


Israel, Canada, and parts of Europe, however, some religiously observant Mizrahim adopted Ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi religious practices so as to not appear less devout. My Aunt Louise (Tovah's niece), for example, became part of the *haredi* community in B'nei Brak, and when I visited her, she forbade me from singing Shabbat songs in the presence of her husband. The new strictness of her religious observance marked a significant change from her Iranian upbringing. In the context of an increasing "Ashkenazation" of Mizrahi religious practice (e.g., the adoption of *shtetl* garb among members of the Israeli Mizrahi religious political party Shas), Tovah's ritual observance seems particularly progressive, perhaps even radical.

When I began research for a new musical

project that re-imagines some of the lesser-known women of the Bible, I discovered further complexities in the progressive/traditional dichotomy. I learned that the Talmud states that Michal — daughter of King Saul and wife of King David — wore *tefillin* when she prayed. The sources do not explain why, but it is clear from the Bible that she was childless. I therefore utilized my great aunt's creative halakhic innovation on childlessness to interpret Michal's actions as being similarly motivated, and I wrote a song linking the *tefillin* stories of these two women. Though she seemed ahead of her time (and even ahead of Iranian Jewish practice today) my great-aunt's religious ritual life in Iran finds support and sisterhood within ancient Jewish tradition. 

## Danger, Everywhere

*Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* by Martin Indyk (Simon & Schuster, New York, 512 pages, 2009, \$28)

*The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power* by David Sanger (Harmony Books, 498 pages, 2009, \$33.00)

### REVIEWED BY DAVID TWERSKY

What will the Obama administration's policies in the Middle East look like? According to two new books on various aspects of the problem, whatever America does — or doesn't do — will leave the Middle East different than it is today. American action, diplomatic and/or military, has its obvious consequences; so too do American inaction, diplomatic and/or military withdrawal, or disengagement.

The Bush administration, whose responsibilities for the subject has only recently ended, sought to spread democracy and end with stability and peace. The Clinton administration had sought peace and thought that would lead to security and stability. Neither succeeded, but President Bush is leaving the world in a more perilous state, largely because of the Iraq war.

Or at least so concludes David Sanger, who has long covered Washington and the world for the *New York Times*, and who maintains that North Korea is more dangerous than it was eight years ago; that Iran is far closer to possessing a nuclear weapon; and that already nuclear-armed Pakistan is closer to unraveling.

In *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power*, Sanger presents six deeply disturbing views of different world problems that all pose daunting

challenges to American power and American values. Interestingly, the Israel-Palestine dispute is not one of them. The six areas are in order: Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Korea, China, and what he calls the "Three Vulnerabilities" — a dirty bomb, chemical, and cyber attack.

If you are the worrying type or want to lose sleep, this book would a great place to start.

With respect to Iran, he argues that the Bush administration did too little, too late; imposed weak sanctions lacking the necessary bite to alter Iranian behavior; and opened the door to Iranian penetration into the Arab world by destroying the Saddam regime. Sanger proposes the imposition of a tough embargo on Iranian imports of refined gasoline products; this, he says, would bring them to their knees. But such a move would require what amounts to a naval blockade in order to search incoming vessels. Such a blockade could credibly be seen by Tehran as a *casus belli*. At that point the distinction between sanctions and military action blurs beyond recognition.

Because of the enormous energies required to change the dynamic in Iraq from "the war is lost" to the "war is winnable," the requisite attention for Afghanistan and the other tough spots was never forthcoming under Bush.

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David Twersky was a contributing editor at the *New York Sun* until its closing last year. From 1993-2002, he was editor in chief of the *New Jersey Jewish News*, and before that served as Associate Editor and Washington Bureau Chief of the *Forward*. Twersky has written widely on Israel and American Jewry in the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, the *New Republic*, *Commentary*, *Moment*, *Partisan Review*, the *Nation*, *Dissent*, the *London Review of Books*, *Tikkun*, the *Jerusalem Post*, and the *Star Ledger*. He has served as a member of the board of trustees of the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*.

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Across the border lies not only the al-Qaeda central, but both the Afghani and Pakistani Taliban, each seeking pure Islamist rule. The problem in Pakistan is that the army's intelligence services are supporting the Taliban and want to see a pro-Pakistan Sunni state in Afghanistan. And the *big* problem is the fate of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. Will the security envelope be penetrated by Islamist sympathizers? Will al-Qaeda/Taliban get its hands on a nuclear weapon? According to Sanger, this danger is right up there with North Korea and Iran. North Korea not only developed several bombs but proliferated weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by selling Syria (at least) the design and materials to build a nuclear reactor to turn out weapons' grade uranium — the one that was bombed by the Israelis in September 2007.

In *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East*, Martin Indyk makes the excellent point that Bill Clinton's peace-process diplomacy "pitted him against the established order in the Arab world." If today there is a change, it is because Obama has not yet earned credibility — will he stand up to Iran or cut a deal at the expense of the Arab countries and Israel? — and because of Iran's push toward regional hegemony at a minimum and its progress in acquiring the bomb. Having been threatened by peace under Clinton, and threatened by the "democracy" policies of Bush, the Arab established order is now threatened most by the rise of Iran.


Another complicating factor is that, in addition to preserving their own power, regional actors are pursuing complex and obscure agendas

not served by peacemaking." Not only are Arab leaders holding different cards, they are playing an additional game.

Indyk shares details about the Clinton years, when he contributed significantly to discussions about Iraq; it is clear that the harder view of Iraq — including a commitment to regime change — began while Clinton was in the White House. During those discussions authoritative voices made the argument that any effort to dislodge Saddam's forces from southern Iraq (where they were massacring Shiites and the Marsh Arabs) would lead to a greater role for Iran. Which state was worse? Indyk proposed a policy of "Dual Containment," an attempt to keep Iran and Iraq in their respective boxes, limiting the damage either could do.

Indyk argues that then Prime Minister Barak essentially had a failure of nerve — that a Syrian track should have been pursued and that it held the greater promise for success. To Obama, Indyk recommends a commitment to addressing the Palestinian issue and expressing support for the renewal of Israeli-Syrian talks.

With respect to Iran, Indyk acknowledges a "chicken-and-egg" problem. An Israeli-Syrian peace and, when possible, a resolution of the Israel-Palestine problem would weaken Iran and break up its emerging anti-American coalition. And weakening Iran (and ensuring that it does not acquire a nuclear weapon) will weaken Hamas and Hezbollah and Syria, and make peacemaking more possible.

American policies change but they always reshape and reconfigure the states in the Middle East. 



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