

*“Circumcise the foreskin of our heart” (Deut 10:16)*

*Our responsibility toward atrocity in Syria*

*By Robert Satloff*

*A d’var torah delivered on Parashat Eikev, Saturday, August 16, 2014*

*Adas Israel Congregation, Washington, DC*

In a 30-year professional career, this is my first talk with foreskin in the title. Now I can wipe it off my bucket list!

Several times over the summer I considered changing the topic. After all, there is so much else to discuss:

- Gaza: the cruel paradox of Israel’s wanting to leave but can’t; Israel wanting to go in but can’t; the horror of human shields; the human toll, for Israelis, psychologically; for ordinary Gazans, in all aspects of their life; the emerging story of Gaza civilians and what Hamas did to them; the media and what it reported and didn’t report; the unusual unanimity of Israeli support for the operation; the deepening tension between the Obama administration and Israel; the rise of Euro anti-semitism. There are no many angles.
- Then, in Iraq, where there may be emerging – in ISIS -- a greater threat to American interests, American allies, and America’s way of life than even what we saw on 9/11; the shocking face of genocide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fate of the Yezidis and the forgotten fate of Iraqi Shiite Turkmen; the remarkable

story of the Kurds; the indifference to the death of Arab Christians. There are so many angles.

- And then, Iran – under the radar while the world is focused on Gaza and Iraq, quietly looking for ways to shackle America with responsibility to cope with the ISIS threat while it reaps strategic dividends, including progress toward a nuclear weapon.

Each of these topics deserves its own *d'var torah*. But I ultimately decided not to talk about them today. I want to stick with my original topic and talk about Syria.

At a time when there are black and white stories in the Middle East – criminal Hamas versus virtuous Israel; genocidal ISIS versus friendly, pro-American Kurds – Syria has become the land of gray, the place where it is too easy to look at the butchery of Bashar al-Assad and the butchery of the radical jihadists fighting against him and throw up our hands. This is too tough. This is too complicated. There are no heroes; only culprits. Yes, people are suffering; and yes, we will help the refugees. But get involved? Sorry.

For many Jews, Syria is something even more: It's a war made in heaven, the best war since the Iran–Iraq War – radical Sunnis battling radical Shiites, a plague on both their houses, long may it last, until the last man standing.

This, in my view, is wrong. Wrong for us as Americans. And it is wrong for us as Jews.

Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe, but not just a humanitarian catastrophe. Syria is a strategic disaster, but not just a strategic disaster. What separates Syria from the other problems we face in the Middle East is that it is both – one place in the world where our strategic interests and humanitarian values intersect. If we aren't moved to act there, then – short of jihadists marching down Connecticut Avenue wearing suicide vests – it is difficult to see where we should act.

The numbers tell some of the story.

- About a year ago, the UN stopped tallying the number killed because there were no independent sources still alive to verify the data. At that time, there were 100k dead. Most good estimates say it is more than 175,000 and heading toward 200,000. To put that in perspective, that's equal to every man, woman and child in Bethesda, Rockville, Silver Spring and, throw in Chevy Chase, too.
- 11,000 were killed just by government torture alone.
- For a snapshot: While the world was focused on Gaza, Syria had one of its deadliest weeks ever – 2,000 killed in just a few days, at a rate that far exceeded the worst of the Gaza fighting.

The numbers tell only part of the story. There's also the human part. Remember how it started? A bunch of kids in the town of Deraa, just over the Jordanian border, wrote some graffiti on a wall. They were picked up by Syrian intelligence, tortured and killed. One of those, a few weeks after the first protest, was Hamza al-Khateeb, 13 years old. A month after he disappeared, his parents got a call. Come to the police station. Come pick up Hamza. According to press reports, this is what they found:

“Lacerations, bruises and burns to his feet, elbows, face and knees, consistent with the use of electric shock devices and of being whipped with cable.

Hamza's eyes were swollen and black. There were identical bullet wounds where he had apparently been shot through both arms, the bullets tearing a hole in his sides and lodging in his belly. On Hamza's chest was a deep, dark burn mark. His neck was broken. His genitals were cut off.”

From kids to grandparents, there are thousands of these stories.

That's the dead. The plight of the living is little better.

- Out of 22 million, more than 9 million are refugees – about 3 million outside the country and more than 6 million driven from their homes inside the country.
- Of this 9, million,  $\frac{3}{4}$  -- nearly 7 million – are women and children.
- Why so many refugees? The government uses starvation as a tool of war.

Until recently, international law mandated that humanitarian aid had to flow through governments – Assad used it as blackmail. “You want to eat? Leave

your villages. Either starve or face death in land I control,” says Assad. That horrible choice compels people to flee.

- Where have people go? More than a million refugees made their way to Jordan, a small country of only 7 million. That’s the equivalent of about 45 million refugees in the United States.
- More than a million made their way to Lebanon, a smaller country of only 4 million. That’s the equivalent of 75 million refugees in the United States.
- These countries are not made of elastic bands. They can bend but at some point they will break. And with it goes what passes for peace, stability and security on the borders with Israel that aren’t currently facing war and violence.

What does all this add up to? The brink of genocide. The Administration denies this. The National Security Advisor went on “Meet the Press” in February and specifically said “This is not a genocide; it is a horrific civil war.” Well, an institution that knows something about genocide – the US Holocaust Memorial Museum – has a different view. Just one month after that White House statement, the Museum issued a statement of its own: “The conflict in Syria is not simply a civil war between opposing armed forces,” the statement says. “What started as a democratic uprising has now become an overtly sectarian conflict in which civilians are targeted for atrocities based upon their religious and ethnic identity... As sectarian violence becomes more widespread and systematic, there is increasing danger that it could escalate to genocide.” The G word – it’s not something we can avoid.

So, the humanitarian need is great. But what's also great is the strategic urgency.

- given Syria's alliance with Iran, our interest is to prevent what would essentially be an Iranian victory, bringing the ayatollahs to the shores of the Mediterranean;
- our interest is to prevent the spread of instability to Lebanon and Jordan;
- our interest is to prevent the flow of weapons of mass destruction from Syria and Iran to Hezbollah;
- our interest is to prevent the emergence of ungoverned spaces where extremism, jihadism and terrorism grow like mold in a test-tube;
- our interest is to remind Sunni Arabs – not just Kurds, Yezidis and other minorities but the Sunni Muslims who make up the large majority of Arabs – that we will not stand idly in the face of their annihilation
- our interest is to prevent both the Iranians and jihadists from getting a foothold on the borders of Israel.
- And if we are concerned about the depths of hell we see in Iraq, let us not be blind to the fact that there is now a single theater of battle, across the Syria/Iraq border; that fighting ISIS from the east without fighting it from the west is to play whack-a-mole, a game in which the mole almost always wins.

Can we act against Assad and not help the jihadists? Can we act against the jihadists and not help Assad? Admittedly, it would have been easier to act three years ago, two years ago, even one year ago. But let's remember: It was exactly two years ago that the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and

head of the CIA went to the president with a plan for arming the moderate opposition. The president said no. It was exactly one year ago that, in the face of heinous use of chemical weapons that killed nearly 2,000 people on one day – including kids asphyxiated in the arms of their parents -- the president threatened military action against Syria and then changed his mind, preferring instead a diplomatic solution which effectively threw Assad a lifeline. Just this past week, Hillary Clinton told Adas congregant Jeff Goldberg that the rise of ISIS can be traced to America's "failure" – *failure* being her word – to act in Syria when we could.

Yes, the moderate opposition is weak; both the jihadists and Assad are relatively stronger today than they were two years ago. But is it too late? As we tell our kids, it is never too late to do the right thing -- which brings me back to the foreskin.

What does it mean to circumcise the foreskin of our heart? At one level, it's obvious – to tear away indifference and let our hearts act the way they were meant to act.

But there is more to the story. Let's remember the second part of Deuteronomy 10:16: "Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more." Circumcising our hearts doesn't just free us from

indifference; it frees us from stubbornness, the insistence that what was once decided is the way things have to be -- facts be damned, interests be damned.

We Jews aren't indifferent about much but, as the Bible relates time and again, we know quite a bit about stubbornness – we were the original stiff-necked people. My wife will confirm it has survived in our genetic makeup, at least on my side of the family. In the modern era, perhaps because of the horrors we have suffered, we have played an outsized role both in fighting indifference at home and in combatting stubbornness abroad. Indeed, if you were a Muslim facing atrocity in Kuwait, in Bosnia, in Libya or Iraq, you owed your freedom – or at least a chance at freedom – in no small part to the courage of Jews who, along with many others, did all they could to circumcise the heart of our nation. It is a mark we Jews should wear with honor.

Syria puts this to the test. Action here faces the twin obstacles of both indifference and stubbornness. We Jews bear a special responsibility to speak up and speak out, especially when there are, as is the case, tens of thousands of courageous Syrians begging for our help so they can fight their own battle.

We, as Jews, should not be satisfied with a policy that provides some food and some shelter for refugees once they escape their country but does nothing about what is pushing them to flee.

We, as Jews, should never stop asking question to which we received facile answers that were wrong when they were first articulated two or three years ago and are still wrong today.

And we, as Jews, should not accept the false choice between doing nothing or doing everything, the straw man of “boots on the ground.” We know the difference. We, for example, didn’t ask Roosevelt to invade Auschwitz, just bomb the tracks. And we know that Israel has never wanted American troops, just American aid, to help it fights its battles by itself.

The threat of totalitarian dictatorship was a real and menacing feature of our parents’ lives. The threat of radical jihadism will, regrettably, be a dominant feature of much of the rest of our lives. Both, I am afraid to say, are alive and well in Syria – and both can come home to haunt us in America and haunt our cousins in Israel. While all eyes are on Gaza and Iraq, let us remember the urgency of fighting indifference and stubbornness on Syria.

Friends, I don’t know whether it’s better to be a cardiac surgeon or a mohel – but there’s a lot of circumcising to do.