

“American Jews and Divided Loyalties”

It's the morning after and are we hung over! The Iran vote has come and gone, and our intoxicated, brawling night has turned to day. As the first rays of sunshine hit our bloodshot eyes, our heads pound from the overload of facts and arguments and conflicting truths from all sides. Our bodies are sore from having been beaten up in fiery debates. And the usual remedies aren't working on our oversize hangover.

It's the morning after, and we are spent, in pain, and at war with our own body. The vitriol of this debate has exhausted the Jewish community and fractured us at our fault lines.

For most of us, the hardest part of this battle has been the emotion of the fight. Some of those against the treaty have accused supporters of having blood on their hands, and facilitating Obama's holocaust. While some of those in favor of the Iran Agreement, have called the opposition traitorous rodents, treasonous, and disloyal to the United States.

There's only one thing that both sides do agree on. It's that this is not just a disagreement, it's a matter of life and death for Israel. And the question is, where does this leave us now? I would say, not in a good place.

In fact, many rabbis have made it clear that they will not speak about Iran on the High Holidays for fear of inflaming and dividing their congregations. We rabbis understand that, if we preach on the Iran debate, we're painting a big target on our white robes. But then again, most of you know me, and I simply can't imagine ignoring the most important crisis facing the Jewish people on a solemn day like this.

Al cheyt sh-chatanu l'fanacha – for the sins we have sinned we must take responsibility and contemplate repair. For the sin of slander, for the sin of arrogance, for the sin of indifference, for the sin of failing to uphold the truth, and for the sin of dismissing the truths of others. For the sin of weakening the Jewish people, and for the sin of questioning the loyalty of our fellow Jews to the United States and to Israel. If we cannot now face our sins and repent, the rift will only widen among us, and the divide between the United States and Israel will become unbridgeable.

But, this is not going to be easy to fix. We can't just paper over the damage we've done to ourselves and forget about it. Like with any broken relationship, we have to go into therapy. We have to do some deep work and dig into our past.

We have to understand what has led us to this place of painful division and conflicting loyalties.

So, in order to understand where we fell apart this year, let's climb onto the therapist couch and look back at the fundamentally solid relationship the United States and Israel did enjoy for more than 60 years.

To begin with, in so many ways our two countries have shared a common story. We're both countries who have overcome adversity, from the Civil War to the Six Day War, and who are committed to democracy founded on the ideal of liberty.

Our shared story cements a common destiny of exceptionalism, to be, in the words of Ronald Reagan, "A Shining City on a Hill," or in the words of our prophet Isaiah, "A light onto the nations."

In 1915, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis declared:

Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism.
...There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry.

And in 2012, President Barak Obama affirmed those same sentiments:

The United States and Israel share interests, but we also share those human values...: A commitment to human dignity. A belief that freedom is a right that is given to all of God's children...

Yes, we are bound to Israel because of the interests that we share – security for our communities, prosperity for our people, the new frontiers of science that can light the world. But, ultimately it is our common ideals that provide the true foundation for our relationship.

Last month, Dr. Scott Lasensky, brother of our board member Steve Lasensky, and senior advisor at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, spoke to us at Temple Solel, and laid out the three pillars that uphold the American-Israeli relationship. The first is clearly that referenced by Justice Brandeis and President Obama – the story and the worldview that our two countries have in common.

The second pillar is our interconnected prosperity. All you have to do is drive through downtown Tel Aviv and see the towering offices of Microsoft and Google to get the picture. Or, head right up the 5 to Carlsbad to see the largest water desalination plant in the Western Hemisphere, built and operated by the Israeli company, I.D.E. Technologies.

Finally, the third pillar of the American-Israel relationship is our strategic alliance. As my teacher at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Tal Becker, who's a

veteran senior member of the Israeli negotiating team, said this summer: in the eyes of the United States, if there were four Israel's in the Middle East, the world would be a better place. Without a doubt, Israel advances America's strategic interests. At the same time, Israel has always known that America has its back in any conflict.

So, these three pillars – shared values, economic cooperation, and strategic alliance – have upheld the structure of our relationship for the last 60 years. That is until now. Because now, catalyzed by the Iran agreement, what we're seeing is a weakening of two of these three vital pillars.

Our strategic alliance is now clearly diverging. In negotiating the Iran agreement, the Obama administration has had a very different strategic priority from that of Israel. While America does want to neutralize Iran's nuclear threat, the Obama administration also wanted to do it in such a way that we can work with Iran in the future to fight against the forces of ISIS. And this, among other reasons, is why the President pushed so hard for a negotiated framework instead of military action or more pressure through sanctions.

Israel, on the other hand, feels it has a lot more to lose with this agreement, because it's living right in the middle of this nasty neighborhood, and Iran is about to make it a lot more nasty. Not only is Israel on the front lines of the Iran nuclear threat, with the Ayatollah consistently and unabashedly declaring Israel's annihilation, but with an additional \$150 billion at its disposal once the sanctions are lifted, Iran will increase its patronage of the very mortal enemies of Israel – Hamas and Hizbollah. Instead of short range, unguided missiles launched from Gaza, Israel can now expect a barrage of long range, precision guided missiles aimed at specific targets – like Ben Gurion Airport, like Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem. Iron Dome is good, but it's not that good.

So, because of the Iran agreement, that third pillar, strategic alliance, is seriously and dangerously cracking. But that's not all. Also, when it comes to the first pillar, our sixty-year shared story and ideals, we can see that starting to give way, too.

America is looking more and more critically at Israel's problem with the Palestinians. The United States sees that settlements in the West Bank are continuing to expand under a right wing ideology within the Netanyahu coalition, and that Palestinians are losing hope of reaching a statehood agreement with Israel. But, on the other hand, from the Israeli point of view, most Israelis don't see any chance right now to make peace with the Palestinians and Hamas – there's simply no one there, no one to negotiate with. However, whatever the reason, our shared narrative of freedom and democracy is not playing out well for

the Palestinians under Israel's control. And this is causing the U.S. to question whether we are still in the same story.

So, on two fronts the U.S./Israel relationship is coming apart. Both our shared story and our strategic alliance are faltering. Americans are questioning Israel's democracy, and Israelis, the majority of whom oppose the Iran agreement, question whether America still has their back.

And all of that brings us to this moment. The reason that our American Jewish community has turned on itself and is teetering on the fault-lines is because our loyalties are being tested like never before. If we support Israeli policy, then we stand against the United States president and much of Congress. And if we support the efforts of the Obama administration, we risk standing against Israel and many of our fellow American Jews.

Today, the words of Justice Brandeis are painful to hear, because they remind us of a once harmonious relationship that we would love to have today, but can't. And there are lots of questions now.

Is it unpatriotic to support Israel's position over that of our government? Are we traitors to our own country by supporting Israel in this debate? Are we Americans first, or Jews first and where should our first loyalties be?

All of this leaves us divided and spent. And the question is, what happens next?

I would suggest that here is where the spirit of Yom Kippur can help us. Because as bad as the damage is, it can be repaired. And here's how. The United States and Israel must bring their story & their strategic alliance back into alignment. And, as American Jews, we have to bring our community back together.

So, how can we reestablish a common story? For Israel's part, she is going to have to face the Palestinian problem. While it's true that there may not now be an opportunity for peace, Israel can at a minimum take certain unilateral actions that show commitment to an eventual two state solution. Among other things, continued settlement expansion to appease the right wing parties is not the way to go. Everyone already knows where the permanent borders are going to be, and Israeli settlements simply can't be built on eventual Palestinian land.

Israel also has to stop empowering and pandering to the religiously rightward turning ultra-orthodox. Right now, women can't pray communally or read from Torah in the Women's section of the Western Wall, and have been arrested for doing so. Right now, all marriages and conversions have to be conducted only by ultra-orthodox rabbis, and Reform and Conservative rabbis and synagogues are unacceptably second-class. Because of these things, our story of shared

democratic ideals is fading, and it absolutely has to be revived. The fact is that, if Israel is seen as an apartheid state and a theocracy, we will no longer be in the same story.

And how can we realign our strategic interests? The first and most important thing that has to be done after the treaty ink has dried, is to go back to the Iran agreement and work with the Obama administration to spell out the ways in which Iran will be held accountable, and the specific consequences that America will impose if any part of the agreement is violated, or Israel's security is threatened. This is where we and Israel have to put our energies now.

The second thing that has to be done now is to provide Israel with the military protection it's going to need in this new and \$150 billion richer hostile Middle East. If America truly has Israel's back, it's time to prove it.

Finally, I would say that both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have to take it down a notch. They can't allow their rancorous and petty personal relationship to determine the fate of nations.

And we American Jews have our own soul-searching to do. As a community, we have crossed the line of civility. We have divided and turned on each other and accused one another of horrible things. We have to be clear that all of us have a love for Israel, but we also have different ideas about the current challenges. This is our task. We have to regroup as an American Jewish community. We have to step back from slandering and stabbing one another. We have to accept that Judaism is a religion of debate and respectful argument. We have to remember the words of Talmud: "Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Chayim – both these and those are words of the living God."

Al cheyt sh'chatanu l'fanecha. For the sin we have sinned by turning on one another. For the sin of slander. For the sin of arrogance. For the sin we have sinned by *sinat chinam*, by needless hatred. It is time to repent and it is time to change course. If we stand, hunkered down in our own truths, we will poison the ground we're standing on. Each of us has a role to play.

In our Facebook posts, in the articles we share with our friends, in the organizations we support and the letters to the editors we write. We can debate respectfully, listen to other opinions, create a community that has space for everyone. Yes, our national leaders also have important work to do, and we hope the spirit of Yom Kippur gives them pause to repent from their grave mistakes over the past year. But they, and we, have to move forward now.

Yehuda Amichai, of blessed memory, Israel's great modern poet, left us a legacy in the form of a poem that we have to truly understand and take to heart now:

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

...And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
House once stood.

That house was, of course the Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed say our rabbis because of *sinat chinam*, needless hatred. And now, the pillars of *our* house are giving way. The walls are beginning to shift and the windows and doors are becoming stuck. If we don't repent and change our ways, we will be left with rubble, and only whispers of our former House of Israel will remain.

This Yom Kippur especially, it is time to plow up the hard ground of our truths and our arguments and our disagreements, and to plant again in a softer soil that can sprout new life, and a new way forward for us and for Israel. Amen.