

ISLAMOPHOBIA
SHABBAT SHUVAH – 5771
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

This week's Torah portion, Haazinu, is part of the conclusion of Moses' speech to the Israelites as they are about to enter the land of Israel. Moses, the man with the speech defect, who was reluctant to respond to God's mission to appear before Pharaoh, has become a master orator throughout the book of Deuteronomy. This week his speech turns to poetry, as Moses becomes a skillful wordsmith.

Words are very important in our tradition. After all, God created the world with words. So it makes sense that, during the High Holy Day period, we spend a lot of time, particularly in services, confessing our sins. And many of those sins have to do with how we speak, how we use our words.

Sadly, our society has become a place where speech has become quite uncivil and disrespectful, if not downright inflammatory. Some people who are critical of Israel compare the Jewish state to Nazi Germany or to South Africa's apartheid regime. Rush Limbaugh, critical of President Obama calls him "Imam Hussein Obama," declaring that he is "probably the best anti-American president we've ever had." Steve Schwarzman, the billionaire chairman of the Blackstone Group, the private equity giant, compares proposals to end tax loopholes for hedge fund managers with the Nazi invasion of Poland.¹

One of the major targets of hate speech today is Muslims. Tele-evangelist Bill Keller denounces Islam as a religion that preaches "hate, violence and death." He also called Islam a "1,400-year-old lie from the pits of hell." Tomorrow is September 11th, the 9th anniversary of the tragic attack on the World Trade Center. The pastor of a small church in Florida, had promised to burn a pile of Korans tomorrow, but has "suspended" this action until further notice.

So, this is a good time to take a look at what we are saying about a group of people, a few of whom were responsible for these attacks. According to a recent Time magazine poll, twenty-eight percent of voters do not believe Muslims should be eligible to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Nearly one third of the country thinks adherents of Islam should be barred from running for President — slightly higher than the 24% who mistakenly believe that the current occupant of the Oval Office is himself a Muslim.

Nicholas Kristof, an Op Ed writer for the New York Times, thinks that most of those who oppose Muslims aren't necessarily bigots but people who do not believe that Muslims share their values, or believe in democracy, or they think that Muslims might harm innocent Americans. They fear that Muslims want to impose sharia, or Islamic law, in America. Unfortunately, their

¹ From Op Ed by Paul Krugman in *The New York Times*, August 30, 2010.

worries are being fanned by fear mongers who spout extreme views equating all Muslims with terrorists.

It is instructive to note that this kind of xenophobia has a long history in this country. There were campaigns against Irish, Germans, Italians, Chinese and other immigrants by people who thought they were protecting their country. They were also manipulated by demagogues playing upon their fears. The closest parallel to today's hysteria about Islam is the 19th-century fear spread about "the Catholic menace." One book warned that Catholicism was "the primary source" of all of America's misfortunes, and some promoted the idea that presidents, including Martin Van Buren and William McKinley, were secretly working with the pope. Critics warned that the pope was plotting to snatch the Mississippi Valley and secretly conspiring to overthrow American democracy. One writer cautioned: "Rome looks with wistful eye to domination of this broad land, a magnificent seat for a sovereign pontiff."

Fears were stoked by books written by people who had supposedly "escaped" Catholicism. These books recounted orgies between priests and nuns, girls kidnapped and held in secret dungeons, and networks of tunnels at convents to allow priests to rape nuns. One woman claiming to have been a priest's sex slave wrote a "memoir" asserting that Catholics killed boys and ground them into sausage for sale. These kinds of stories inflamed a mob of patriots in 1834 to attack an Ursuline convent outside Boston and burn it down.²

Of course Jews know what it means to be targeted and accused of horrible acts. We are all aware about the blood libels, accusations in the Middle Ages accusing Jews of using the blood of children to bake Passover matzahs. In this country, anti-Semitic screeds regularly warned that Jews were plotting to destroy the United States. A 1940 survey found that 17 percent of Americans considered Jews to be a "menace to America."

A particularly shocking incident from our own American past took place in December 1862 when General Ulysses S. Grant issued his infamous General Order No. 11, an order that expelled all Jews from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Grant described the "Israelites" as "an intolerable nuisance." The justification for the order was the black market in southern cotton conducted by unlicensed traders, including some Jews. In the emotional climate of the war zone, prejudices flourished and Jews became the target of discriminatory regulation.³

The suspicion that Jews were not patriotic had echoes in France as well, when Napoleon was deciding whether to grant citizenship rights to Jews. In order to ascertain the loyalty of French Jews, Napoleon convoked an assembly, called the Sanhedrin, and asked them to answer the following questions:

² From Kristof's Op Ed in *The New York Times*, September 4, 2010.

³ From a Washington Post Online Ope Ed, "Why Jews should support mosque near Ground Zero," by Rabbis Robert Levine and David Ellenson, August 6, 2010.

1. Is it lawful for Jews to have more than one wife?
2. Is divorce allowed by the Jewish religion? Is divorce valid, although pronounced not by courts of justice but by virtue of laws in contradiction to the French code?
3. In the eyes of Jews are Frenchmen not of the Jewish religion considered as brethren or as strangers?
5. What conduct does Jewish law prescribe toward Frenchmen not of the Jewish religion?
6. Do the Jews born in France, and treated by the law as French citizens, acknowledge France as their country? Are they bound to defend it? Are they bound to obey the laws and follow the directions of the civil code?

In other words, if we emancipate these *Jews* and allow them to become French citizens, are we risking a [fifth column](#)? Will they be Frenchmen? Or just a Jews content to maintain their oddities and, pollute the French way of life?⁴

These are the kinds of suspicions that are animating our discourse about Muslims today. While it is true that those who were guilty of the horrific crimes on September 11th were of the Muslim faith, the vilification of all things Muslim is wrong. There are kind and moderate American-Muslims who continue to be victims of hatred and prejudice. And there were Muslim victims that day, 9 years ago, on September 11th. One of the most beautiful stories to emerge from the devastating attacks of 9/11 was told by a Pakistani Muslim who was employed at the World Trade Center. Fleeing north as the first tower was collapsing, he was felled by a missile of glass and debris. Stunned, he laid on his back as frightened safety seekers stamped by him. The pendant he usually wore, inscribed with an Islamic prayer for safety written in Arabic, gleamed through the darkness. Suddenly, a Hasidic Jewish man bent over him, took the pendant in his hand and read the Arabic out loud. With a deep Brooklyn accent he said, "Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, and let's get out of here."⁵

Every year we are reminded at Passover that we were strangers in Egypt, that you were humiliated because we were Jews. As Jews, we have the obligation to raise our voices and do all in our power to prevent such bigotry from being directed at other people or faith.

Since 9/11, many Muslims have felt similar broad brush rejection. Muslims worry today about their place in American society. "Will we ever be really completely accepted?" they ask. Dr. Ferhan Asghar, an orthopedic spine surgeon in Cincinnati wonders "whether it will get to the point where people don't want Muslims here anymore."

⁴ From blog by Rabbi Rebecca Yaël Schorr originally posted on [Frume Sarah's World](#).

⁵ From Op Ed by Levine and Ellenson.

Eboo Patel, a founder and director of Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based community service program that tries to reduce religious conflict, says, "I am more scared than I've ever been — more scared than I was after Sept. 11."

According to the New York Times, which interviewed both men, that was a refrain echoed by many American Muslims in interviews last week. They said they were scared not as much for their safety as to learn that the suspicion, ignorance and even hatred of Muslims is so widespread.

This is not the trajectory toward integration and acceptance that Muslims thought they were on. Muslim critics make no distinction between Muslims. Blame is heaped upon an entire faith. We know how indecent and immoral it is when an entire group is held culpable for the acts of a few.

Rabbi Rebecca Schorr suggests that, when questions arise about Muslims, We should replace the word Muslim with the word Jew and see how that makes us feel.

Let us not be guilty of doing to others what has been done to us. Remember that the sage Hillel summed up the whole Torah as follows: "What is hateful to you, do not do to any other. "

Columnist Kristof says that Americans have called on moderates in Muslim countries to speak out against extremists, to stand up for the tolerance they say they believe in. He says we should all have the guts do the same at home.