

Sermon for Yom Kippur Afternoon  
September 28, 2009 – 10 Tishri 5770  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

What does it mean to be a true friend? Here's friend A.

Friend A says to you, "I love you. And because I love you, I will always be there for you. I will never judge you. I will never question why you do what you do. You will forever have my unconditional support. And anyone who would dare to judge you or question your choices isn't really a good friend."

Friend B says to you, "I love you. And because I love you I will always be there for you. But because I love you, if I think you're doing something that is harmful to you, I'm going to tell you. And because I love you, I will try to help you be as healthy as you can be. Our love for each other should make it safe for us to discuss and debate what's best for both of us – and we may disagree. But even if we disagree, that doesn't mean that we don't love each other, and it doesn't mean that I won't always be there for you."

I'm very grateful for my friends. I'm grateful for my type A friends, and I'm grateful for my type B friends.

In some ways, a type A friend is a good friend to have – someone who will be with you through thick or thin, someone who will never judge who you are or what you do. It's nice to have a friend who won't second guess you, who will go along with whatever you think is best, who trusts you implicitly.

But there are times when a type A friend isn't so useful. Sometimes we need our friends to tell us when they think we're not making good choices, who will have the courage to stand up to us when we're going down a bad path. We learn in the Talmud: "let the one who loves them, rebuke them."(P. Ber 6a)

Over the last year, I have had lots of conversations with friends of mine who are also friends of Israel. And there has been much debate among them about what it means to be a friend to Israel. To some, to be a friend to Israel means being a type A friend. A real friend, they say, will support Israel no matter what. A real friend will not question the choices Israel makes, the goals she sets for herself or the manner in which she chooses to pursue those goals. A real friend will not ask Israel to change its ways, or push Israel to do anything it doesn't want to do.

Others tell me that to be a friend to Israel means to be a type B kind of friend. A real friend, they say, will support Israel no matter what, but will never hesitate to speak up when he or she thinks Israel is going down the wrong path. A real friend will question Israel's choices, and participate in the conversation over Israel's goals and the manner Israel should pursue those goals. A real friend to Israel, they say, will try to encourage Israel to do things that are in her best interests, even if Israel's leaders do not see it the same way.

So which is the best kind of friend? What is the best way for us to be a friend to Israel?

I'd like to propose that we consider a new type of friendship – a friendship I'll call Type C. The "C" stands for Complex, because I think the friends that Israel needs today understand the incredible complexity of the predicament in which Israel finds itself today.

While we could look at any of the myriad problems that Israel confronts, the most pressing problem for Israel, and indeed that world as well, is the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weaponry.

In their recent book *Myths, Illusions, & Peace*, Dennis Ross and David Makovsky try to pick apart the complicated web of entanglements that comprise the threats and possibilities in dealing with Iran. These two are among the most experienced and thoughtful experts on Middle East today, and they understand that the possibility that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons is an unacceptable game-changer that would profoundly alter the security of the Middle East and the world.

There are two different mindsets when it comes to dealing with Iran. There are some whom Ross and Makovsky call the "engagers" and others whom they call "regime-changers". The first school says that Iran is much like any other state, and therefore should be treated like any other state. Since policies of deterrence worked during the cold war with the Soviet Union, it will work with Iran as well. The other school says that Iran is unlike any other state. It is led by revolutionary ideologues who subscribe to a radical vision of fundamentalist Shi'a Islam. They believe that nothing can change Iran's behavior, and that Iran will accept nothing short of our defeat. Engagement with such an intractable enemy is doomed to fail – nothing short of regime change will work.

Those who believe in engagement point out that the Soviet Union and China during the cold war were no less ideologically motivated. The logic of deterrence and mutually assured destruction would apply even to Iran. While the leaders of Iran are motivated by religious ideology, they can also prove to be rational and pragmatic. They are an Islamic republic, but they ignore the Muslim struggles in Chechnya so as not to antagonize Russia. They may denounce America as "godless" but they are willing to align themselves with socialist leaders like Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro. Iran's leaders, they say make decisions based on a rational cost-benefit analysis, ultimately aimed at what will keep them in power.

For example, in May 2003, a few weeks after American forces removed Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, a fax was sent by the Irani leadership to the State department through the Swiss embassy. The fax laid out a comprehensive proposal for dealing with the differences between Iran and the United States, including disarmament, regional security, and economic cooperation. The Iranis offered guarantees that they would abstain from weapons of mass destruction, that they would act against Al-Qaeda and work toward comprehensive Middle East peace, in exchange for abolishing sanctions and releasing frozen assets. The fax came from the highest authorities in Iran, primarily because after the rapid victory of U.S. forces in Iraq, they were concerned that Iran would be next.

But those who advocate regime change argue that Iran is unlike any other regime. Even during the cold war, America and the Soviet Union had direct communication, and still we found ourselves within a hairsbreadth of nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis. Iran's leaders believe sincerely in apocalyptic religious ideologies. As Bernard Lewis, a longtime expert on Islam and the Middle East notes, for Ahmadinejad, "... mutually assured destruction is not a deterrent, it is an inducement."

People like Ahmadinejad believe that God is acting through them, to hasten a time when all evil will be vanquished and only the faithful will remain. He has stated his core beliefs that God's hand can be seen in Iran's successful development of nuclear technology. He routinely calls for Israel's destruction. He denies the Shoah. How do you negotiate with such a man?

But regime change is not a simple notion, as we have learned from our experience in Iraq. Last summer, when millions wanted to see a change in government, they didn't necessarily want to see the revolution uprooted. Even Ahmadinejad's nemesis in the election, former president Ayatollah Rafsanjani, is not in favor of dismantling the state – nor is it clear that the green revolution advocates dismantling Iran's nuclear ambitions. And if the regime feels an existential threat, they may retaliate through their extensive militia and terror networks – Hizbollah, Hamas, and their militias in Iraq. And the backlash against such an attack by Arab and Muslim nations could be equally scary as well. The repercussions of a military strike against Iran are anything but good.

So what are Israel and America to do? What is the best way for America to take care of its own needs and how can America be a good friend to Israel in the process?

The answer is to embrace the complexity of the problem. The problem is enormously complex, the variables extremely complex, and the possible solutions equally complex. Simple answers – like, “Just sit down and negotiate” or “Just bomb them back to the Stone Age” don't work. The way these problems will be solved is by understanding and accepting their complexity. They can't be explained in a two and a half minute package on TV news and they can't be solved in a fifteen minute segment on talk radio.

Ultimately Ross and Makovsky advocate a complex way forward, pressing Iran economically through China and Saudi Arabia, whose vast investments can be leveraged in Europe to squeeze the regime, while working through official channels in Europe and back channels to create an end game that helps Iran to achieve some of its aims while backing away from nuclear arms. America and our allies need to hold fast on red-lines, as we began to do last week in Pittsburgh, and to show the Iranian regime that they will be less secure if they develop nuclear weapons than if they back away.

Israel, like the problems she faces, is complex. It is a society comprised of people from a myriad of backgrounds and beliefs – Ashkenazi and Sephardi, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, secular and religious, hawks and doves. And the best way we can be friends to Israel is by embracing that complexity – that there are things to love about Israeli society and things that frustrate us as well. The best way we can be friends to Israel is to understand that there is more than one way to love Israel, and that lovers of Israel must embrace the complexity of what it is we love.

We can be type C friends because we are Israel. We too are complex. Among us too are engagers and regime-changers, rich and poor, conservative and progressive, hawks and doves. American Jews are as complex as are Israeli Jews. But underneath the complexity of our differences, is the commonality of our peoplehood. We are all Jews. We are all responsible one for another. And while we may look at the world through many different lenses and from many different perspectives, our common bond is the foundation on which we all stand. We share a common history, a common destiny, a common set of values and principles on which we build our lives.

Prime Minister Netanyahu expressed our common hope this week in his address to the United Nations: “We want peace. I believe such a peace can be achieved. But only if we roll back the forces of terror, led by Iran, that seek to destroy peace, eliminate Israel and overthrow the world order. The question facing the international community is whether it is prepared to confront those forces or accommodate them.”

And because the threat Iran poses to Israel is the same threat Iran poses to us, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel. We must all be friends to Israel -- type C friends – concerned and committed, to insuring Israel’s safety and security. America must lead and use all our wisdom and leverage to convince our allies that a nuclear Iran cannot be tolerated. What endangers the Jews endangers us all. We must use all the tools we can muster, diplomatic, economic, and military if necessary, to stand up to Iran with enough strength that Iran will choose to stand down.

That is why it is so important to invest in the State of Israel. We need to participate in our Federation Campaign to take care of our community here and our people there. And we need to purchase Israel bonds. To purchase a State of Israel bond is not simply a safe investment for your portfolio; a State of Israel bond invests in the security and safety of Israel. It affirms that we have a stake in the fate and destiny of the State and people of Israel – our state and our people.

I conclude as did Prime Minister Netanyahu: “let us be strong and of good courage. Let us confront this peril, secure our future and, God willing, forge an enduring peace for generations to come.”