

## These and Those Words: Bibi, AIPAC, Iran and Purim

One of the nice things that I have the opportunity to do on a regular basis here at Emunah is teach. Often I get to teach while people eat – that seems like a pretty successful model!

On Wednesday, I had a tri-fecta of meals and teaching – breakfast with our Jewish law class, our teens over dinner, and our monthly lunch and learn iEngage 2.0 class that Linna Ettinger helps me coordinate.



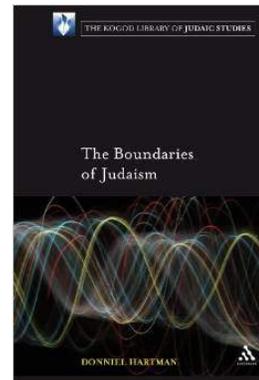
We had an amazing class starting our discussion with this book, *The Boundaries of Judaism* by Rabbi Donniel Hartman (whose videos we watch as part of our learning). Let me share the opening story with you:

“A famous Jewish joke tells of a community which, after the death of its longstanding and revered rabbi, forgot its position on a certain central issue of Jewish law, leaving the community deeply divided between two factions. Not knowing what to do, the communal leaders went to the oldest member of the community, who was on his death bed. ‘Reb Moshe’, they pleaded, ‘do you recall our tradition?’

“Immediately, one faction began to press its point, arguing: ‘Didn’t we do it this way?’ Not about to let their adversaries sway Reb Moshe, the second faction started to shout over the other: ‘Reb Moshe, don’t listen to these fools. In truth is this not our tradition?’ The shouting continued unabated, with each side trying to drown out the other all throughout the day.

“When finally a moment of quiet descended on the room, Reb Moshe raised his frail hand and began to speak in a hushed voice. ‘My memory is not what it used to be’, he said, ‘but this sounds very familiar. I remember that this same issue was raised in the community when I was a child. There were two factions each trying to shout over the other.

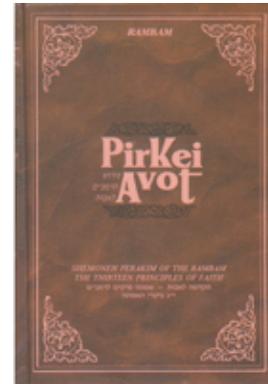
“The shouting, the debating – that is our tradition.” (Donniel Hartman, “Pluralism, Tolerance and Deviance,” in The Boundaries of Judaism, Donniel Hartman (London: Continuum, 2007), 13.)



There is a lot of shouting these days. We see it in our American political discourse which overflows with disagreement and yelling in the absence of calm and compromise.

And we see it in our Jewish community – far too much division and discord, not enough healing and harmony. This has become most acute over the last month vis-à-vis Israel. From my vantage point, it has become most destructive.

But I also believe in the famous teaching from *Pirkei Avot* (the *Ethics of the Sages*): “*Havei dan et kol adam l’khaf zekhut* – judge everyone as fairly as you can – give them the benefit of the doubt.” So, this



morning, I want to try to present my assessment of where Jews and Israel are today, trying to judge everyone as kindly as I can.

In order to do this, let me take a step back and look at the big picture. The Jewish people sit today at a time of unprecedented opportunity and security. For us living in America, we are – almost entirely – living in safety as Jews and enjoying freedom and great economic opportunities.



We have challenges here in America – demographic challenges and assimilation. We live in such a welcoming culture that it is easy

to lose our distinct identity and to become merely subsumed by the whole. But even with those difficulties, we should appreciate the fact that we are quite blessed.

What about our family and friends in Israel?

They too live in an unprecedented time – Jews are back in



Israel in a manner we have not seen in almost two millennia.

They have created a thriving modern country, resurrected Hebrew as a spoken language

and created the amazing Startup Nation – where business, technology, science, and innovation are thriving.

But they have challenges – they have internal challenges – integrating many different Jewish sub-communities and an Arab minority, living under an Orthodox monopoly that does not allow for religious pluralism for Jews, not having everyone serve the military or the country equally, and the challenges of the settlements on the West Bank. In addition, there are external challenges – from the Palestinians to other Arab and Muslim countries to terrorism coming from Hezbollah and Hamas.

Jews in other places are experiencing some of this as well, as



we have seen in the deadly terrorist attacks upon Jews in France and Denmark. But the greatest existential threat comes from Iran. Iran has stated explicitly that it wants to see Israel “wiped off the map” of the world, that it is a “tumor” that should

be wiped away.

That and the fact that they have been pursuing nuclear weapons and they fund terrorist organizations that murder Jews in Israel and around the globe like the bombing of the AMIA, the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina.



So, it’s an interesting time – overall, one of profound blessing and safety, but with deep and real challenges that must be addressed.

Since we are just a few days from Purim, it would be wise to point out the similarities between today and Purim. In the Megillah,

there is also a pretty rotten person who wants to kill the Jewish people: Haman.



Boo! Come on – we need some practice!

What does he say? “*Yeishno Am Ehad mefuzar u’meforad bein ha-amim* – There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in your majesty’s interest to tolerate them. [...] Let an edict be drawn for their destruction.” (Esther 3:8-9)

It does sound a lot like Iran’s leaders today and strangely enough, both are from Persia! There are similarities, but it is not the same.

First of all, Megillat Esther, the Scroll of Esther, which contains the story of Purim, was written as fun farce by Jews living in the Persian Diaspora almost two and half millennia ago. It is funny and farcical,



containing humorous names – for example, Mordechai is similar to the Persian god Marduk – it would be like naming your Jewish hero today: Jesus. And it was written at a time when Jews had no power. They could not protect themselves at all and lived at the whims of their rulers – like the comedic King Ahashveirosh of the Megillah. That is why the Jews write about killing their enemies at the end of the story. Were they really powerful enough to do something so horrific and wrong, it would not be funny. But since they had no power, they added on the absurd and immoral ending.

Today is a different time. The Jewish people are not living without power. The Jews in Israel have a military that works day and night to protect them – in a manner not seen since the days of the Maccabees.

That said, there are dangers – nuclear weapons in particular, are game changers. So, that brings us to this moment and how best

to stop Iran from obtaining those destructive weapons. Almost everyone in American and Israel wants the same thing: to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons – the question is how to do this.



President Obama thinks he can get there through negotiations. Prime Minister Netanyahu does not. No one knows what will work. While I hope that negotiations will work, I have serious reservations.

I was privileged to have a long conversation with Senator Markey the other week about this: We concluded that neither of us knows the best strategy for this moment – should we add new sanctions or not? Should we increase the pressure on the Iranians or not? He and I agreed that no one knows exactly how to deal with this most risky moment.





All that brings me to the  
Speaker of the House John  
Boehner's invitation to Prime  
Minister Netanyahu to speak to  
Congress, which was done without

consulting with the White House. Bibi has now made the Iranian issue a political hot potato and a much more partisan one.

Giving him that benefit of the doubt, I might assume he is scared for Israel's survival and comes at the moment from a place of wanting the best for Israel. If I am in a less generous mood, I see him playing political games to help himself just weeks before the Israeli election.

Bibi has created a terrible rift between the administration and Israel – not a good thing at any time, and certainly not at a moment like this, given the negotiations with Iran. It's not that Bibi does not have legitimate fears and doubts about the negotiations – those may be quite valid. But it is about how he is voicing them. He is doing this in a divisive manner that hurts his overall goal. Not smart.

Bibi has alienated the administration, Democrats and many on the left. That is not helpful and could very well undermine the effort to create a nuclear-free Iran.

Far better would have been a Bibi who came with a new peace initiative including a settlement freeze – that would have shaken the current dynamic and made him a leader in the same vein as Aaron, Moshe’s brother. The Mishnah states that Aaron was not only a lover of peace, but also a pursuer of peace – that is something we could all use a lot more of.

Tomorrow, 20 of us from Emunah are travelling to Washington, DC to join with 15,000 other activists for three days of listening, learning and lobbying our political leaders. Our overall goal is to strengthen the US-Israel relationship and this year, more than most, that relationship needs work.



Here at Emunah, we are a diverse group. We are on the left, the center and the right vis-à-vis Israel. We will have Democrats, Independents, and Republicans attending the AIPAC conference. Right now, the left wing



members of our group are infuriated by the Prime Minister. And some on the right are upset that the administration has chosen Samantha Power and Susan Rice, who has strongly criticized Bibi, to speak at the AIPAC Policy Conference.



Right now, we need to heal this rift and make sure that supporting Israel does not become a partisan issue. If Israel becomes a Republican issue, it will hurt the Jewish state. It needs to remain a bipartisan issue.

But even more importantly, AIPAC reminded all the participants about being civil. There are some who would yell and boo the people they do not support. AIPAC does not condone that – anyone who comes to speak at the convention is someone who can help Israel. While they (and we) may disagree about some details, that does not condone treating a speaker rudely.



Precisely at a time like this when partisanship, tension, and emotions are all high, and the environment is especially charged, we need to remember our



Jewish values of *derekh erez*, of treating each other with respect.

AIPAC's mission is to be a big tent organization that keeps the US-Israel alliance bipartisan, striving to make all participants feel comfortable being part of its movement. That can only be accomplished if we treat those with differing opinions respectfully.

Let me return to our iEngage 2.0 class last Wednesday. We looked at a number of texts. It was fascinating to see how our rabbis 2000 years ago approached debate and disagreement. Judaism makes room for dissent and allows space for multiple truths – as the Talmud states: “*Eilu V'eilu divrei Elohim Hayyim* – these and those are the words of the living God.” (*Eruvin* 13b)

We may disagree, but let me stop and not be so presumptuous that I cannot, or even refuse to, hear someone else's perspective.

There is truth and much we can

learn from everyone, especially from those with whom we disagree.

But most of all let us learn how to speak more civilly.

Let us learn how to say to others, and especially to those with whom we disagree: *Eilu V'eilu* – your words are also the words of the living God.



We are all in agreement then.