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Saving Israel, Saving Ourselves

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A week ago, I traveled to Washington along with 300 other Jewish leaders representing 21 national Jewish organizations. The purpose of this trip was to lobby Congress to support a bill imposing a refined petroleum embargo on Iran. Even though Iran exports oil, it imports 40 percent of its gasoline, and a disruption of imports would cause severe economic repercussions on an already unstable regime.

Before the lobbying began, we were briefed by six Democratic and Republican House leaders. Each of them expressed concern that Iran poses a threat, not only to Israel, but to America as well. They explained that Iran has experience in exporting terror, not only supplying missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza; they have also carried out terror attacks across the globe.

One such attack occurred in 1994 when Iranian operatives blew up the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, killing 85 people. After an investigation and trial, Argentina's courts convicted an Iranian named Ahmad Vahidi of planning the attack. Unfortunately, Vahidi was not present for the trial, and has served no time in prison. But if you're looking for him, he's not that hard to find. About a month ago he was unanimously approved as Iran's new minister of defense. Another Iranian implicated in this attack is the "moderate" opposition leader, former president Rafsanjani.

As we listened to the presentations of the congressmen, they asked us to imagine the damage that Iran could do if they had nuclear weapons. Not only could they use these weapons themselves, but as we heard, they could also place them in the hands of a proxy, a terrorist group who would pose an immediate threat to targets across the face of the globe.

The Congressmen's concerns echo what I've heard for years when I've traveled in Israel. Although Israeli's are famous for having different points of view on every subject, when it comes to Iran, they speak with one voice. It hasn't mattered who I've talked with, whether it's right wing politicians or left wing doves, journalists, generals, taxi drivers or fruit vendors, they all say the same thing. They all believe that if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, they will use it.

In our daily news we hear reports of renewed efforts for a peace process, but in Israel concerns about peace have been pushed aside. Every other issue, every other threat pales in comparison. For even though Israelis acknowledge that Hezbollah, Hamas and Fatah can still cause them harm, they also know that Israel is strong enough to stand up to it. But when it comes to nuclear weapons in Iranian hands, one bomb is all it will take to end the Jewish state.

In looking for a way to illustrate the state of mind of Israelis today, I came across a quote from the respected historian, Professor Benny Morris. Here's his blunt assessment of what lies in store for Israel the day after Iran acquires nuclear weapons. He writes: "The second holocaust will be quite different. One bright morning, in five or ten years, perhaps during a regional crisis, perhaps out of the blue, a day or a year or five years after Iran's acquisition of 'the Bomb,' the mullahs in Qom will convene in secret

session, under a portrait of the steely-eyed Ayatollah Khomeini, and give President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, by then in his second or third term, the go-ahead.”

Let me ask you a question: If you and your family lived in Israel, and this was your vision of the future, (a vision that is shared by almost every Israeli today) what would you do? If Iran held a mushroom cloud over your head, would you stay? Would you raise your family there? You know it’s one thing to be constantly harassed and threatened by war, to raise your children and know that they’ll go into the army, that they’ll have to fight. It’s another matter entirely to try to live with a daily threat of extinction. The fact is Iran does not need to use a nuclear weapon to destroy Israel. Simply possessing one, simply posing the threat day after day could be more than enough to end this Jewish dream, all on its own.

Some of you sitting in this room listened on the radio the day the U.N. voted to create the Jewish state. Is it possible that you will also witness the day when Tel Aviv is turned over to the Palestinians and the U.N. certifies that the last Jew has left the country?

A world without Israel; it’s not such a far-fetched idea. After all, the world went 2,000 years without a Jewish state, and they didn’t seem to mind one bit. The only ones it mattered to were us. It mattered to us, not just because Israel is the land of Abraham and Sarah, not just because it was promised to us when we left slavery in Egypt, not just because it was the land of King David and Solomon and the site of the Temple. It mattered to us because without a Jewish state, life was not very good for us Jews.

Before the state of Israel existed Jews were a powerless people; strangers in other people’s lands, a helpless nation dependent on the goodwill of others. For two thousand years the most that we could hope for was benign neglect – that our hosts would not pay too close attention to us, because attention meant one thing only, it meant persecution.

It’s hard for us to conceive of what life was like for our great-grandparents. But if we were to go back in time 100 years to Eastern Europe where most of our families come from, to the city of Kishinev, we could regain a sense of the precarious nature of Jewish life.

According to an official census taken in 1897, 50,000 Jews lived in Kishinev, roughly half the population of the city. It was a flourishing community with a diverse economy, dozens of congregations, and 16 Jewish schools. Kishinev was a place where Jewish life felt settled, where we were at home. But despite our comfort, our sense of security was shaken to the core on a cold February day. Here’s what the New York Times reported about the events that took place on February 16, 1903:

There was a well laid-out plan for the general massacre of Jews on the day following the Russian Easter. The mob was led by priests, and the general cry, “Kill the Jews,” was taken up all over the city. The Jews were taken wholly unaware and were slaughtered like sheep. The dead number 120 and the injured about 500. (Actually the New York Times was wrong, the dead numbered 47, but the report continues ...) The scenes of horror attending this massacre are beyond description. Babies were literally torn to pieces by the frenzied and bloodthirsty mob. The local police made no attempt to check the reign of terror. At sunset the streets were piled with corpses and wounded. Those who could make their escape fled in terror, and the city is now practically deserted of Jews.

Unfortunately, this event, the pogrom of Kishinev was not an isolated incident. As any student of history can tell you, the horrors of the Holocaust were not an aberration; they were the culmination of our people’s experience in country after country, in age after age. Life as a Jew was always precarious, no matter where we lived, or how accepted we felt. Indeed, if there is an oddity in our Jewish experience, if there is an aberration, it is the life we have been blessed with today.

To emphasize this point, I want you to try and imagine the terror that would have seized a city if a Jewish community leader was caught stealing money from his neighbors? This wouldn't merely be a *shanda* – a scandal, it would be a crisis of the highest magnitude. The safety, security, survival of the entire community would be in jeopardy.

And yet this past year, when our nation was rocked by a fifty billion dollar ponzi scheme, no Jews hid in their attic for fear of reprisal from angry neighbors. No priests called for assaults against us. No politicians called for expulsions or pogroms. Viewed from the span of history, this is a remarkable moment in time. A moment when a Jew engaged in “stereotypical Jewish behavior,” and our host country, America was not provoked. This country did not respond as every other country always has. Truly, to live here today is a blessing.

But what is the source of this blessing? Why is our life so different than that of our ancestors? Is it simply that America is different than the rest of the world? To some extent, yes, America is unique. But despite this uniqueness, our experience in this country has not always been as comfortable as it is today.

Kids, ask your grandparents how easy it was for them or their parents to go to college, to become a doctor or a lawyer when they were growing up. There were quotas then. Colleges would only accept a small number of Jewish students. Ask your grandparents about restricted clubs, restricted neighborhoods; ask them about the names they were called. Ask them about anti-Semitism. While our experience in this country has been better than it was in any other country, for most of our years here we did not feel totally secure. Even in America, life has not always been like it is today.

Consider an event that took place 70 years ago, the Voyage of the S.S. St. Louis. It was 1939, and a ship was crossing the Atlantic carrying over 900 men, women, and children. They were among the last Jews allowed to leave Nazi Germany, and they were headed to freedom in Cuba. Unfortunately, when the boat arrived, a new government refused to allow the passengers to disembark. Knowing that if they returned to Germany their fate would be the concentration camps, the ship headed up to Miami, seeking a place of refuge for those on board. But there would be no refuge offered by our country. We had quotas. The ship was not allowed to dock. And the American Jewish community, what was our response? We were silent. In the end, as food supplies dwindled, the captain had no choice but to take the ship back to the only country that would receive it. He sailed back to Germany and the fate of the passengers on board was sealed.

America has not always been a safe haven for Jews. So why is it today? What's different about our world that has given us the chance to feel at home here, to feel free, not only from persecution, but free to express ourselves, free to raise our voices, to cry out when we witness injustice whether it is directed against ourselves or others. Free even to lie, cheat, and steal and still be treated no differently than any of our countrymen. *Ma Nishtanah?* Why is this place, this era, different than any other place we have experienced in two thousand years?

There is only one answer. What has made us feel safer today, what enables Jews to feel a sense of security no matter where we live, is the fact that we have a state of our own. As long as we were only strangers in other people's lands, we were at risk. But the presence of a Jewish state, whether we choose to live there or not, changes the way the world sees us. We are no longer helpless, dependent on the kindness of others. Today we are able to take care of ourselves because there is a Jewish country that will stand behind us, beside us, and with us.

Unfortunately, too many American Jews have forgotten the central role that Israel plays in our lives. We have forgotten what life was like for our grandparents before Israel existed. We have forgotten, or

maybe we never learned, that a world **with** a state of Israel is a better place for Jews. With Israel, we are not condemned to be the eternal victim of history. With Israel, we have security, we have freedom, we have dignity as individuals and as a people.

Today, our security, our freedom, our dignity is threatened by the country of Iran. We are threatened when Iran declares its hatred towards Israel. When its religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei proclaims: "The cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region," he threatens not only Israel, but us as well. When "moderate" former president Rafsanjani states: "If one day... the Islamic world will be equipped with the weapons available to Israel now, [Israel's] imperialist strategy will reach an impasse, because the employment of even one atomic bomb inside Israel will wipe it off the face of the earth, but would only do damage to the Islamic world," he is not only threatening Israel's future, he is threatening our future as well. And when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad convenes a "scholarly" conference to discuss the myth of the Holocaust, and proudly proclaims that Israel should be wiped off the map as he builds more and more centrifuges to create enriched uranium, he is not only threatening the extinction of the Jewish state, he is threatening the extinction of the Jewish people. This is not simply my judgment; it is the judgment of 2,000 years of history, 2,000 years of hatred, blood libels, crusades, pogroms, and a Holocaust. What part of Israel was Iran attacking when it blew up the JCC in Buenos Aires? It was attacking the Jewish part, the same part that fills this room today.

Friends, for several years now we've known of this threat. And for several years we've been told, that Iran is not just Israel's problem, it's a problem for the entire world. Well unfortunately, the rest of the world hasn't gotten the message. The rest of the world is too consumed with their own hatred towards Israel to take time to worry about an Iranian nuclear bomb.

This week, a United Nations Commission declared that the war in Gaza, Israel's response to eight years of missiles fired at the men, women and children of Sderot; that it was a war crime. This month a Swedish newspaper accused Israeli soldiers of "killing Palestinian civilians and harvesting their organs." Israel called on the Swedish government to condemn this despicable lie. Sweden refused, citing a need to protect the freedom of the press. Meanwhile throughout the entire Middle East, the blood libel in its "traditional" form continues to be spread in newspaper articles and on TV shows.

Friends, we can no longer wait for the rest of the world to get the message. We can't wait because they're not listening. They're not even on the right channel. At this moment, Iran possesses enough enriched uranium to make a bomb. Experts believe that from this point on they will be able to produce enough material to make two additional bombs each year. To say that our time is running short is an understatement.

So what can we do to make a difference? We need to support the work of AIPAC in Congress and put pressure on Iran's government. There is severe dissatisfaction with the current leadership in Iran. We need to do whatever we can to make it harder for them to govern. Limiting the flow of gasoline would shut down economy. This is an action that can be taken now. We need to insist from our President that if talks with Iran do not produce results quickly, that he will implement a gasoline embargo and work to isolate Iran from the nations of the world. We need to join together with our community, with JUF, JNF, Ben Gurion University, Weizman Institute, with whatever public pro-Israel events are occurring. We need to call on *our* Jewish and non-Jewish friends and ask them to join with us, to support us. We need to ask them to have their religious institutions discuss boycotts and divestment from companies that are doing business with Iran. (By the way, many of these folks had no problem discussing divestment from Israel just a year or two ago.) In short, we need to raise our voices, make noise, put up signs, and raise conscientiousness.

Back in the 1970's the Jewish community united as one to Save Soviet Jewry. An iron curtain stood between Jews and freedom. Any clear thinking person would have told you that this was an impossible goal. But in America we are free to raise our voices. And we did. And little by little people listened. Save Soviet Jewry became a rallying cry at every Jewish event. It was inscribed on every synagogue. It was proclaimed by teens and seniors, on college campuses and in front of embassies. This was a human rights issue, and our calls eventually attracted the support of politicians, who raised the issue at every opportunity. In the end a miracle occurred, justice prevailed, the curtain was raised, and Soviet Jews were freed.

Today I'm asking you to make this issue as important as saving Soviet Jews was in the '70's. Because today, not only are those same Soviet Jews (a million of them who now live in Israel,) not only are they in harm's way, but so too are five million other Israelis, and six and a half million Jews across the globe. The world will not act if no one calls them. We have to raise our voices. We have to begin to call.

There's a climactic moment in Megilat Esther, where Mordecai stands before Esther and asks her to speak to the Persian King about the threat that Haman poses to her people. Esther hesitates. She knows that approaching the king is dangerous; it may mean the end of her life. Mordecai responds to her. He says, "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained this royal position for just such a crisis."

Friends, we are Esther, facing a crisis from the land of Persia. Our people are in danger and the only way to save them is, like Esther, to raise our voices and speak out. Since the 1940's we took an oath. We swore: Never Again. Now is the time for us to fulfill that promise. Let our voices ring out like the piercing cry of the Shofar. For the sake of our homeland, for the sake of our people, for the sake of our children: let us lift our voices now.

Amen.