

## All We are Saying is Give Peace a Chance -- T'shuva as Paradigm Shift

Rosh Hashannah 5776

Rabbi Victor Hillel Reinstein

Aching in their innocence, the words echo now, during these days. Sung at countless peace marches and rallies, calling in those days for an end to the Vietnam War, the words of John Lennon became a chorus of hope, "all we are saying is give peace a chance." It took courage then, as it does now in these days, to sing of a new way, to envision a new day, to believe and to strive to make it happen. The song rose up in those days all across the land, from California to the New York Island, from village greens and town squares, from college campuses and big city thoroughfares. In vigils of a handful to the masses of humanity come to Washington, the people sang, "all we are saying is give peace a chance." They walked and talked, "gonna keep on walkin', gonna keep on talkin' on to the Freedom Land." They came there to Washington to speak truth to power, there to where the president lived. Along the broad and famous avenues, the ubiquitous phalanx of police and soldiers to block the way with shields, batons, and guns. In those days, it was how to sing loud enough for the president to hear the song above the din. And in these days, in stunning reversal, stirrings of a paradigm shift, it is the president who struggles to be heard above the din, pleading to "give peace a chance."

It is a rare moment in these days, as we stand in the immediate confluence of political and spiritual time. In the roiling waters of the two realms meeting, we encounter each other. There is so much happening in the world out there, so much pain and heartache, so little to inspire hope. That is why we are here. As the world weighs upon us, how can we leave the world behind? Should we leave it behind? Where shall we find hope? How shall the hope we nurture in this space help us to lighten the load if we don't acknowledge the very things that weigh upon us? Whether it be the searing specter of climate change, the scourge of racism, the unabated violence in the Middle East, the misery of migrants struggling to find a worldly foothold at the doorsteps of Europe and upon our own, the Iran nuclear debate and the unspoken evil of nuclear weapons themselves, whether in the hands of Iran or anywhere else. To leave it all behind is impossible. How can we pray for our own wellbeing and not consider the plight of humanity in real terms? Years ago, in another place and time, I was asked by a synagogue board member to tone down the politics and speak about the abstraction of peace. Human beings are not abstractions, nor is peace, nor are the demands of these days, these days of awe, days of turning. God's demands are upon us, the commandments given in real terms, not as abstractions.

We are each bidden to bring to this space the deepest of our own personal struggles, our sorrows and our joys, not to leave behind any part of ourselves. This is the place and time to hold it all, to integrate all the scattered parts of ourselves and to receive the gift of renewal. So too, we are bidden to bring to this space all the struggles in

the world around us, for they too weigh upon us and are part of the personal heartache we carry. We are each cells in the body of humanity, strands in the web of creation, each intrinsically part of the world around us, feeling its pain and that of others as our own. Acknowledging all that is in our own lives and in the world around, not pretending that we can leave any of it behind, we come through the striving to a place of greater wholeness. Our ancestor Jacob became whole only after he struggled and wrestled, and in his wholeness he still limped.

In the immediate confluence in these days of political and spiritual time, of legislative and liturgical calendars, we gather as Jews to mark the turning of one year to the next. We mark one more cycle and our own place within it in the unfolding of historical time toward its fulfillment, of swords turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks. In our gathering this week, in these days, it is hard not to acknowledge the gatherings of Congress in these days, as well, in the ongoing debate on the Iran nuclear agreement. I acknowledge with humility, seeking forbearance, that in the very saying of these words the harsh politics that have surrounded them can take our breath away. I have struggled with whether and how to speak about this issue, how to speak about a deeply political issue in a religious context.

In the broader issues it raises, the Iran nuclear agreement is very much a religious issue. In fairness, that which makes it a religious issue will vary for people of different views. For some, responding to a perceived threat to Israel, represented by the agreement itself, is inherently a matter of religious imperative. For others, of equal commitment to faith and people, there is indeed a greater promise of security for Israel with the agreement than without. For some, the agreement is a pact with the devil, and therefore inherently immoral. For others, it is a pact with an adversary in order to shift the status quo, ultimately to make a friend of an enemy. About much more than its details, the agreement is about a process and an approach to resolving conflict, primacy given to words rather than war. That is why it is an opportunity not to be lost in its dawning, that so urgently needs to be given its day. How can it not be better to give every opportunity for diplomacy to work before allowing the chasm of difference to flow with blood? If all we were saying then was give peace a chance, how much more does it need to be sung and heard today. The old paradigm of war and might has hardly made the world safer since Vietnam. All we are saying is give peace a chance, allow the way of diplomacy to take root as a new paradigm. During these days of turning, at the interface of politics and spirit, we can see *t'shuva* as paradigm shift.

*T'shuva* means turning, repentant turning. It is the hallmark of these days from Rosh Hashannah through Yom Kippur, the *Aseret Y'mei T'shuva*/תשובה ימי עשרה /the Ten Days of Turning. *T'shuva* requires the ability to see and acknowledge mistakes, not easy, but even harder, the courage to make amends and change, to see what hasn't worked and take a new path. In Maimonides' classic formulation, it is to find oneself in the same situation in which one previously erred and not to make the same mistake again, not to give in to the same urges and assumptions with all of their disastrous consequences. Rambam is speaking about *t'shuva* in the life of the individual, as a way of human dynamics. It is a way of hope reflecting a realistic optimism

deeply rooted in Jewish thought and belief that people can and do change. But why can't we consider the same dynamics in regard to nations? As nations replicate the ways of individuals, so too can nations effect *t'shuva* and change. *T'shuva* is predicated on the same view of reality that allows for a paradigm shift, "a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions" (Oxford Dictionaries); recognizing "a time when the usual and accepted way of doing or thinking about something changes completely" (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus).

*T'shuva* is hard, but in regard to personal behavior we generally know in our hearts when we've been wrong, even before we are ready to acknowledge and act on the need for repair. *T'shuva* as paradigm shift can be even harder, when there is neither inner voice nor a set of external mores to call to us, to challenge and chide and point to another way. It is hard to let go of the assumed security in the ways that have always been, especially when those ways are about actual security and wellbeing. The way of the world has been to rely on weapons, repeatedly affirming the paradigm of might, in the end might becoming its own paradigm of right. We become myopic, seeing only the near term illusion of security, while embers of resentment simmer in our adversary, waiting to explode again into conflagration. That is the tragic mistake in the way things have always been, in the assumption of security through military might. In the myopic paradigm, we miss the long term vision and its way of bringing the other along with us, the only way to break the endless cycle of violence. Beyond a moral argument, might becomes the least effective way of change and of long term security.

The way of *t'shuva* as paradigm shift is blocked by fear. Fear is important, necessary in assessing danger and taking action to protect ourselves. There is reason for fear regarding Iran, in some of its leaders' repeated denials of the Holocaust, in its dangerous alliances, its human rights abuses, and in its menacing statements regarding Israel, even as the agreement is debated. In whatever language and place that debate unfolds, whether in English or in Farsi, in Washington or Tehran, extremist views stoked by hate and fear entrench the old paradigm. Trapping us in the old ways, in the frighteningly familiar situation in which we continue to err rather than turn, fear can immobilize and prevent us from taking effective action, both in the moment and for the long term, blocking needed vision of heart and mind. Fear can become corrosive, eating away at our essence until through fear we adopt a politics and a spirit that make us other than who we really are. Rooted in fear that recalls the worst times of our powerlessness, making me cry for when it was true, ads in the Jewish press preclude reasoned debate and engagement with each other, warning in regard to the congressional vote that, "the future of the Jewish people worldwide hangs in the balance." Retreating into fear, we isolate ourselves from each other and from the greater possibilities of engagement. In our effort to project a unified communal stance, we delegitimize those who differ, who are no less a part of the community but who walk to the beat of a different paradigm. I recognized with sadness both the fear and manipulation at play in an Israeli diplomat's introduction to a talk about the agreement with a group of rabbis. In the manner of a joke whose purpose was thinly veiled, he asked if there were any nuclear physicists among us, and to what degree we understood nuclear fuel cycles. Greeted with awkward laughter, it was an at-

tempt to disempower those who would question or differ, suggesting that unless you are an expert in these areas you have nothing to say. Reducing the agreement to its most technical details, for which there were scientific experts on the negotiating teams, obscures the most promising details that in their astonishing presence reflects a spirit and a way that is beyond the details.

The way of *t'shuva* as paradigm shift is reflected in the details of the agreement. Because of a willingness to talk rather than to bomb, to engage as human beings rather than as enemies, the results are already longer lasting and more significant than could otherwise be imagined. The first word of the agreement's formal name speaks to its process, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. It is about acting together rather than in isolation, working in concert, rather than against each other. For all of the efforts to highlight the agreement's shortcomings, there is something thrilling in making the effort to engage with it. A dry, technical document, glimmers of real people shine as *midrash* through carefully shaped words of legal text. It is a document that sings of possibility, standing in both its details and spirit as testimony to the way of diplomacy, of words rather than war. With timelines varying for different facets of the agreement, the Iranian nuclear program will look startlingly different than either Iran or the United States, its partners, and the world could have realistically speculated, articulating as legal commitment from its very preface that Iran will never develop nuclear weapons. In his own letter reflecting on the process and its accomplishments, Secretary of Energy Moniz points beyond the agreement itself to chapters yet unwritten, "With the agreement, there will be an extensive and extended rollback for 15 years of Iranian nuclear activities with a permanent improvement in verification capability by the international community. This is the fundamental architecture of the agreement. This would also include unique verification options for 25 years that could become the basis for... [a] strengthened global nonproliferation verification regime..." ([energy.gov/iran-deal](http://energy.gov/iran-deal)).

In the way of the old paradigm, without the agreement, Iran would retreat in anger and hurt, drawing ever deeper into itself, embittered and unhindered in its determination to produce a nuclear bomb as soon as possible. Without incentive through the reduction of sanctions and the promise of engagement, abusive and reckless behavior can only increase. In the unravelling of what had been a partnership of hope, the new model dissipates, the dynamics of "joint" removed from the Comprehensive Plan of Action, the United States, too, is left alone. When moderation and conciliation fail, extremists everywhere gain the upper hand. As *might* once again is affirmed as the paradigm, war once again becomes the likely outcome of our failure to engage in *t'shuva* as paradigm shift.

In the use of words rather than war, addressing one issue can open doors to allow other issues in. Beyond the scope of the agreement with Iran, Secretary Moniz is pointing to "global nonproliferation." With many more immediate issues that might be addressed through the way of joint and comprehensive plans of action, beginning in the Middle East, the very question of nuclear weapons themselves has been put on the table. As Rosh Hashannah celebrates God's breathing of the world into being, conception and birth, the miracle of all life held in Creation's fragile web, the evil of nuclear weapons is brought into focus. Stripped bare on this day is the arrogance of

humanity's ability to destroy itself and the world of God's creation that is our common home.

Of strife in our ancestral home, even as among us today, there is a poignant weaving together of the personal and the political in today's Torah reading (Genesis, chapter 21). At the beginning of the portion is the sending away of Hagar and Yishma'el. At the end of the portion, Avraham enters into an agreement, what is in effect a "non-aggression pact," with the Philistine king, Avimelech. I have always wondered of the connection between the beginning and the end of this Torah reading. Of tension between two ways, in the context of these days, in the confluence of politics and spirit, it becomes clear. Enduring the heartache of strife in his own family, the inability to engage in *t'shuva* as turning toward those he loves, Avraham draws from personal pain the wisdom and insight from which to offer a way of national turning. The missed opportunity to do *t'shuva* in the personal realm becomes the impetus for a new paradigm among peoples and nations. Of negotiations touched by deceit and defensiveness, Chizkuni, a thirteenth century commentator, questions, *How did Avraham make a partnership with Avimelech/היאך עשה אברהם שותפות עם אבימלך/heyach asah Avraham shutafut im Avimelech?* The answer is in the last words of the Torah reading, *And Avraham dwelled in the land of the Philistines many days/וימים רבים/yamim rabim.* Of change deeper and longer lasting than that which comes through war, the fruits of diplomacy are realized in their fullness a generation later when Yitzchak also makes a pact with Avimelech (Genesis, 26:26-33). Only then, as affirmation of the vision and the way, does the name of the place where both father and son sought peace come to be called *B'er Sheva*, as pointed out by Chizkuni, and the Torah adds, *עד היום הזה/ad ha'yom ha'zeh/until today*, emphasizing the enduring nature of the pact. In the Yitzchak text, Avimelech suggests, *let there be an oath between us/נא אלה/na ala beynoteynu.* The Hebrew word *אלה/ala*, with only slight vowel change, the pronunciation remaining the same, can mean either an oath or agreement, or a club or cudgel. In the same word is the possibility either to join, as in a joint comprehensive plan for the good of both, or the mutually assured destruction in each striving to beat down the other. In this one simple word is the choice between words and weapons, and whether or not the making of a sacred oath.

As ancient as it is modern, in its dynamics and in the stress of its coming to be, the Iran nuclear agreement is about much more than itself. It brings to the fore, churning within us and among us, the fierce challenges of fear and hope and the tensions between. From all the varied perspectives so deeply felt, it is about the way forward, and in the way of our going about the nature of what the future shall be and its promise. In our reading of sacred texts, it is about which paradigms of the past to draw from and be inspired by. In the confluence of political and spiritual time, I apologize for discomfort caused in addressing the awkwardness of their interface, and for the incompleteness of details left unaddressed in the context of *d'rasha*. Most of all, felt within me in all of its painful irony, I apologize for any feelings of hurt caused by my words. With prayerful passion, I plead for wholeness among us as the first turnings of *T'shuva* as Paradigm Shift. For the sake of our people and friends, for Israel, for the United States, for Iran, for all the nations and people of this world, and most of all for children everywhere, I offer the old song that echoes now, *All We are Saying*, is Give Peace a Chance.