

Controlling Our Own Destiny

Kol Nidrei 5776/2015

Over the summer many of us poured time and energy into learning about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran deal. It was *the* topic in many Jewish circles. Some of us advocated or lobbied for or against the deal. I know thoughtful, knowledgeable, good people on either side of the question. In the weeks and days leading up to last week's Congressional vote, the inevitable outcome became clear. Some Congressional leaders had hoped to get the 60 votes needed for a resolution of disapproval that would have limited the president's power to lift sanctions. They did not reach that number, and of last week, the deal is in place. So **it no longer matters whether this is a good deal or a bad deal**. It is a deal.

And yet, both those who supported the deal and those who opposed it agree that this deal gives us plenty to be anxious about.

- Iran is the most anti-Semitic regime to come along in decades. Its leaders have repeatedly, publicly called for the destruction of the State of Israel.
- We fear that Iran will use the funds released as part of the deal to strengthen its proxies in the region: Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon – both of which threaten Israel daily – as well as the Assad regime in Syria and rebels in Yemen.
- We worry that Iran will hide its nuclear efforts from inspectors, or that inspectors will not be as thorough or probing as they could be.
- We are concerned about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Iran's development of a weapon will likely spur Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and other nations use oil money to purchase weapons of their own from nations willing to sell them.
- We wish the agreement would cover a longer period of time.

The deal is far from perfect. **However the status quo was untenable**. The sanctions on Iran had hurt its economy. But it is not clear that the sanctions were all that effective at curtailing Iran's nuclear capabilities. Many experts agree that Iran was only months or even weeks away from developing a bomb. Most importantly, the sanctions would not have held out much longer, as China, Russia, France and other nations are eager to do business with Iran. The status quo was no longer an option, as much as we might have wanted it to be.

Nor was going back to the negotiating table. If we had rejected this deal Iran likely would not have sat down with us again. Neither would our partners. The sanctions would have crumbled and Iran would have been left with no controls whatsoever over its nuclear program.

So as I said, in the end it was not about whether this was a good deal or a bad deal. This imperfect deal was **the best deal we were going to get.** It is grounded in reality: the limits of American influence, the relationships we have with other nations, and the growing regional power of Iran. Rabbi Joshua Davidson has written that this deal is certainly no “...idealistic vision of peoples living in peace... [It] is about choosing the most sensible option available, which sometimes is the best one can hope to do.”¹

We don't live in a world of perfect solutions; we live in a world of good enough. So what some consider “the most sensible option” is now in place. If you're looking for reasons to be cautiously optimistic there are some. This is the first time that Iran has agreed to limit or regulate its nuclear program in any way. The 15 years that the accord covers is a veritable eternity in rapidly changing Middle East; who knows what the landscape will look like by then. And the option of military force remains on the table, both for us and for Israel.

I believe the deal is our best option at this time. But it leaves me deeply concerned nonetheless. **The most troubling aspect of the deal is that we Jews might not control our own destiny.**

Judaism asserts again and again that each of us has ultimate control over our lives. We do not believe in original sin, the residual taint of Adam and Eve disobeying God's command in the Garden of Eden. Instead we believe that each of us has within us both the *yetzer ha-tov*, the drive to do good, and the *yetzer ha-ra*, the drive to do evil. At any moment we can listen to one or to the other. Maimonides held that the entire range of human behavior was entirely up to each of us: “Each person can choose to be as good as Moses or as evil as Jeroboam.” (And trust me, Jeroboam was pretty evil).

And of course this day of Yom Kippur is all about the control we have over our own fate. We are to look within and take responsibility for our own faults, not to blame them on others, on external obstacles, on forces greater than ourselves. Tomorrow morning's Torah portion insists that our destiny is in our own hands: “See, I have set before you good and evil, life and death – therefore choose life!” In essence, Yom Kippur is the exact opposite of my least favorite current expression: “It is what it is.” No! We Jews reject such resignation, such fatalism. “It” can be whatever we want to make of it! As individuals we have the power to control our own destiny.

Of course, when it comes to the destiny of the Jewish people our history tells a different story. For the two millennia following Rome's conquest of Jerusalem our fate was determined by others. Generation after generation we were persecuted, kicked out of our homes, killed with

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-joshua-m-davidson/no-moral-to-this-story_b_7932720.html

impunity. We were not in control of our own destiny, and there was rarely anyone who would come to our aid.

The creation of the State of Israel changed the course of our history forever. We Jews took our fate back into our own hands. No longer could anyone dictate where we were allowed to live or what professions we could pursue. No longer would anyone be able to subject us to discriminatory laws, to round us up, let alone send us to death camps. Never again would we have to rely on others for protection.

Thanks to the creation of the State of Israel our people is in control of our own destiny. We speak up for ourselves, we advocate for our interests, and most importantly we defend our own lives. We don't have to beg or plead anyone else to do it for us. We Jews decide where, when and how to fight – and we do it *as Jews*.

The State of Israel's continued existence, and the many ways in which it is thriving, is one of the greatest miracles of Jewish existence. Because of Israel, we Jews determine what will happen to us. Thank God for that.

One reason that this deal is so important is that it reminds us that **Jewish destiny is in our own hands.**

I stood on this bima last year and reflected that it was difficult for me to believe that anti-Semitism was once again a real and present threat to the Jewish people, especially in Europe. Thus, as we contemplate the prospect of the most anti-Semitic regime on earth acquiring a nuclear weapon, we are rightfully concerned about placing the fate of the Jewish people in the hands of others. And as *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg puts it, "If, in the post-Holocaust world, a group of people express a desire to hurt Jews, it is, for safety's sake, best to believe them."²

However Israel was not a party to these talks. So who will be responsible for our safety? Who will hold Iran to this deal? Will the negotiating parties be willing to use diplomatic or military power to enforce its provisions? Will the International Atomic Energy Agency be as scrupulous with its inspections as we would want them to be?

Let me present this thought experiment: What if instead of President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry, we had President Joe Lieberman and Secretary of State Chuck Schumer endorsing this agreement? I wonder how we would feel if those backing the deal most strongly were Jewish. What if we Jews were in control of our own fate at the negotiating table?

I was interested to learn that the chief U.S. negotiator, Wendy Sherman, is Jewish. She served as Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs for a number of years and is a veteran of nuclear negotiations with North Korea in the late '90s. Does a Jew sitting at the table in Vienna change the way we see this deal? For some of us, it might.

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/08/iran-israel-obama-kerry-jews/400895/>

It seems to be in our nature to desperately to control the world around us. Ever since the command, “Fill the earth and subdue it,” we have tried to control what is most essentially outside of our control, including nature and disease.

We try to control our children – first by building a protective cocoon around them, then by directing them toward a certain summer program that we think will help them get into the college of their choice, then steering them into what we believe is a worthwhile graduate program, then doing what we can to make sure that they choose a spouse that we will approve of. Of course, we do it all for their own good! Or at least that’s what we tell ourselves.

We also try to control our spouse. We may withhold affection, or dole it out intermittently to produce some desired result.

We try to control our friends and co-workers, especially when we want something from them.

We try to control our parents too, especially as they age. We have an urge to influence their decisions about where they should live, how they should maintain their health, and how they should spend their money. This urge to control the world around us is not generally as helpful as we imagine it to be.

Tonight, as we bare our souls, we acknowledge that some things are within our control while others are not. In saying the Kol Nidrei prayer we ask God: Please forgive my vows, promises and commitments that – after honest effort – I was not able to fulfill. Some I was unable to fulfill because of my own shortcomings. Other times I was thwarted by external forces.

At the same time, tonight, let us take our Jewish destiny into our own hands. We still have many ways to control our own fate. Israel’s leadership has the same job description that I do: the continued existence and thriving of the Jewish people. But this responsibility for the destiny of the Jewish people does not fall solely on those in official positions of leadership. We all figure in the destiny of the Jewish people.

First and most importantly, let us continue to advocate on behalf of Israel. We stand on ground that is as firm as ever when we make our case to Congress and the White House on issues related to Israel’s security.

- We want the U.S. to ensure that all the treaty’s provisions are rigorously and scrupulously enforced.
- We should urge Congress to strengthen both our own ability and Israel’s ability to “detect and eliminate”³ an Iranian nuclear weapon.
- We want the U.S. to continually improve Israel’s defensive capabilities.

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/opinion/thomas-friedman-if-i-were-an-israeli-looking-at-the-iran-deal.html?_r=0

- We want the U.S. to do more to prevent the flow of arms to Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran's proxies that threaten Israel daily.
- We want the U.S. to support Israel more than ever on the world stage, where it is often isolated.
- We want to make sure that the U.S. holds the military option on the table, or would support Israeli military action, should Iran not hold up its end of the bargain. The president has promised this and any future president should too.

Will we ever feel completely safe? Will we ever sense that Israel is secure? Perhaps not. And maybe that is what it means to be Jewish: to be in a perpetual state of existential anxiety.

To be a Jew is to be eternally concerned that this legacy that we love so deeply is tenuous, and on the edge of ceasing to exist. That's why we gather here tonight. We come to declare that despite our history and the challenges of the present *we are still here*. We come to breathe life into our siddur and our Torah, for the melodies that bring us back to bygone years, for the generations who sit beside us, for this communal home – our synagogue – that means so much to us. We're here because this legacy is *ours*, and *we* are the ones who give it voice and texture and flesh and power. And we are the ones who give it a future.

Let *us* ensure the continued thriving of the Jewish people. Let us take Jewish fate into our own hands by advocating for Israel on Capitol Hill. Let us take Jewish fate into our own hands by teaching one another to love Torah, and love coming to shul, and love the family brisket recipe. Let us visit Israel together, as there is no better place to glimpse the Jewish future.

We love this beautiful, fragile gift that we have inherited. Let us ensure that it shines and glows and lives for another hundred generations.

Ken yehi ratzon – May it be so.