

Sticks and Stones: The Unbreakable Covenant of The Jewish People
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The old 19th century nursery rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" attempts to persuade the child victim of name-calling to ignore the taunt; to refrain from physical retaliation; and to remain calm and good-natured. It is a lovely sentiment, but it isn't always true, is it? Sometimes words can hurt; and, more often than not, they do. They can cut deeply and do grievous harm. Once uttered, it is very hard to take them back; even harder, to undo the damage they have caused. We know because we have all been both the recipients and the deliverers of painful, and sometimes devastating, words; and every day, but especially tonight on *Kol Nidrei*, when we are judged for our misdeeds and plead forgiveness from those we have harmed, we are ashamed, or should be, that such cruelty every came out of our mouths, pens, or keyboards; and for those of us who were their recipients, the ache of that hateful phone call, letter, e-mail, or text weighs heavy on our hearts.

Indeed, one of the most troubling results of the Jewish community's difference of opinion regarding the Iran Nuclear Agreement has been the name-calling, slandering, labeling, and mocking of the other. Jewish public proponents of the Deal, like Congressman Jerald Nadler of New York, have been called liars, self-hating Jews, anti-Semites, and betrayers of Israel. In Nadler's case, he was attacked both politically and personally. An Orthodox group called, "American parents and grandparents against the Iranian deal" took out a full-page ad in nearly every Orthodox weekly paper, which featured a two-decade-old picture of a grossly overweight Nadler, who struggled for years with obesity until undergoing stomach-reduction surgery in 2002; alongside it was a photo-shopped burning Israeli flag.

On the other side of the aisle, opponents of the deal have been labeled knee-jerk, partisan alarmists; ignorant and dishonest fools, who live in fantasyland; and, among the most offensive slanders, were accusations of those against the agreement being anti-American and warmongers. These Jews were also accused of the old anti-Semitic smears of being both rich and dual-loyalists, meaning their real allegiance is to the State of Israel, and not to the United States. And some of these slanderous attacks came from the highest echelons of our government.

All of these verbal assaults, whether aimed at those who support the deal or those who oppose it, are shameful and disingenuous. Every member of our American Jewish community, who has expressed his or her opinion, has a deep love for and loyalty to America; for a democracy that allows us to speak out; for all the freedoms we cherish; and for the ultimate ideals of justice and peace we all seek. And whether we agree with all her politics or not, all of us have a cherished place in our hearts for Israel and her people. The American-Jewish partnership is sacrosanct and, as Americans, we have no other ally in the middle-east, who we can trust, and upon who we can depend, save the one and only democracy in the region -- Israel.

Most of all, none of us wants to go to war, with Iran or with any other country. As much as we value our military, and the men and women and their families who sacrifice so much to keep us safe and ensure our freedoms, not one of us -- whether we favor the Iran Nuclear Agreement or not -- not one of us, wants to be the cause of the human carnage, destruction, and chaos that is the price of war.

And that is why, all the rhetoric aside, I do believe, that now that the Iran Nuclear Agreement is a reality that we must come together to ensure that the United States and Israel, as well as the world, are secure. And our community will. Because sticks and stones may break our bones and words can hurt us, but they can never destroy us. Unfortunately, in the wake of this deal, it is our primary mission -- ensuring humanity's safety -- that will now be a lot more difficult.

As you know, I have opposed this agreement, and vocally -- speaking both from this pulpit and in our local *Jewish News* about my concerns. The primary reason for the P5 +1 negotiations was to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon; this deal pushes the window for Iran's development of a bomb out fifteen years, if Iran complies with its demands and that is a big if; but, ultimately, the agreement fails to prevent Iran from reaching its goal of becoming a nuclear state. Some day, in the not too distant future, we will very likely face a nuclear Iran.

True, we should all be grateful for what this deal does do: it does require Iran to shut down, for now, many of its centrifuges; it does demand that Iran destroy its Arak Heavy Water Reactor; and it does call for stopping the enrichment of uranium -- all excellent outcomes.

But, on the other hand, all of its centrifuges remain intact; research and development on bigger and better centrifuges continue; in eight years, Iran gets to start building advanced centrifuges; and, in year 15, the restrictions and inspections on them expire completely. At that time, Iran's breakout for a nuclear weapon will be two to three days.

The plan has also been touted as the greatest nuclear anti-proliferation treaty ever brokered; but Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey for starters, have all said that if Iran gets a nuclear bomb, they will too; and, even before that, they already want the latest and greatest military hardware the US has to offer. If we oblige them, as we have said that we will, truly, we have no idea who will be running these countries in five years? Those same rockets we arm allies with today that fly east, can also fly west and vice-versa in enemy hands tomorrow.

We also cannot forget that Iran is the largest exporter of terrorism in the world. To cement its power -- the hegemony it seeks in the middle-east, --it funds and arms proxies in Iraq; in Syria, backing President Bashar Asaad's ruthless civil war; and through Hezbollah in Lebanon, who it controls. Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, together, form the largest and most powerful Persian Empire since the 7th century. Most frightening of all, this deal will free up \$100 billion plus dollars with which Iran can further its dirty work. Just yesterday, *The Times of Israel* reported, (and a Kuwaiti newspaper, *Al-Rai*, confirmed), that Iran has already increased funding to Hezbollah, which "has enabled it to obtain highly developed new armaments . . . including all the advanced weaponry that Syria has obtained from the Russians.

The same article stated that Iran has delivered suitcases full of cash directly to Hamas' military wing in Gaza; and that Iran is the main, and likely, only power attempting to build terror cells to fight Israel on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. Even if Iran were to use the vast majority of its financial windfall from the deal to rebuild its infrastructure, and, in light of yesterday's news that is clearly a big if, Iran is already banking on exponentially more money to support terror. As recently as last week, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, declared, and I quote, "I say [to Israel] that you will not live to see the end of these 25 years . . . Until that happens, the struggle and the jihad will not give the Zionists a single moment of serenity." End quote. The agreement is clearly bad for Israel; but this deal, is also bad for us, the United States, the so-called Great Satan, who Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and Mohammad Yazdi, the head of the influential Iranian Clerical Council, have also vowed to destroy.

There are those who say that all of this inflammatory rhetoric is just political posturing. They may be right, but what an unthinkable price to pay if they are wrong. Last week I was accused of being a liberal; no doubt this week I'll be slammed for being a Conservative. I consider myself a moderate who believes that if someone says they intend to kill me, or my people, or other innocents, I'm going to take them at their word; and I have a moral obligation to speak out.

Of course, not all Iranians are members of its Revolutionary Guard, or religious fanatics who desire the restoration of Persian Empire of the 7th century; or radicals who seek the destruction of the free world. In fact, Americans, who have visited Iran recently, report that they have never met lovelier, more hospitable people . . . and I believe them. Iran has been a top-ten tourist destination for many years. Indeed, moderates predict that the passage of this agreement, will increase their influence in Iran's parliament by 25%; and that the infusion of cash, will open markets and borders further. They may be right. And I pray daily that, God-willing, the good people of Iran, and throughout the middle-east, who desire peace and prosperity for themselves and their children, prevail.

But the problem is that the power in Iran rests in its Revolutionary Guard. It is they, along with the Cleric Council, who make certain that Iran remains, practically: anti-American and anti-Semitic. Additionally, we know that since 1991, so for the past twenty-five years, Iran has violated no fewer than fifteen previous commitments it agreed to whether they were a part of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; United Nations Security Council Resolutions; or International Atomic Energy Agency Requirements. I will spare you every detail,¹ but suffice it to say, with the lack of access granted to inspectors in this deal, there really is no way to assure that Iran doesn't cheat.

So now that the deal will be a reality, what can be done?

Regardless of your belief, all agree that there are vast gaps in the agreement. There are no "how to's" in the deal to re-impose what are called "snap back" sanctions should Iran violate the agreement, which, given their track record, they likely will. There are no degrees of recourse if they cheat and fudge a little versus a lot. These are things we ought to be talking to our congress people about.

We, and our Federation's Community Relations Council, can help you with talking points. We can do much more to assure our safety, that of Israel, and the world.

Equally important, we, the United States of America, need to be ready ourselves, for the inevitable changes in the region and world; but also, we need to make certain that Israel, who is on the front lines of the war against terror, maintains her qualitative military edge. This will require many more weapons defense systems Iron Dome and David's Sling, as well as offensive weapons, like the bunker buster MOP, which, at the very least, could serve as a deterrent to Iran fulfilling its nuclear ambitions in one of its underground facilities like Fordow. So now, more than ever, Congress needs to ensure its commitment to Israel's foreign aid package beyond its current expiration of 2017. That means more calls to our elected officials for us.

Friends, we have spent too much energy, as a nation and Jewish community, fighting one another, rather than the real evil. Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama should never have made this about each other or themselves. It should never have been about Democrats versus Republicans; or liberals versus conservatives; or AIPAC versus J Street. It should never have been cast as a question of loyalty to America versus loyalty to Israel. Or, worst of all, played out as an ideological divide between the younger generation of American Jews versus the older more established one. The Iran Nuclear Deal is both an existential and a moral issue; it is both a Jewish issue and an American one. So as Americans and Jews, we have no choice, but to work together as one to ensure the safety and security of our world and its people. The only question that we should be asking is how can we work together to get there. Period.

An interesting bit of history from the founding of the State of Israel:² In 1920, Jewish settlers in Palestine organized a defensive militia called the *Haganah* to defend Jewish settlements from attacks by armed Arab groups. By 1931, a second group spun off that was called *Irgun Bet*, or second division, later just called the *Irgun*. The chief difference between the groups was that the *Haganah* believed in a policy of restraint, while the *Irgun* urged retaliation for Arab terror attacks on Jews. The *Haganah* was loyal to the Labor Zionists, led by David Ben Gurion, while the *Irgun* was loyal to the Revisionists, led by Menachem Begin.²

For years, the two factions profoundly disagreed as to how best to defend the Jews of Palestine. Begin believed the British had essentially declared war on the Jews by barring entry to Palestine for Jews fleeing the Holocaust. The *Irgun* conducted a campaign of retaliatory attacks against the British, most notably the famous attack on the King David hotel that killed nearly 100 people. Ben Gurion, however, believed that the violent provocations employed by the *Irgun* made Jews not only vulnerable to Arab attacks, but to British reprisals.³ But when Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948, Israel's new Prime Minister Ben Gurion ordered that, for the new state to survive the existential threat posed by its Arab neighbors, the fighting forces had to come together as one army.

On June 11, 1948, less than a month after the creation of the State of Israel, a landing tank ship named the *Altalena* set sail from France for the newly created Jewish state. The ship carried hundreds of volunteer fighters trained by the *Irgun*, and more than 150 million francs worth of French weaponry and military material.

The arms and weapons on board would prove vital to the defense of the Jewish state in the face of the coming Arab attack. But Ben Gurion believed those same arms would provide for the retrenchment of the *Irgun* as a separate Jewish militia, and that was something he refused to accept.

When *Irgun* volunteers began to unload the *Altalena's* cargo just yards off the crowded Tel Aviv shore, Ben Gurion ordered the *Haganah* to fire on the ship. Gunfire erupted and a mortar set fire to the *Altalena*. The heat of the fire caused the munitions on board to begin to explode and eventually, Begin and the crew had to abandon ship. Sixteen *Irgun* fighters were killed in the confrontation, along with three IDF soldiers. But the most amazing thing came in the form of Begin's response. On the *Irgun* radio channel that night, Begin said: "Raise not your hand against your brother... Not even today. We shall continue to love Israel, the good and the bad, the misled and the mistaken. We shall continue to love Israel and to fight for it." Later in life, Begin would write: "After my death, I hope that I will be remembered, above all, as someone who prevented civil war."

How difficult must it have been for Ben Gurion to give the order, in the shadow of the Holocaust and on the precipice of war, for the *Haganah* to fire on Jewish soldiers aboard a desperately needed Jewish supply ship? How difficult must it have been for Begin to order his troops to stand down and not retaliate? But both men came to realize a truth that we, today, must not forget: that we can only meet the existential threats we face as a people when we remember our covenant with each other and sacrifice whatever is necessary to come together as one.

As Jews, we have a fundamental moral obligation not only to seek forgiveness, but also to grant forgiveness.⁴ No matter what, we don't get to opt out of our relationship with each other. The covenant demands that we never give up on that relationship, and that we do whatever it takes to heal our fractures, both personally and communally. Our tradition teaches that it is in the web of that relationship that we draw nearer, not simply to each other, but more importantly, to God; and if we separate from each other and disengage, ultimately we lose everything that matters.

Friends, we are drawn here tonight because we are a part of a covenant, a covenant that not only binds us individually to God, but also to one another as Jews and as human beings. Indeed, tomorrow we will read the Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, about how we all stood together at Mount Sinai to receive that covenant: from the mightiest to the lowliest of us; men, women, and children; those who were physically present; and, we, who were not yet conceived. At that moment at Sinai, as tonight while hearing *Kol Nidrei*, we experienced a stirring moment of communal solidarity, as all Israel, as all of us, stood together once again to choose between blessing and curse, life and death. In this New Year, 5776, may we reaffirm our covenant -- our commitments to one another, to our people, and to humanity -- choosing to work together to ensure goodness, life, and peace for all. And, finally, may every word spoken by our mouths or typed by our fingers be words that lift up and never words that tear down. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ Violations of previous nuclear agreements include: building secret nuclear sites; acquiring help with developing key technology; testing nuclear triggers; importing uranium; denying inspectors access to key documents, scientists, and sites; producing Plutonium; and enriching Uranium. As you know, the current deal has secret side agreements with the IAEA, which allow Iran to inspect its own facilities, while IAEA representatives watch on close circuit camera. Iran has only to allow access to known facilities; and has the discretion to delay inspections by up to 24 days. Whether isotopes remain as proof of nuclear material or not, there is no way to assure that they do not cheat.

² From the Rosh Hashanah Morning 5776 sermon of Rabbi Dan Levin, "A Call to Covenant," September 15, 2015.

³ *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul*, by Daniel Gordis. New York: Nextbook, 2014, chapter 7, pp.79-97 and *Ben-Gurion: The Biography of an extraordinary man*, by Robert St. John. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959, pp. 158-163.

⁴ Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:9-10.