What Keeps Me Up At Night?

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I finally took people’s advice this past spring and tried XM Radio for six months. With Chava in Cincinnati, Zahava in D.C. and my entire spring and summer traveling constantly around West Virginia discussing the Iran Nuclear Agreement, I was traveling more than I ever thought I would and decided to try it. I figured 6 months for $45 was an offer I couldn’t refuse.

I am a believer now. XM is unbelievable! I can listen to the news anytime I want, a godsent to this news junkie. As a political junkie, POTUS Channel 124 is fantastic as well as other stations which allow me to catch hearings and briefings on the Middle East. All summer long, I have listened to my beloved Mets. I don’t whether that is a good thing yet but I can now catch the Jets. I love comedy and I have several stations for that; while preparing my classes early in the morning, I love listening to “Coffee House”.

And whenever I drive on Sunday morning, Righteous Radio with Rabbi Elliot Cosgove is a wonderful show on Judaism, religion and life. It was that show gave me my High Holiday theme for this year. Rabbi Cosgove had an hour interview with Abraham Foxman, the incomparable leader of the ADL who recently retired as its national director.

Foxman was born in Poland in 1940 and left with a Catholic family when his own family was ordered by the Germans to enter a ghetto. He was baptized and raised by them and after the war and a lengthy legal battle, was eventually returned to his parents. They all came to the United States in 1950. For 50 years, he has been a part of the ADL and has been its National Director for almost thirty. A powerful and respected voice for our people, Foxman’s activism fighting anti-Semitism has been legendary and his presence on the world Jewish scene has left an indelible mark.

In the interview, Rabbi Cosgove asked Foxman a lot of questions on his life’s work but then asked him what I thought was the most important question. He said: “Abe, what keeps you up at night? After years and years of fighting the good fight, looking at the world today, what are the things that you worry about after a half a century of combating anti-Semitism?”

And while his answer was so insightful and so moving, it was the question that has been on my mind all summer:

What keeps you up at night?

What an important question to consider on the High Holidays. Family strife, financial worries, health concerns are, of course, the most immediate one that come to mind. Those are the difficult personal concerns that rob you night after night of sleep: You can’t sleep because you wonder how you’re going to pay your mortgage; your son or daughter is struggling in life and you worry about their future especially when you are gone; you know you are going to the doctor this month because you just haven’t been feeling 100% lately and you just have a bad feeling about what the next few months may hold in store for you. You see an empty seat today and remember your friend who went through the same thing just a few years ago and is no longer here.

That can keep you up at night.

We will talk about the personal next week. But the question that Rabbi Cosgove was asking Foxman was in the broader sense. Looking forward: what are the things you who have been so committed to, the causes you have worked for and devoted your life to, what concerns you, Abe? You have been a lion confronting anti-Semitism in America and throughout the world; in many ways, you have seen that problem diminish significantly in America, dramatically rise throughout Europe and the Middle East. What keeps you up at night?

When I began thinking about what to say to you this year, that single question has been on my mind. What’s been keeping me at night (other than my dog who somehow likes to play at one am)? That question has been on my mind. That question and the words of my colleague and friend Rabbi Jack Moline. Jack has always had a great sense of what people are listening for and he said this about the high holiday sermons. He says:

“I want to hear my rabbi struggle with the questions that are troubling his soul. I don’t even care what those questions are, and my interest is less in the question than in the struggle. I do not want to hear a string of texts…. I am in shul to focus on my own struggles and I need someone to show me it is possible to come in broken and walk out healing.”

He is right. People are not looking for answers as much as looking for others who, like them, struggle with life. Struggle with issues. Worry about the future.

I think Jack is right.

I haven’t been able to go to a shul to listen to a rabbi in an awful long time but you know if I could, I don’t want to hear about texts; I would want to hear their hopes and dreams, their fears and concerns, the burdens they carry, the tears they shed, the worries they consider….not out of voyeuristic curiosity but to help me better understand my own life, my own insecurities and my own mortality. I want to know what keeps people up at night because those are the issues that matter.

And that’s what I want to do with you this High Holiday season, share with you what are the things that keep me up at night, both in the macro, the larger more general issues of life and the micro, the personal human struggles. Not to give you a window into my soul but to, perhaps, help you ask yourself the right questions and allow you to frame your struggles this year.

What is keeping me up at night?

Well, as many of you probably can guess, the Iran Nuclear Agreement has kept me up at night. All summer long. It has really consumed most of my life these past several months.

But what keeps me up at night was not the fears for how the vote would go, what our West Virginia congressional delegation would do, or whether I made the right decision to oppose the nuclear agreement so openly and forcefully. I didn’t lose a second of sleep over any of that.

Not a second.

That doesn’t mean I felt it was an easy decision to make but because from the start and many of you who have actively followed my posts on Facebook and Twitter, gone to any of my meetings including ones outside the shul like at the First Presbyterian know, I approached this issue as one of an imortant policy disagreement among good friends. I respected and completely understood the valid concerns of those who felt it had to be approved. Throughout this discussion, I advocated my opposition to this agreement in a respectful, non-partisan and open way. I was never critical of the administration or accusatory in any way of those who held a different position.

And so at no point did I lose sleep over that. In fact, I believe I will look back at this moment in time and say I think I grew more as a leader than at any point in my life, grew as rabbi in this community, as a stronger and more effective advocate of the US/Israel friendship, and elevated the standing of this state by the manner in which our discussion was handled. I feel like this summer will be a memory I will long cherish.

What has kept me up at night, however, has been the deep rift that this discussion has created in the American Jewish community.

What should have been a robust and substantive discussion of an important policy and a disagreement among brothers and sisters on what is the best position to advocate has turned into a highly divisive, ugly, and partisan debate on support for Israel and the role Jewish leaders and organizations should play in crafting ideas for the community at large.

The opposition to this agreement taken by most of the major Jewish organizations in America (ADL, AIPAC, AJC, The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the Simon Weisenthal Organization, JCRC, Federated Jewish Communities throughout North America) and the significant number of Jews who disagreed with that position created tension that was inevitable and, perhaps, foreseeable. But what keeps me up at night and worries me is the future of the pro-Israel movement and activism in America as a result. What this debate has revealed is what an unclear future there is for Jewish support for the U.S./Israel relationship and what it is going to look like in the years ahead.

That keeps me up at night.

I saw an inability of Jews on both sides to avoid the personal attacks on each other; I saw too much reckless criticism and not enough of an attempt to create understanding; I saw a great deal of resignation; moreover, I saw an unwillingness on the part of some Jews to even participate in this discussion. I witnessed that what I always thought was a united front when it came to Israel fracture, and I don’t know yet how it will come back together. It will, I pray, but I worry about the dissolving of the cooperation and mutual respect which has been a hallmark of why we have been so successful in this country advocating for the importance of Israel.

People have asked me whether this advocacy has taken its toll on me. So much traveling, so many hours, so much pressure in what has been seen by some as a hopeless and unwise strategy. Not at all. What has been difficult is not the struggle, or the decision to argument against the deal, but seeing a troubling future of Jews in America that this discussion has made me think a lot about.

Let’s look at this morning’s sedrah.

Abraham has two sons: Ishmael from a maid servant, Hagar, and Isaac from his wife, Sarah. Tensions mount within the family and then Sarah forces Abraham to choose between her son and Hagar’s son. Abraham doesn’t want to choose. G-d eventually tells Abraham to listen to his wife and he reluctantly does but it is not an easy decision. He ultimately exiles his son Ishmael.

I am sure that decision kept Abraham up at night.

I don’t think Abraham questioned the decision of his wife, not after G-d told him it was the right thing to do. But I bet he agonized over it because he was worried about how it would forever change the relationship he had with his son Ishmael and how his decision would affect the relationship with Isaac and Ishmael.

I guess that is what I am feeling. How will what happened this summer affect the relationship among us and within the Jewish people?

The Iranian Nuclear Agreement debate exposed huge rifts among Jews in America, among supporters of Israel, and between Jews in Israel and Jews in America. It has significantly weakened what has always been the firewall of the political strength we have had in Congress: bipartisanship about Israel. I didn’t lose sleep thinking I made the wrong decision to oppose the agreement any more than rabbis who made the decision to support the deal. For us, it was a debate about policy. I think like Abraham, we all knew where we had to be and what we had to do. But like Abraham, we should all pause, reflect and fear that this event has, perhaps, significantly changed the way our relationship with each other is going to be from this time forward and that frightens me. And that’s what keeping me up at night.

The Iran Nuclear Agreement fell dangerously short in my opinion and the opinion of many good people I respect, including the overwhelming number of Israelis. Like Abraham, I knew what I had to do, and so I come out as passionately as I possibly could. I think I also explained in a respectful fashion why this deal created in my mind an existential threat to the safety and security of our ally Israel and major issues for our country’s larger foreign policy interests.

I don’t lose a moment of sleep thinking whether I was right or wrong. In fact, I am glad to say I wasn’t on the sidelines sitting on my hands while this was happening. I know that when this page of history is noted, I was an important part of it and proud to have had a role. No loss of sleep for that.

But I heard among Jews on both sides of this discussion around the country and here locally some very troubling and hurtful comments made publicly and privately. This debate was nastier, uglier, and more personal than anything I have ever witnessed among our people. We have always had people who could be cruel and insensitive but it was rare for Jews to so openly call Jews such vicious names: Jews who supported the agreement were referred to as “sonei yisrael”(haters of Israel), kapos, nazis. Jews who were opposed to the agreement were called racists, war mongers, bigots, dual loyalists. Good people on both sides were called some of the most vile names and insults I could imagine and quite openly. I know from it personally. By more than one person, I have had my political loyalties questioned and my loyalty to this country questioned, and mostly by Jews. I have been criticized for being too political by those who have always wanted me to be more political and too pro-Israel by those who in the past have themselves been accused of being to pro-Israel.

Much more hurtful, I have had my loyalty to this shul questioned. That hurt most of all. I have been accused of now working solely for AIPAC and abandoning the synagogue by folks who weren’t joking and who should know better. I know what I have done, the sleep I have lost, the meals I have skipped, and the long hours late at night at the shul. Ask Marilyn but ask yourself. I spent this summer many a night up most of the night, not worried, but trying to catch up on my correspondence (remember getting emails from me at 2:00 am?), writing unveilings and eulogies, trying to maintain our webpage, sending newsletters, preparing speeches for a church on a Sunday all because of the appointments, counseling, and lessons I had throughout the day.

I have never been criticized so harshly and so personally.

That all hurt but what is keeping me up is the fraying of the ties that bind our Jewish community together. What has kept me up is that the realization that there is a serious and growing divide within American Jewry; we are no longer a cohesive family.

It is not that we can’t have differences of opinion. We are Jews for crying out loud; arguing is in our DNA. It is just that I see that we are no longer a united people with a sense of purpose, who seem willing to argue but know how to put things aside and stay on message. We are no longer a united people understanding that we can disagree but acknowledging our shared common interests.

What kept me up during the Iran debate and I am afraid is going to keep me up in the future is that this summer, I realized that this is no longer the community of Willard and Bob.

In case you don’t know, Bob Levine and Willard Pushkin were legendary leaders of our community. They were highly generous and deeply committed to helping Israel, Synagogue, Temple and Federated. But you needed to see them at the regular Federated board meetings. You could bet if Bob said “A” about Israel or about giving to a cause, Willard said “B”. And vice versa. And it didn’t matter what it was. Whatever one thought about a matter concerning Israel or the Jewish community, the other was passionately on the other side. Then we voted. Bob or Willard lost; they both gave their money and support regardless and then they went out of dinner as if nothing happened and they never talked about it again.

That is not what happens today.

Not today. Today, if you have different view, you ridicule the other side and bad mouth it; you leave angry, and you walk away If you don’t like something at the Shul or the Temple or a Jewish organization, you just leave it. If you don’t like a position an organization takes, you take a walk.

And that keeps me up because the more we fragment, the more we will dwindle in size and impact and the less support we will have for the Jewish state.

And the darker our future as a community will be.

This is not the first time there was tension among us. We have seen this film before. But I don’t see this one going away; I see it as a bellwether for the future. And with more and more Jews not even engaged in Jewish communal life, the future for American Jewry is very concerning.

Abraham had to take a position knowing that he had to make a decision, but what kept him up at night was that whatever he did would forever crack the cohesiveness of his family. He was right.

Today, we are at a similar moment and this debate has exposed a serious rift between our people. And it couldn’t come at a worse time. Israel needs our support now more than ever and we have a community that is in desperate need of working together to create a stronger community.

This debate is over and we must have a conversation on what it means to be one Jewish people, why support for the only Jewish State is critical to our survival, and why we can have disagreements but only in a way that strengthens our future, not weakens it.

May G-d be with us in the months and years ahead.

Amen