

## Memo to the Next President of the United States

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At the time of the last presidential election I spoke about the factors I suggested should be taken into consideration when deciding who to vote for. I specifically did not endorse either candidate, and was pleased when some of you who heard the sermon interpreted it to be in support of the Democratic candidate, Barak Obama, while an equal number assumed it was a declaration of support for the Republican nominee, John McCain. My point then, as now, is not to endorse a candidate, but to urge you to vote and to make your vote count. Some members took my advice about making your vote count to heart. They picked up and moved to Florida – not exactly what I had in mind.

My message is consistent with what I try to teach in other contexts. Your decisions, be they personal or how you conduct business, as well as how you look at political matters should be made based on the filter of Judaism. I hope your Jewish values are a primary factor in helping you make important decisions, including determining which candidate shares your vision for our country and will pass my grandmother's test: Is he good for the Jews?

I don't know about you, but when I go into the voting booth, I think of my grandparents who made the courageous decision and painful sacrifice of coming to this country. I feel patriotic, proud to be a citizen of this great land, and pleased to have the privilege of voting. Aware of our history and of the disenfranchisement of our ancestors throughout the ages, voting and citizenship is not something I, or any of us should ever take for granted.

One of the privileges of being a citizen in a democracy, is that we are entitled to base our vote on whatever criteria we choose. Being a part of a people whose sage, Hillel said 2,000 years ago, "*Im ein ani lee, mee lee*: If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" is pretty good advice and ample justification for voting from a Jewish perspective, especially when that same sage continues, "*ukeshe'ani lee, mah ani*: but if I am only for myself, in other words, my own self interests, then what am I?"

I still believe it is inappropriate for a rabbi to stand on the bema and tell you which presidential candidate to vote for, and do not intend to do so --- unless Ron Paul would have been one of the nominees --- in which case I might have considered making an exception to that rule.

Instead, tonight I want to share with you a memo I have written and prepared for the next President, to be opened on January 21, 2013 by whoever wins the election. It is my humble attempt to offer some unsolicited advice about the issues facing our nation. As a citizen, as a faith leader, as a rabbi, these are the things I would like to suggest need to be addressed, regardless of who is elected, and regardless of who will be the recipient of this memo.

Mr. President:

First and foremost, congratulations on your victory and inauguration. (Great party last night.) You have daunting challenges, an awesome responsibility and a great opportunity before you.

It is a privilege to be a citizen of a proud democracy which cherishes freedom, where decisions about our future and the direction of our country are made at the ballot box. Almost 150 years after Abraham Lincoln's stirring Gettysburg Address the promise still rings true, that ours is a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Since I am sure you will receive wise counsel and suggestions from many advisers and numerous people from a variety of perspectives and walks of life I will comment on three primary areas.

The first matter of concern is the contentiousness and divisiveness that pollutes and permeates the public arena. While we have always had our differences, it seems that the polarity has become even greater in recent years. Our discourse has deteriorated to a situation where there is more heat and less light. The negative campaigning is a reflection of the antagonistic nature of our society, and it takes a toll in countless ways. As you surely have noticed people are skeptical about the process and are being turned off to politics as a result.

This past year, Representative Steve LaTourette, Maine Senator Olympia Snowe, Nebraska Senator Ben Nelson as well as North Dakota's Senator Kent Conrad all announced that they would not seek reelection, and all for the exact same reason. Representative LaTourette explained, "I have reached the conclusion that the atmosphere today and the reality that exists in the House of Representatives no longer encourages the finding of common ground." He went on to say that these days, to rise in party ranks politicians must now hand over "your wallet and your voting card" to party extremes, something he in good conscience could no longer continue doing.

How we debate important issues, how we talk to each other, about each other and to each other has to change. We have become such a compartmentalized, fragmented and bifurcated nation we no longer even have a common source of news. Each of us listens to the network that reinforces and hardens our partisan positions while decimating and condescendingly ridiculing the other side. I am reminded of the joke about the woman who went to the Post Office to buy Chanukah stamps. When she was asked what denomination she wanted, she said, "Has it really come to this? We are so divided even our Chanukah stamps come in denominations? Fine," she continued, "I'll take 25 conservative, 15 orthodox, and 10 reform."

The spirit of bipartisanship where Republicans and Democrats worked together for the common good and were willing to compromise to accomplish something seems to be either some kind of fantasy fairy tale or ancient history. With the increasing influence of extremist groups and their entry into the mainstream political parties, cooperation is rare, and considered tantamount to treason by those who have set themselves up as paragons of virtue and as the determiners of what is right and what is wrong. Portraying themselves as guardians of the principles of our republic they have made it almost impossible to pass legislation. I can recall in my lifetime when rigidity was rejected and the common good was a shared goal, when there were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats, public servants who put country and patriotism above short-lived pyrrhic victories. All that appears to be a distant memory, confined to something read about or studied in history books, as political discourse has become increasingly rancorous, replacing reasoned argument with demonizing invective and ad hominem attacks.

So, Mr. President, I ask you to do what you can to raise the level of our dialogue to help reduce the level of discord. Set a tone which promotes greater tolerance of opposing opinions and respect for positions we may differ with. Remind us that we are one nation, that there is far more that unites us than what

divides us, that we can be civil while disagreeing, that we must learn to respect the opposition and to accept that neither side has all the truth all the time.

Jewish tradition offers ample role models as a guide. Indeed, the Talmud itself can serve as an example of how individuals can disagree and dissent and conduct vigorous debate without resorting to denigrating the other side. Rabbi Israel Salanter taught, "Be vigilant in protecting the honor of all people, especially those with whom you disagree." The acrimonious nature of how we deal with our differences was the subject of a recently passed resolution of the Rabbinical Assembly calling upon members of the media and government officials to conduct themselves according to the highest standards of civility in all public discourse. We call this *derech erez*, an ideal which means common decency and respect for the dignity of others.

The need to raise so much campaign funds contributes to the dysfunction, demanding so much energy, time and resources making it more difficult to reach consensus. Rather than helping to inform and educate voters, the fundraising apparatus merely feeds the contentious tendencies. Will Rogers' observation that we have the best politicians money can buy is becoming truer with each election. So I hope you will address this matter by both setting a tone that promotes greater harmony and propose legislation to fix our campaign finance laws.

The second point I wish to address has to do with the social and economic issues facing us. There are those much wiser and more experienced than I who will offer policy recommendations on the economy, on reforms for the financial regulatory system, on how to lower the national debt and reduce our deficit, (and who actually understand the difference between the two). You will hear advice about the best way to create jobs, to get more Americans back to work, about health care, social security and Medicare, education, immigration policy, the environment, energy and other aspects of the domestic agenda.

While these are all important issues to me, I will avoid specific recommendations, and instead frame my advice with a much broader brush and context. My counsel is drawn once again from my experience as a rabbi and the wisdom of Judaism which talks about the role of the individual and of the community. It is a balanced and nuanced view. While recognizing that each individual must take responsibility for his or her own actions, Judaism teaches the imperative of recognizing our obligation to the other members of our community. Since our fate is intricately bound up with the welfare of all we should neither view the government as the source of all evil, nor should we see it as the solution to all of our problems. Pirke Avot advises, "Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the government, people would eat each other alive." To foster the spirit upon which our nation was built, I hope you would consider instituting a plan of national service so all young people will have the chance to serve and to give something back to the country that has given them so much.

Our tradition teaches that we have been entrusted with a sacred task as stewards of the earth, and so we believe that we humans are God's partners. A story in the midrash tells us that after God created the world He showed it all to Adam and told him, "I want you to see all the beauty I have created. No being will be created after you, so it is your task to care for the world." This simple but powerful ancient story beckons us to consider the consequences our actions and decisions will have upon future generations, and to think about the kind of world we will bequeath to them. As a result we must address pressing issues such as preserving the environment and seeking alternative forms of renewable energy. Doing so will also have the advantage of lessening our dependence on foreign sources of energy.

Speaking of the kind of world we will bequeath to our children and the need to reduce our dependence on foreign dictatorships to meet our energy needs, brings me to the third subject of my memo, and one of particular concern to me -- our policy in the Middle East, towards Israel and the threat posed to the civilized world by a nuclear Iran.

Here again, I share my thoughts with you as a rabbi, but also as a concerned citizen of the United States and of the world.

Our relationship with Israel, which is mutually beneficial for both parties, is unique in the history of the world. Our nation's steadfast unwavering bi-partisan support for the State of Israel is not just a platitude or applause line for an Aipac conference. It is the bedrock of our nation's foreign policy and one of the few areas of national consensus. Support for Israel sends an important message to friend and foe alike. It lets the world know that we stand by our friends, and that we reward those who share our values. As a result, standing with Israel serves our interests, for it is proof that it is good to be an ally of the United States.

The threats faced by our most steadfast and consistently reliable ally, not just in the region, but in the world, are real. Surrounded by 50,000 Hezbollah rockets in Lebanon, a belligerent Hamas in Gaza, Al Qaeda supplied Bedouins in the Sinai, as well as the bellicose intentions of the Arab League, all seeking to inflict harm and loss of life, Israel must remain on constant vigil to protect its citizens from incursions across its borders. Remarkably, despite the perils of its precarious security situation it continues to work and hope for peace, to be a leader in medical and hi tech innovation, to be a people who knows how to love life and live it with a zest and optimistic can-do spirit.

I respectfully suggest you approach the Israeli-Palestinian situation with caution. Others have invested considerable energy, only to be disappointed. Peace will come when Israel's enemies accept the reality that it cannot and will not be defeated. Unfortunately its peace partner, the Palestinian Authority continues to encourage incitement among its people by honoring suicide bombers and promoting vile anti Semitic offensive images in its schools, mosques and media. I hope you will make it clear that the Palestinian Authority must make a choice. Let them know they cannot pursue contradictory paths and have it both ways. If their goal is to achieve statehood, let them expend their energy in that direction. They must show their intent to live side by side in peace by turning away from vilifying Israel and supporting efforts to undermine its legitimacy in the international arena and among their own people.

You can play a constructive role by insisting it begin to prepare its people for peace. Let them know, as Israel's leaders have consistently done, that they will need to make concessions and accommodations and not continue to perpetuate the conflict in the hope of undoing history. An important step would be to stop placing unreasonable preconditions before entering negotiations.

Having been to Israel and having spoken with Israeli leaders and its people, you have seen firsthand the genuine desire and longing for peace. It is why Israel has made numerous painful sacrifices over the years, giving up land, releasing prisoners, taking down roadblocks, removing all Jewish residents from the entire Gaza strip and other places to show its good will. Promulgators of hate are repudiated, pushed to the fringe and not tolerated or allowed to occupy the mainstream.

I urge you to insist that the Arab world take similar steps necessary to prepare their people as well for the professed goal of peaceful reconciliation. This cannot be done while a concerted effort to undermine the legitimacy of Israel takes place. This cannot be done while the atmosphere is constantly

being poisoned by imposing boycotts and calling for divestment and other tools designed to harm Israel. Israel's enemies pursue these actions not because of the existence of settlements, which Israel has said can be addressed at the negotiating table, nor to protest specific Israeli policies, and not out of sympathy for Palestinians, but because of their unwillingness to be reconciled to the very existence of Israel. Were their actions motivated by concern for Palestinians it is fair to ask: where is the outrage in the Arab world over the killing in recent weeks of over 400 Palestinians in Syria?! I hope your administration will forcefully denounce anti Semitic cartoons and images sanctioned in the official Arab press as vociferously as images offensive to Muslims denounced, while still defending the democratic principle of free speech.

I have a specific policy suggestion to propose that may be helpful to all parties. Offer aid to the Arab countries that dismantle, resettle, absorb and provide decent housing for Palestinian refugees rather than keeping them languishing in the squalor of refugee camps, which are breeding grounds for hatred.

The unrest in the Arab world holds hope and promise that they will enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century and become more open and tolerant. But recent events highlight the precarious, volatile nature of the situation. The risk of chemical weapons and other heavy artillery falling into the hands of irresponsible parties bent on the destruction of Israel is great. We must continue to strengthen Israel's defense capability to deter acts of aggression against it.

And by the way, Libya, Kuwait, Somalia, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, to name a few, are all places where the United States has committed either troops, resources and or considerable funds to help liberate its citizens. At a significant cost to American taxpayers, and of American lives, the United States has demonstrated its willingness to help the people of Arab and Moslem lands, including Bosnia and Kosovo. Rather than express appreciation for our assistance and sacrifices, our embassies are torched, our motives are questioned, and our efforts to establish relationships are rejected. We are told that we need to change our policies towards Israel or curtail free speech in order to placate those who do not share our values. When we see the response in the Arab world after all we have done we have to recognize the very real possibility that it might not be our policies that are the problem. In the words of the Jennifer Aniston hit romantic comedy, the time has come to consider it might be that, "They're just not that into us."

We should pursue a policy and course that we believe to be right and just and not allow American foreign policy to be dictated by unelected tyrants who oppress their own people, nor by angry uneducated violent street mobs.

As for the biggest threat to Israel, the region, and the world, Iran, it is clear that the talks which have been going on since 2006 are not slowing Iran's progress toward obtaining a nuclear weapon. In September the head of Iran's nuclear agency Iranian Vice President Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani, admitted in a newspaper interview that his government has repeatedly lied to international inspectors to protect his country's nuclear program and to cover up the technical advances it has made.

Although the sanctions have clearly had an impact on Iran, they have not prevented its unrelenting march towards seeking to obtain nuclear capacity. The goal is not just to make things difficult, uncomfortable or bread more expensive for Iranians, but to isolate Iran and to prevent it from acquiring nuclear capability. Iran now chairs the conference of 120 non-aligned nations, which met a few weeks ago in Teheran, with numerous foreign ministers and fifty heads of state in attendance. So much for our policy to isolate Iran from the rest of the world being successful.

The world could well change forever if the foremost sponsor of terrorism is allowed to be in possession of nuclear weapons that they can provide to their terrorist proxies throughout the world. It is like giving an arsonist a can of gasoline and matches, or putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank.

After all, we are not speaking of a country that acts rationally. What sane nation would go to such extremes to be so deceptive and subject its people to such crippling sanctions to develop something for peaceful purposes? It defies all logic. Not unlike its proxy, Syria, Iran does not refrain from committing human rights violations against its own people, executing hundreds of innocent people each year. Its leaders say they are willing to sacrifice half their population to destroy Israel. Based on their track record we cannot assume this is mere bluster or rhetoric for internal consumption. There is no reason to assume that once they cross the threshold and acquire nuclear weapons capability they will suddenly become reasonable and begin to act rationally. This is not the second act of the Cold War, where containment was an option. We are not dealing with Soviet apparatchiks, whose government was populated by Politburo bureaucrats who really only wanted the perks that came with party membership, or communist ideologues who believed their own propaganda and saw world events in terms of economic conflict.

If our history has taught us anything to share with the world it is to take rants by madmen threatening to wipe us out seriously. We are the proverbial canary in the miner's shaft. All too often, what has befallen Israel eventually has been the fate of the rest of the Western world as well. Israel was the first nation to be the target of terrorist attacks, suicide bombings, and assaults on its embassies and civilians, a precursor to actions now all too common around the world.

And so, we are at a critical juncture. Israel must make tough choices, as must the United States, for the timeline to act is limited. By the time you read this, either it or the US will have felt the need to act. It is my sincere hope that our policy will be guided by the principles I have outlined in this memo, parts of which have been the hallmark of longstanding American foreign policy in the region. I beg you to do all you can to prevent Iran from going nuclear and to support Israel should it find it needs to take drastic actions.

In conclusion, Mr. President, I hope you will rise to the occasion. Inspire us. Uplift us. Protect and defend the ideals of our nation, as well as for those across the globe who look to us for guidance and leadership. America is a unique nation. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, it remains the world's last great hope. It has been selfless and done much for the world. Help us dream dreams of greatness, and lead us so the potential of our promise will be fulfilled.

My hope and prayer remains what I said to President Obama four years ago, on his first day in office at the prayer service at the National Cathedral, "May God be with you, and may you be with God."

Respectfully submitted,

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