

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5771
September 9, 2010

“It’s the wrong place. Find another place.”

These words, uttered by Abraham Foxman, Director of the Anti-Defamation League, express much of American sentiment regarding proposed Park51 Islamic Cultural Center that would be built two blocks from Ground Zero in a neighborhood packed with restaurants, shops, churches, and offices. Indeed, a recent CNN poll shows that 68% of Americans oppose this center being built so close to Ground Zero.

That the majority of Americans disagree with this project is perhaps not so remarkable, but the problem is that these words were uttered by the director of one of the largest civil rights organizations in the country and one of the most powerful Jewish organizations in the world. The mission of the ADL, founded in 1913, is “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.”

So when Foxman told the Muslim community to find another place for their community center, it intensified a fierce national debate about religious freedom and the September 11 attacks. Asked why a civil rights organization would oppose this, Foxman replied, “Ultimately, this was not a question of rights, but a question of what is right.”

Foxman’s reason for opposing the location of Park51 is because it would be offensive to the families of the victims who perished in the 9/11 attacks, whom he likens to Holocaust victims: “Their anguish entitles them to positions that others would categorize as irrational or bigoted.”

But, as Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International and weekly host for CNN writes,

[The] 9/11 families have mixed views on this mosque. There were, after all, dozens of Muslims killed at the World Trade Center. Do their feelings count? But more important, does Foxman believe that bigotry is OK if people think they’re victims? Does the anguish of Palestinians, then, entitle them to be anti-Semitic?

Zakaria had been a recipient of the ADL’s prestigious Hubert H. Humphrey First Amendment Freedoms Prize. In protest, he returned the \$10,000 honorarium that accompanied the award.

Park51’s leader, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, is known for being a moderate Muslim voice, for his work on interfaith relations, and for continually denouncing terrorism in general and the 9/11 attacks in particular. Organizers of Park51 say that the center would be modeled after the Jewish Community Center and YMCA of Manhattan, have a board composed of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, create a national model of moderate Islam, and foster “integration,

tolerance of difference and community cohesion through arts and culture.” It would include a large prayer room as well as classrooms, restaurants, bookstores, an auditorium, a swimming pool, and a gym.

This controversy is fueled by stereotypes of Muslims, xenophobia, and political opportunism. Even though Mayor Bloomberg, the lower Manhattan community board, and the city’s Landmark Preservation Commission have given overwhelming support to the project, the opposition has become strong. The Muslim community has witnessed not only hateful protests of mosques across the country, but the stabbing of a Muslim New York City taxi driver. The Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida is promoting “International Burn a Quran Day” on September 11. Numerous prominent Republican Party leaders have riled up their base with hateful language towards Muslims.

Two other large Jewish organizations, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and the American Jewish Committee, historically committed to building bridges with other communities, have also joined the ADL, not in opposing the location but in casting suspicion on the center, and in the case of the AJC stating that Islam inspires terrorism and questioning whether the center’s leaders condemn terrorism.

Similar to Mr. Foxman, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an institution dedicated to “promoting human rights and dignity” and to “promoting unity and respect among Jews and people of all faiths” also opposed the center. Rabbi Hier, considered one of the most influential rabbis in the United States, appeared on Fox News at the beginning of August and stated the following:

For 3000 families, the 9/11 site is...the site of one of the greatest atrocities ever committed in the United States, and it’s a cemetery. And the opinion of the families should be paramount as to what should go near that site. Now having a fifteen-story mosque within 1600 feet of the site is at the very least insensitive.

For Rabbi Hier to liken the 9/11 site to a cemetery is significant, for the Simon Wiesenthal Center is currently building a Center for Human Dignity — Museum of Tolerance in western Jerusalem on top of the Mamilla Cemetery, a historic Muslim burial ground with thousands of grave sites that date back to at least the 12th century. Like the controversy surrounding Park51, the Museum of Tolerance speaks to the complexities of Jewish identity in the twenty-first century.

Even though in 1948 the Israeli Religious Affairs Ministry recognized Mamilla to “be one of the most prominent Muslim cemeteries...” and it vowed that Israel will “always know to protect and respect this site,” the cemetery continues to be dismantled. Since the 1960s, Independence Park was built over a portion of it, a road was built through it, electrical cables were laid over graves, and a parking lot was constructed over another part of it.

Amidst great protest, construction has now begun on the Museum of Tolerance, and Israeli bulldozers have demolished about 1,500 Muslim gravestones in several nighttime operations. Supporters of the Center claim that there are no human remains left in the section where they plan to build, and they have accused the Islamic Movement, an organization that advocates Islam among Israeli Arabs, of manufacturing hundreds of fraudulent graves. Furthermore, they argue that the opposition is the work of Muslim extremists who wish to build their presence in West Jerusalem, and this is evidence of the need for a center to spread more tolerance.

Because the cemetery has been cleared in the middle of the night and dozens of police officers have surrounded the site, it is impossible to know what human remains have been found. The contents of the cemetery have been disposed of in an undisclosed location. The question therefore arises, if there is nothing to hide, why all the secrecy?

The supporters' claims are especially questionable given that Gideon Suleimani, the Chief Israeli Archaeologist who was assigned by the Israeli Antiquities Authority to lead the excavation of the site, states that during his partial excavation of the site over 400 graves containing human remains were exhumed or exposed. He estimated that there are four layers of graves, with at least 2,000 graves remaining under the site of the Museum. Regardless, when the case went before the Israeli Supreme Court in 2008, the Antiquities Authority informed the Court that the site "contains no further scientific data."

Suleimani explained, "It's part of the conflict about who owns the land. It's not archaeology. It's not science. They want to move away the Muslim memory of the area to make it Jewish. So it's totally politics."

Rabbi Hier argues that it is insensitive to the families of the victims of 9-11 to build a Muslim community center two blocks from Ground Zero, but when Palestinian families have come forward to protest the desecration of a cemetery where their ancestors are buried, the Simon Wiesenthal Center rejected offers to build in alternative locations.

To summarize: The Anti-Defamation League opposes a Muslim community center which is dedicated to "integration, tolerance of difference and community cohesion through arts and culture." The Simon Wiesenthal Center destroys an historic Muslim cemetery to make way for a museum designed to "promote tolerance and understanding."

It should be said that many leaders of American Jewry have voiced strong support of Park51 and have voiced strong opposition to the Museum of Tolerance. Two examples: The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association has issued a statement in support of Park51, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis of the Reform movement passed a resolution in opposition to the location of the Museum of Tolerance. Yet it's not clear how many Jews agree with these statements. Indeed, regarding Park51, a

recent New York Times poll shows that most Jews in New York City oppose the center, a number higher than those who identify as Protestant.

For Jews with a long history of standing up for the rights of minorities, for speaking out in support of religious freedom, and for taking liberal positions on domestic political issues, this is somewhat surprising. According to Shaul Magid, professor of religious studies and modern Judaism at Indiana University, this stems from a very real fear, distrust, or hatred of Muslims. He writes, in an article entitled “Islamophobia, Antisemitism, the Holocaust, and a ‘New’ Jewish Cause” that to understand Park51 – and his comments could easily apply to the Museum of Tolerance – we need to carefully examine American Jewish identity especially as it relates to the Holocaust. The Holocaust has to a large extent defined American Jewish identity for the last half century and has fostered a deep-seated belief in the Jewish community that the Jews have always been threatened and always will be threatened. Therefore, the Jewish community must continually stand vigilant against its enemies (*Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture*, <http://zeek.forward.com/articles/116925/>, August, 2010).

It is true that the Holocaust caused utter devastation to the Jewish people. It is also true that anti-Semitism has been a terrible reality for Jews throughout the generations and that it is still very real today. The Holocaust as an identity, however, is a different issue. It has become, for many, the core of what it means to be a Jew. “Why be Jewish?” the question goes. “So you don’t ‘grant Hitler a posthumous victory’” comes the response (Holocaust theologian Emil Fackenheim’s 614th commandment).

Magid cites two articles from the early 1980s to illustrate his point: Biblical scholar Robert Alter’s “Deformations of the Holocaust” whereby he expresses concern that by overemphasizing the Holocaust, other important dimensions of Jewish education, history, thought, culture, and literature are diminished (*Commentary*, February, 1981) and former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary Ismar Schorsch’s “The Holocaust and Jewish Survival,” whereby he writes, “By saturating our young and old with the nightmare of the Holocaust, we will, at best, only generate an ephemeral, secular, Trotzjudenthum (a Judaism of defiance), without substance” (*Midstream*, 1981).

Many of us grew up with, or still encounter, this kind of Judaism – a Judaism that is negative, defensive, and fearful. A Judaism that always looks inwards, that is entrenched in the dread of impending disaster.

Despite the prominent place that the Holocaust occupies in American Jewish life, Magid posits that with the passage of time the Holocaust will no longer be the central focus of American Jewish identity. Yet no new passion has widely transformed American Jewish identity, and so we are left with a vacuum. Enter “global anti-Semitism,” a term that Magid explains is often synonymous with Muslim anti-Semitism and is fueled by the Jewish community’s own negative feelings towards Muslims. This then becomes a replacement for the Holocaust. He writes:

...Let's face it: the threat and subsequent fear of Islam in America, that is, Islamophobia, has been good for those Jews for whom the Holocaust was a central tenet of their identity. This is mainly because it puts a new focus on antisemitism, now not Nazi antisemitism but the antisemitism in the Muslim world. In addition, it serves to affirm a right-leaning political ideology regarding Israel, viewing Israel as the front-line against a global attack on America (<http://zeek.forward.com/articles/116925/>).

Anti-Semitism is still a real problem, and it is important to examine how it functions in the Arab or Muslim world, but to use this as a new way to construct Jewish identity is not a healthy approach. Carrying around a strong sense of victimhood, reacting to complex issues negatively, defensively, and fearfully is not, as the saying goes, "good for the Jews."

Moreover, it has very real implications for how the Jewish community sees itself and behaves in the public sphere. In the extreme, if Jews are history's permanent victims, then any action is permissible in order to survive. Jews simply do not have the luxury to worry about others if we are always on the point of extinction.

In this view of the world, Palestinians are Nazis, the year is 1938, and another Holocaust is on the horizon. Israel withdrawing from the West Bank would result, in the words of Prime Minister Netanyahu, in Auschwitz borders.

Is that really the kind of people we want to be? Is this really the kind of Judaism we want to pass on to the next generation? Many, if not most of us, would answer no. But now let's ask some harder questions: Who *do* we want to be? What kind of Judaism *do* we want to pass on to the next generation?

Judaism as a religion provides us with very strong, moral principles. Human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. We are obligated, therefore, to treat all people with respect and dignity – even people with whom we are in conflict. What if we approached political questions like Park51 and the Museum of Tolerance through this lens? What if the Jewish community revived its commitment to engage in difficult dialogue with others, instead of casting aspersions on them? What if the Jewish community reinvigorated its long history of social justice and asked not, "Is it good for the Jews?" but rather, "Is this the right thing to do?"

The Torah repeatedly instructs us, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." What if we carefully remember that generations of Jews have suffered from oppression and acknowledge that these memories and experiences have caused our hearts to harden? What if we refuse to let ourselves reenact that pain towards others and refuse to allow ourselves to be the oppressors?

We have inherited a rich intellectual tradition, a tradition where real issues are debated, sometimes vociferously, and where minority opinions are also valued. What if we reclaimed this heritage and demanded that our communal leaders not only permit but encourage debate on important and controversial matters? What if young liberal Jews, who are far less Zionist than their parents, grew up learning that to support Israel means to fight for its democratic principles? What if they grew up learning that an integral part of their Jewish identity is to oppose any actions of the Israeli government that conflict with their beliefs in peace and justice for all people?

The American Jewish community is facing a real decline in the number of Jews who choose to affiliate with its secular organizations and congregations. What if we opened the doors to our communities, making them welcome and inclusive? What if we cared less about who came in and concerned ourselves more with why so many have left? What if we found those Jews on the margins and learned from their unique experiences, allowing ourselves to be challenged by different perspectives?

So many of us are searching for meaning, for a sense of purpose, for an ethical path by which to live our lives. What if we committed ourselves to Jewish learning, to Jewish celebration, and to Jewish practice? What if the answer to “Why be Jewish?” didn’t have anything to do with Hitler? What if the reason to be Jewish was rather because the religion and the culture have enough potential that we want to join together to make our communities vibrant places?

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us commit ourselves to taking some risks. Let us ask these difficult questions and reconsider the direction of our community. In the face of Park51 and the Museum of Tolerance, let us challenge ourselves and others as to what it means to be Jewish and what it means to be part of the Jewish community. Let us ask: Who do we want to be? What kind of Judaism do we want to pass on to the next generation?

L’shanah tovah, may it be a year of growth and wisdom for us all.