

## **The Iran Imperative - Rosh Hashanah 5770 (2009)**

The apartment we rented in Jerusalem had an interesting feature. We noticed that one of the bedrooms had thick concrete walls, and ventilation that came in thru a specially constructed airshaft. Unlike the other rooms, this one had a heavy metal door that latched shut with a vacuum seal. Last summer, when we put our daughter Sara to sleep in that room, we decided not to tell her that she was actually sleeping in what we learned is called, a safe room. We didn't want her to worry every night about the possibility of attack by rockets or poison gas.

Yet, the fact is that this is the new building code for everyone in Israel. Any home built today, by law, must have a safe room - one room to which a family can retreat in the case of rocket or gas attack. Preparation for war is an ongoing reality in Israel and the Middle East.

It's a hard thing for us to imagine. Because for us, war is mostly something we read about in the newspapers or see on the television. Except for 9/11, war doesn't reach our shores. War is theoretical, and nearly antiseptic. We see images from guided missiles closing in on their precise targets and then, at impact, the screen goes white.

Perhaps this is why we can afford to be so cavalier about war. We don't have to put our children to sleep in safe rooms, or have gas masks stowed in the hall closet. We have, thankfully, never turned on the television and seen bombs raining down on our American cities.

This being Rosh Hashanah, it is the season when the Shofar is sounded. Sunday, when Shabbat is over, we shall once again take out the ram's horn and sound the ancient notes.

In biblical times, the Shofar was not only used to proclaim the New Year. It was also sounded to signal danger and, as a charge, to lead the troops into battle.

Today, in addition to heralding the New Year, it would seem that many are also sounding that age-old alarm for danger, and even battle, with their Shofarot pointed toward Iran. As the newspapers tell us, there is no doubt that Iran is building a nuclear capability. And there is no question that Iran is led by an anti-Zionist regime that would relish nothing more than Israel's destruction. So, say many, blow the Shofar and let Israel lead the charge. Like it has done before to Iraq and Syria, bomb back Iran's nuclear ambitions. Skilled and cunning fighters that Israelis are, let them once again prove their fighting prowess and unilaterally put an end to Iranian aggression.

And we, sitting here in our San Diego synagogue, have to be wondering, is this really what Israel should do? Our relatives and ancestors, 6 million of them, fell victim to Hitler and the Nazis. Then we did not have the power to resist. Today, we most certainly do. Since the United States is hesitant, maybe our Jewish State should just act boldly and deal with the consequences later.

Now, why am I raising this question on Rosh Hashanah, the most important time of the year? I'll tell you why. Because, putting my daughter to bed in that safe room it became clear to me, as it is to all Israelis, that there is no greater threat to the State of Israel and, for that matter, to us, than Iran.

The Shofar does need to be sounded. As Maimonides wrote 800 years ago: "Wake up you slumberers from you sleep!" Even though war does not seem to touch us here, we would be utterly naïve to ignore the threat of Iran. Especially as Jews, we should know that when an enemy arises to kill us, we must take heed.

We have all heard President Ahmadinejad repeatedly call for the destruction of Israel, and even blatantly deny the Holocaust. But he is not alone among the Iranian leadership. This month, after the sham elections back in June, the Iranian parliament ratified Ahmadinejad's new cabinet. And who do you think received the highest number of votes of any of his cabinet nominees? None other than the new Defense Minister, Ahmad Vahidi, the mastermind of the Jewish community center bombing in Buenos Aires in which 85 Jews were killed. Not only has Vahidi been formally charged by Argentinean prosecutors, but he is wanted by Interpol on terrorism charges. But that is not even

the most shocking part of the story. As the vote for him was announced in the parliament, an overwhelming 227 out of 286 votes in favor, a spontaneous chant broke out among the lawmakers: "Death to Israel, death to Israel."

And what we need to understand is that this not just a slogan recited by Ahmadinejad in front of the television cameras or chanted in the halls of the Iranian Parliament. No, this is a political doctrine that translates into international terror, and empowerment of the most extremist, ideological, and dangerous nation in the world, all tipped with a nuclear warhead that will be ready to launch in the very near future!

Iran methodically exports Jihad, holy war, throughout the Middle East. Today, Iran essentially controls Syria, is fueling Iraqi insurgents, and is arming and training Hizbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza.

We all remember the 2006 Lebanon War when Israel destroyed the majority of Hizbollah's Iranian supplied missiles. Well, it's three years later, and now Hizbollah is not only completely rearmed, but stronger than ever. To give you an idea of how much stronger, in the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah launched 4,000 rockets at Israel from Lebanon. Today, Hizbollah has some 40,000 rockets in its arsenals. And Israel currently has no effective defense against them.

In a paper published this year by the Director for U.S. National Intelligence, Dennis Blair wrote that Hizbollah "remains the most technically capable terrorist group in the World," and would even attack U.S. interests. In other words, Hizbollah is not just Israel's problem.

Meanwhile, thanks to Iran, Hamas also grows stronger in Gaza everyday, and threatens the moderately controlled West Bank. As a result of Iran's influence, Hamas is now reversing its long held secular identity, and imposing Shariah, strict Islamic law, which never existed before in any of the Palestinian territories. But more than that, Hamas has become heavily armed. Up until now, their rockets have had no guidance systems and a relatively short range. More often than not, they thankfully came down on Israeli roads and empty fields. But now, Hamas is testing longer range, guidance controlled missiles, that could inflict carnage on Israel's southern towns. All of this is courtesy of Iran's patronage.

But, we would be fooling ourselves to think that Iran has only the limited objective of destroying Israel! Anti-Zionism is just a galvanizing strategy. Many think that what Iran really wants, is to be the super-power of the Middle East.

Right now, the moderate Arab countries – Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Bahrain – are all feeling a seismic shift. The balance of power in these moderate states is already precarious, to say the least, and they don't underestimate the popular appeal of Islamic fundamentalism.

And then, of course, there is the spread of Islamic fundamentalism throughout Europe itself. France and Great Britain, as we know, are knee deep in it.

Yet, all that being said, the very worst has yet to materialize. There's an elephant in the room that we haven't even talked about. Iran is on a dedicated path to making an atomic bomb and the delivery system to launch it. Estimates vary as to when Iran will have a nuclear arsenal, but the latest reports suggest that by 2013 Iran will be able to produce 25-30 nuclear warheads a year and that, within just a year or two from now, its nuclear program will already be irreversible and unstoppable. We can all imagine that, once Iran gets the atomic bomb, it will be the single most dangerous power in the Middle East.

So, now the question of the hour – what is to be done? Many look at Israel's past success in bombing the Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities and think, why not again? Send in the experts! How hard could it be? Israel has the best pilots, and a bunch of souped-up, customized American planes. Bust a few bunkers, and bomb back Iran's nuclear ambitions to oblivion.

Well, unfortunately, as recent intelligence tells us it isn't quite so simple. Unlike Iraq and Syria that had one or two nuclear sites, Iran has spread its nuclear facilities all over the country. In fact, nobody is even sure exactly how many installations there are. We know the major ones, of course, and we also know they're buried under tons of concrete and heavily fortified with the most modern defense systems money can buy. Not only would every Israeli pilot have to make a direct and precise hit, but he would also have to contend with a huge battery of surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, and thousands of anti-aircraft guns shooting up in the sky. It's estimated that Israel would have to be prepared to lose 20-30 percent of its aircraft, the kind of loss that has never been acceptable to Israelis. And all that, with the distinct possibility that the strike wouldn't even be successful in destroying Iran's three main nuclear sites.

But this is only part of the scenario. Because the likelihood is that an Israeli attack would pull together Iran, Hamas, Hizbollah, Syria, and Lebanon, and open the floodgates for retaliation. Israel would get pounded from all sides. A new wave of terrorist attacks would surely sweep through the heart of Israel – suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and even cross border raids would all spread like wildfire. And Iran itself would be likely to launch its missiles at Tel Aviv or other major cities in retaliation. It would be an absolute nightmare, with Israelis closed up in safe rooms and bomb shelters, and sending their sons and daughters back into battle.

Having spent much of this past summer in Israel, I can tell you that the overriding sentiment right now is that the price is too high. As much as Israelis fear Iran, they are simply not willing risk that much on an attack that may not even succeed. While I could very well turn out to be wrong, my current read on Israel is that it will not bomb Iran and, in fact, is becoming more and more convinced that Iran is really America's problem to deal with.

And there is truth to this opinion, even though most American's probably don't feel much urgency. After all, we don't have missiles pointed at us, or terrorists being armed and trained on our borders. In other words, when the Shofar sounds the alarm, we don't necessarily hear it.

But Israelis are correct that we should, because Iran is sowing extremism and hatred of both Israel *and* the West. And whenever it decides to, Iran will sponsor terrorism that can reach our shores. Most experts will tell us that 9/11 is not likely to be a one-time event, but rather a window into what the new millennium could hold in store for us. We are simply not impervious and, unless we contain the threat, Iran could become a nuclear power with the resolve to act against us.

But, what can we realistically do? Right now, any attack against Iran, whether by Israel or the U.S., will only galvanize action against Israel and the West. Whereas now, the Arab states are divided, an act of aggression would force even moderate countries to close ranks with Iran.

So, even though it's not so glamorous and doesn't create a great heroic storyline, it seems the most effective thing we can do is impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran.

I know that doesn't sound very menacing. After all, how could an oil rich country like Iran be hurt by our sanctions? Well, here's the answer. Iran is not really oil rich. Even though Iran has crude oil, it doesn't have enough capacity to refine it. Believe it or not, Iran actually imports 40% of its refined petroleum, and this has killed the economy. So, Iran is already in terrible shape, with soaring unemployment and inflation to deal with.

In fact, many believe the reason Iran doesn't yet have nuclear weapons, is precisely because of the sanctions we've been imposing. Just think about it. Iran has been working on nuclear weapons since 1985 – that's almost 25 years. Now, compare that with our project during WWII, when it only took us five years to develop the atomic bomb – and that was without computers, and the "how to build a bomb" blueprints that anyone can download from the internet today. The sanctions are working, but we have to stay tough, and get even tougher.

Right now, there are two crucial bills sitting in Congress. If we can get them passed, they will place punishing sanctions on any company that helps Iran refine or import refined oil, and they'll let our

state and local treasuries divest from companies that support Iran's oil industry. These bills essentially place a chokehold on Iran's oil industry. And without oil, Iran faces economic collapse. Unless, Iran suspends its nuclear weapons program, this will be its fate.

President Obama and the E.U. have given Iran a window of opportunity for dialogue that closes very soon. Actually, in point of fact, Ahmadinejad has already quashed any expectations for success. So, it will shortly be time again for action. These two bills will be coming through committee and onto the floors of the House and Senate. And we must make absolutely sure they pass, and President Obama does not delay in heading off Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Hopefully, you'll wait until I'm done speaking to look inside your pulpit folders, where I've placed more information. I would ask every one of you, as I have done, to go online and email your representatives to urge their support of these two critical bills. We absolutely cannot allow Iran to progress any further with its nuclear program, and time is of the essence.

In our tradition, there is still another occasion on which the Shofar is blown – not only to sound the alarm and call the troops to war, but also to move the Israelite camp forward on its march. Sometimes war is the answer; other times it is not. There are moments, such as these, I would suggest, when the Shofar is sounded and the camp must not over-react but, rather, advance in a thoughtful, calculated way. From afar, it may seem like guts and glory to send in the Israeli fighter jets, and take out Iran's nuclear program. But, close up, inside the safe rooms and bomb shelters, on board the bus targeted by a suicide bomber, it is a very different reality.

Yehuda Amichai, one of Israel's great poets, reminds us of the ripple of devastation such a choice can bring - how even one bomb radiates outward from the smallest device, to encompass cities, states and even distant continents. In his poem, "The Diameter of the Bomb," he writes:

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters, with four dead and eleven wounded. And around these, in a larger circle of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered and one graveyard. But the young woman who was buried in the city she came from, at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers, enlarges the circle considerably, and the solitary man mourning her death at the distant shores of a country far across the sea included the entire world in the circle. And I won't even mention the crying of orphans that reaches up to the throne of God and beyond, making a circle with no end and no God.

When the Shofar calls to us, we must not only hear it, but discern its message. "Wake up you slumberers from your sleep." Sometimes a call to repentance, sometimes a call to war, and sometimes a call to march forward in measured strides.

We can, we have, created ungodly circles of death and carnage on this earth. We cannot so easily inflict this fate again on those we love. We cannot be callous to war, nor call upon Israel to carry this burden alone. This time, the Shofar is calling to us and we are the ones who should answer –with the kind of strong, international pressure that only the United States can rally, that could hold Iran accountable and make our world safer.

I hope you will join in pressing this cause, for in this New Year, much depends on you and me!