



Sermon Tidbits

APRIL 6, 2015

Passover – Last Days

A Matter of Trust – Seventh Day of Passover

Pharaoh...had a change of heart (Exodus 14:4)

וַיִּהְיֶה לִבֵּב פַּרְעֹה (שְׁמוֹת י"ד : ד)

Last week, the United States, the other P5+1 countries, and Iran announced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for dealing with Iran's nuclear program. This plan is designed to serve as the framework for a final deal to be concluded by June 30, 2015. While we should appreciate the hard work of President Obama, Secretary of State Kerry, and the rest of the negotiators, the plan, as presented, raises many concerns that should be addressed before a final agreement is signed, not the least of which is that it places far too much trust in the Iranian leadership.

After suffering through all ten plagues, Pharaoh finally agrees to let the Israelite people go. As the Jews make their way from Egypt towards the Red Sea though, "Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart (*vayayahfech l'vav*)" (Ex 14:5). Commenting on this, Rashi notes that Pharaoh's, "heart changed from what it was, for he had [just] said to them 'Rise up and go forth from among my people.'" (Exodus 12:31) In a matter of days, the Egyptians' hearts changed from wanting to banish the Israelites from among their midst to chasing after them in full battle gear. That instantaneous change of heart placed the entire Jewish nation in grave mortal danger from an Egyptian army bent on their annihilation.

Today the Jewish state of Israel remains in danger from a nuclear threshold Iran. Only days before the agreement was announced, the commander of the Basij militia of Iran's Revolutionary Guards [said](#) that, "erasing Israel off the map" is "nonnegotiable." This echoes [statements](#) made repeatedly by Iran's Supreme Ruler, Ayatollah Khamenei and other senior Iranian leaders to destroy Israel and the near constant refrain of "Death to America."

So-called moderates such as Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and foreign minister Javad Zarif in tweets immediately after announcing the JCPOA dismissed the American four page outline of the agreement as "spin" tweeting: "The solutions are good for all, as they stand. There is no need to spin using "fact sheets" so early on." These are the people we are putting our trust in?

At our Seders we asked four questions. This framework raises at least that many. We all hope for a diplomatic solution to the Islamic Republic's quest for a nuclear weapons capability. Good diplomacy therefore is the key to avoiding war. In order to ensure good diplomacy, and clarify that Iran indeed is ending her pursuit of a nuclear bomb, this framework and any final agreement must be submitted to congressional scrutiny. The Iran Nuclear Review Act of 2015, bipartisan legislation authored by Senators Corker (R-TN) and Menendez (D-NJ) would require just that. This bill will be marked up in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 14. Now is the time to encourage your senators to become original cosponsors.

Only the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea saved the Israelites from destruction at the hands of a pharaoh who had a change of heart. We can't place our trust in an Iranian leadership that still calls for the destruction of Israel and America. A good deal can still be made and it is up to us and our representatives in Congress to insist upon it. ■

The Freedom to Kvetch – and Vote

And they said to Moses (Exodus 14:11)

ויאמרו אל משה (שמות יד:יא)

In his Yiddish dictionary “FrumSpeak,” Chaim Wieser defines the word “kvetch” (p. 46) as, “to complain in a feeble, peevish way: WHINE. ‘The baby K. for milk all night.’” A “kvetcher” is “one who consistently expresses discontent.” By that definition, we are a nation of “kvetchers.” At least we seem to have always been this way. From the very moment before we left Egypt, even before we could pass through the Reed Sea to freedom, the people began to complain. “Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying ‘Leave us alone so we may serve the Egyptians?’” (Exodus 14:12) Days later, when food supplies dwindle, “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness...” (16:2)

Yet, all this kvetching might not be such a bad thing. Nina Amir [writes](#) that, “prior to this parashah no written record exists of our ancestors kvetching as slaves. They groaned under Pharaoh’s rule, yes, but kvetch under Pharaoh’s heavy hand? I don’t think so. Their new capacity to complain clearly illustrates an essential distinction between slavery and freedom. Slaves cannot kvetch...A free people, on the other hand, can kvetch with less fear of ramifications.” You don’t kvetch if you suffer under the iron hand of a despot. You kvetch when you innately sense that you have a voice, and a right to complain. Kvetching truly represents a mentality of freedom. Rabbi Yechiel Greinman of Rabbis for Human Rights [writes](#) that Jewish protest, after such an extended period of silent slavery, represents a powerful expression of freedom. “Our ability and our right to stand up against injustice is an expression of freedom. Silence in the face of injustice and giving up on the right to protest represent a rebellion against the most basic Jewish morals. One who walks in the path of Abraham cannot remain silent event against the Heavenly will, and certainly not against a government that ignores the needs of its citizens.”

From all accounts, the election in Israel last month was hard fought, but it was also fair. No matter our opinion of the outcome, we can celebrate the remarkably vibrant Israeli democracy. Israelis of every race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and ethnic background were free to kvetch; to criticize, to debate and speak out about their vision for the new government of Israel. And then millions of them – over seventy percent of eligible voters – cast their vote, without any interference, for the party of their choice. This year, a record number of Arab-Israelis, women, and Druze were elected to the Knesset. Not only is this freedom unique in the Middle East, it is unique in the world. According to Aaron David Miller, only 22 countries have had stable democracies since 1950 with no history of military rule or dictatorship. One is, of course, the United States. Israel is proudly another one as well. Both nations proudly count themselves in the relatively small group of countries that encourage their citizens to both kvetch, and vote. ■

The Eternal Hope for Peace (Haftarah 8th Day)

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6)

וגר זאב עם כבש (ישעיהו יא:ו)

This famous verse spawned a centuries-long rabbinic debate: Do we really believe that in Messianic times the nature of the world will change, and wolves will lie with lambs? While Nachmanides (and many others) believed that nature will indeed change, Maimonides strongly dissented. He wrote, “Do not presume that in the Messianic age any facet of the world’s nature will change or there will be innovations in the work of creation. Rather, the world will continue according to its pattern. Although it is written (Isaiah 11:6) ‘The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat,’ these words are a metaphor and a parable. The interpretation of the prophecy is as follows: Israel will dwell securely together with the wicked gentiles who are likened to a wolf and a leopard...”

Tradition teaches us that we need not hope, yearn and pray for the natural world to change to bring peace. Rather, we must hope and pray and work towards the era when those who wish to destroy us abandon their hatred and seek to dwell in peace not only with Israel, but with all peace-loving nations of the world. ■

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