

Can this stain be removed? Reflections on the Iran Deal

Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei; July 18, 2015/2 Av 5775

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

Ever since returning from Israel a few weeks ago, everyone has been asking, 'So, how was your trip?' 'How was Israel?' 'I loved all your pictures on Facebook, it looked like a really great experience...

Of course it was wonderful...In the many dozens of times I have been to Israel it's never been anything less than an incredible journey. But then a dear congregant asked a question that gave me some pause. She said, "Was this trip better than your last trip?" I quickly reviewed in my head, *When was the time before this when I was in Israel?* Turns out the time before this was last summer, when I was there not with a group of congregants from the shul; not with my family; but with a group of American Jewish leaders in the midst of *Mivtza Tzuk Eitan*, Operation Protective Edge--Israel's war last year with Hamas in Gaza. I stayed in the very same hotel in Tel Aviv this summer as I did last summer. One bright, beautiful morning as we walked out the front doors of the seaside Carleton Hotel, I pointed to the clear blue sky above our heads, right above us on Ha'yarkon Street. I said to my daughter Nessa, you see the sky right above us? Last summer, that's where I saw the Iron Dome missile defense system intercept a rocket right over my head. Right up there were the plumes of smoke from the destroyed rocket. And this is where we ran from the street back into the hotel's concrete reinforced stairwell to take shelter. Yes, in many ways this trip was better than my last trip. A year ago the country was desolate, this year it was teeming with people. Last year there was hardly a tour bus in sight, this year it looked like an outright invasion from Birthright groups had descended on the country. Last year the Kotel plaza was empty, the shops were empty, the restaurants were empty, the hotels were empty. Last year people thanked us profusely for coming in the midst of a war. This year the country is busy and pulsating with activity. *Baruch Hashem*, this year the country is so much more alive!

But just a few weeks after we left, while a war, thank God, hasn't broken out, and the steady stream of tourists has not abated, this summer's dark cloud has moved in over Israel's horizon. You know we call this time on our calendar "*bein ha'mitzarim*," between Shiva Asar

B'Tammuz, the fast day that began the three weeks of mourning leading up to the commemoration of both Temples' destruction on Tisha B'Av, this is a time of constrained joy for the Jewish people, of painful historical memory, and even today, a trying time on our calendar. Last summer it was the war in Gaza, the kidnapping and brutal murder of the three Israeli teenagers; in years past it was the war with Hezbollah in Lebanon or various Intifadas, or the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit...all of that seems to have been ignited right around this particular time on the calendar...from antiquity to today, this time period seems to be particularly difficult for the Jewish people. For whatever reason, people like to make war in the summer...the weather's nicer, it stays lighter longer... This has historically been a time of *tsuris* for us. And this year's dark cloud is of course the so called Iran Deal, which has managed to do something for Israelis that few other issues have...that is, unite them! From left to right; sitting government to the vocal opposition; religious and secular; sabras and new immigrants; Jews, Christians, Muslims, and I suspect, Bedouin and Druze alike! I'm going to share a quote from an Israeli leader, and I want you to try to guess who said it:

The deal with Iran “will unleash a lion from the cage, it will have a direct influence over the balance of power in our region, it’s going to affect our borders, and it will affect the safety of my children.”

Iran, this leader said, is an “empire of evil and hate that spreads terror across the region,” adding that, under the terms of the deal, Iran “will become a nuclear-threshold state in a decade or so.” Iran will take its post-sanctions windfall, he said, and use the funds to supply more rockets to Hezbollah in Lebanon, more ammunition to Hamas in Gaza, and “generally increase the worst type of activities that they’ve been doing.”^[1]

Now you may have thought this sounds like the bluster of Bibi Netanyahu, or perhaps ultra-nationalists like Naftali Bennett or Avigdor Lieberman. But these words were uttered by Bugi Herzog, Isaac Herzog, the leader of the opposition; The Labor Party leader who ran unsuccessfully against Netanyahu for prime minister in this past Israeli election! Herzog, who represents the vanguard of liberal Israeli politics, is declaring the existential danger of this deal

^[1] Israeli Opposition Leader: Iran Deal Will Bring Chaos to the Middle East, Jeffrey Goldberg, *The Atlantic*, July 16, 2015.

for Israel. Look for Bugi Herzog here in Washington in the weeks to come...he'll be here lobbying Congress to oppose the Iran deal.

Friends, you don't need me to tell you what you can read in the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, or the Atlantic. There is a flood of articles and analyses of the deal in print and on the internet, and you are a particularly sophisticated, knowledgeable bunch. A rabbi friend of mine once said, 'the only authority I possess is the authority of Torah.' And in reading the Haftarah this morning I was completely taken aback by the prophet Jeremiah's words in chapter 2 verse 22. This happens to me sometimes...after 6 years of seminary, 13 years in the rabbinate, many more as a regular shul goer, I still happen upon words and phrases that I either haven't noticed or never appreciated before. The prophet says to a wayward Jewish people: *Ki im techabsi ba'neter, ve'tabi lach borit, nichtam avoneich l'fanai*...Even if you wash yourself with nitre [Nitre is probably a sodium soap or potassium nitrate] the prophet says, even if you lather yourself with nitre and use a lot of soap; still your iniquity, your sin is unable to be washed away. First of all, this seems to fly in the face of everything we say on the high holidays; everything we teach about *t'shuvah* about forgiveness and renewal; What do we say, if you repent sincerely, if you mend your ways, if you make amends with those you have wronged, then you are forgiven; you're given a fresh start! But the prophet Jeremiah seems to be suggesting that no atonement is available, at least in certain cases. That it is possible for a sin to be so deep, so saturated that it can't even be removed by the strongest detergent.

As I read these verses in the context of this current situation, I couldn't help but think of Iran. It seems that an underlying hope and expectation in this agreement is that by the time it sunsets; by the time the agreement expires, the openness and unrestricted participation it affords Iran in the world will convince the Iranian people that it should abandon the mullahs and the sponsorship of global terror and extremism and become a civilized, responsible, peace-loving member of the family of nations. No more demands of Death to America; no more threats to wipe Israel off the map; no more al Quds rallies where effigies of the American President, the Saudi King, and the Israeli prime minister are burned; no more desecration of American, Israeli, and British flags; no more talk of Israel and Zionists as the enemies of Islam; no more torture, rape and killings of political prisoners; no more dissemination of anti-Semitism like the government controlled media's publication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion; no more repression of women, gays

and lesbians, no more arms shipments to terrorists, the list goes on and on. Can this stain on the soul of Iran--these deep seeded anti-western, anti-American, anti-Israel, anti-Semitic proclivities ever be washed out of Iran's mentality? Is this the kind of irremovable stain that the prophet Jeremiah was referring to in today's Haftarah?

Because if it is, then we can expect Iran to harness that infusion of billions of dollars, that windfall of profit from new business ventures and expanded oil sales and direct it toward the ongoing financing of global terrorism, support for terrorist proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas, and yes, the pursuit of a nuclear program that is not for strictly civilian purposes.

A few chapters later, the prophet Jeremiah seems to contradict himself. In chapter 4:14 he says, "Wash your heart from wickedness that you may be saved." Now wait just a minute, two chapters earlier he said even the most caustic soap can't erase some sins...now he's saying wash away your wickedness and you can be clean? *Nu*, which is it? Not surprisingly, our sages did ignore this glaring contradiction. I want to share with you the commentary of *Radak*, Rabbi David Kimchi, the great medieval Bible commentator, grammarian, and lexicographer. He said, "there is iniquity that cannot be atoned for by repentance alone but by sufferings which completely purge the iniquity..." In other words, certain sins can't be atoned for with words or prayers, or even making amends. Sometimes, the only way to cure them is through suffering. I think that the expectation that Iran will undergo fundamental cultural change much less regime change as a result of this deal with the west is a pipe dream. The President charged that detractors to the deal did not offer alternatives other than all-out war. But of course there were other alternatives! No sane person wants war! The most powerful alternative is what brought Iran to the negotiating table to begin with; the one thing that forced them to talk--and that is sanctions. Strong, debilitating, exacting sanctions that have crippled Iran to the point of sitting across the table from avowed enemies to get them lifted. Those sanctions, which in Kimchi's language caused Iran to suffer, were the only hope to get Iran to abandon its destructive machinations. Now they are all but lifted, and the President's suggestion that they can be snapped back when needed has been exposed as a fallacy...Snapping back assumes that a host of nations, including China and Russia, along with all kinds of newly invested business interests will give up their profits and access to Iranian markets and oil and just walk away in a snap, notwithstanding all the bureaucratic, geopolitical maneuverings that are also a precursor to

“snapping back.” Once the sanctions, which took years and painstaking efforts are lifted, they will be very difficult if not impossible to re-impose.

This is why I will be spending the next few weeks lobbying my elected representatives to oppose this deal. Iran's stain is too set-in, its diabolical intentions are too discolored and tarnished to be erased or altered by a deal that allows Iran to continue to pursue ballistic missiles, conventional arms, and nuclear development. I hope you'll join me in that effort.

I want to close with some other words that jumped off the page for me while davvening the days following the announcement of the deal with Iran. In the Amidah each day we recite in the 12th benediction, *ve'lamalshinim al tehi tikvah*, Please God, frustrate the hopes of those who seek to do us harm. *Ve'chol ha'risha ke'rega toveid*, and may all wickedness directed toward us be destroyed. The interesting thing about this benediction is that although it is inserted as the 12th, it is actually the newest addition to the *sh'mona esrei* (which means 18) which is now composed of 19 benedictions. It was added in a time when there were many menacing threats to the Jewish people both internally and externally...so menacing that the Sages felt the need to add a benediction to the thrice-daily Amidah! We are again facing such a time. Thank God we live in a country where we can express our concerns to our elected representatives, even as we pray that those who seek to harm us are confounded and that somehow we will see a glimmer of peace on the horizon. The realization that we must all come to today is that this glimmer will not appear without our efforts and activism. If the dark clouds are to part and give way to light and hope, it is you and I who must help part them. May we have the strength to do so, together.

Amen.