

Egypt Convulsing

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Four comments:

1. Freedom

Anyone who takes Judaism seriously supports oppressed people who yearn to be free. Anyone who takes America seriously supports persecuted people who dream of liberty. Anyone who takes Western values seriously supports crushed people who rise up for justice.

And so: in all three components of our identity we cannot help but root for those who sincerely desire democracy, liberty and freedom in Egypt.

We Jews have a long history and a long memory of Egypt. Egypt will always draw us to her; we will never really be free of her. The central narrative of Jewish life is the exodus from Egypt. It established for all time and for all people that oppression is abhorrent to God. Human beings are born to be free.

The parting of the Sea parted the chapters of history. Before the exodus Pharaohs were normative. After the exodus freedom prevailed. Before the exodus darkness covered the earth. After the exodus humanity stepped into the bright sunshine of a new day.

There would still be slaves. There would still be tyrants. There would still be suffering. But from that day forth it would be the Pharaohs who were on the wrong side of history; and justice was on the side of those who rose up to break the shackles of oppression.

Remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live; Do not oppress the stranger for you, yourselves, have been strangers in the land of Egypt.

Proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants.

The blessings of freedom are natural and self-evident, granted to us by our Creator who has endowed us with “certain unalienable rights...[and] that to secure these rights governments are instituted...deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...[and] whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it.”

These principles are ingrained in us. We cannot hold them true and self-evident for Americans alone. They are either universally true and self-evident or a colossal sham whose purpose, or consequence, is to forever separate the free from the un-free and to create two categories of people: those who are deserving of freedom and those who are not.

And so: I state today without any hesitation: I support all those in Tahrir Square who are fighting and dying today for freedom, liberty, democracy, justice and civil rights.

2. Democracy

Not all those in Tahrir Square who are opposing the Mubarak regime are fighting for freedom, liberty, democracy, justice and civil rights.

Democracy is a system of government with competing institutions, checks and balances, pluralistic expression, majority rule and minority rights. Democracy is messy and complicated and requires commitment and discipline to persevere even through the daily frustrations of having to tolerate the other. As Churchill explained: "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried."

Democracy takes time to develop; it takes patience. It takes a mindset of pluralism, of accommodating other opinions. Democracy is not a one time event. Democracy is not a one time revolutionary moment. Democracy is not one person, one vote one time.

It is surprising how often Americans and the people of the West confuse elections with democracy. The Iranian regime was elected. Hezbollah was elected. Hamas was elected. Hitler was elected. All of these elections were fair; they did, in fact, constitute the majority will of the people on that election day.

Democracy requires the secular institutions of democracy: secular courts, political parties, freedom of thought, expression and assembly; a free media; regular elections, fighting against corruption; a civil society and civil institutions.

3. Wither Egypt?

Therefore, the real question before us is this:

Is Egypt headed towards more democracy, more openness, more tolerance and more pluralism or is Egypt headed in the opposite direction? Is Egypt headed towards greater freedoms or greater oppression?

What will the new Egypt look like? Will it look more like Iran or more like Poland? Will it look like Gaza that is controlled by Hamas, which, itself, is an outgrowth of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, or will it look like Hungary? Or will it even look like Russia, which would not be too bad.

Both forces – the forces of progress and the forces of regression - are on the street fighting for the new Egypt.

And I have no illusions about the nature of the forces of regression. Some experts suggest that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is moderate and non-violent. I am not an expert. However, I align myself with those experts who contend that the Muslim Brotherhood has hardly become a soft cuddly brotherhood of democrats.

They are anti-American, anti-democratic; anti-Semitic; anti-Israel and believe in the implementation of Islamic law, interpreted strictly and fundamentally. Al Qaeda's second in command – Ayman Al Zawahiri – was one of the leaders of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas gleaned its inspiration from them as well.

If Egypt is headed towards more democracy it will be good for all the forces of enlightenment. It will be good for the Egyptians, good for America, good for Israel and good for the stability of the world. Democracies tend to ally with each other. They tend not to go to war with each other. If Egypt is headed in the opposite direction we are entering a very dangerous epoch. The stakes are enormous and should give everyone pause for sober thought.

Egypt is not Tunisia; it is not Jordan; it is not Lebanon; it is not Syria; it is not even Iran. Egypt is the Arab world's beating heart. Egyptian culture dominates the Middle East. Egypt has a vast army, brimming with all of the most advanced weapons that American money can buy.

Egypt anchors the Israel-Arab peace process. The Camp David accord, signed thirty-two years ago has eliminated the possibility of an existential war on Israel because all of the other neighbors realize that they cannot win a war without Egypt. All of the wars that Israel has fought since have really been asymmetrical skirmishes between a modern army and insurgent forces. Those of us who remember the massive tank wars in Sinai shudder at the possibility of a newly-hostile Egypt.

Egypt sits on the Mediterranean Sea. It controls the Suez Canal. Up to ten percent of the world's sea cargo goes through the Suez Canal.

Egypt has been a reliable ally of the United States. We have intelligence-gathering networks there; we have military arrangements there; Egypt even sent soldiers to join the American led liberation of Kuwait in the first Gulf War.

The ramifications of Egypt turning against the West are cataclysmic.

What are the chances of Egypt making democratic progress? I don't think anyone really knows. That is what is terrifying so many people today, including Middle East experts and those who have responsibilities of leadership.

I would point out the obvious: there is no evidence in the Middle East to suggest that the overthrow of the previous order has led to a better order. In fact, the preponderance of the evidence suggests otherwise.

The Middle East is not middle Europe. If we look at successful democratic revolutions in our time – the revolutions of Europe in 1989 – each of these countries had democratic histories to draw upon.

Even in Iraq this semblance of democracy – if you can even call it that – if whatever Iraq is - holds after we withdraw – it will have been purchased through massive American treasure, American arms and American blood.

In the history of human affairs, revolutions do not always succeed and even if they do, they do not always make things better. And even revolutions that ultimately make society better usher in a period of intense struggle for the future.

They talked about the rights of man in 1789 France too but soon the guillotines were unsheathed and the streets dripped with blood. They talked about democracy when they overthrew the Czar in 1917, and there was, in fact, democracy in Russia for eight months until the Bolsheviks choked off the oxygen of freedom for most of the remainder of the 20th century. They used the language of human rights in 1979 Iran until some time later when Ayatollah Khomeini finally seized permanent control. Yugoslavia descended into chaos, inhumanity and depravity after the fall of the Soviet Union and only pulled out of it after the American-led intervention.

Revolutions release revolutionary energies that are supremely difficult to control. All revolutions have a period of time – no one really knows how long – but it is limited and brief – it is a window of opportunity – to determine the future of the country. During this time there is usually a bitter struggle that is often violent and savage. It is like a great inhale; the intake of oxygen before the massive thrust.

This is where we are now, or will soon be. And here is where America and its allies have a crucial role to play. If America can help chart a path from here to a better there we will have a chance to create a better, more peaceful, safer world. If we fail, we are in for a long hard road.

The departure of Mubarak is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end; it is, at best, the end of the beginning. It is only now that the hard work of building up civil society begins.

4. Israel

Some brief thoughts about Israel:

Israel has more at stake in the outcome of this struggle than anyone else, save, perhaps, the Egyptians themselves. In the long run, a more open, democratic, tolerant and

American-allied Egypt is in Israel's interests. An Egypt that is ruled or unduly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood; an Egypt that turns away from the West; an Egypt that tears up the peace accord with Israel is an unmitigated disaster.

Two brief points:

First:

The upheavals sweeping the Arab world have little to do with Israel. They lay bare the preposterousness of the argument that we have been subjected to for so many years that Israel causes the anger on the Arab street.

The primary cause of the anger on the Arab street is Arab regimes that cannot deliver food, medicines and decent standards of living to their populations. These people see the lavishness of the rulers' life-style and their own poverty and this is what causes their anger. Arab dictators have cynically used Israel as a camouflage to their own ineptitude. You mean to tell me that a few apartment complexes in Gilo or on the French Hill is what has caused the Egyptian street to revolt?

Looking at the Middle East today, there is only one stable democratic American ally that can be counted on and relied upon to be there always by the side of the West: Israel – an island of stability and freedom in a sea of radicalism that is steadily encroaching on Europe and America.

Second:

If Egypt tears up the peace accord with Israel it will destroy for many years to come any Israeli incentive to make peace. The underlying rationale of the entire peace-making efforts going back to Camp David is that when an accord is reached it is permanent, irrevocable and ends all claims against the Jewish State. In exchange for that promise, Israel returns territory that it won in a defensive war and that cannot be restored once handed over. If Egypt rips up the accord; if as the Muslim Brotherhood has said just this week, that when they seize control they will recommit to war against Israel, it may send Israel into a defensive crouch that will end peace-making in our times.

I have been thinking all week of my meeting in Cairo with President Mubarak some fifteen years ago. I had organized a delegation of about forty rabbis from across the United States. We were in Egypt to promote the peace accords and to lobby for continuing American aid to Egypt. Before I left New York, I had asked for a meeting with Mubarak but had not received an answer. As soon as I entered my hotel room in Cairo – I hadn't even set down my luggage – the phone rang.

It was some authoritative-sounding voice who told me to appear in the lobby early the next morning and they would take me to the president. I could bring an additional six colleagues if I wanted.

I had some reservations; after all, it could have been anyone calling me. But I felt that prudence dictated that I appear. They obviously knew who I was and had followed me into the hotel; and in any case, I wanted to meet the president; that's why we came.

I did add those six colleagues. If I was going down, I didn't want to go down alone.

The next morning we met a number of menacing mustached men who shoved us into their cars and sped us down the chaotic Cairo streets to the president's palace.

We did our thing; we spoke with Mubarak, who was exceedingly pleasant and engaging – constantly reminding us - however - that the Middle East was not America; we took some pictures; gave some interviews in the press and moved on. On the way we passed Tahrir Square. We passed the October 6 Bridge near where Anwar Sadat was assassinated – named for the so-called victory of the Egyptians during the 1973 war with Israel – a war they had actually lost but made unprecedented headway during the first few days of the war.

And as we passed the October 6 bridge I remembered thinking back – way back – to 1979. I was a tank commander in the Israel Defense Forces and was stationed in the Sinai Desert. After the peace accords were signed, we evacuated everything.

On my last day in Sinai, right before we crossed the border back into Israel, our bus stopped in front of a makeshift sign that had been placed there by an Israeli soldier. On it he scrawled in paint these words:

Lo nasognu, vitarnu le'maan ha'shalom

We have not retreated; we have compromised for the sake of peace.

The notion of going back to those days of war with Egypt fills me with dread. The idea that we have compromised for the sake of only thirty years of peace fills me with sadness.

I hope with all my heart that the Egyptians themselves, those who seek moderation, democracy and liberty prevail; that they begin to build a decent, prosperous society.

And may the stewards of our country find the wisdom, patience and fortitude to help bring about that day.