KORACH: How to Lose a War in the Middle East

In this week's parashah, the Torah shows us that some conflicts can only be resolved by tearing them out at the root. When Korach challenged Moshe's leadership, Moshe refused to settle for an ambiguous or halfway outcome. He didn't ask for a sign in the heavens to prove he was right; he asked for something far more extreme. "If these men die a natural death," he said, "then God did not send me. But if God creates something never seen before, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them alive…". And so it happened: the earth opened and they vanished from this world, leaving no trace and no doubt. Some conflicts cannot be settled with partial results.

After long months of fighting and a string of ceasefires, the United States and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding this week –a phrase that stirs grim memories for any Argentine Jew of a not-so-distant past–. Some rushed to celebrate; others took it with more caution, or with outright pessimism, because Iran's defeat was partial, ambiguous, unfinished.

Iran's Celebration

The loudest celebration, without a doubt, is Iran's. Picture a boxing match. Iran is the fighter flat on the canvas, knocked down, all but knocked out. The referee leans over him and begins the count: one… two… three… The crowd already considers the fight over. The count goes on: seven… eight… nine… One more second and it will all be finished. And then the unthinkable happens. It isn't Iran who rises, nor his own corner that calls off the fight: it's the rival's corner –the United States, with victory already in hand– that suddenly throws in the towel! The referee stops the count. The bout is suspended. Iran, who was about to lose by knockout, is handed a victory or, at best, a technical draw. That is why the

leaders of the ayatollahs' regime celebrate more than anyone: they know, better than anyone, how close they came to the end. They didn't win the fight in the ring. It was handed to them.

President Trump's Victory

For President Trump, this deal with Iran —call it an understanding, a peace, or a ceasefire— is a positive picture too: no active fighting, no American soldiers falling, and the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz has brought oil prices down, kept prices in check, and sent the markets ever higher. And for Washington, that is cause for celebration. Because in the United States —and for President Trump— victory and defeat are measured by one very specific gauge: the economy. If prices fall and the market rises, you celebrate. And the market rose.

There is also a political calculation. Even though much of his own administration is deeply uneasy with this deal, for the president it remains a win: one less problem on an agenda that, within a few months, will be dominated by November's congressional elections. The confrontation with Iran, which could have hurt his Republican candidates in that race, has just been defused. And that's no small thing: if the Republican Party loses the House or the Senate, Trump would be left all but paralyzed for any decision he might want to make in the final two years of his term. In those elections, what decides the vote is neither Iran nor Israel: it is, once again, the economy.

The Challenges for Israel

In Israel, the mood is far more sober.

On one hand, no one can deny what President Trump has done for Israel. No American president —nor, I would dare say, any leader of any country— has ever done so much for the Jewish State. Whatever happens from here on, that legacy cannot be forgotten. Israel has benefited enormously from that support on several fronts: in Syria, where it has taken and now holds

the northern part of the Hermon; in southern Lebanon, where the Jewish army has advanced to the Litani River and controls that entire sector, essential to peace in Israel's north; and in Gaza, where it now controls more than 60% of the territory. In the Middle East, victory is measured by the land you hold. And it is worth celebrating that Israel has won all that ground, that the United States cooperated directly or indirectly, and that the American president has not, for now, pressed Israel to pull back from any of those three zones. For Israel, that is an incredible, extraordinary, and undeniable triumph.

On the other hand, the deal with Iran —a sixty-day ceasefire— is a serious problem. It does not remove the concrete threat of Iran, which for Israel is not economic but existential. The elimination of nuclear material is left "subject to future negotiations": no one knows when that uranium will be inspected, when it will be destroyed, or under whose supervision. Nothing is said, either, about Iran's long-range missiles or its support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and the Houthis. Meanwhile, Iran will do what it does best: play for time and play at diplomacy. It will gain months, it will gain years. And when it is ready, it will enrich its uranium and once again threaten Israel with all its force.

Shaul and President Trump

From Israel's vantage point, the outcome of this war closely resembles what the Jewish people lived through three thousand years ago, when the first king of Israel, Shaul, had the chance to wipe out Amalek: the archetypal enemy of Israel, the first antisemite in history, the one who again and again sought our destruction with relentless obsession. The Divine instruction was clear: eliminate Amalek completely, and erase that existential threat one hundred percent.

Shaul had a powerful army. He went to war —and he won! But he

didn’t finish the job. He let himself be swayed by his advisers’ opinions and left the king, Agag –Amalek’s political leadership– alive and standing, along with much of his wealth and resources. Shaul’s victory was perhaps 90 percent. But in battles like these, when the threat is not eliminated to the very end, winning 90% amounts to a defeat!

And the facts bore it out. Some five hundred years later, a descendant of that same Amalekite line Shaul had spared –Haman– rose up against the Jewish people and tried to annihilate them, and only a miracle saved us from extermination. The terrible decision to leave the mission unfinished dragged us all the way to that conflict: the “seed” of Amalek survived, and once again threatened the Jews.

Netanyahu and the New Challenge

Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, knows full well that in the Middle East you cannot declare victory while the enemy is still standing. The consequences of not uprooting that Iranian political leadership today –of leaving it standing, surviving– are a terrible burden that Israel, and perhaps in the longer run the United States and the whole world, will bear in the future, once Iran has rearmed.

I trust that, with God’s help and inspiration, Netanyahu will know how to navigate this stormy sea, in which he can neither fall out with Trump nor repeat the mistake King Shaul made: leaving unfinished the task of eliminating Amalek.

I believe the prime minister knows full well the historic role he has been given to play. And he must be weighing the possibility that now, or before long, Israel may have to face Iran “alone” –without the help of the United States–. Netanyahu’s greatest achievement would be, and this is the most delicate part, for President Trump not to oppose Israel finishing what it began exactly one year ago, in the Twelve-Day War, to remove the Iranian threat. For that, we will need

a great deal of help from Heaven.

May HaShem enlighten our leaders and inspire them to attain the victory that, in the Middle East, is the only formula for achieving peace.