

I HAD A NIGHTMARE LAST WEEK

A long time ago, when I was just finishing Amherst, word somehow got around the neighborhood that Walter was going to seminary to become a rabbi. The old ladies of 82nd Street (in Bensonhurst) were pleased, and I remember the day one of them met me on the street. She was delighted about my new career choice, and then she told me wonderful things about her own rabbi. "He's such a nice man. And he speaks so clearly; we can understand him!"

That was, I now suppose, no small thing for these old Jewish ladies, all of whom, like my grandmother, came to America as teenagers or young adults. So I imagine now that these ladies really needed someone who could speak loudly and enunciate clearly because they mostly couldn't hear much anyhow and English was definitely not their first language.

This makes some sense to me now, but I remember being mortified at the time. Because I was a real smart lad, a good student, a would-be thinker (indeed a budding philosopher!) on matters of history, theology, philosophy and Jewish values. That's what I saw myself as being and doing in the future. And all this lady could think of in praise of her rabbi was that he spoke clearly!

I hadn't thought of that incident in well over half a century, but I remembered it last week. Because I heard President Obama's speech in Cairo. And I thought it was terrific. He is an elegant and graceful man, speaks simply and plainly and with feeling and sense. We can understand him! He quite carried me along and, although I occasionally let out a snort of protest, I couldn't tear myself away from the television.

I see why so many people voted for Barak Obama; he is brilliant, persuasive, charismatic and makes great speeches. Of which that was definitely one.

And then it was over, and we went to make some coffee. And discovered that were all impressed. But none of us could quite remember what he had actually said. So we got a transcript of the speech on the Internet and then a full page in the Jerusalem Post. Then we realized that we had problems; people were finding a lot of sloppy history, inappropriate connections, false equivalents and problematical omissions.

And Charles Krauthammer, of course, did it better than anyone!

I don't want to critique the speech or deconstruct its connections—others have done it better than I—and I don't want in any way to denigrate the President, or to say or imply that I thought this wasn't a truly great speech. Or to imply that I do not wish him, and America, the best of

luck in making his vision of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East become reality. That not what my nightmare is about.

My problem is what comes next.

Because it is clear that his plan will fail. But meanwhile, in pursuit of that vision, the new administration is changing the rules about Israel. The old understandings and assumptions have gone. And make no mistake; that is absolutely its prerogative. It is the government of the United States; we're not. And we can fight for our point of view, and will, but cannot make American policy different just because we don't like it. So President Obama has laid out a new vision of reconciliation with the Arab & Muslim world. And said he proposes to push that agenda, and work to creating a peaceful and friendly Middle East that can learn to live in peace with Israel.

We all hope that he makes progress. But he won't; the Middle East is what it is because of centuries of neglect and stagnation. Radical Islam is so deeply embedded in the psyche of the Arab world because it so accurately reflects the consequences of the failure of Muslim societies to go forward; to create anything like freedom, democracy, literacy and human rights: freedom and equality for women, for converts, Christians, heretics, homosexuals and communists among others. Freedoms without which you can't think and invent and fix up the world. Such freedoms and rights are just not there in the Arab world. And thus people go to God (happens among the Jews too!) when their own world fails them.

That being the case, it seems very unlikely that the Arab world will change in any positive direction any time soon. Which means that there is not much evidence for the sea change that would be required to recognize the legitimacy of a Zionist Jewish sovereign presence in the Middle East. The best we can expect is what we have got already from Egypt and Jordan: recognition of the FACT of our existence. but never of our LEGITIMACY. Because that would violate the Muslim rule that land which had once been *wakf*—Muslim territory—can never revert to the hand of non-Muslims. And with the humiliation of failure growing deeper every day in the Muslim world, the fundamentalism of its religion—the escape of those in despair—seems likely to get deeper rather than dispel.

Bottom line, President Obama will fail in his grand vision of peace in the Middle East. Of that I have no doubt. But then what? Here is where my nightmare begins. Because I fear for the American Jewish community when that failure becomes too obvious to deny.

Danger

I think the present situation is dangerous for the American Jewish community. Because they, as liberal as the administration, supported

President Obama in overwhelming numbers and indeed funded his campaign. And I still hear people raving about him; which, having heard the speech, I understand even if I don't agree. Perhaps they are right.

But what happens when an American administration, despite its determination to succeed, has failed to make any headway with the Arab world. It will find, as many have found before, that the Arabs cannot be leaned on. So it will conclude (as administrations before it always have found) that the only party which CAN be leaned on is Israel. Therefore it will do just that, making demands which we cannot accept:

- a) like dividing Jerusalem between pre-67 and post-67,
- b) like not allowing building of houses for people's children if they happen to live in pre-1967 East Jerusalem or in the Territories,
- c) like making it impossible for me to move to Ma'aleh Adummim if Jerusalem gets too expensive, because they can't build any new houses there,
- d) like negotiating or forcing us to negotiate with people who deny our right to exist and only want us dead,
- e) like insisting on the creation of a hostile Hamas state 10 miles from the airport, 15 from Tel Aviv, and 500 yards from Jerusalem.

We are the only ones vulnerable to pressure and the US administration may renew its pressure on Israel in inverse proportion to its success in influencing the Arabs in the deluded belief it'll make a difference in the East/West conflict. If the situation really gets nasty we will face political flak (already starting), even economic sanctions, denial of free trade, etc. Then what? ¹

Then the Jews of America are going to be torn between faith in President Obama and support for Israel. And Obama will win. And the community will split (in unequal parts) and that may well be fatal to Jewish life in the USA. That is my nightmare. ■

¹ Then we will need Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to keep making goo-goo with the Russians (soon to become our new major strategic partner?)!