes to overturn a Presidential veto. The Iran Deal is a done deal.

[http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/31/world/middleeast/simple-guide-nuclear-talks-iran-us.html?_r=1]

I believe this is worth our consideration as we celebrate Rosh HaShanah, in part, because the discourse this summer among members of our broader Jewish community—and, sadly, many umbrella communal organizations—was rank with vitriol and animus; and there is, likely, a need for some collective *t'shuvah* to begin the year with as much love and compassion as we can muster.

At times, with some issues, there is blessed moral clarity. When we as a congregation considered marriage equality, there was an absolute right and wrong. On climate change, while there may be some debate as to the most effective strategies to address the problem, there is no debate that the overwhelming majority of people on the planet contend we are in the midst of a serious and devastating climate crisis.

But with the Iran Deal, there is an absence of moral clarity; or at least, we're in some moral murkiness. We're in the land of the unprovable. The Iranian leaders have for years funded terrorism against Israel and throughout the Middle East. For the people who are skeptical of this deal or oppose it, you don't have to look far or hard to understand that your concerns are legitimate.

For those who support the deal, it is equally easy to understand why you find the framework reasoned, that after more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, you're willing to give diplomacy a reasonable chance; that this deal was crafted over two years with some of the world's most expert nuclear minds and negotiators.

And for those who simply tune out when the conversation arises, who are overwhelmed by the contours of international diplomacy, who find it difficult to weed through the interminable advocacy emails and news reports and cable talking heads, I hear you. It would be so delicious to remain indifferent despite Torah's command that we cannot, in fact, remain indifferent. It would be easy to throw our hands into the air, confused and despairing. I get it: Of all the things I never expected to speak about as a rabbi from the bimah on Rosh HaShanah, one word: centrifuges!

These past several months, I have held in my heart the faces of my colleagues and friends and family members—people with the same moral commitments to Israel and our shared Jewish values—who oppose the Iran deal. More than 1,000 rabbis wrote a letter in opposition. In part, they stated:

...The Iranian regime denies basic human rights to its citizens, publicly calls for America's downfall and Israel's annihilation, and openly denies the Holocaust. This dangerous regime—the leading state sponsor of terrorism—could now be given the financial freedom to sow even more violence throughout the world. [<http://founderscode.com/more-signatures-on-letters-opposing-iran-deal/admin/>]

Debate is holy. Vilification of our opponents is not.

For centuries, we Jews have debated with a spirit of humility and compassion. Rabbi Hillel and his descendants “were gentle and modest, and studied both their own opinions and the opinions of [Rabbi Shammai and his students], and humbly mentioned Shammai's words before their own.” [Talmud Eruvin 13b].

Of all the decisions on policy issues I've made in my career, this one weighed the most heavily upon my heart. Both sides express legitimate concerns. I support the deal, but I do so with trepidation and a healthy dose of *realpolitik*; for me, the Iran Deal is solid but not ideal, though I appreciate it will ostensibly dismantle Iran's nuclear program for the next decade plus. To me, the deal is simply less bad than all the other options. Along with nearly 450 other rabbis, I signed a letter to members of Congress last month in support of the deal. It reads, in part:

The Obama administration has successfully brought together the major international powers to confront Iran over its nuclear ambitions. The broad international sanctions moved Iran to enter this historic agreement. Should the U.S. Congress reject this agreement, those sanctions will end. There will be no new negotiations, as the other member countries are fully in favor of this agreement and have no desire to re-negotiate. (Ameinu, August 2015)

I am an unequivocal progressive Zionist; my love for Israel is as potent and real to me as my love for Michael and our children. And it is precisely because of that love, my moral commitments and our Jewish values that led me to support his deal; to seek peace and pursue justice; to make every attempt at diplomacy before engaging the tools of war.

Zora Neale Hurston wrote that, "love makes your soul crawl out of its hiding place."

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The rabbis' collective statements have been thoughtful, measured, and civil. I have not, nor will I, vilify anyone who opposes the Iran Deal. In part because there are many people I love and respect who oppose it; in part, simply, because I could well be proven wrong. I have no idea what the horizon looks like from the place where we are right, but I'm intimately familiar with earth that is tough and trampled.

If only the same could be said about others in our community. I will not rehash all the arguments and debates here; but suffice it to say that the vitriol from all sides has been at times equal measures appalling, embarrassing, and *unmenshlich*. Leaders who claim absolute certainty on the Iran Deal terrify and befuddle me.

We are a people who have been debating one another for more than two millennia. Forget about argument as an art form; for Jews, it is an expression of religious commitment.

For centuries, we have debated everything in Jewish life.

From how do you light Chanukkah candles (Rav Shammai said you begin with a full Chanukkiyah and remove one each night whereas Rabbi Hillel said you add one more each night), to whether or not you sound the shofar if Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbat (the vast majority of rabbis say you do not; I’m in the minority who can’t imagine Rosh HaShanah without it), to how it is possible for a rabbi to declare a snake kosher—when Torah states it is unequivocally *treif*—we’ve been discussing, considering, dialoguing, and debating since Abraham first challenged God in Genesis.

Pundits proclaim that the Jewish community is deeply divided over Iran. That may be true, though the data suggests we aren’t significantly more divided than in the past. But hyped division sells newspapers and is a good fundraising hook.

We’ll never survive this, some proclaim.

Look at the Pew study, *geshrei* others. This will be, wrote one communal leader on Twitter, the end of the Jewish community as we know it.

I fundamentally disagree. Our capacity to disagree is holy.

We are strong enough as a people to have this rigorous debate. Healthy public discourse is a sign of strength, not weakness.

“Diversity of opinion is power,” wrote *Stephen P. Seiden, chair of JCC Association’s board of directors and Dr. Stephen Hazan Arnoff, CEO and president of the organization*. [<http://jcca.org/making-room-for-dissent/>]. “A polarized community is not one that achieves much. In blurring these principles, we lose sight of one of our primary purposes. To best serve our communities we need to bring Jews together even at moments of greatest political divisiveness and passion—to think, debate, reconsider, question, and grow—even if it means exposing ourselves to dissent that makes us uncomfortable. We [must be a]... haven for tolerance and discussion and above all... a place to dialogue with colleagues and neighbors of every perspective, making all of us wiser, more compassionate, and more prepared to solve the challenges and divisions we face.”

As Adam Kirsch notes, “The Talmud is never scandalized by disagreement; rather, the rabbis see it as a chance to understand the legal issues more deeply [<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/167118/daf-yomi-76>].”

What concerns me as we begin this New Year is not that we Jews don't share values; I believe we do share many. What troubles me is that a people who left the narrowness of thinking and believing and being in Egypt are recreating such narrowness and restriction here in America. What we need is spaciousness—a public generosity of spirit—when our shared values and moral commitments lead us to different policy or political strategies.

We gather on Rosh HaShanah this year especially, I believe, to do some communal healing; to look at each others hearts and realize that while my commitment to peace lead me to support the deal, your commitment to peace may lead you to oppose it. And we're here, in this sacred place, to lift up our voices in humility and compassion and wonder and heartbreak and hope, together.

This is not new Torah. Genesis Rabbah (39:6) taught 2,000 years ago, "If you desire the world to endure, there can be no absolute justice, while if you desire absolute justice the world cannot endure.... Unless you forget a little, the world cannot endure."

Audre Lorde offered what seems like commentary on the Midrash. "Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat." — [Interview](#) with Carla Hammond for *Denver Quarterly* 16.1 (1981)

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What am I most deeply concerned about after we peel back the particulars of the deal and the toxic communal discourse? Ultimately, when we caricature people—when people on the left call people on the right war mongers and people on the right call those on the left naïve and weak—by a decision they've made, we damage our own souls. I'm focused not only on the harm we do to our relationships with each other, but also to the desperate cost to our own humanity when we dismiss one another when we disagree.

As the new year begins, we must ask ourselves: How many times did we look at the decision someone made about Iran—or any other matter—and build a case around them, their motivations, their moral commitments before we asked them any questions? Did we lift up curiosity, still the small but potent judgmental voices inside our heads and inquire: What motivated you to make this decision? Why do you believe this is right and just?

When we create spaciousness amidst the pundits pontification and vilification of those they disagree with, we find that sometimes, the lines were redrawn here, that people confound our expectations: My dear friend Menachem is a rabbi in Berkeley, a passionate leader for human rights around the globe, a champion for GLBT rights in the Conservative Jewish movement, and simply the menschiest, kindest, smartest guy around. He believes this isn't the best deal we could have gotten. While I see it differently, I would sooner cut off my left arm than lose him as a friend. In the midst of competing moral commitments, Judaism calls us to choose love, because that house where we are right is easily bulldozed by the arrogance of our certainty, and it is awfully lonely standing on the island of one's certitude.

Ultimately, we as individuals and as a people need to ask ourselves some urgent and powerful questions: What kind of Jewish people and community will we be? What will we create together? Where will we dig up the world with doubt and love? In shattered places of certainty, where will we discover love for one another and our people? As important it is to create a new future, how we treat one another in our creation is as important—more important—than what we actually build.

Hundreds of years ago, in the earliest days of the 18th century, deep in the Carpathian Mountains, in what is now Ukraine, lived a Rabbi who changed the world. Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer was known as the Baal Shem Tov – the master of a good name. He was believed by his disciples to be so great, so learned, and so holy, that he could do wonders here on earth. He was a miracle worker. Among the legends told of him, we learn that, whenever he sensed that his people were in great danger, he would go to a secret place in the forests surrounding his town, light a special fire and say a special prayer. And then, without fail, his people would be saved from danger.

In the due course of time, the Baal Shem Tov died, but he didn't take all of his people's worries with him. And, so, when another crises loomed, it fell to his disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, to solve it. He went to that same, secret place, of which his teacher had taught him, and he said, "Master of the Universe, I don't know how to light the special fire of my teacher, but I know his prayer. Please, let that be good enough." And, it was.

When the Maggid died, the task fell to his student, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov. In a time of crisis, Rabbi Moshe Leib would go to that same place and say, "Master of the Universe, I don't know the prayer of my teacher, and I don't know the fire of his teacher. But, I stand in the place where they stood, and I beg for your mercy. Please, let that be good enough." [As told by Rabbi Jason Rosenberg, 2 September 2015].

Today, we stand in a place utterly familiar and completely new, pleading for compassion. The miracle of human relationships, of these Yamim Noraim, is that when we have caused hurt, we have the power to apologize, to seek forgiveness, to work toward repair. The miracles aren't magic; they come from humble, soulful, honest work. We look to our sages of the past to light our path forward, even when we

are uncertain, hungering for their fire. Let the fires we kindle illuminate our hearts and may affection and respect radiate in the glow of the sparks.

It is a new year, a new day.

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