

“Some Different Thoughts on Iran”

This is the eve of Purim. There are many obvious parallels between events in ancient Persia and modern Iran, between Megilat Esther and Megilat Iran. There are obvious parallels between ancient Haman in Persia and modern Hamanijad in Iran. So I will stay away from the obvious and would rather reflect on something more subtle.

The Rabbi's comment on the opening passage of the Book of Esther

“Veyehi Bemei Ahasverus, Hu Hamelech mHodu Ad Kush”- to which the Midrash rabbah on Esther reflects: “Vayehi Lashon Tzara”- The very first word of the Megillah in Hebrew “vahei” is “lashon Tzara” –indicates imminent trouble, such as the Hebrew letters vov vov yud-”vai”- a wail (oy vai, ves mir, later incorporated into Yiddish?) – tzarot are coming,.

Indeed, we all feel that the “ Lashon tzarot- the Vai” as we today contemplate the worst scenario, the chain reaction of terrible events throughout the world if and when Israel attacks Iran. But doesn't it seem to be a Sophie's choice for Israel and for us?. We feel the same “Lashon tzarot- Vai” as we contemplate Israel NOT attacking Iran and the eventual possession and deployment by Iran of a nuclear bomb against Israel. This is a Shabbat of melancholy-of “lashon Tzarot”. This is a time of melancholy.

I am not capable of commenting on the military any more than you. But let me talk a little bit about the less obvious, triggered by a piece in the New York Times last week which some of you may have read, and I suspect others may not have read, because it was buried deep in the weekly review. It is written by Roya Hakakian. Roya Hakakian is an Iranian Jew, a poetess whose family fled Iran after the collapse of Shah Pahlavi. Ms Hakakian points out two themes. The first is the contribution of the Jewish Community to both ancient and modern Iran. Secondly, she points out the reverse - The open arms and welcome mat and assistance which Iran gave to Jews both in ancient times and modernity.

First the Iranian welcoming of Jews in dangerous times “vai” loshan Tzarot. In introducing Mordecai Hayehudi, it traces his origins back some 100 years goes back to the 6th century BCE when the Jews were exiled to Babylonia, after the destruction of the First Temple. “ The Jew Mordecai from the tribe of Benjamin which had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives...whom Nebuchadnezzar the King of Babylon had carried away..” Then the Jews 80 years later found a savior in Persia, who had conquered Babylon, Cyrus the Great who helped return back to Israel, reestablish a Jewish presence and rebuilt the temple which had been razed 80 years earlier. In modernity too, it was Iran who became a refuge to Jews, many fleeing Hitler's armies. Thousands owed their lives to the valorous conduct to the head of the Iranian the head Iran's diplomatic mission in France. He who defied Nazi orders by issuing thousands of passports and travel documents to Jews. Many Polish Jews settled in Iran, their graves and their descendents are still there.

And today, there are still 20,000 Jews in Iran. After Israel and Turkey, Iran is the largest Jewish community in the Mideast. Most Jews emigrated to Israel after the fall of the Shah. Most of those who remain, regard Iran as their home and take pride in Iranian Jewish Culture. One Jew sits in Parliament. He is quoted as having said publicly, “It regrettable that a horrible tragedy so far reaching as the Holocaust being denied. Comments in the press on the President's Holocaust denial.” And apparently government money subsidizes Teheran's main

Jewish hospital. Most importantly, Jews are free to come and go outside of Iran, as they wish.. Apparently, those who remain do so to continue an uninterrupted Jewish presence and Jewish culture of 2500 years.

Not only was Iran a welcoming homeland for Jews in ancient times and a conduit to safety in modernity, but Jews reciprocated. Roya Hakakian points out that “at the dawn of the 20th century Iran was racked by lawlessness and tribalism. By about at mid-century, Shah Pahlavi’s Iran had an Army and an effective central government which made subsequent industrial government possible. The credit for a surprising amount of that industrialization goes to the efforts of leading Iranian Jews. She continues “among them were the Nazarians, who left Iran for Israel in the late 1940’s, fought in Israel’s 1948 war of independence, went on to work in construction in Israel, and when they had mastered their skills, committed the unthinkable. They returned to their birth place in (Iran) to begin building their period. They became manufacturers of loaders, dumpers, cranes, and cement mixers and made those modern tools or organization available and affordable for the first time in Iran ... Another group of brothers the Elghanians erected high rise buildings and highways that inoculated the country against tribal isolation.. They also founded in Iran the first advanced plastic factory which paved the way for other scientific and socio-economical advances.”

Ms Hakakian includes “lashon Tazarot” too- the tragic execution, for example, of one of the Elghanian bros after the fall of the Shah, for “corruption on earth” and “espionage for Israel, which caused most of the 100,000 Iranian Jews to emigrate to Israel or the United States.

So that the article of Hakakian adds to the melancholy of this Shabbat. Vayehi – “vai” lashon tazarot - it is not only the threat of the reciprocal actions and the triggering of a regional war and unintended consequences throughout the world, but a rich reciprocal relationship and memory which will be severed and overwhelmed.

This is a Shabbat of melancholy “It came to pass in the days of King Ahashverus Vai –Lashon tzarot“ then and now.