

Shannah Tova Umetukah

Some of you may not know me, so by way of brief introduction, I am Rabbi Jaron Matlow, a member of CBT. I am a retired Navy Line officer, and veteran advocate.

We all know that the debate over the Iran nuclear agreement has been very heated lately. There are many points to consider in this issue. I will reassure you here, that this won't endorse a political position.

Over 1,000 rabbis in the US have signed a petition to block this agreement. In this petition, they write, "We have weighed the various implications of supporting—or opposing—this agreement. Together, we are deeply troubled by the proposed deal, and believe this agreement will harm the short-term and long-term interests of both the United States and our allies, particularly Israel. Collectively, we feel we must do better." Loudly missing, however, in this petition, is any mention of an alternative solution to the issue.

Having been a military line officer, I have a perspective on warfare and diplomacy that most rabbis, who have not worn a uniform, do not have. At the same time, I should note that several hundred retired Admirals and Generals have come out

against the agreement. While I was never an Admiral of course, as a rabbi, I have a differing perspective than these well respected senior officers, as well. These officers write, “In summary, this agreement will enable Iran to become far more dangerous, render the Mideast still more unstable and introduce new threats to American interests as well as our allies. In our professional opinion...the plan makes it likely that the war the Iranian regime has waged against us since 1979 will continue, with far higher risks to our national security interests. Accordingly, we urge the Congress to reject this defective accord.”

Again, nothing is stated in their letter, advocating for an alternative solution. There are, however, a number of other Admirals and Generals, notably including Colin Powell, who support the accord. In both of the opposing letters, concerns are noted about the human rights conditions in Iran, Iran’s noted vow to destroy Israel and America, and other strategic concerns regarding Iran’s nuclear program.

There are also several hundred rabbis who have signed a petition in support of the deal. I am one of the latter. Personally I am a supporter of this agreement.

As we all know, the country is waiting for Congress and the President to take action. Because there are enough Senators to block a GOP vote to block the plan, it appears it will go forward; this is certainly a backwards way to win a battle. It's also interesting to note that King Salman of Saudi Arabia, one of Iran's biggest enemies, is reportedly satisfied with this agreement.

You are probably wondering, "What does the Iran agreement have to do with Rosh HaShannah? During the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, we are focused on Teshuva, return or repentance, and Tikkun, repairing damage in this troubled world. It is here we need to focus in considering this deal.

Iran has been under global sanctions for a number of years. Has this changed the resolve of Ayatollah Khamenei or President Rouhani? No it hasn't. So, what has happened by way of these sanctions? The Iranian citizens, who are not able to do much about it, are being punished for the sins of their leaders. Even though Iran has "elections" make no mistake, the citizens of Iran have little say in what their government does, since Ayatollah Khamenei is the Supreme Ruler, and he is not an elected official.

While I strongly condemn the policies of the Iranian government, as well as its actions, its oppressed citizens should

not bear the burden of their sins. This is where Tikkun comes in. As global citizens we need to be concerned about such things. Remember that when the Egyptians sank into the seabed and were drowned, the Midrash states that the Angels cheered. God said to them, “why are you cheering – those are my children too.” Thus, even if we despise a government, we should not be complicit in harming their people, especially in a totalitarian government.

Now I know that most here at CBT are pro-Israel, as am I. So you’re wondering, how can I have sympathy for Iranians when Israel is in jeopardy, or when they shout “Death to America and Israel”? So let’s explore a few of the issues. We know that Iran has a nuclear industry, and has advanced centrifuges for creating enriched Uranium and Plutonium. These can be used for nuclear power reactors, as well as for nuclear weapons. Iran also has cruise missiles that can reach Israel, so concern is warranted.

Right now, Iran having a nuclear weapon is just theory. We know they have the materials, but so far there is no evidence that they actually have built a nuclear warhead. Those who oppose the agreement advocate for two choices, either more sanctions, or war with Iran.

So what happens if we put more sanctions on Iran? Does this stop their nuclear program? Of course not! Russia is helping them, and China and North Korea may be as well. So using sanctions is basically maintaining the status quo. Nothing changes, but certain people feel proud of themselves for making things harder on Iran.

The other choice is war with Iran. This is a terrible idea on a number of fronts. If we attack Iran, they will shoot missiles at Israel, as Saddam Hussein did during Desert Storm. Israel has the Iron Dome missile defense system, but that system is around 80% effective. In other words, 20% of missiles fired get through – that can cause a lot of death, injuries and damage.

The second issue is that Iran is actually helping in the war against ISIS, whom I consider a much bigger global threat than Iran. If we attack Iran, they will be occupied with our war, and ISIS will actually be strengthened. Another bad idea!

The third issue is our military's status. Our military is wiped out after 15 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Further, as has been the case after every war in this country, we've had a drawdown, which places the burden of a war on Guard and Reserve troops, who are the least well equipped to deal with

another major war. Additionally, as I see it, a war with Iran will make the combined Iraq and Afghanistan wars look like a walk in the park. The only way to fight a battle like this is a huge deployment of troops, at an unsustainable level. So this is also not an option.

Is the agreement perfect? Of course not! Does it give Iran much more than it takes? Absolutely! Is it necessary? 100%! The goal of this agreement is to delay Iran's weapon program by at least ten years. Further, Iran does not get their frozen assets unless they prove that they are in compliance, although they are demanding the money up front.

So what happens if the agreement is approved? This biggest change is humanitarian. The Iranian people will be able to access more resources, and will not continue to suffer at the hands of our country and others. This, friends, is Tikkun.

Remember what Hillel said when a Roman asked him to teach him Torah standing on one foot. Shammai sent him away, but Hillel answered him with this: "Do not do to others that which you find distasteful. That is Torah; the rest is commentary, now go and learn." By cutting off food and other supplies from the Iranian citizens, we are in violation of this vital teaching of Hillel's.

This is called the Golden rule in secular terms, and every religion has a version of it. And I don't mean the second rule, "He who has the gold makes the rules" or the third rule, "Do unto others before they do unto you..."

As Jews, American citizens and citizens of the world, we have an absolute Holy obligation to effect Tikkun, to repair the damage in this fractured world. In progressive liturgy, in the Oseh Shalom prayer that ends the Amidah and Kaddish, where the traditional liturgy says "Al Kol Yisrael", For All Jews, the progressive says "Al Kol Yisrael v'al Kol Yoshvei Tevel" For all Jews and all inhabitants of the World. We ask God to bring peace to all citizens of this world.

In the weekday Amidah, in the "Kabbalat Tefilah" Berakha, or the blessing about God's acceptance of our prayers, the Ashkenazic liturgy says that God listens to the prayers of Israel. Notably, the Sefard liturgy (mainly a Chassidic liturgy) says that God hears the prayers of every person. This is a much more universal message.

The message of these two differences in liturgy is clear. While we are God's "Chosen People" that does not mean that we have a monopoly on the desire to be heard or the need for Peace.

All of God's children have that need. Remember the Angels at the Sea, when the Egyptians were drowned.

Is the Pharaoh's heart hardened, in the case of Khamenei and Rouhani? Of course! Khamenei just stated he believes Israel will be gone in 25 years... Does that mean that as Americans, we should cause their citizens to suffer? Of course not!

So what do we do? I'll leave that up to you, because I promised not to be political. You are all smart, wise people and know what you need to do regarding this major issue.

I wish that we all are blessed with a Shannah Tovah uMetukah, a Sweet and Happy New Year. Further that we may be blessed with forgiveness for all our lapses during this penitential season. Remember that to receive these blessings we must first make Teshuvah, return or repentance, and we must work for Tikkun.