

Shabbat Nachumu: Responding to a Bad Deal

Rabbi Neil Cooper, August 1, 2015 /16 Av 5775

There is general agreement in the American Jewish community that the deal signed with Iran is not a good deal. The debate, so far as I can tell, is not over whether the deal is good but over whether it is good enough to support. Supporters say that it is the best deal that could have been made (despite the fact that we would have hoped for more concessions and greater flexibility and access in inspections). Nay-sayers fall on a spectrum which, on one side says we “we should have/could have done better” to a more forceful objection, summarized by Gov. Huckabee: This brings Israel to the oven door.

I don't want to talk about the deal. I would assume that our members assume different positions for and against. I am not going to tell you who is right/wrong. What I would like to share with you is that there is “right” in both right and left! And there is wrong in both right and left. And what is wrong is not found in the position you take but in the conversations conducted between right and left. And that conversation has been distracting, destructive and distressing to witness. To get to that point this morning, however, I begin with a passage from this morning's reading, from Parashat VeEtchanan

Deut. 6:18 p. 1028:

Do what is right and good in the eyes of God that it may be well with you and that you might go in and possess the good land which the Lord swore to your fathers.

Commenting on this, the Ramban (13th Century Spain) focuses on the words *HaYashar ViHatov B'einei HaShem* and comments:

This is a great thing on the Torah: that it lays down laws for human behavior in all spheres but, after doing so, enjoins us to do what is right and good in all matters:

'ad she'yikanes ba-zeh ha-p'shara v'lifnim mishurat ha-din... 'ad she-yikra b'chol'inyan tam vi'yosher / until compromise and “lifnim mishurat ha-din”, going beyond the (explicit letter of the) law to find leniencies and, in that way does one fulfill the injunction to do what is right in the eyes of God.

What the Ramban is saying, I believe is, on a deep level, quite remarkable. What he is saying is that God can give us rules and directives, laws and justice, for many issues we might confront. But following the laws and adhering to the standards of strict justice is not, in itself, sufficient. Even when the law seems clear, one may still need to apply an element of compromise and leniency **to do what is right in God's eyes**. In other words, God wants the compromises and leniencies we make in order to make peace to supersede God's own laws. What is right, in God's eyes, according to Ramban, is what is *yashar v'tov*.

Put another way, that which is right according to God's justice may not be right in the realm of human relationships. Justice may, at times, be too harsh, too monolithic. Justice must be tempered, softened and it is our job to temper what is just and right with compromise and compassion in order to make peace. Justice may reflect the letter of the law, but God requires not justice but peace, and it is our job to bring peace.

In the conversations which have swirled in every Jewish publication since the agreement was reached, the level of certainty about its meaning and implications has been clear... clear to each side that their view right. This is a terrible agreement and here are the reasons. Or, this agreement does, in fact, give

us much of what we had hoped to achieve in these negotiations. The deal, perhaps most importantly, avoids military action. Who is right? I have two answers:

1. Who is right may not be clear for some time. Ultimately, one side may prove to have interpreted the issue in a way which will be reflected in the events which occur over the next ten years.
2. It doesn't matter who is right if the result of being right sows anger, division and rancor among the Jewish People. And this is the answer I focus on.

Questions:

Who here has an opinion regarding the Agreement?

Who here thinks that they are right in the opinion they hold, with respect to the virtues of the Agreement?

Who here is aware of the arguments on the other side, which promotes a view opposite their own?

Who here believes that, if they heard arguments of which they were unaware (not classified) they could be persuaded that, in fact they are wrong and the other side is right? Do you want to have a discussion, winner is right, loser is wrong?

Who here would be interested in engaging in a discussion in which each conversant tries to convince you that you are wrong and they are right?

In my experience, it is a rare occurrence that someone is convinced that, after listening to your convincing argument, that the other side is right and they are wrong. Unless a person has no opinion to start with, most people have great difficulty being convinced that they are wrong. How then can we discuss these contradictory positions without the discussions becoming contentious?

Laws for civil discussions of sensitive issues which tend to become acrimonious:

1. **I am not trying to convince you that you are wrong.** Rather, I will tell you what I believe. I can tell why I think I am right without convincing you that you are wrong. (I had this exchange with a member who wrote to me saying: why shouldn't I try to convince you that you are wrong? My answer: You are trying to prove me wrong because you think that you are right. You, in your magnanimity want to save me from the "wrong path". But I don't believe that I am wrong. I will listen to why you think that you are right, but I believe that you can be right **for you**, which does not mean that I cannot be right **for me**. In these discussions, begin, "I believe..."
2. **Acknowledge the opinions and opinions of the other person as possibilities if you can.** If you cannot, acknowledge the possibility that they are right, say why: "I cannot accept your assumption that the Iranians will act in good faith and not try to circumvent the Agreement. If they were to act in good faith, however, your view makes sense".
3. **Search for common values:** We are all interested in the security of Israel even though we may not agree on how that security is best assured.
4. **Regardless of who is right/wrong, we are both part of an ongoing conversation among people who care deeply and, even if we disagree, we must find a way to understand each other, accept both our differences and our points of agreement.** And we must do this because of our commitment to the unity of our People, because Israel needs us both to commit to her well-

