

## The Great Debate: Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Obama, Congress and Purim

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Dear Friends,

Throughout the years, I have tried to remove myself from partisan politics. I believe that rabbis should not become partisan, and therefore, polarizing figures. I do not intend to set a different precedent with this letter. I do not want to wade into the ever-intensifying torrents of emails and public commentaries regarding the speech which Prime Minister Netanyahu is scheduled to make on Monday before a joint session of Congress. Indeed, the waves of opinions and editorials this event has generated seem to have created a maelstrom, drawing nearly everyone into the debate from which no one seems able to escape. Case in point: on the listserv of the Rabbinical Assemble (RAVNET) the number of long-winded opinions devoted to this issue by my colleagues exceeds the combined total number of words spoken by all American rabbis over the last three High Holiday season (I counted!).

At the same time, standing at a distance from all of that, there is an irony which I find fascinating, at best, deeply troubling, at worst. The irony I see relates to the power of words.

The controversy surround the Prime Minister's visit to Washington has been framed, supported and/or denounced, based on the different narratives one chooses to believe.

1. Etiquette argument #1: Some use the "breach of etiquette" argument: Essentially, the invitation was extended to PM Netanyahu by Representative Boehner instead of having the formal invitation come from the White House.
2. Etiquette issue #2: There is a different issue of etiquette regarding whether or not proper notification, a matter of courtesy and etiquette prior to an invitation being extended to a Head of State, was given to the White House.
3. Partisanship: A third position focuses on the partisan battles which are becoming increasingly more strident, both there and in Israel, as the scheduled date of the speech gets closer. The speech, from this perspective, is interfering with at least three agendas:
  - a. Pandering to Republicans: A speech to Congress, in which both houses are now dominated by the Republicans, becomes a not-so-subtle slap at the White House. Our Democratic President sees this speech as one given to Republicans.
  - b. Publicly disagreeing with the President: PM Netanyahu has made his position on Iran eminently clear: A comprehensive agreement which has the effect of crippling Iran's capability to create a nuclear bomb is the only acceptable agreement. The information leaked to the public, and to PM Netanyahu, suggests that the agreement with Iran is heading toward a place far away from the place the Prime Minister would consider acceptable. The President is upset, therefore, that the Prime Minister's speech will make the case for a different and much stronger agreement than the one being negotiated by the Obama Administration with the Iranians.
  - c. Israeli Elections: Elections in Israel will be held in less than three weeks. PM Netanyahu's job as PM and his approach regarding Iran and the US will be a central issue in the minds of Israeli voters. The international recognition garnered by PM Netanyahu, in addition to the tough stance he is taking by publicly disagreeing with the

President over what will be portrayed as a moment of existential importance, will give a tremendous boost to the PM in Israeli polls.

On the basis of all of the above (and the other issues and sub-issues I have not mentioned) many of us have formed our opinions. But, beyond the question of whether or not the Prime Minister should accept the invitation to speak, is the issue of the power of words in general and, specifically, the power of the words of PM Netanyahu. There is no avoiding the politically partisan impact which this speech will have, but, in the end, it is only a speech. And yet, it is the speech which has generated as much heat as the issues on the ground. Following the career of PM Netanyahu, it is clear that he knows how to play the political game. So does President Obama, for that matter. And despite their personal mutual animus for each other and the fact that their approaches to this issue are quite different, they agree on one thing: that the words used to describe these matters are crucial and powerful.

I am reminded here of the verse, "The power of life and death are held by the tongue." Here, the life and death referred to can be taken literally. We hear the words of our enemies and are reluctant to accept them at face value. Threats to incinerate Israel, references to Israel (such as that of Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran who described Israel as a "one bomb country") are shocking. And yet they are not taken seriously since, this is nothing more than sabre rattling. We need not take these words seriously.

Personally, I take seriously what people say, whether toward me or about me. I think that is also at the crux of the debate which has been generated by PM Netanyahu's visit. Both the President and the Prime Minister are watching and weighing carefully the words of each other. And, it is that careful listening may actually lead to something very positive: We have been focused on the words which will be spoken and the venue at which these words will be heard. Perhaps our leaders will be reminded that there are also words being spoken on the other side. From throughout the world our enemies are threatening to attack and kill Israelis and Americans. And, as we have seen. These words lead to action.

The truth is that I am not thinking so much about whether the Prime Minister will speak to Congress. Rather, I am thinking about the threats of our enemies. I am thinking about my children and grandchildren who live in a country which is in the cross-hairs of our detractors. I am thinking about where this world will be if Iran succeeds in acquiring nuclear capability. I am thinking about the word which come from our enemies.

This week we celebrate the Holiday of Purim, a day of joy and merrymaking. But at the core of this holiday is a sobering message. As the story goes, our enemy, Haman, sent an edict out to the empire calling for a day of destruction of all of the Jews in the empire. It was the threat of our enemies which mobilized Mordechai to intervene and to stop our enemies from destroying us. Today, our enemies have taken their words and their plans from Haman's playbook.

I will be attending the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington DC next week. PM Netanyahu will be speaking to us. The issue which he addresses will be "Nuclear Iran." His message will not be partisan. Our questions will not be political. Our question will not be "Did you/Will you speak to Congress?" Our question will be, "What will be done?"

I pray that those caught in the verbal vortex of a partisan dispute will put their vociferous bickering aside and focus not on the words of the PM, but on the words of our enemies.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Neil S. Cooper