

Not Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World
Parashat B'Shallach
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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

How did we get here? A set of cartoons, trying to capture something real (namely, the rationally based fear of Islamic terrorism that writers and artists in Europe feel) appears in an obscure Danish newspaper, and there are riots throughout the Muslim world. And newspaper editors are in a panic, wondering if, on the one hand, they are compromising on free speech by bowing to the threat of violence, or, on the other hand, overstepping their bounds, unnecessarily exacerbating a volatile situation—becoming the news rather than merely reporting on it.

This is clearly a story, a big story. One that deserves to be addressed by all of us and, especially, from the *bima*. The only question really is, “What more can be said? What more *should* be said?”

As my son put it somewhat cynically—appropriately enough, since he’s a teenager—“Other than Muslim-bashing, what do you have to say about this?”

Well said.

Well, as is the case with any other contemporary issue, my question is this:

What is the *Jewish* angle on this cartoon controversy?

Unfortunately, when you ask the question this way, you realize that there’s a lot about this that is Jewish.

For one thing, throughout the Arab—and the greater Muslim—world, the Jews are being blamed for it.

There is something truly bizarre about what has happened, don’t you think? A newspaper in a country that has a cross on its flag prints cartoons that Muslims find offensive, and, in retaliation, an Iranian newspaper sponsors a contest for the best cartoon mocking the Holocaust. That we Jews are seen as at the center of a controversy that, on a certain level has nothing to do with us is truly extraordinary. I’m reminded of the Tom Lehrer song, “The Catholics hate the Protestants, and the



Protestants hate the Catholics. The Hindus hate the Moslems, ... and everybody hates the Jews.” Something odd is obviously going on here.

Did “the Jews” instigate this? The only way to explain this preposterous proposition is to see it as an example of an anti-Semitic paranoia that sees us, the Jews, as evil incarnate. (Together, of course, with “the Crusaders”—a pairing that, if you’ve ever studied the eleventh century, makes little sense.) If there’s a religion that threatens all who stand in its way, it’s not Judaism. I say this notwithstanding the proliferation throughout the Arab world of editorial cartoons that depict the Jews as megalomaniacal creatures who control the world.

We live, clearly, in an Orwellian world, in which attempts to reveal truth through editorial cartoons are equated with attempts to suppress truth and promulgate falsehoods. I’m referring to a recent report that the editor of the Danish newspaper that published the cartoons, Fleming Rose, had stated that he was willing to publish the cartoons lampooning and denying the historical basis of the holocaust that had been solicited in Iran. (He later drew back from that offer, but stay tuned: What do we think are the chances that newspapers will show as much respect and discretion as they have up to now when the opportunity presents itself to publish cartoons that offend not Muslims but Jews? Already there are several websites that feature prominently a cartoon depicting Adolf Hitler and Anne Frank in bed. *Rachmana litzlan!*)

The word ‘fascist’ is bandied about quite a lot. What does it mean? According to my dictionary, fascism is “a system of government marked by centralization of authority under a dictator, ... suppression of the opposition through terror and censorship and typically a policy of belligerent nationalism and racism.” Granted that some of these elements (most notably centralized government) may be missing, if what we’re witnessing in the world today isn’t fascism, I don’t know what is. It may not be as centrally organized and coordinated as the fascist regimes of Italy or Germany during the 20th century, but to say that there isn’t what has been called Islamo-fascism operating in the world today is to blink reality. And one central target of this Islamo-fascism is the Jewish people.

But stepping away from the enormous and obvious existential challenge to Jews that this represents, what is the perspective of *Judaism*?

How does the Jewish *tradition* view the core issues at stake here? Such as:

- The right of free speech and the limits on free speech
- The right of an individual or a religious tradition not to be maligned

- The proper way to respond to what is perceived to be an insult to oneself or one's faith

This is not an easy subject to address, for several reasons.

First, as is always the case, the so-called “Jewish perspective” is a moving target.

The Jewish tradition has always been in a state of evolution. In time we see a development of philosophical and theological ideas.

The second reason focuses on the substance: We can't be too smug here.

We won't necessarily be so pleased to learn just what the Jewish tradition has to say about all this.

After all, the earliest stratum of the Jewish tradition, the Bible, decries graven images. Where do you think the Muslims got the notion that they shouldn't depict the human form? It's tied directly to the prohibition against idolatry.

Moreover, the Bible's approach to religion is exclusivist and intolerant.

The Book of Deuteronomy tells us explicitly how the Israelites should relate to pagan deities: they should destroy them.

So, if we're looking at the Jewish tradition to back up our contemporary sense of tolerance and pluralism and acceptance of alternative faiths—we're in for a surprise. We have to overcome some rather negative stuff in our own tradition.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that we are no longer living in the biblical age, and we Jews—at least we who are sitting here today—realize that. The Jewish tradition has indeed evolved considerably since Deuteronomy. The Talmudic tradition is one that celebrates diversity of perspectives. Debate, disagreement, the willingness—indeed the necessity—of questioning one's assumptions—these are at the cornerstone of the Jewish intellectual tradition. Jews have long recognized that no one has a monopoly on truth. This extends even beyond the confines of the Jewish People. Already in the middle ages, the Meiri recognized that adherents of other monotheistic faiths (such as Christianity) shared much in common with us. He felt that, rather than being divided between one religious faith and another, the world was really divided between the civilized, of whatever religious identity, and the uncivilized, wherever they happened to live.

Coming at it from a North African perspective, Maimonides certainly believed that Muslims were not pagans, and that Islam deserved our respect (though, like all good philosophers living and working in the Islamic orbit, he had less respect for Christianity, which he considered somewhat less austere and pure in its theology).

The greatest breakthrough, though, in Jewish perspectives towards “the other” occurred during the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment revealed to us that everyone has the capacity to reason, and that all truths are subject to question. With the Enlightenment, the demonization of the other has truly disappeared from our lexicon. (Again, I’m speaking of post-Enlightenment Jews. There are certainly those on the fringes who fail to accept this premise.) The notion that non-Jews constitute a different order of being is hardly acceptable in Jewish discourse today. We know that religious faiths arise in different places at different times, under different circumstances, and that to the extent that each is seeking the truth with integrity, there is truth and there is value in that religious quest.

Moreover, as uncomfortable as it may sometimes feel, we accept the legitimacy of criticism, of confrontation, of *tochachah* (rebuke). We accept irony as a means of seeking truth. As Jews, how could we live without it? What would Jewish humor be without irony?

Irony is our great survival mechanism.

Irony has helped us keep our heads up during truly terrible days.

Do you know that there are even Jewish jokes about Hitler and the Nazis?

They arose, for the most part, in the thirties, long before the murderous aims of the Nazis were fully realized. They reveal how Jews, as underdogs, were willing to employ humor to, at least symbolically, defeat our foes. And this has continued. How is it that a Jewish holocaust survivor could star in *Hogan’s Heroes*? And how could *The Producers* become the hit that it is unless Jews were willing to explore the greatest of taboos, and laugh even in the face of evil? Of course, criticism should never descend to the level of humiliation. It’s a fine line, but one that we are bidden not to cross.

Speaking about crossing, today’s parashah is all about crossing the Red Sea, and leaving our enemies behind. But our enemies are never left behind. As we see at the very end of this week’s parashah, even after crossing the Red Sea, leaving behind the decimated and drowned Egyptian army, the Israelites are pursued by yet another enemy, the Amalekites. The Amalekites never seem to disappear, no

matter what era of Jewish history you look at. There are always those who are willing to blame the Jews. And our era is no different.

As Jews, we have to support the principle of free speech—especially in response to the fascist attempts to suppress it. And so we should not support any attempts to censor art or literature or social commentary. On the other hand, we should decry religious, racial and ethnic stereotyping in the media. After all, we Jews have been victimized by this far more than Muslims. On the third hand, we should also decry the hypocrisy throughout the Arab world: the complacency about anti-Jewish caricatures that coexists with the sanctimoniousness of the offense at depictions of Muhammed.

Freedom is very fragile, and can be threatened very easily. The enlightenment granted us by the Enlightenment is not a universally respected value, and can easily be taken away from us. In a war between the post-Enlightenment republics and the *Umma*—the Islamic nation—where should we cast our lot? We must promote Enlightenment values. These offer us the greatest hope in this increasingly dangerous world in which we live, for our own survival, for the survival of civilization as we know it, and the survival of humankind. *Amen.*

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[The Following is a Statement by the ADL, available at www.adl.org:]

ADL is opposed to religious, racial and ethnic stereotyping in the media. We found some of the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* troubling, particularly the direct linkage of Mohammad and violence.

At the same time, we are gravely concerned by the extreme violent reaction these cartoons have generated in Muslim communities in Europe, and particularly in the Middle East. It is certainly the right of individuals and governments to express their disagreement with these depictions. However, the use of violence, threats, boycotts and other extreme reactions are highly inappropriate and bode ill for future debates involving Islam, democracy and free speech.

What has been overlooked in the controversy is the fact that despicable anti-Jewish caricatures appear daily in newspapers across the Arab and Muslim world. While invoking the supposed “freedom of the press” in their countries, Arab and Muslim leaders have refused to take any action to stem the drumbeat of anti-Semitism in widely circulated newspapers, many state-sponsored. Indeed, leaders of regimes such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia have virtually ignored appeals from the United

States and Jewish organizations to put an end to incitement in their media, excusing it in the name of “freedom of the press.” One would hope that leaders of Arab and Muslim countries would turn all of the anger being aimed at the European press into a larger lesson for their own people about the power of images.

ADL is strongly committed to free speech and freedom of the press—principles we consider the cornerstones of democracy. In a democratic society, newspapers need to be free to publish controversial content without fear of censorship or intimidation of their writers and editors. At the same time, newspapers and all media outlets should take into account the sensitivities of racial, ethnic and religious groups.