

For the Sake of Heaven

Rosh Hashanah 5776

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The sages of the Talmud argued. A lot. They disagreed, often vehemently, about how Jews must go about complying with the commandments of the Torah.

Those same rabbis taught that only some arguments are "for the sake of heaven." Others are not. Legitimate disputes over how best to achieve the will of God are permitted, even necessary. Divisions over who should be in charge, on the other hand, are forbidden. Divisiveness that becomes personal attack is so harmful that, according to the rabbis, it led destruction of the Second Temple, sending our people into exile for nearly 1900 years.

At this High Holy Day season, Jews in the United States and in Israel join our political leaders in disputation. We are arguing, of course, about the agreement that the Obama Administration and the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany, have struck with Iran about that nation's development of nuclear weapons.

Is our argument for the sake of heaven? Or do we threaten to tear the Jewish people apart, inviting destruction once again?

The Iranian regime is evil, and is bent on wiping the Jewish State off the face of the Earth. Lest anti-Zionists take comfort, we mustn't forget that the United States is Iran's ultimate enemy, the "great Satan" of the Iranian mullahs.

Nobody should imagine Iran's regime to be composed of civilized, responsible national leaders who can be trusted. Nobody should forget that these extremists deny the Holocaust. Santayana taught that "those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." A regime that denies history is eager to repeat it! As many have said before me, "When somebody says they want to kill Jews, our history has taught us to believe them."

Iran equipped with nuclear weapons, then, is a deadly danger to the Jewish State, even if it weren't a dreadfully destabilizing force throughout the Middle East, which it is.

Nobody disagrees about this danger. President Obama and Secretary Kerry, on the one hand, agree with Prime Minister Netanyahu and Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog, on the other: Iran must not acquire nuclear weapons. The

British, French, and Germans agree. Even the Russians, the Chinese, and the Saudis agree. Indeed, few geopolitical questions enjoy greater consensus: Iran with nuclear weapons is potentially deadly to the whole world.

A great question looms: How best can the world prevent Iran from possessing the nuclear weapons that it covets?

In the last decade, the answer was American-imposed economic sanctions. However, Iran plowed ahead toward its nuclear aim. Then, in 2009, the United States was able to convince the Europeans, the Russians, and the Chinese to join in those sanctions. Iran was crippled. Still, the murderous Islamist regime plowed ahead with its nuclear ambitions. At the same time, the mullahs who rule Iran, pressured by their increasingly impoverished people, sought an end to the sanctions.

The United States Administration and its partners in the sanctions are persuaded that the world's best course is to end that economic penalty in exchange for restricting Iran's nuclear development with international inspections.

Reasonable people can and do disagree over whether the agreement will accomplish its goal. This dispute is and ought to be robust, even hard-fought. Nothing less than worldwide security is at stake. Life and death are on the line for our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel.

One may point out that the agreement is unlikely to prevent Iran from going fully nuclear when the pact expires after fifteen years. Another may insist that a delay of a decade and a half is more than worthy. Those who find the deal's inspections regime inadequate should vehemently oppose it. Others, who think that the plan is the best hope of preventing a nuclear Iran are equally right to support it.

Most of us are less sure. Not being expert in centrifuges or international atomic energy arrangements, we are forced to rely on authorities. Those who possess that specialized knowledge are divided. What does seem clear, for good or ill, is that the fight in Congress ended with a Senate vote last week. Perhaps even congressional disapproval would have accomplished little. The other five nations that negotiated the pact with Iran would have gone ahead without us. A U.S.-only sanctions regime may be symbolically welcome to Israelis but would accomplish as little as it did a decade ago.

Several weeks ago, our Reform Movement released a statement, which focused on "the day after." As the agreement goes into effect, how can we best protect Israel and the world from Iranian extremists?

That's the right question. In the meantime, though, a divisive debate has plagued us, hampering the achievement of our shared, worthy goals.

Not for the sake of heaven: Comparing President Obama, or anybody who favors the agreement, to Nazi appeasers. Neither our President nor any responsible leader has suggested that the Iran agreement promises "peace in our time," or that the Iranians can be trusted to keep their agreements, or that the mullahs' motives are pure.

Not for the sake of heaven: The United States Ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, an American Jewish Zionist if there ever was one, has been called a "Capo," a Jewish Nazi collaborator. He has faced death threats.

Not for the sake of heaven: President Obama and his supporters have questioned the motives of members of Congress who oppose the agreement. Senator Schumer, an American patriot, has been accused of dual loyalty because his position aligns with Israel's. The President has personally argued that moneyed interests are behind opposition to the agreement. Dual loyalty accusations and thinly veiled reference to Jewish money are anti-Semitic, plain and simple.

Not for the sake of heaven: casting one political party as pro-Israel and the other as anti-Israel. The Prime Minister of Israel treads terribly close to that line. Partisan rancor is nothing new to any of us. Still, making a priority of one's partisan goals, above what is best for our country or for Israel, is just plain wrong. Partisan disputes are about who should be President and about which party should control Congress, not about what is good and moral. Suggesting that one party is anti-Israel risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, with one party so brutally attacked by Israel's leaders and supporters that its activists are eager to turn against Israel, God forbid. This kind of argument threatens to swallow the Jewish State, just as surely as Korach and his biblical band of rebels were consumed in a fiery pit.

Blessedly, our local discourse on the matter has been appropriate. More than a few American Jewish communities have torn themselves apart. Wisely, our Federation Board did not risk the unity of our community by taking sides in the

debate, but issued a sound, meaningful statement of concern. Reasonable people, devoted Zionists all, can disagree about the best way to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Israel will need us to be one, united American Jewish community in the days ahead. Even if the agreement lives up to its supporters' fondest dreams, it will put billions of dollars directly into Iranian hands. We know what the extremist mullahs will do with at least some of that money: Millions will flow to Hamas and Hezbollah, Iranian clients and hateful terrorists, who threaten the lives of Israelis every day. Together, all pro-Israel Americans will need to urge our leaders to shore up Israel's continuing right to self-defense. We will need the votes of those who oppose the Iran deal and those who support it, lawmakers of both political parties. American aid is critical. Iron Dome is only one example of the military cooperation that has expanded in recent years, a partnership that will need to grow after the deal is implemented. If we have branded each other as Nazi sympathizers and war mongers, we won't be able to work together. If we write off all who favor the agreement as foes of Israel, calling on them for support may be untenable. If we conduct what remains of this debate for the sake of heaven, we may enhance Israel's security.

This morning, we have already heard the calls of the shofar several times. In a few moments, we shall hear them once again. This last time, the shofar sounds to remind us that the ram's horn was heard when we entered the covenant with God at Sinai. The very last call, *tekiah gedolah*, urges us to pray that, one day, the shofar's blast will last forever, with the coming of a Messianic Age.

In our imperfect, unredeemed, pre-Messianic world, we cannot expect universal agreement – among Americans or among Jews. We can, however, disagree agreeably. We can guard our tongues, vowing to conduct all our disputes for the sake of heaven, with moderate words, with critique rather than with accusation. Perhaps that's the best we can do in this imperfect world, on this flawed planet where nobody possesses unique, absolute knowledge about how best to keep the peace.

Then, one day, may Iran be ruled by extremist mullahs no more. Then, one day, may Israel and the Middle East know war no more. Then, one day, may the United States and all the world live in harmony. Then, one day, may that great shofar sound, and may all God's children know peace.

Amen.