

My House Shall be a House of Prayer for All Peoples

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We had a beautiful Shabbat morning service this past Saturday. It was a modest gathering, maybe 15 of us. But there was a decided intimacy. We grabbed a bunch of the white folding chairs from the Rosh Hashanah luncheon the previous day. We set up a couple of long tables. We laid the Torah on the table and covered it with a *tallit*. And we began by singing *Mah Tov* *Ohalekha*. How good are Your tents. It was worship at its best. Which is not to say that *this* isn't special. On the contrary, to gather as we do tonight, all of us, has a power that is unmatched, a drama that that is unparalleled. But—for me—this cannot compare with the sacred intimacy of a *minyan*, just getting together because it's Shabbat. And our chapel, even in a state of post-*Beyachad* and *Rosh Hashanah* 2nd day lunch disarray, never felt more *heimish*. I admit, the sunlight pouring through the windows helped a lot. In fact, the bright sunshine was eerily reminiscent of that very same day, nine years earlier.

I have no doubt that we all knew it was the anniversary. No one said a word as we gathered to slowly comprise the quorum of ten. But I'm certain that in each of our minds we knew that this was the day, the eleventh of September, the day best known by its abbreviation—9/11. And yet, even then it would not be until the Torah reading, specifically the second *aliyah*, when Alan Sokolow was called to Torah, that we dared to give voice to the import of the day.

As Alan started walking up to the Torah I knew I had to offer a special prayer. You see he had just had surgery a couple of weeks earlier. I wanted to give him the opportunity to *bensch Gomeil*, a special prayer for one who has recovered from an illness. Alan wasn't expecting this, of that I'm certain. And I don't know if he had originally intended to say something to us that morning, or if getting the *aliyah* and being offered the opportunity to recite *Gomeil* inspired him to address us. Howbeit, his words opened the door for a sacred catharsis.

Immediately after the *Gomeil* blessing Alan said to us, "This is special for me, this *aliyah*, on three levels. First, to be able to stand here after my surgery and recite this prayer feels very good. Second, today is also my mother's *yahrzeit*. And third, I'm a survivor of the attack on the World Trade Center. I just wanted to share that with you. Thank you." And then he sat down. And we all took a deep breath and nodded.

Later that morning, when we recited *Mi Sheberakh*, I asked those present to include the survivors and the families and friends of the victims of 9/11 in their prayers for healing. And then, at the *Kaddish*, I again invoked the memory of those slain in New York City, in Virginia and in Pennsylvania. Then we sat down to eat. And it was there that it all kind of came out. Sitting around a couple of tables pushed together, we just started reminiscing about where we were on that day nine years earlier. What we did. How we felt. Where our kids were. What we remembered. There weren't any tears shed, at least none that showed. Clearly the shock and the anguish had long since worn off. But the memory of that day's trauma was still very present.

It's hard to believe it's been nine years.

Like December 7 and November 22, September 11 will continue to live, not merely "in infamy" but in anguish as well. More than just a memory of a heinous act, it will be—especially for

those of us who would see the plumes of smoke for days and weeks and months on end—a day that will haunt our hearts and souls for as long as we live. We'll not merely remember where we were that day. We'll remember how we felt. We'll remember the acrid taste of Manhattan's air, how it made our eyes burn—even when they were already filled with tears.

So you need to know I will never begrudge someone for the damage that day did to his or her soul. I will always try to do everything in my power to understand their continued sadness and pain and anger. We all earned the right to our feelings that day. Which is to say, I am particularly sensitive to those who resist the building of a mosque in the shadow of the World Trade Center. It's hard to disconnect our emotions from the acts of terrorists with the Islamic faith they use to justify their crimes. Even if it's not fair, I understand how difficult it is to be objective. Just as so many of us were outraged when Carmelite demonstrators chose to erect crosses outside the barbed-wire fence of Auschwitz—even though they were factually correct in their attempt to draw attention to the Christians who perished there—I have to admit that there are some events which are so far outside the pale of ordinary history that they command a unique status; they have earned the right to special treatment. The eleventh of September and the area in and around Ground Zero has that for Americans (and especially New Yorkers) in the same way that Auschwitz has become *makom kadosh*—sacred ground—for us Jews. Indeed, we Jews understand the need for setting aside parcels of earth as “untouchable”.

Having said that, I also believe that it is precisely because of our experience as Jews, and particularly as *American* Jews, that I support the building of an Islamic center near the site of that tragedy.

Here's the simple truth: We, of all people, should get what's happening to American Muslims. There is no people on this earth that has known more pain, more prejudice, more discrimination, in more places, and over more centuries than has the Jewish people. Our very origins are rooted in being the *other*. “You shall care for the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” No substantive text appears more often in the Torah. And for good reason. Because this is our *raison d'être*. This is why we exist as a people. The oppression of Egyptian servitude was not simply a pretext for redemption; rather, we were slaves in order that we could know the feelings of isolation and estrangement, in order that we might remember the fear and the pain of being the outsider, in order that we would embrace the sacred work of eradicating such evil from the world. And if Egypt wasn't enough, our history has relentlessly taken us to school. From the Babylonian exile to the Hadrianic persecutions to the Crusades and the Inquisition to the pogroms and the horrors of Auschwitz, we Jews are a people well-acquainted with The Night. We know what it's like to be forced to play the role of pariah.

Each year when I take our Confirmation class to Amsterdam, we make a point of visiting the *Liberaal Joodse Gemeente*—the liberal synagogue—on the Friday night of our trip. And without exception, there has always be a student who seemed surprised, even upset, when, as we would enter the old synagogue, we would be forced to initially walk through a double-door entry way, get everyone inside that security foyer, and only then be allowed to pass through the second door which leads to the courtyard leading to the synagogue's main door. “What's the matter? Don't they trust us?” one of the students once asked me. “Actually, they really do trust us,” I said. “Because I've been here so many times before. They know me. Otherwise, we'd have to wait here in the security foyer until they come and inspect each one of our passports.” But if you've been to Europe and visited a synagogue there, then you already know this. This is

standard-operating-procedure for Jewish communities there. “Oh right,” we remind ourselves, “this is Europe. This is the place that invented anti-Semitism.”

So we should be particularly sensitive when, here in America, mosques find themselves required to do the same. Because the Islamic experience here in America, what we Jews have labeled the *Goldene Medina*, the “home of the free and the land of the brave”, is becoming more and more the home of the feared and the land of the hated. And while we were all outraged and repulsed by the stunt of Pastor Terry Jones who garnered for himself international attention when he proposed burning Qurans this past Saturday, the fact that he ultimately relented and canceled the bonfire should not diminish for us what lies behind and beneath its motivation. The bigotry and nativism and xenophobia we see here is absolutely no different than the Islamophobia that is sweeping throughout Europe. Did you notice the French banning of the wearing of Burqas in public just this past week? The vote of the French senate was 246 to 1. Only this is here, in America. The fact of the matter is there were multiple incidents of mosque vandalism in the United States this past weekend, including an East Lansing, Michigan mosque that found a Quran burned and covered in feces outside it’s entryway. As the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine prophesied, “Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people.” By contrast, ours is a nation that affords us the privilege of burning our own flag. It’s a subtle but important distinction.

This is the country my grandparents and great-grandparents chose to come to because this was the land that guaranteed them a freedom from persecution. It’s never been perfect. (I grew up in a city that boasted Father Coughlin and Henry Ford.) No nation is free of bigots and racists. We will never be able to say that all Americans are tolerant and enlightened. But America’s uniqueness is not in its populace but rather its fabric. This is a nation that is blessed with a constitutionally guaranteed protection of the unpopular and against the intolerant. What sets the United States apart from all the other places we’ve called “home” is but a document, a piece of parchment, an *American Torah*. This is the land whose first president promised us—the Jews—that America is a republic that would give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...” Freedom of expression, especially freedom of religious expression, is this country’s most sacred pillar. For all the anger and hatred we see in Americans, what redeems us is a constitutional right to freedom of speech and protection against the majority, especially when it comes to religious expression. We, of course, have the right to oppose the Mosque, even protest against it. But our right to do that should not supersede the right of American Moslems to build a center for whatever they want and wherever they want it.

As Jews we should be deeply disturbed by these acts of hatred, even if they’re not directed at us. Because if our anger is reserved for only ourselves, if the outrage we feel at the recollection of the crimes perpetrated against our people is limited to just *our* experience, then we fail in our mandate to be an *Ohr La-Goyyim*, a Light unto the Nations. If we feel we have the right to demand sympathy for our pain, then we must be willing to practice empathy for the pains of others—even when it comes to those whose religion connects them to the enemies of our people. Maybe even moreso.

For when all is said and done—and let’s be honest with ourselves—this is not because of the *location* of the proposed *Cordoba House*. Nor is it out of respect for the nearly three-thousand victims of the World Trade Center. Well we know that were it a Jewish or Christian community to propose building a religious institution two blocks north of Ground Zero, I would be talking about something else here this evening.

I am chagrined that there has been so much opposition to the Ground Zero Mosque from within the Jewish world. We, of all people, should be sensitive to a religious community that finds itself marginalized. Even more I am stunned and saddened that some of the most respected and admired voices within Judaism have succumbed to their own fears and prejudices. I would hope and pray that such sentiment is not rooted, even subconsciously, in the reality that the enemies of Israel also happen to be Moslems. Indeed, we Jews know only too well what it is like to be blamed for the acts of a few. But I sense that that is precisely what is at the core of the hostility coming from the Jewish community. We must not allow ourselves to go there. We cannot permit our sensibilities of the Arab-Israeli conflict to influence the way we view a fundamental American value of religious liberty. I say this not only because we Jews will ultimately suffer as a result, but simply because it's not right.

We came here tonight to listen to *Kol Nidre*. It is arguably the most sacrosanct prayer in Judaism. Yet at its core—a prayer asking God to forgive us for not fulfilling our promises and oaths—is an historical reminder that there once was a time when we were not free to openly practice our faith, that we once lived in lands where we were forced to say words we did not believe. We know what it is like to live our faith under duress. We should know better.

But maybe even more, we should know better because our faith, our tradition, our Torah demands that we resist the fear and the hatred that can so easily overwhelm our souls. As we are taught in the Talmud, if peace is not the goal then the words are not Torah. And that, more than anything else, is why I support this proposed Mosque and community center. Because we are commanded to “seek peace and pursue it.”

I remember nine years ago wondering, “Where is the moderate Islamic voice?” From a religion that is, by all accounts, the most populous on the planet, how is it that terrorist after terrorist attack brings only silence from the Muslim community? I understand that the terrorists are but a fraction of the Moslems in the world. And even if there are many, perhaps millions, who despise the United States (the Big Satan) and its partner (the little Satan) Israel, there are still many, perhaps even many more who see these acts as do we—unmitigated evil. “Where are they?” I wondered. Indeed, I can see why it is so easy to cast the majority together with the minority, especially when the majority is so silent.

So I confess, when I first heard of the proposed Mosque I was ambivalent. I remember saying to a friend, “Well I support it, of course. It's a matter of freedom of religion. It's an American thing. But what I was really hoping for was a voice, someone from within the Muslim world to stand up against their coreligionists who preach and practice hate. That's what we really need,” I said. “We need a voice, a voice of reason.”

Well the fact of the matter is *this* is that voice. They are right here. Trying to build a center devoted to understanding and tolerance. As Keith Yost of MIT's *The Tech* wrote:

“The members of the Cordoba Initiative are not confederates of Al Qaeda—they are its sworn enemies. Indeed, they are its greatest fear. They share a religion with the 9/11 hijackers only in the most nominal sense. These are the men and women who are leading the assault on Al Qaeda's ideology. As our soldiers hunt down and destroy Al Qaeda's fighters and physical assets, Cordoba hunts down and destroys the ideas of Al Qaeda with equal prejudice.”

Somewhere, sometime, somehow this madness has to stop. This war that has been waging for a thousand years, this war that has taken countless Jewish and Christian and Muslim lives, has

to stop. And even if all evidence is to the contrary, even if everything we see and hear tells us that it won't happen in our lifetime or the lifetimes of our children and their children, somewhere, sometime, somehow someone has to take a step in the direction of peace. I believe that the building of an Islamic community center devoted to interfaith understanding is precisely what would constitute that first step.

Does anyone really think that the builders of this Mosque were trying to be insensitive? On the contrary, it is one of the most humble and sincere acts of *teshuvah* I have seen in the wake of that nightmare nine years ago. *Teshuvah* not so much as repentance, but rather turning, changing course, putting us on a track toward reconciliation. Now all we have to do is extend our hands in friendship. Just like Jacob and Esau.

Memorials to the victims are sacred, to be sure. But personally, I'm much more interested in building houses in which we can live together. That was Isaiah's dream. "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples."

It's time to lay the first brick.