

Matot – Ma'ase 5775 (July 18, 2015)

The Shock Troops

Rabbi Marc Israel

This is not the d'var Torah that I set out to give when I began preparing and writing earlier this week. In fact, it is not the d'var Torah that I planned to give when I woke up on Friday morning. I had planned to speak about the importance of listening before one reacts, about taking the time to read and understand a deal before deciding on one's position. In fact, I spoke briefly on that theme at our Thursday morning minyan. It was a good sermon; one that I strongly believe is true and important. One needs to listen, especially to the voices with whom one disagrees, before reacting and making up one's mind. I had all my source material ready to give an expanded version of that sermon and, in fact, I had much of it written. I could have given that sermon this morning - it would have been nice, it would have been true, and it would not have ruffled any feathers.

But as I continued to read, to listen and to consider – and especially as I re-read this week's Torah portion, I realized this was not the sermon I needed to give today.

This is.

When I was a child, there were endless conversations about whether we were American Jews or Jewish Americans – are we primarily Jews, modified by our American identity or are we primarily American, modified by our Jewish identity. While in many ways I have come to detest that question, I always knew in my heart how I would answer it – for me, even before I became more observant, my Jewish identity was always at the soul of who I was and America is the country in which I live. It doesn't mean I don't love America, for I do – I get chills when I sing the Star Spangled Banner, or when I stand on the National Mall in Washington DC or walk around the Old City District. I believe strongly in the ideals upon which our country was founded and would not hesitate to fight on behalf of America. I feel a real sense of pride – I really do – when I file my taxes and when I get a notice, as I did last week, calling me to jury duty. I never miss an opportunity to vote. I believe wholeheartedly that, with all of its faults, America is closer to being a shining light of freedom and democracy and of morality than any country I know.

But, when it comes down to it – I am American because my grandparents and great grandparents were fortunate enough to choose this as the country where they moved. I would be Jewish regardless of where I was born and where I choose to live – my Judaism is the primary source of my values and my identity.

There was another related question that we used to discuss – if, God forbid, Israel and America were ever to go to war, for whom would you fight? This question seemed then, as now, to be so absurd that it did not merit an answer. But what if it is not a war? What if it is a conflict of values or of methods? Where do my loyalties lie?

These questions have been swirling in my head these last several days following the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the Iran Nuclear Deal.

Let me state clearly and emphatically – I am not an expert in nuclear technology and while I studied political science in college and am a voracious reader of foreign policy, I certainly do not claim a level of expertise. Therefore, I am not in a position to judge this deal on its merits – whether or not it reduces

Iran's capabilities significantly, whether or not it is the best deal that could be attained, whether or not war, if it were the only alternative, would be a better alternative to this deal. I can have opinions, but those opinions have no greater value because I am rabbi than your opinions may have as a doctor, lawyer, teacher or professor.

It would be easy for me to get up and quote Jewish values that could back up either side of the argument – about the need to offer peace when you besiege a city or, alternatively, cite the rebuke of the Israelites for showing mercy on their enemy that we read in this week's parasha. But, as I've indicated, I can find just as many text that would lead one to support the deal as I could find to oppose the deal.

This is why, early on in the week, and again even until Friday morning, I had decided I was not going to take a position on the deal and certainly would not speak about it this morning.

Until.

Until I read again the passage of the Gadites and the Reubenites conversation with Moshe. The Gadites and Reubenites were cattlemen and were living, along with the rest of the Israelites, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. They came to Moses just before the Israelites were set to cross the river to conquer the land and requested permission to settle there, since it was much more fertile land upon which to raise cattle. Moses, initially angry, strongly rebukes them, accusing them of abandoning their brethren. But the Gadites and Reubenites stepped forward and said "we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home...We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion." And to this Moshe acquiesces.

So what does this have to do with the Iran deal?

I believe that there is plenty of room for debate in the American Jewish community about Israel's policies. I believe that making room in the tent for a broad range of views strengthens us and, ultimately, strengthens Israel.

But as I continued to read and consider and learn more about this deal, one fact kept coming back to me. Every single Israeli leader – from the left to the far right – expressed their fear that this deal would put Israel in a more dangerous situation. Over 70% of the Israeli population oppose the deal – and for anyone who knows Israel, it is very hard to find 70% of Israelis who can agree on anything. The only voices that have supported the deal have come from the Israeli Arab members of Knesset, some of whom were quite open in expressing their support based on the fact that it will strengthen Iran. While a majority – even a supermajority – holding an opinion does not make it correct, it does require us to stop and listen. When every Israeli leader across the political spectrum comes to the same conclusion, it would be highly paternalistic of us to claim that we know better what is in Israel's best interests.

So I still don't know what I think about the deal on its own merits. There are many aspects that concern me – especially the clauses that essentially allow for a 24 day waiting period before the IAEA could enter a suspected nuclear site. On the other hand, I could also be persuaded that this was the best deal possible and does more to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon than any non-military alternative could achieve.

However, at this moment and time, the most persuasive argument to me is that Israel needs me and I must answer that call. If my parents and grandparents had chosen to move to Israel and not America, I would have been drafted into the army at age 18 – at the beginning of the first intifada. There is much about Israel's policies at that time with which I disagree. It wouldn't have mattered – if I were drafted, I would have served. Soldiers don't have the luxury of debating whether or not they agree with a policy. They must serve when they are called upon.

Today, when the broad consensus in Israel is that everything must be done to try and stop this deal, I, who have chosen to live my life outside of the land of Israel like the Gadites and the Reubenites, must answer the call and be willing to serve as the shock troops – the front guard, stepping forward to fight on Israel's behalf. And so, I have decided that regardless of my own ambiguity, I will be joining forces with those who are working to oppose this deal.

Yesterday we entered the Hebrew month of Av – the 9 days leading up to Tisha B'Av, on which we will commemorate the loss of both of our Temples and of Jewish sovereignty – a loss that took us nearly 2000 years to recover. I feel that I must do my part to stand with Israel to assure that we, who are so fortunate to witness the 3<sup>rd</sup> Jewish commonwealth, and are not also the same generation to witness her destruction.

Over the coming days and weeks, there will be rallies, lobbying trip and other efforts to stand in solidarity with Israel during these difficult days. I intend to take part in the rally this Wednesday, and many of the other activities that will take place. I do so knowing that I may not agree with everything that will be stated, but by taking part, I will be doing my part to answer the call that I have heard from the state of Israel. I would ask each of you to consider your own position and, for those who agree, to join in.

For all of us, these are difficult days with no easy answers. I hope and pray that each of us will do all we can, in whatever way we can, to ensure that we do our part to contribute to Israel's well-being in this hour of need.