

From the Rabbi

Elul 5775/August 2015

“Directives”

After receiving my umpteenth email from the umpteenth Jewish organization “directing” me to “tell your senators and congressperson to oppose/support the Iran deal,” I finally exploded and fired off an angry reply.

First, I should tell you that I get all the emails you get, plus some others intended just for rabbis. The rabbi ones are my favorites. They tell me what I “need” or “ought” to be telling you, and pronto! And to the word and letter! And what dire things will happen if every Jew in my congregation doesn’t act now, and exactly in the manner they advise.

As for my explosion, I told this organization the following:

Dear Friends:

*I can’t tell you how little I appreciate people telling me what to tell my congressional representatives. As a rabbi, I certainly tell my congregants what I think, and I often tell them what I personally am going to tell my congressperson and senators. But I would never “direct” them to do this or that. Nor do I like our Jewish organizations telling **us rabbis** what to tell people. That goes for the whole year ‘round, and especially at the Days of Awe.*

Feel free to pass on my sentiments to anyone and everyone. And good luck, by the way, coming up with a better solution to the Iran problem than the one on the table. It will be incumbent on all of us who persuade Congress to scuttle the deal to get that same Congress to fill what will quickly become a huge diplomatic and strategic void. If this deal is bad, try comparing it to the no-deal that preceded it and that will surely follow its defeat.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Les Bronstein

This particular organization wrote right back. They apologized for being “directive,” but defended their long history of taking “courageous stands on issues of vital importance to the Jewish people and the world.” They begged my indulgence.

I responded as follows:

Generally I don't shoot off quick angry emails, but yesterday I felt it was finally appropriate to do so. I'm not mad at your organization in particular, and certainly not mad at you for taking what is surely a well-considered position. In fact, I expect it from you. I wouldn't stand for anything less!

Furthermore, I'm not entirely in disagreement with your take on the Iran deal. There are numerous questions one could ask (and must ask) about whether the deal is sufficiently enforceable; about whether a more far-reaching set of expectations could have been imposed on the Iranians; and whether both the Israelis and Saudis could have been made to feel more included in the process, at least symbolically so.

My main complaint is that our “defense organizations” (by which I include AJC, ADL, and others, and, I suppose, even AIPAC and J-Street to an extent) couch their policy positions in terms of “directives” to their supporters. “Tell you senator to...” is, to my ear, insulting. It's fine for contexts such as “hurry on down to your local Toyota dealer while supplies last” but not appropriate to influencing Congress or the President of the United States on matters of utmost importance.

We're not selling Toyotas. We're acting as concerned citizens in regard to issues of national and international security. Your constituents and mine are intelligent folk. They thoroughly appreciate our carefully calculated positions, and they take those positions into consideration when communicating (as they surely do) with their elected officials. But they can't possibly appreciate the kind of strong-arming they have experienced to an unprecedented level around the Iran deal.

Perhaps more importantly, they can't love the sense that they are being asked to split their Jewish selves from their American selves (or for that matter, their global selves). This toying with our loyalties has got to cease.

My hope was that you – or some other Jewish organization - would take the lead on setting a high-ground tone in this debate. I would like to be able to count on you to calm people down and focus on the issues rather than the personalities, party politics, gossip, and prejudices. Please, we need some dignity in these proceedings.

So in the end, I'm fine (more than fine) with your organization taking what I consider to be a mistaken position on the deal. I say without irony, "thanks for your leadership." But I need you to help with a radical shift in the tone of the debate. When you guys resort to ad-speak, what hope is there?

Thanks for listening.

That's what I wrote. I share it with you because you are the intelligent, informed, involved, impassioned American Jews I think about whenever I think about anything whatsoever. You are the people whom I am not afraid to speak my mind to. You are the folks I know will not walk away the moment I say something you disagree with. In fact, you would only walk if I refused to listen to your rejoinder.

You are well read, well informed, and well grounded in your Jewish loyalties and your American idealism. You are hard headed and practical, yet you are also optimistic in a way that only a bunch of crazy Jews can be. You are difficult to preach to, because you know so much. Yet you are a *mechaye* to preach to, because you listen with both ears and process with every lobe of your brain and every chamber of your heart. When I anticipate another Days of Awe, I have anxiety over whether I can produce a pair of talks worth your consideration, but I do not tremble about whether you will allow me to tell you the truth as I see it.

Recently I was invited to address some rabbinical students who spent the summer as interns for the Jewish organization T'ruah: A Rabbinic Response to Human Rights. The students came from every branch of Judaism, including Orthodoxy on one end and Renewal on the other. They worked with local initiatives combatting human trafficking, housing discrimination, reproductive rights, and so forth. They asked me to address the problem of talking "from the pulpit" about touchy issues, especially political ones. I think they were mostly worried about whether they could say what they felt was right without fearing the loss of their jobs.

I told them that the main question they needed to ask themselves was what they wanted to accomplish by their speaking out. Did they want to irk people? Make people think? Take a stand? Activate and organize? Move people to care?

I said that they had to be clear, first of all, about themselves. What was their own rabbinic identity? Where was the locus of their own conscience? How could they convey a responsible tone? How could they demonstrate unwavering concern for "*amcha*," i.e., the wellbeing of their own Jewish people? Of the relationship between a Jewish message and a universal need?

I urged them to strike a tone that is moral, but also humble; moral, but not moralistic. I said they should make it clear that they themselves had truth, but not *all* the truth; that their congregants *also* possessed great truths and insights; that as rabbis they were indeed ethicists, but not pundits; that their politics was an entry point into a greater religious inquiry, not an end in itself.

I enjoined them to encase their argument in Torah, but not to use Torah as a phony "prooftext" for a point of view they had already arrived at. I told them that in my case, I never stopped hoping to get my congregants to start looking at pretty much every issue through a Jewish filter: not "what's good for the Jews" (though that, too), but "what, in Jewish eyes, is truly *good*, truly *Godly*."

That's what you expect from your rabbi. That's what I expect from our high-profile Jewish leaders and spokespersons. Don't "direct" us. Rather, *lead* us. *Teach* us. *Engage* us. And most of all, *respect* us.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein