

A Letter to the People of Egypt
From an American Rabbi

Dear Egyptian People,

Salam. We have been captivated and mesmerized by the images splashed across our television screens of what has unfolded before our very eyes the past 18 days. We are inspired by the courage and determination of the young people who have led this revolution. We have been impressed by the unity of purpose and the harmony shown by such diverse segments of the population. We admire the restraint you have displayed and the lack of violence in making your voices heard. We rejoice and celebrate with you in what you have achieved, and genuinely share your joy, hopes and dreams for a better future.

Our two peoples have known each other a very long time, longer than most peoples. Our intertwined history goes back several thousand years. Our patriarch Abraham, the very first Jew sojourned in Egypt, as did his son, Isaac. Abraham's great grandson Joseph rose to a position of prominence and served as an important adviser to the Pharaoh, ultimately recommending and implementing a plan that saved the country from famine at a time when the rest of the region was crushed under the burden of a widespread scarcity of food. And then there was the matter of a certain public building project, the pyramids and a subsequent confrontation between our leader, Moses and the Pharaoh, culminating in plagues, ten of them to be precise, which led to our liberation and hasty departure. Then, as now, freedom from an oppressive leader was a powerful, undefeatable driving force.

Beyond the Biblical period, one of the first communities in the Diaspora from the seventh century BCE was in Elephantine, Egypt. Throughout the centuries Jews lived in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities, contributing to and enriching Egyptian life and civilization. Probably our most famous resident was Moses Maimonides, who sought and found refuge in your country when he escaped Muslim fanatics who had overrun Spain. In Egypt he rose to prominence and served as physician to the king and the royal court, while serving as the leader of the Jewish community and composing some of his great philosophical and legal treatises, writings revered to this day by all three of the great monotheistic faiths.

So as not to raise unpleasant matters at a time when you are celebrating your new found freedom, I will skip over the nature of what transpired between us for the greater part of the second half of the twentieth century. And while almost no Jews live in Egypt today, (that's the part we are going to overlook), nevertheless, we are neighbors, living in close physical proximity today as well, in that Israel shares its largest border with Egypt.

As a result it is fair to say that while the rest of the world watches what is taking place with fascination, we do so with more interest. We are not mere detached spectators or unaffected bystanders. Much more is at stake for us than other people around the world witnessing the exciting unfolding of events.

If you have sensed mixed signals from our community, it is not because we are not thrilled by your being liberated from the cruel rule of a dictator who ruled with an iron fist for three decades, and not because we loved him so much, but because we are concerned about what the future will bring.

Make no mistake about it, we know that President Hosni Mubarak was not a saint. We are not blind. We know that he was not a very faithful friend. Far from it. His only visit to Israel in the past 20 years was for a few hours, to attend the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin. He tolerated and even

encouraged hideous anti-Semitic literature and propaganda. Preposterous conspiratorial theories about Jews planning the 9-11 attacks, and poisoning the hearts and minds of Egyptian children were spread. Television shows which portrayed Jews in the worst possible way and which perpetuated the blood libel charge taught you to fear and hate Jews and Israelis. This should come as no surprise, for he repressed truth as well as his own people. Like all dictators he did not allow any opposition or expression of dissatisfaction with his harsh regime.

So why would there be any support or sympathy for such a leader? And why would we have any concerns or misgivings about getting rid of such a terrible person?

Because despite all of these flaws we appreciate that he kept the peace treaty negotiated by his predecessor, Anwar Sadat and the nation of Israel. He opposed the rabidly fanatic Hamas terrorists who seek the destruction of Israel and did not allow weapons of mass destruction to reach their hands. He cooperated with the United States in its efforts to defeat Al Qaeda and to combat terrorism. These are not insignificant things which can be easily ignored.

Perhaps our justified feeling of isolation amidst a sea of hostility makes us blind to the faults of those willing to say they will not go to war against us. On the rare occasion when a leader of a neighboring nation does not have weapons pointed against us we breathe a sigh of relief. Perhaps it is the contrast between the peace, albeit a cold one that he maintained, and the memory of Anwar Sadat's predecessor, Gamal Adbul Nasser, shouting in bellicose tones to massive crowds that he whipped into a frenzy promising to "push the Jews into the sea." Or our anxiety could be prompted by the yet to be determined role of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite attempts by some to whitewash their positions, its official policy and express goals are still to impose sharia law, abrogating the peace treaty with Israel and restoring, by violence if necessary Islam to its position of prominence and world domination. We worry about the potential for their ascendancy to power and what they will do to those who oppose their approach, for they are anything but a peaceful group. Let's put it this way: the Muslim Brotherhood's charter is nothing like the mission or charter of the brotherhood of most synagogues.

We worry not just because of our own self interests. We worry for you, and what will happen to your nascent movement for democracy should one tyrannical regime merely be replaced by another totalitarian form of government. The freedoms you fought for and so rightly long for and deserve could disappear.

History has shown that revolutions' outcomes are far from certain. Democracy is a delicate and fragile system of government. We have seen this movie before, and anxiously hold our breath, for us, and for you, and hope and pray that the ending will be Eastern Europe, 1989, and not Iran, 1978.

Unfortunately, the path chosen by Anwar Sadat, one of recognition and of deeper ties with Israel was not embraced and did not progress to the next stage under Mubarak. The hoped for tourism in both directions never occurred. Israeli academics are banned from Egyptian conferences. Recently a prominent popular Egyptian author refused to allow his book to be translated into Hebrew and banned its publication in Israel. The number one song in Egypt a few years ago was the popular hit, "I hate Israel."

Israel does not seek territory, and is not a threat to you. It willingly did what no other nation that was victorious in war and that had captured land has ever done. For the only time in history a nation relinquished land acquired in a war of self defense, land that had oil fields, land that served as a buffer, a sacrifice that meant an already small country shrunk became 1/3 of its

previous size as it gave away 2/3 of its territory. It did so in the hope that a new direction would begin, one of peace and cooperation. So while peace and cooperation would have been nice, and good for both of us, we have made do with the one, with peace.

We hope that you recognize that the ensuing peace that has held for the past thirty years, despite its shortcomings has been good not just for Israel. It has been almost a generation since our sons faced each other in war, and this is good for you as well as for us and is in your best interests also.

If the fear-mongers prevail and those who call for nullifying the treaty with Israel seize power, after Israel gave up tangibles for something seen as ephemeral and intangible, a promise on a piece of paper which can be abrogated, you must know that it will make it difficult if not impossible for Israel to ever again agree to any kind of territorial compromise with any other Arab ruler or nation. That is why much is at stake for the entire region in how you decide to relate to us.

Since we have had some experience with democracy, we say welcome to the club.

A word of caution is in order, for leaders can appeal to the best or the worst in their people. They can appeal to our hopes and dreams, or they can become demagogues who manipulate and play to our fears. For democracy to be successful it requires adhering to principles such as free speech and a free press, freedom to organize, a stable economy that offers opportunity for all, a rejection of corruption as an integral part of the system, independent political parties, an open and pluralistic educational system, respect and guaranteed rights for minorities, and abiding by agreements and upholding treaties negotiated with neighbors. It is much more than just voting, as anti-democratic forces can achieve power and squash and destroy the very system they used to gain power. Free elections are what brought Hamas to power in Gaza, and Adolph Hitler in Germany.

We encourage you to demand that your leaders be open and honest about their intentions and that they appeal to the best in you so they do not betray your hard fought newly won freedom.

This is a hopeful moment for all the world whose eyes are on you. We extend our hand in peace and friendship and hope you will continue to inspire all of us by following the brave path of true freedom and pursue the vision of the courageous Anwar Sadat who turned away from war and destruction when he and his partner, Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin proclaimed, "no more war, salam, shalom, peace."

B'shalom, with friendship and best wishes,

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