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Mortimer and Raymond Sackler
Institute of Advanced Studies

and

The Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

**Lecture by Professor Bernard Lewis, Professor Emeritus,
Princeton University**

On

IRAN: HAMAN OR CYRUS?

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רחוב בלוך 14, תל-אביב 64161 Tel-Aviv, 14 Bloch St.,

טל. 03-5221022, 03-5242404

פקס. 03-5231616

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Lecture by
PROF. BERNARD LEWIS, Professor Emeritus, Princeton
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Mr. Avraham Nitzan: Good evening, it is always a pleasure to introduce a person who needs no introduction so I will start by introducing myself. I am Avraham Nitzan; I am the director of the Sackler Institute of Advanced Studies. We are a very small operation in Tel Aviv University. What we do is to invite and host and organize visits of prominent scholars in all disciplines of science and arts and other areas of human knowledge at Tel Aviv University. This, and several other operations like this, is what distinguishes Tel Aviv U. on the one hand from specialized research institutes and on the other - from purely teaching institutes or professional schools, and this is what makes us a comprehensive research university. During the nearly thirty years of our operations, I believe we have done many good things on this campus - probably the best of them was to have Prof. Bernard Lewis as a permanent member (applause) of our institute. In this capacity, he has made annual visits to

the university, he has stayed with us, given us lectures, he has shared with us his knowledge, insight and wisdom concerning everything that has to do with us, the Jewish people, and with the region in which we live which sometimes seems to be beyond explanation, but Prof Lewis perhaps does the best job possible of explaining it to us every year when he comes to join us. Two weeks ago Prof. Lewis talked to us on the subject of "Israel's contribution - ancient and modern" (this is about us); tonight his subject sounds very intriguing, given what goes on in our region. He will speak on Iran - Haman or Cyus? I sincerely hope he votes for Cyrus but we will see. Prof. Lewis.

Prof. Bernard Lewis: Thank you Mr. chairman. As always it's both a pleasure and a privilege to be with you; that's normal. What is remarkable is that the pleasure seems to grow the longer I stay here and the more frequently I come. I look forward to that.

My subject this evening, as you've just been told, is Iran, more particularly Iran's relations with Israel, and I chose the names of two well-known figures, one definitely historical, the other possibly historical, possibly mythical, both representing deep-rooted and ancient traditions of an attitude towards the people of Israel - one of ill-will, the other of good-will. And both

of these attitudes can be followed through the millennia of Iranian history.

Let me begin with a few generalities about Iran to which I think it is useful to draw attention. In several significant respects, Iran is very different from the region which in modern times we have got into the habit of calling 'Middle East'. Most of the nations - so-called - most of the countries or nations of the Middle East are modern creations, invented by mostly European diplomats and imperialists, with frontiers drawn with pencils and rulers on maps. Iran is not in that category: Iran is a genuine nation, as that word is used in Europe. It has a millennial identity going back not just hundreds but thousands of years; it is familiar to anyone who reads the Bible, and anyone who is acquainted with Greco-Roman history as well as other more recent events in the region. In most of the Middle East - that is to say in most of what is generally known nowadays as the Arab world, we use the term nationalism to describe the sentiments of loyalty and activism that motivate their political life. The word 'patriotism', which is more common in the western world, doesn't really seem appropriate. It is appropriate for Iran. What we see in Iran is not nationalism Arab style; it is patriotism western style, a continuing identity through many different changes of culture, of ruler, even of religion. And - more important perhaps - a common identity which embraces a great

number of ethnic and linguistic minorities, still intensely aware of their common Iranian identity. If you look at the map of Iran, going round, there is one minority after another: various kinds of Turks, some Arabs, Baluchis and so on, all the way round. Yet these are for the most part overwhelmingly Iranian in their sentiments and loyalty, something which has struck me again and again as compared with other parts of the Middle East where ethnicity counts far more than nationality and religion counts far more than either. In dealing with Iran, I would say therefore that it is very important not to give the present rulers of Iran the gift of something that they do not at present enjoy, and that is the loyalty of Iranian patriotism.

I will try to clarify what I mean by that as I go along. At the moment I just want to point out that Persian is a quite distinct language; it is not like the rest of the spoken languages of the Middle East and North Africa - a dialect of Arabic. It includes a lot of Arabic words, as English includes a lot of French words, but English is not French, and English is not a Latin language. In the same way Iranian retains its distinctive identity even after all the changes that followed the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Persian is an Indo-European language, related more closely to English and French than to Arabic or Turkish, in spite of their geographical propinquity. One can see this by applying the usual basic

test - kinship terms and numbers: Mother - madar; father - pedar; brother - biradar; daughter - dukhtar and so on. It is a language closely related to the adjoining languages of India, more distantly related to most of the languages of Europe. It is also spoken in various forms by a number of peoples outside the frontiers of the present republic of Iran, and I am thinking notably of three groups. The first is Tajik, spoken in the former Soviet republic called Tajikistan. Most of the other former Soviet republics of Muslim identity speak languages of the Turkish family: Tajik is not a form of Turkish, it is a form of Persian, and there is therefore a relationship with Iran that does not exist elsewhere.

The second is in Afghanistan: Afghanistan is of course not Iran; it is a separate country with a separate identity, sometimes in conflict with Iran. There are two national languages in Afghanistan; one is a purely local one which is shared with neighboring areas of Pakistan; the other, called Dari, is a form of Persian - very similar though with some minor differences to the language spoken in Iran. Let me give you an example of the difference. When I spent some time in Afghanistan many years ago, I was provided by my hosts with a car and driver; I went into a building to see some official and when I came out, there was no sign of the car or of the driver. When I looked around I couldn't find him. There was a guard at the door and I asked him whether he had

seen the driver of my car, which in Persian as spoken in Iran would be 'chauffeur-i macheen." He did not understand that. Eventually they explained to me that in Dari the driver of the car is called 'driver-i motor'... I had a similar problem changing flights in Herat when my luggage disappeared. My problem - how do you say luggage? I tried various Persian and Arabic words that I knew; but they didn't work. I thought I'd try the international vocabulary - Baggage - but it didn't work. Then somebody appeared carrying my luggage and I said 'There it is'. 'Ah! Box-i shuma" - box is the Dari word. That's just by the way. Dari is closely related to Persian; they are mutually communicable. The third one - much less important, but it has been in the news rather recently - is Ossetian, one of those small ethnic groups that are - shall we say - attached to the Republic of Georgia.

Let me turn now to the Islamic aspect of Iranian history and identity, and there, as in the other lands that were conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the seventh century, the previous identity was not just forgotten but obliterated. In all these countries of ancient civilization, as you know, the ancient languages were forgotten, the monuments destroyed and even the scripts forgotten. The same is true in Iran: the writing used in Iran before the Arab conquest was no longer taught or known, and the Iranian identity expressed in the older culture was forgotten, but with this important difference: the Iranians

did not adopt the Arabic language as did the ancient peoples of Iraq and Syria and Egypt and North Africa, who all adopted Arabic and became arabized from the seventh century onwards. The Iranians retained their identity, they retained their language even within Islam; they retained an awareness of being something different. Their history, as I said, was forgotten, obliterated, deliberately defaced. If you go and visit some of the ancient monuments at Persepolis and other places you can see how the inscriptions and the figures were quite deliberately hacked and destroyed by the invaders. But yet, as I said, they retained their identity. It is true that the Persian language, after the advent of Islam, is written in the Arabic script and contains an enormous vocabulary of Arabic words, often with subtle changes of meaning, but it is not Arabic.

One wonders why it is that the Persians, unlike the others, retained their identity; I think one can adduce several reasons. One is that in Iraq and Syria they spoke Aramaic, and the transition from Aramaic to Arabic wasn't all that difficult. But then in Egypt, they spoke Coptic and there the transition to Arabic would have been more difficult, but still took place. I think the main reason is not language but awareness. Iraq, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, had all been under foreign rule for centuries, in some parts for millennia. They had been conquered a long time before the coming of Islam; they

had lost their identities, they had lost their memories, they had become accustomed to being subjects of some external greater power. This was not the case with the Iranians. Their memories of greatness, their memories of independence, were far more recent; were in fact immediate and I think that is probably the main reason why, despite the loss of their history, they retained their identity. They felt the need for history, but since their history was not accessible to them, they invented one. We have the very rich Iranian tradition of shall we say 'historical mythology', expressed in its best form in epic poetry.

I mention all this because I think it is relevant to understanding the place of Islam in Iran and the place of Iran in Islam. With the Islamization of Iran and the adoption of this new Arabized, Islamized version of the Persian language, Persians, in the early centuries to a much greater extent than later, learned and used the Arabic language - the language of their new imperial masters and of their newly adopted religion, and made a very significant and important contribution to early Islamic culture and history. One even finds occasionally the term '*Islam-i Ajami*' - Iranian Islam, so to speak; their version of it as distinct from what you might call the more orthodox (I hesitate before using that word but it is the best I can think of) - version pursued in the Arab countries.

Now you may say 'Well what about Shi'ism? That surely becomes typically Iranian?' It does, yes, but not until much later. As you know there is a great divide in Islam between the Sunni and the Shi'a. Some have likened this division to the difference between Protestants and Catholics in Christianity, a comparison the absurdity of which is easily demonstrated. Just ask 'which are the Protestants and which are the Catholics?' and there is no way of answering that question because it is meaningless; it is a comparison which simply does not apply. The dispute between Protestants and Catholics was over ecclesiastical authority; there is no Vatican in Islam, at least there wasn't for centuries. They're trying to construct one now. That is not the point: Shi'a-Sunni differences continued for a very long time but it was at a comparatively late stage, in the sixteenth century of the Common Era, that Shi'ism becomes associated with the Iranian identity. That is when a Shi'a dynasty established itself in Iran and created the Safavid monarchy, which is the basis or the starting point of the modern history of Iran.

Now this was not nationalist. The Safavids were actually not Persians. They were not even Persian-speakers; they were a Turkish tribe who came from Anatolia and moved eastwards. If we look at the correspondence between the Ottoman Sultans and the Persian shahs in the early sixteenth century, the Sultan

writes to the shah in Persian; the shah writes to the Sultan in Turkish. Now you may say they are both being courteous, each is addressing the other in his own language. Not at all, the letters in question are very insulting in tone and nasty in general, and prepared the way for the outbreak of war. The Sultan wrote to the shah in Persian because in sixteenth-century Turkey, Persian was the language used by educated gentlemen, and the Shah wrote to the Sultan in Turkish because that was the only language he knew.

The Safavids from the early sixteenth century onwards were able to create and maintain (and were followed by others who did the same thing) a genuine national and territorial identity. Iran became a nation-state in something resembling the European sense of that term and without any parallel anywhere in the Arab world or for that matter in Turkey. Remember that in Turkey, the name Turkey was only adopted in the twentieth century by the Turks; previously the country was known by other names: Turkey was what Europeans called it. There was an interesting report from a Turkish ambassador in France in the eighteenth century who wrote a letter full of anger - he had been addressed as the Turkish ambassador. He found this insulting, because in the language used at the time the "Turks" meant the nomads and peasants of Anatolia; he was the Ottoman ambassador.

It wasn't until comparatively modern times that identity in terms of nationality and ethnicity came to be generally accepted and understood. In Iran, from the Safavids onwards, it is not Persian or Iranian identity that matters; it is the Shi'a monarchy, creating a kingdom sharply differentiated from its neighbors on all sides; to the West the Ottomans; to the East and North-East, the various Muslim rulers of Central Asia; to the south-east - the various Muslim rulers of India after the Muslim conquest of India. All of these were Sunni and most of them were strongly anti-Shi'a, persecuting the Shi'a in their own countries. The Shi'a identity thus became an important part of Iranian self-awareness and more particularly, as differentiating themselves from their neighbors on all sides.

A word about the names Persia and Iran: Persia is strictly speaking the name of a province, one part of the country in the south-west, adjoining the Persian Gulf. In Iran, as in many other countries, there were different dialects and one of them, Persian, came to dominate. Just as Tuscan became Italian and Castilian became Spanish, so Persian, the language of Pars, became the national language of Iran. Those who came from the West and first met that language and first met the people of Pars used the name for the country as a whole though the Persians themselves did not do so.

The name Iran is closely related to the word Aryan - Persian is an Indo-European language related to Sanskrit on the one hand, and to Latin and Greek and the various languages of Europe on the other. That also is part of the developing self-awareness. At times it became even a question of foreign policy. In the early years of the Nazi regime in Germany, the Germans made a great effort to win over the support of Iran and they sent emissaries to tell the Iranians 'You are not like these damned Semites all around; you are not of an inferior race; you are Aryans as your name indicates. We recognize you as equals' and so on. And it worked for a while: it did win some good will, not surprisingly after all -it is difficult to reject that sort of approach. It was about that time, and possibly (I can't say certainly but I would go so far as to say probably) it was at that time that the government of the country began to insist on the use of the name Iran instead of the name Persia.

Previously the country was known in all languages but their own as Persia. Now they insisted 'No, not Persia but Iran: we are Iranians', and the German insistence on Iranian-Aryan identity may well have been part of that.

This raises the larger question of the pre-Islamic heritage. At the time of the advent of Islam and the Arab conquests, the countries of the Middle East west of Iran - Iraq, Syria, Egypt, North Africa - were Christian, and

were in due course Islamized, some though not all preserving Christian minorities.

Iran was not Christian. Iranians had a different faith, an original faith of their own, not brought in from outside: the faith of Zoroaster. In the north of Iraq there is a group of people to the present day known as Yazidis; they are accused by their neighbors of being devil-worshippers. That is an unjust accusation. The Yazidis are not devil-worshippers; they are dualists. That is to say they believe in two independent powers, not in a single almighty God who rules everything, but in two supreme powers, one of good and one of evil and since the good one is by definition good, why waste time praying to him? It is the evil power that you need to propitiate. One understands why the Yazidis are called devil-worshippers but one also understands the logic of their position: you might call it a theological positive neutralism, in the sense of that expression familiar from the days of the Cold War.

The dualism of Zoroastrianism is extremely important in human history. The Jewish-Christian-Muslim God is almighty; the Zoroastrian god is not. He is the supreme power of good but there is also, confronting him, a supreme power of evil, and there is a cosmic struggle going on for all eternity between the two. In some modern Islamic sects and movements as well as in Iran, one can see some relics of Zoroastrian

dualism: the belief in a god who is not omnipotent but who, on the contrary, requires the help of humans to fight his enemies and offers them a variety of rewards and inducements to win them over.

This dualism is very important, as we will see in a moment when we look more closely at the figure of Satan: Satan, as you know, has a long and complex history. There are two kinds - there is what you might call the Judeo-Christian, partly Islamic Satan who is either a rebel, a fallen angel or something of the sort, or else a servant of God carrying out some of God's more mysterious purposes - testing for example on God's behalf. In the Zoroastrian faith, Satan is an independent power, the enemy and opponent of God.

This begins to be globally important with the Babylonian captivity. The Jews were sent from the land of Israel to Babylon and they remained there until the country was conquered by the Persians and became part of the Persian empire. I think we are all familiar with the story of how Cyrus extended his good will, his protection, to the Jews and helped them return to their homeland and he is one of the very few figures spoken of with – one might say adulation - in the Hebrew Bible: he is described as God's anointed, God's Messiah and so on. The Bible uses terms of praise for Cyrus the Mede stronger than for any other ruler, Jewish or non-Jewish, and this strongly pro-Iranian attitude in the Jewish

tradition continues thereafter. There were reasons for that to which we will come back in a moment.

One element I think which will help us to understand the relationship between Cyrus and the Jews is the mutual recognition of a higher religious level. Judaism and Zoroastrianism are in many ways very different but they resemble each other when compared with the polytheistic and idolatrous faiths of most of the ancient world. Their religions were not the same but they were akin; they could communicate and they shared the same contempt for the cults that prevailed virtually everywhere else in the region. I think this understanding, this mutual recognition and understanding, will help us to understand why Cyrus adopted the policies he did towards the Jews and why the Jews responded as they did.

Now that I think is generally understood and accepted. What is less generally understood is the importance of the Zoroastrian impact on post-exilic Judaism and therefore on Christianity. If you look at the books of the Hebrew Bible, and compare the pre-exilic books with the post-exilic books, there are certain quite significant differences - differences which can in no small measure be attributed to Zoroastrian influence.

One is of particular relevance, and that is messianism. The idea of a messiah, of an anointed one of a sacred seed who will return and establish the Kingdom

of God on the earth does not appear in the older books of the Hebrew Bible. It is a Zoroastrian notion, the idea of a descendent from the sacred seed of Zoroaster who would return at the end of time, defeat the powers of evil in the final battle and establish the triumph of good on earth. This kind of messianism has impact in post-exilic Judaism and therefore more powerfully in Christianity.

Let me turn now to the subject of national revival and the revival of national self-awareness in Iran. Here as elsewhere, the much-condemned Orientalists played a role of key importance in restoring to the people of Iran some knowledge of their own history, of their own heritage, of their own past. The ancient languages of Iran were not entirely forgotten. There were small groups; the so-called Parsees, followers of the ancient religion of Zoroaster, but they had minimal impact and most of them were not in Iran but in India. It was the orientalist who first deciphered the ancient writings, the ancient inscriptions and restored to the Iranians, as they did to the Egyptians and the Babylonians and the rest, the knowledge of their own glorious but forgotten past.

I recall a particular manifestation of this change in 1971, when the late Shah decided to have a public international celebration of the two thousand five hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Persian state but more particularly, from his point of view, the Persian monarchy, founded by Cyrus the Great. It was an

international celebration to which I had the privilege of being invited, and I was flown there - to Teheran and from there to Shiraz, and from there to Persepolis. It was quite a memorable occasion. There was a great statue of Cyrus, and a quite elaborate construction on which all the guests were located – political leaders, diplomats, academics and others. Then the Shah descended from the sky in a helicopter, landed just by the tomb of Cyrus and made an eloquent speech, of which I can only remember the last words. He said "O mighty Cyrus, you may sleep in peace for we are awake." It turned out to be an overstatement.

This historical allusion also has an importance, I think, in understanding the role of monarchy in Iran, as a unifying factor. As I said before, there were different ethnicities, different languages, different local cultures. But along with Shi'ism, the monarch was the great unifying force and for the Shah and his followers, this was a point of which they made very full use.

Another theme in modern Iranian history is that of revolution. Revolution, as you know, is a word much used in the Middle East: it is the only generally accepted title to legitimacy. All regimes claim to be revolutionary, though most of them have come to power by procedures which would be more appropriately described as coups d'etat or something of the sort. Coup d'etat in French, Putsch in German, pronunciamento in Spanish; English

history happily provides no equivalent. As I said, revolution is a common widely-used term; every regime claims to be revolutionary. The Iranian revolution, I think, is real. By this I am expressing neither approval nor disapproval; what I am saying is that it is a genuine major transformation, comparable in its way with the French and Russian revolutions, with parallel themes and parallel phases and, as I remarked the other day, it now appears to be entering what you might describe as either the Stalin or the Napoleon phase. I think the Iranians would prefer to call it the Napoleon phase; I think it would be more accurate to call it the Stalin phase.

The initial western reaction to the Iranian revolution was a very positive one, particularly in the United States where it is generally believed that any movement to establish a republic in place of a monarchy must be progressive and therefore good.

There was considerable reluctance to recognize the reality of what was happening in Iran. At the time of the Iranian Revolution I was in Princeton. I had been in Iran not long previously, but when it happened I was back home, reading the newspapers and listening to the news. There was a great deal of talk about this man Khomeini. I must confess - I had never heard the name Khomeini before, but I did what we normally do in our profession: I went to the university library and looked him up in the catalogue to see if there was anything either by him or

about him. And I found a little book called 'Islamic Government' written by the said Khomeini. It was available in both Persian and Arabic, but not, at that time, in any Western language. I checked the book out and read it and this made it very clear who he was and what his aims were, and the idea that this was going to be the establishment of a liberal, open, modern society in place of the reactionary Shah was utter nonsense.

The problem was how to make this known. I asked an Iranian colleague of mine who was in Princeton at the time (actually an American of Iranian origin and I thought it would be better coming from him than from me) - to write an article about it which he did and I sent it to the New York Times, where I had a connection at that time, and they wrote back saying 'We don't think this would interest our readers'. We then tried the Washington Post, with someone else writing the article, a member of their staff, so they published it. And the editor and the author were immediately summoned to the State Department and roundly denounced for publishing this mischievous anti-Iranian propaganda, pointing out that this was totally unfounded and unjustified, that there was no such book, it didn't exist and so on and so on. It took a long time before it was possible to persuade the oddly-named Intelligence community of the existence of this book, of its contents and its meaning, and who Khomeini was and what he was going to do.

I think by now we have all lost whatever illusions we may have had about the regime, though in some cases people have substituted a different set of illusions. By now the Iranian revolution is seen as a major threat in the region and it is, in the sense that it is reaching out - westwards to Iraq, where it has been playing a major role in the various disorders that have plagued that country, and beyond Iraq by the northern route to Syria, to Lebanon, by the southern route to Hamas in Gaza. The fact that one is Sunni and the other is Shi'a doesn't seem to bother. The common enemy overrides what have become relatively minor differences among themselves.

Because of this, there is a growing concern in the Muslim Middle East, particularly in the strongly Sunni countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who see this as a real danger. It is a real danger for two reasons. One is the Shi'a reason: there are significant Shi'a minorities in Kuwait, in Saudi Arabia, in the other Gulf states; in some of them even perhaps Shi'a majorities, locally at least, who have been suppressed and disenfranchised in most ways. The Iranian revolution has awakened them and they are seen, with some justification, as a major threat to the existing regimes. It was perfectly clear, in the war that Israel fought against Hezbollah in 2006, that the Sunni Arab states were quietly hoping the Israelis would do the job and finish it, and were manifestly disappointed when the Israelis failed to do so. This growing concern has

interesting parallels with Sadat's fears of Soviet domination. It was the fear of Soviet domination rather than any goodwill to Israel which led him to seek peace against what he saw rightly as the more dangerous enemy, and clearly there are a number now in the Arab world, including near neighbors, who take the same view. If you look at the reactions to what has been happening in Gaza, one cannot but be struck by the silence on the West Bank for example, the relative silence shall we say, and elsewhere. This creates, I think, a new and interesting situation.

In looking at the Iranian revolution, we must also be concerned by what I would call the apocalyptic aspect of it, the fact that these people really believe that this is the final stage. Most religions, certainly Judaism, Christianity and Islam, share a belief in an end-of-time scenario when God's anointed (however he may be described) will come and fight God's enemy in the final battle, and establish the Kingdom of God on earth, when all the wicked will go to eternal damnation and the good will enjoy the eternal delights of paradise, as specifically described.

Awareness of MAD, of the threat of mutual assured destruction, was an effective deterrent during the cold war in both the United States and the Soviet Union. Both had nuclear weapons as also did some other powers. But they didn't use them because they knew that if they did

use them, the others would respond in kind, and the fear of mutual assured destruction was a way of keeping the peace. This doesn't quite work at the present time because, as I said, of the apocalyptic view. With these people and their apocalyptic mindset, mutual assured destruction is not a deterrent, it's an inducement; it's a quick free pass for the true believers to heaven and its delights while the unbelievers and misbelievers go to well-deserved eternal damnation. I think one has to be careful of that mind-set.

This raises the interesting and relevant question of the Devil. In Iran, the common practice is to speak of the United States and Israel as the Great Satan and the Little Satan. Generally speaking there is a sort of not very sharp but nevertheless discernible difference of opinion between those who hate America because America is Israel's patron and those who hate Israel because Israel is America's protégé. They overlap but they are distinct and the different themes can be seen in various groups and writings. For the Iranian leadership, the United States is the major adversary, the leader of the world of the infidels in succession to the long series of leaders who ruled the world of infidels. Against them, the Iranians now see themselves as the rulers of the world of true Islam. This coincides to a quite remarkable extent with the al-Qaida perception of the struggle, - again, the US as the global infidel satanic force. What I

find remarkably interesting is that in some Iranian writings about the role of the US as the satanic force, the word they use is not 'Shaitan', which is the Islamic equivalent of Satan, but Ahriman, which is the Zoroastrian term for the supreme figure of evil.

Let me turn now to what is perhaps our most immediate concern: what are the resulting attitudes to Jews and to Israel? And here I think the two names that I put in the title - Haman and Cyrus - serve to typify two long-standing, two enduring traditions. The treatment of Cyrus by the Jewish historiographic tradition is quite remarkable: he appears as a messianic figure and during the periods of Persian rule, there were no complaints, no rebellions. There were problems now and then, problems with the 'Resh-Galuta' who got into trouble with the authorities, but these were generally speaking seen as very minor problems and did not affect the genuine relationship. Cyrus, as I remarked before, is presented even in the Bible as God's anointed, and the period of Persian-ruled Babylonia is still seen as a golden age in Jewish history, especially the early centuries of the Common Era, before the advent of Islam, when Syria, Palestine, Egypt were ruled by the Byzantine empire and when Babylonia (Iraq) was ruled by the Persians, and the Jews were headed by their own chief, the 'Resh-Galuta'. Jews were accused by the Byzantines of being a Persian fifth column; they were suspected (and there is some

evidence that these suspicions were not without foundation) of being pro-Persian and anti-Byzantine. The clearest evidence of this in the early seventh century when the Persians invaded Palestine, captured Jerusalem, where they were welcomed enthusiastically by the Jewish population, and stayed there for a number of years, after which the Byzantines were able to recover the city, drive out the Persians and then carry out a major massacre of the Jews who were accused, as I said, not without foundation, of pro-Persian sentiments and activities.

What about Haman? I hope I am not treading on anybody's corns when I say that the Haman-Esther story as contained in the Bible, is probably mythic. We are indeed told in the Talmud that the Book of Esther was not originally included in the Hebrew Bible, but they finally decided to include it because of its popularity among the people. This was not part of the original choice. If you look at the book, it is in many ways suspicious, starting with the names - Esther and Mordehai. One thinks of the Babylonian Ishtar and Marduk, a rather remarkable resemblance, and many more things. Nevertheless the Haman-Esther story does, I think, give us a first account of the other Iranian tradition, the tradition of hostility. It is there unmistakably in the Book of Esther; it is expressed through the personality (be it historic or mythic) of the Persian dignitary whose main purpose in life seems to be

to make life difficult, if not impossible, for Jews. This continues, but not in the pre-Islamic period; at least it's not documented. There are occasional difficulties but nothing of any consequence, nothing that is retained, shall we say, by the Jewish historiographic tradition.

But with the advent of Islam and the adoption of Shi'ism, it's quite a different story. Iranian Islam is much more intolerant of Jews and in most other respects; Jews were worse off in Safavid Iran than in the Ottoman empire, in Morocco or in any of the Sunni Muslim states. There was for example the idea that the Jews were 'nijis' – unclean; that anything touched by a Jew became unclean and could not be used or eaten. A whole elaborate development of this doctrine of what I would call 'untouchability' since it is so obviously related to the kindred Aryan doctrine of untouchability in the neighboring country of India.

This continued, and if we look at the position of the Jews in well-documented semi-modern periods it is clear that the Jews were very badly treated; they were treated, as I said, as untouchables and subjected to all kinds of indignities and humiliations. It is in the same tradition that, in the language of the Islamic Republic today, Jews are usually depicted as vermin or microbes or cancers or something of the sort. Cancerous microbes is the phrase that is used.

There is some difference between the external and internal language used in Iran at the present day; for example in slogans draped over military vehicles, the English text says 'Down with...' and the Persian text says 'Marg bar' which means 'Death to...' Death to is not exactly the same as 'Down with', though I doubt if there would be much difference if they were able to realize their purpose.

Let me end with some quotations; one from Khomeini: "A billion Muslims should united and defeat America". This was basically the purpose of the Iranian revolution; this was what it was all about for him and his followers - confronting the ultimate enemy, the Great Satan, compared with which Little Satan was of relatively minor importance. Another quotation from Khomeini: "The Americans will run away (meaning from the Middle East) leaving their illegitimate child (that is Israel) behind them, and then the Muslims will know what to do." Ahmadinajad many times, when addressing the Arabs, uses that formula and also has made the point that the Middle East has become the battle-ground between the Muslims and the infidel West. In other words it's not the Middle East as such that matters; it is now the battle-ground between the two great global forces - the force of good and the force of evil.

Let me give you another quote - this one from Hassan Nasrallah (I don't need to introduce him), the

head of Hezbollah: "Islamic prophecies as well as Jewish prophecies, declare that this state (meaning Israel) will come into being and all the Jews of the world, from every corner of the world, will gather in occupied Palestine. This is not so that their false messiah (Dajjal) can rule the world, but so that God can save you the trouble of running them down all over the world, and then, when you do so, the battle will be decisive and terminal". This is a speech in 2002, recorded on the Hezbollah website and printed in the Beirut Daily Star.

What are the possibilities in dealing with this threat from Iran? I think one can divide it into two: one is the obvious military one. It may reach a point when there is no other; I don't personally believe that we have reached that point yet and I believe that, even in talking about it, it is very important not to give the regime a free gift of something that they don't at present enjoy, that is the support of Iranian patriotism. It needs careful handling: for example, if you say "Iran must not have nuclear weapons". Well, we all agree on that, but try to look at it from the point of view of an Iranian patriot, not a supporter of the regime necessarily. He would say 'To the north is a nuclear-armed Russia; to the east a nuclear-armed China; to the south - a nuclear-armed India and Pakistan; to the west - a nuclear-armed Israel. Who is to say that we must not have it?' Obviously one sees why they must not have it – none of the others are proposing

to obliterate anybody. But I am trying to put the question as it might appear to an otherwise well-disposed Iranian patriot. I think one has to handle this very carefully and before deciding that the military option is the only one that remains, there are possibilities internally - the use of internal openings within Iran - opportunities which I think have been under-used or totally neglected. One thinks for example not long ago of the bus strike - a quite remarkable opportunity but nothing was done about it. It seems to me that, for the moment, one should aim at disruption rather than a military action, but I must, in concluding, admit the possibility that one may, at some time, reach a situation when there is no other option available. Thank you.

Avraham Nitzan: I am sure that Prof. Lewis will entertain some questions if there are any.

Q: What is the difference between Cyrus encourage Jews to leave Babylonia to go back to Jerusalem and his encouraging other nations to do the same?

Prof. Lewis: Can you tell us more about the other examples:

Q: I understand that the Jews were not the only ones - that many subject peoples were told to go back to their homelands

Prof. Lewis: I am sorry I must plead ignorance.

Q: Once Iran has nuclear weapons, do you think they would use them against Israel or other western nations, and

second - after the war in Gaza, what do you think Israel can do to promote the peace process with the Palestinians and the other Arab states?

Prof. Lewis: The second question is not really relevant to my lecture but I will try. As far as Iran is concerned, one must be ready, one must be prepared, I think one must make every effort to deal with it peacefully. I think there are possibilities. For example one could do far more of what in this country is called 'hasbara'. At the moment Israel has a daily radio service in the Persian language - one hour. I am told, and I have been told this repeatedly by Persian friends, that this is the most widely listened to and the most widely respected news program in the whole of Iran. This should be increased. It has not been increased and it was only with difficulty rescued from a proposal to suppress it. I think there is much more that can be done by way of what you might call 'political warfare' or 'propaganda warfare' and I think there are a lot of people in Iran that one can reach out to in that way.

Q: When talking about the Iranian threat, people talk about the threat to the Sunni Arab nations, maybe to the West, to Israel, and I feel there is a power missing here; and from my little understanding of Islamic history, I understand it was the Turks that constrained the Shi'a forces against the Sunnis in the 11th and 12th centuries. What do you think of the prospect that it will be the

Turks, or that the Turks could constrain the new Iranian outburst?

Prof. Lewis: Certainly the Islamic movement is growing stronger in various parts of the Muslim world; we have all seen what has been happening in Turkey of late. The trend is very clear; the outcome is still uncertain; it is beginning to look more and more like some form of re-Islamization, some form of reversal of the achievements of the Kemalist revolution. That I think is a real possibility; I can even imagine a situation in which Turkey and Iran exchange roles: the opposition in Iran takes over, Iran becomes the secular modern state; Turkey becomes the Islamic republic. I am not trying to be funny; that strikes me as a serious possibility. In both countries there is a movement, a desire for change from what has been happening over the past century or so, and in the two countries it leads in opposite directions. There is, I think, another factor, and that is the genuine and growing concern in Muslim countries, among increasing numbers of Muslims, about what is happening to their faith, to their religion, to their civilization. There is a growing awareness of where it has brought them. You may have seen a series of reports published under the aegis of the United Nations by a committee of Arab intellectuals, on human development in the Arab world. This was both interesting and important. In these, they give a vivid picture of the failure of these societies as compared with

every other part of the world except Sub-Saharan Africa. A great change that has taken place in the modern world is the communications revolution; it is no longer possible, as was usual in older autocracies, to control the production and distribution of ideas and of news. This is no longer possible; it is the loss of that control that I think was the main factor leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union and I think - *insh'allah*- that it may produce the same effect in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Q: I would like to ask - is there any explanation for the fact that through the Ottoman empire period, and in the surrounding areas that were under the rule of the Ottoman empire - there was not a single time the Turks were in any conflict with the Persians and the Iranians. Is there any explanation for that?

Prof. Lewis: They had a long series of conflicts - there were conflicts, certainly. They were fighting over Iraq for example. Both the Iranians and the Ottomans claimed Iraq; sometimes the one had it, sometimes the other. And both tried to find allies in Europe against the other.

Q: (inaudible)

Prof. Lewis: I am not aware of any such influence; I do not exclude the possibility. The Sunni-Shi'a divide is only important in regions where you have both. In solidly Sunni countries like North Africa for example, it just doesn't matter. I was in Indonesia at the time of the Iranian revolution or a little after, and there was great

enthusiasm. Now Indonesia is a solidly Sunni country and the fact that Iran was Shi'a didn't bother them in the least, because there are no Shi'a in south-east Asia, and therefore it was not an issue. I found Gaddafi for example insisting that there is no Iranian threat, that's not a problem. Saudi Arabia - that is the great threat. He is a Sunni but he dismissed the Shi'a threat; he said 'We had a great age under the Shi'ite rule of the Fatimis, which is true of course but irrelevant.

Q: You talked about the apocalyptic vision of the messiah in Shi'a Islam. Is it the same in Sunni Islam so if one day one of our Sunni neighbors gets hold of the bomb, should we have the same concerns?

Prof. Lewis: No. Both Sunnis and Shi'a have this apocalyptic vision, as do Christians and Jews. Most religions have something of the sort. The difference is that the Shi'a in Iran believe that it is happening now.

Q: After the 12th century, the Sunna closed ... and there is no new Hadis within the Sunna. But until today the acceptance of the Imam rulers is that they are sumil hatl (infallible), and therefore if there is a change in the spirit of the Shi'a, it might change the attitude towards Jews, towards Christians and so on. Is that so? Is there any chance that one day an Imam will emerge in a Shi'ite country and bring about a great change such as you cannot make in the Sunni regimes?

Prof. Lewis: I can only answer in one word "Halevai" ...

Abraham Nitzan: Now that everything has been clarified, I would like to thank Prof. Lewis very much for being with us. We look forward to seeing him again with us next year for more lectures. Thank you very much.

(END OF SESSION)