

Who's afraid of Putin?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As I watched the Sochi Winter Olympics, I thought of Putin's long shadow was cast, malevolently, over the construction, the management, and the security of the event. I wondered what act of aggression he would get up to next. His smirking, self-satisfied, bullying presence thumbed a nose at the civilized world as he gloated over his support for totalitarian regimes in Chechnya, Syria, Moldova, and Georgia. His malevolent involvement in other countries and the blatant way he suppresses and imprisons opposition at home are chilling. His KGB nature reveals itself for what it is. Well, now we know. A leopard and his spots!

By way of contrast, Obama's incompetence, the way his naive worldview and credulity have made a fool of him, is equally frightening. It means there are no red lines, and no ally can trust that he will actually step up to the plate in a moment of crisis. Perhaps a little tokenism here, bravado there. But is the EU any better? They need their deals with Russia. They are being very circumspect.

There is another perspective. You could argue that Putin has backbone and determination in trying to reestablish Russia as a world power, to revitalize an ethnic culture and religion that had all but been eradicated by Marxism. You might argue that in supporting Assad, Putin is the only bulwark against extreme, violent Muslim fanaticism.

Meanwhile in the West, the liberal, so-called chattering classes, or politically correct world, perpetuate the myths of the old order, excoriating the United States and its allies and capitalism as the real oppressors. They are cowards who will refrain from boycotting Russia or China but prefer to bully smaller fry.

Then comes the Jewish perspective. We tend naturally to side with freedom. But the freedoms of the European Union have created a world in which Jews are increasingly marginalized and vilified and Israel is boycotted. Their religious practices are increasingly restricted. Putin, on the other hand, has been very supportive of Jewish life in Russia. Ironically, it might just be easier to be a practicing Jew in Moscow nowadays than in Paris, Copenhagen, Oslo, or even Zurich.

We may cheer the Ukrainian opposition for trying to escape the Russian grip. But there's another side to Ukraine too. The Chief Rabbi has warned that the lid the pro-Russian party kept on anti-Semitism is now lifted. Ukraine is arguably, more than any other part of the old Russian Empire, the cradle of the most virulent and violent anti-Semitism. It is the origin of the Chmielnicki atrocities (he is regarded today as a hero by many Ukrainians), the Beilis blood libel, and the Kishinev pogroms, to mention only the most notorious. Many of the demonstrators from Western, Cossack Ukraine were neo-Nazis and sympathizers; some wore swastikas and declared a desire to rid

Ukraine of its remaining Jews (admittedly Eastern Ukraine and Western are very different) and the Cossacks are as divided as the Jews, some pro-Russian and others anti.

This has always been our dilemma. We Jews have to live somewhere. Nowhere is perfect. It's often a matter of what compromises we have to make. So would you rather live under Putin? Not I.

Two and a half thousand years ago we were in a similar position. Yes, really. Egypt and Babylon were the two competing world powers. Both cultures were cruel, morally bankrupt but militarily strong. There were Jews living in both empires. The kingdom of Judah (the northern state of Israel had already been destroyed) was caught in between both powers, switching from one to the other as alliances were promised and then betrayed. We ourselves were torn apart internally; socially, religiously, and politically. In the end we backed the wrong horse. Despite being assured by our false prophets that we would be fine, we suffered horribly.

But thanks to the Persian Emperor Cyrus, Jews living in the Empire and in the renewed satrapy of Israel enjoyed an era of toleration. The Macedonian Alexander the Great followed suit. Toleration meant it didn't matter what or who you worshipped, so long as you accepted the conqueror's authority. Persia was an absolute dictatorship. Greece had a modified form of democracy. What Jews who lived under both regimes cared about was less the style of government than the practicalities of earning a livelihood. Conflict was over trade, rather than religion. But once again Jew argued with Jew, as the Maccabean revolt illustrated.

Under the Roman Empire, too, Jews lived and thrived, some in the East and some in the West. They had to choose which leader to back, of course. One moment it was Pompey. The next it was Caesar. I am sure they had PACS in those days too. Tensions between East and West resurfaced. Some Jews revolted against Rome and looked to the Parthians for support. Others, like Josephus, abandoned their people and chose to live acculturated in Rome. And there indeed they lived peacefully, flourished, and were (eventually) accepted. Then too disagreements between the Jews in Israel and those in the Diaspora were common.

With the rise first of Christianity and then Islam, we (along with home-born heretics) were persecuted most of the time, occasionally tolerated, rarely accepted. So we kept on moving, when we were not expelled, which proved our salvation, searching for safe havens in and between the rival camps.

On to modernity. Jews living in Germany were sure their cultural tradition put them at the comfortable and safe center of civilization. Like Napoleon, they looked down on Britain as a nation of shopkeepers. Jews fought on both sides in the First World War. Many supported the rise of fascism. And I recall both in England and Israel meeting refugees from Hitler who still believed that Germany was heaven, and Nazism had all been a terrible mistake.

I rehearse all this to make the point that we have always been faced with conflicting politics and realities and have tried to tread warily through the

minefields. Sometimes we got it right. More often we got it wrong. I can't think of a better example than the conviction of the ultra-Orthodox leadership, almost to a man, a hundred years ago that Eastern Europe would be safer for the Jews than anywhere else.

I am both rational and mystical. I am in part liberal and part conservative. The challenge most of us have is to make the right micro-decisions, even if we cannot make the right macro ones. If there is a metaphorical message in our holy texts, it is that in the end (and sometimes it's a very long end) God (or history) sides with the ethical, regardless of their identity or their affiliation.