

Parashat Tzav: Reflections Upon Returning from AIPAC's 2016 Policy Conference

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Attending the annual AIPAC Policy Conference is a unique experience. Those who attend are enthusiastic and energetic supporters of Israel. This year, the largest conference ever, hosted 18,000 people, including 4000 high school and college students, large contingents of Hispanics, African Americans and evangelical Christians, over 750 rabbis and cantors and civic leaders from around the country.

AIPAC is comfortable for many who are often in uncomfortable settings. Within the halls of the Washington DC Convention Center, one does not encounter demonstrations against Israel (similar to those one might find standing outside the Convention Center). There were no voices spewing anti-Israel lies (as one finds at demonstrations outside of the building and on college campuses today and increasingly so as "Israel Apartheid Week" is marked later this month). There were no sessions which one might attend in which the biases of the news media provide the basis for study and reflection.

At AIPAC, the expectation is for fair and balanced reporting of the situations faced by Israelis and for the difficult process of weighing and examining statements and policies which, at times, are confounding and confusing enough, even without the skewed views.

Packed into our daily schedules, over the course of the two-and-a-half days of the conference, are dozens of opportunities to learn from some of the greatest experts on Israel and the Middle East, about the most updated and even un-publicized advances and initiatives occurring in Israel today, politically, militarily and technologically.

Fortunately for Israel, the current unrest in the Middle East has caused Lebanon, Syria, Iraq Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries (normally vocally anti-Israel, to one degree or another) are pre-occupied with their own internal civil wars. The familiar threats to destroy the State of Israel have been placed on the back-burner while countries deal with their own domestic problems.

After that, Israel, Iran and the Arab countries all agree on one thing: That Israel will exist at least long enough for these countries to defeat those with whom they are fighting so that, when those other wars are completed, the victors will be able to return to their task of seeking to destroy Israel. There is a certain comfort, I suppose, that comes from knowing that the more the face of the Middle East changes, the more it remains the same, that Israel bashing and hatred remains and will ultimately transcend any Arab outbursts against each other.

At the conference I attended two sessions in which the topic related to the threats against Israel. Tal Becker and Jonathan Harris, both well-known for their insights, breadth and depth of knowledge of Israel, spoke of different threats with which Israel contends. Jonathan Harris analyzed the military threats outside of Israel. His was a sobering presentation. Speaking of each country bordering Israel.

Within each country, there are internal existential struggles underway with forces of radicalized Islamists. Egypt, under Pres. Sisi, fights al-Qeida which is attempting to hamper Egypt's hold on the Sinai and gain access to Gaza where they will help and provide arms to Hamas, helping them to secure their control in Gaza and to attack Israel.

Syria, as you know, is in a brutal war with ISIS, a battle between bad and worst, a battle about which it is hard to know who is better. Russia, of course, is supporting Syria's Pres. Assad, a sworn enemy of the US. The US is supporting Syrian insurgents who are fighting both ISIS and Assad.

They are also fighting against the Kurds, who receive assistance from the US. Yet, the Kurds in Iraq, also beneficiaries of US arms, are fighting against Iraq, which also receives arms from the US. In Iraq, that means that the US is supporting both sides of the conflict there. (Parenthetically, I like the Iraqi model which encourages both sides to win!).

Insurgents, ISIS, Hezbola, Hamas, Al Qeida, Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood and more are all sophisticated and well-trained. They fight as organized forces with clear goals and objectives. They possess top-notch arms, artilleries and tanks. And, when they finish their internal, national fighting, some of which Israel has, behind the scenes, been helping with, they will, with varying degrees of seriousness, turn their guns toward Israel. And then what? Mr. Harris tried to give assurances about Israel's strength and qualitative military edge. His assurances were equivocal, to some degree evasive and even frightening: Israel will defend itself. Israel's might, supported by the US, and fortitude would not yield.

At the same time, I was surprised that, nowhere in his presentation did he mention the threat from Iran. When questioned, he answered by saying that Iran is now fighting through its proxies in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. Iran, though dangerous and, having negotiated a nuclear deal which most believe was heavily weighted in favor of Iran, would not attempt an attack anytime soon. Beyond the individual points addressed in the agreement with Iran, we have certainly given them the gift of time. And Iran is focused far down the road. Time is their ally.

It was interesting as well that Mr. Harris did not touch upon the issue which, according to popular opinion, is the single most important conflict in the region, the one from which, according to Israel's detractors, is the source of all other conflicts: the Palestinians. Tal Becher has been on most prominent members of negotiating teams in Israel when Israel has tried, at the UN, in the USA and in Israel, to work toward a negotiated peace with the Palestinians. I attended his lecture as well.

Tal's summary was equally distressing. He spoke of the partnership needed in order to strike a deal. And that partnership for peace does not exist. And Tal gave several reasons why there has been no deal and at least, in the foreseeable future, there will be no negotiated peace with the Palestinians.

The Palestinian narrative: The story told by Palestinians is one of being brutally and violently abused by the Israelis. Some were expelled from their homes, or left voluntarily, expecting to be back soon. Others were waiting to come into the land from Jordan. They are still in Jordan, living in an imposed exile created by Israel. That is at the core of their narrative.

The conundrum here is what should Israel do in the meantime? While there are no negotiations scheduled on the calendar, while the Palestinian narrative becomes ever-more firmly entrenched, are there things that Israel could do? Are there confidence/trust building steps which Israel could take?

One suggestion was that, we know that, in any future agreement, settlers living in Judea and Samaria (also called the West Bank) would need to be evacuated in any eventual deal. Perhaps Israel should be building new cities within contiguous Israel to accommodate the 80,000 – 100,000 settlers who would be forced to move if there is, eventually, a Palestinian State. That would show good faith and begin to refocus the eventual negotiations.

That's one opinion, one possible perspective. But that perspective may not coincide with the way Palestinians will see that city-building.

Any response or unilateral action (or inaction, as in freezing building in the territories) will be interpreted as a win for the Palestinians and will serve as proof that "negotiations will not do as much for us as not negotiating." Moreover, President Abbas (now in his 10th year of a five year term) enjoys the greatest degree in popularity among Palestinians when he appears as an obstructionist, as a one who will not make a deal. He is a hero to the masses whenever he says no.

From Tal Becker's report gleaned two crucial lessons:

1. That situation is complex, the goals are illusive and the path is obscured by the fact that the bi-lateral "will" to move forward in a direction determined by negotiations simply is not there.
2. And yet, despite the sobering prospects for the immediate future, we do not stop hoping, we do not despair. We live with even greater intensity, refusing, even for a moment, to let go, for one reason alone: we have no choice. We have nowhere else to go.

Against this backdrop at this year's conference, we welcomed four of the five candidates for the nomination for president of the United States from their respective party. Despite the excitement of a political rally created by the appearance of all of the candidates (with the exception of Bernie Sanders), I could not help but wonder whether these candidates, all delivering strong pro-Israel stump speeches, were truly aware of how dangerous that part of the world is. It is almost amusing to listen the rhetoric, much of which is appealing, re: who will be strongest candidate for Israel. Each speech touched upon all of the right issues which an AIPAC audience would expect (being called: throwing red meat to the hungry), The Iran Deal, the support of the US, the close and unbreakable friendship between the US and Israel, etc.

A word about the most highly publicized and widely attended presentation by Donald Trump: I had written to our congregation prior to the conference and informed our members that I would not be in the room when Mr. Trump spoke. **I would not, and did not, leave while he was speaking.** I left the auditorium prior to his being called, after the speaker preceding Mr. Trump, concluded his remarks. And, you may be interested to know that there were only a relative handful of people who did leave. I stood with the others listening to the speech from outside. By the end, I was glad that I had decided to step out of the room for that speech, glad however, for a reason different from the reason I wrote in my letter.

His speech, you see, included much of what I had heard from him in the past in his analysis of the current threats to Israel and the way that he would stand up to those threats. In general his remarks were impolite and very general (believe me!). His tone conveyed his characteristic certainty and self-assurance that he can and will do that which others have failed to do, although he does not tell us how. We simply must "**believe.**" We have already heard his litany:

These Muslims are bad dudes. I would stop all Muslims from entering our country.

This president is the worst ever for Israel. This one lies. That one is a baby.

This is the worst deal that has ever been negotiated: my first day in office I'll rip it up and get a better deal for the US and for Israel.

This is the worst president ever for Israel.

I know how to fix this. BELIEVE ME, (over and over) I know how to fix this. I know what to do. "I have actually read the deal with Iran – more than anyone else." It is a terrible deal.

I had absented myself from his speech unlike others who opted to sit silently through the speech. I chose to be leave rather than have my presence be interpreted to suggest that there is some legitimacy to his message, as the Talmud reminds us: *shtika ki-hoda'ys dami / silence suggests acquiescence*. I chose not to be present when the words, insults and invectives emerged, lest I be associated with those who agreed with him. At the same time, I certainly understand those whose protests involved sitting on their hands.

In the end, although less crude than other speeches I have heard him deliver, I was glad not to be in the room for another reason: I was disappointed, dumb-founded and appalled by the large number of people in attendance who stood and cheered for Mr. Trump with enthusiasm and joy.

The approval of the AIPAC members was astonishing. And the new AIPAC President, Lillian Pinkus, excoriated the delegates the next morning for cheering with enthusiasm for a person who denigrated the president and mocked those who had signed the Iran deal. She called out the delegates who stood and cheered when Mr. Trump proclaimed that "This is president Obama's final year...yay." Her anger was not aimed at Mr. Trump. He said little that he had not said before. Her rebuke was to AIPAC. Again, I believe that she was correct.

You see, it is true that we must be must be polite. But those who attend AIPAC do so out of a commitment not only to the political State of Israel but a commitment to a place which, by definition, represents world Jewry and the high standards that make Israel a Jewish state. To my mind, those who stand with AIPAC stand against bigotry, racism and who stand against scapegoating an entire religion, considering all to be guilty until proven innocent. We Jews know what that feels like.

We know what has happened when we were singled out as the cancerous growth on the body of the world's humanity, a cancer which must be eradicated and erased. AIPAC supporters must hold themselves to a standard which coincides with the standards of humanity embodied in the State of Israel. Those who represent Israel's greatest supporters, must act in a way which reflects Israel's, AIPAC's and Judaism's highest ideals.

I believe that AIPAC did everything right. They needed to, and were correct to invite Mr. Trump. It was our responsibility to respond appropriately, by walking out with me or by sitting on one's hands. Yet, it was a large swath of the delegates who cheered. And all must learn from that mistake.

I want to turn your attention away from last weekend for a moment and look at a small passage from this morning's Torah reading. The *Parasha* ends by describing how Aaron, the High Priest, function: "Aaron and his sons did all that God commanded them to do" (p. 625. Lev.8:36), which Rashi explains as praiseworthy, "they did not turn either to the right or the left." (*She lo hatu yamin u'smoll*) On the surface, one could easily apply this comment of Rashi to suggest that this is a warning not to get involved (right or left) with either Republicans or Democrats. Our reading today, however, does not support this interpretation. Rashi is not speaking of political affiliations between AIPAC activists. It is a different comment on this passage which I find speaking to me.

The *Hatam Sofer* (R' Moses Schreiber, 1762-1839, Germany/Austria-Hungary) once asked a congregant to lead the service. The congregant shrugged his shoulders and hemmed and hawed, as if unworthy for the task. The *Hatam Sofer*, piqued, quoted the

Rashi above, "Aaron and his sons did not shrug their shoulders (they didn't turn, they did not look to the right or left to find someone else to do the job). To shrug your shoulders as if to say "maybe this should be someone else's honor and responsibility", is nothing but false modesty. Aaron's sons, when asked, simply they just got up and did what they were bidden to do. Excess modesty," he concluded, "is also a form of pride."

At AIPAC this year, we stood together, 18,000 strong for Israel. The show of support was impressive and enthusiastic...all heartening. But we missed the opportunity to demonstrate that the depth of our support for Israel's safety is inextricably linked to the values of the Jewish State. Many who remained in the room, looked with uncertainty to their left and their right. They cheered when they heard words of support for Israel's safety. They forgot that they and Israel must be guided as well by Jewish values. And when they looked, I believe that they saw others standing and they followed. Unfortunately, they followed the wrong models.

My friends, supporting Israel is our responsibility. We cannot give that responsibility away. But when we assume that responsibility, we must support her security in order to assure Israel's physical and moral survival. We cannot cheer a cruel, unjust or bigoted Israel nor can we cheer the support of one whose values run counter to our own. It is our responsibility to stand and cheer for an Israel which is kind, humane and compassionate.

Israel came into being as the embodiment of values, to pursue justice and to find peace. Israel exists as the only place we have, our only homeland, our only refuge. Survival is necessary but insufficient. Israel must not only be strong, it must be good. We have no choice but to get it right. We have nowhere else in the world to go.

I hope that the lessons of this Policy Conference inform our actions, our words and our silence in the future. I pray that we make our choices in the future, especially those on which the lives of our brothers and sisters in Israel depend, with the knowledge and understanding of the past, with unquestioned strength, with a desire for justice and with the wisdom we acquire through the values by which we define our lives as Jews. May we, with AIPAC's help, live to see an Israel whose strength enables it ultimately to find the Peace for which we pray daily. *Adona'i oz l'amo yiten. Adona'l yivarech et amo ba-shalom.*