

**BUILDING SHULS, BUILDING MOSQUES,
REBUILDING FOUNDATIONS:
A Sermon on the Park51 Controversy**

**Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert
Temple Emanuel, Marlborough, Massachusetts
Yom Kippur Morning
September 18, 2010; 10 Tishri 5771**

The year was 1954, and Temple Israel was ready to move. Founded in 1886, the synagogue had outgrown its home in St. Louis. Its leaders made arrangements to purchase land in the suburban city of Creve Coeur. Title passed on June 1. The next day, a hearing was held on a proposed change to the zoning ordinances. Those ordinances, enacted just three years earlier, allowed “churches” to build in residential districts. The new ordinances, which were enacted three weeks after the Temple acquired the land, would have prohibited these “churches” – including the synagogue – from being built.

While nothing explicit was said in public, many in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities believed that anti-Semitism

had a hand in these actions. The Temple decided to fight rather than search for another home. Local Protestant and Catholic churches supported their petition for a building permit, and the archdiocese and the council of churches in St. Louis filed briefs in the subsequent court case. The Missouri Supreme Court held that the freedom of religion clauses in the state and federal constitutions required the city to allow Temple Israel to build its synaogue on its land.

The next Shabbat, Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman said, “We remember the time when religious groups would do everything in their power to prevent congregations of other denominations from building. Here the fragrance of the interfaith spirit of America has so permeated the entire community that the ... religious and lay leaders of this community stood side by side with the officers and rabbi of this congregation ... asking for the

right to build this synagogue, this new Temple, this house of God.”¹

That wasn't the first time that Jews found opposition to building a shul in America. In 1843, Congregation Mishkan Israel opened in New Haven. As the historian Jonathan Sarna has noted, the New Haven Register bemoaned this “public defeat for Christendom.” “The Jews have outflanked us here, and effected a footing in the very centre of our own fortress.... Yale College divinity deserves a Court-martial for bad generalship.”²

By the way, our own state of Massachusetts had allowed its first synagogue only one year before, in 1842, over two centuries after the first European settlers came here. And even

¹ “Research: Religious Freedom,” American Jewish Archives, including a link to the sermon of Rabbi Isserman. <http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/collections/freedom.php>.

² Jonathan Sarna, “When Shuls Were Banned in America,” *Forward*, Aug. 20, 2010, <http://www.forward.com/articles/129998/>

the first Jews to settle in America were themselves almost evicted from the New World.

When Jewish refugees straggled into New Amsterdam after the destruction of the Dutch colony in Recife, Brazil, Governor Peter Stuyvesant hardly welcomed them with open arms. He asked his superiors at the West India Company to allow him to send them packing, because the Jews were “deceitful,” “very repugnant,” and “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.” When his request was denied, he wrote once more. Allowing the Jews a foothold in the colony would set a dangerous precedent, he correctly predicted. “Giving them liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists.” And, for good measure, he did refuse the request of the Jewish

community to open a synagogue. Shearith Israel did not get a public space for another fifty years.³

As Sarna has noted, we Jews have indeed typically served as the leading wedge for religious dissenters in America. We have reminded this country that there are groups other than Christians who have come here looking for the opportunity to worship in our own way and in our own places.

Six weeks ago, Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City explicitly dissociated himself from the actions of his long-ago predecessor. Mayor Bloomberg came to Governor's Island, where those first refugees landed, and which is now in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. There, he announced his support for the decision allowing the opening of an Islamic cultural center and worship space in lower Manhattan: the

³ Ibid.; Samuel Oppenheim, "The Early History of the Jews in New York, 1654-1664. Some New Matter on the Subject," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909), 1-91, 20.

Park51 project or, as many of you may know it, the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque.” The project had already stirred up strong opposition and support, sentiments which have only increased as time has gone on. Mayor Bloomberg took them on directly. “Political controversies come and go,” he concluded, “but our values and our traditions endure....”⁴

Mayor Bloomberg got his Jewish education not so very far from here, at Temple Shalom in Medford. I don’t know if he learned about Peter Stuyvesant there, but I do suspect that he learned something about Jewish values and traditions. Perhaps the preeminent such value is expressed in the Torah portion that we’ll hear this afternoon: *V’ahavta l’rei’echa kamocho*, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵ And he probably also learned the

⁴ Michael Bloomberg, “Governor’s Island Address on Religious Tolerance,” Aug. 3, 2010, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/michaelbloombergdefenseofnymosque.htm>.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18.

most famous story from the Talmud associated with that verse, one that many of you know as well.

It involves a Roman occupier who comes to Rabbi Shammai and says, “I’ll convert to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.”

Shammai, not enjoying being mocked, drives him away with a builder’s tool. The Roman then comes to Rabbi Hillel and makes the same offer. But instead of repulsing him, Hillel says, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now, go and learn it.”

As Rabbi Denise Eger has noted, it’s that simple. Treat others as we want to be treated. We all know it.⁶ And if it isn’t clear enough, here’s one little bit of “commentary.” It comes

⁶ BT Shabbat 31a; Rabbi Denise Eger, “A Mosque at Ground Zero and Rabbi Hillel,” Aug. 21, 2010, <http://rabbieger.wordpress.com/2010/08/21/a-mosque-at-ground-zero-and-rabbi-hillel/>

from the same chapter of Leviticus, a few verses later: “When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them... [Y]ou shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁷ Treat others as you would want to be treated, and be especially concerned for those who aren’t as established as you are. Not too long ago, we were those people.

But arguments have been raised against the Park51 project, and at least the principal ones should be acknowledged. First, some find it abhorrent that a “mosque” should be erected at the very site where thousands of people were killed by those acting in the name of their particular version of Islam. That sentence, however, contains more than its share of half-truths and outright fabrications. The project isn’t a “mosque.” It is a cultural center, rather like a Jewish Community Center. It will have a

⁷ Leviticus 19:34.

Muslim prayer space, if you want to call that room a “mosque,” but it will also have a prayer space for other religious groups.

Nor is the project “at” Ground Zero. It’s two and a half blocks away, in a former Burlington Coat Factory that was not part of the attack. In crowded lower Manhattan, two and a half blocks might as well be two and a half miles. And, if those two and a half blocks are hallowed ground, it would be hard to imagine why they contain liquor stores, fast-food restaurants, bars, and strip clubs. Nor is the concept of an Islamic Center in the area anything new; one existed in the neighborhood for years before 2001, without generating any complaints.⁸

While it is true that the mass murderers professed faith in Islam, they were not the only Muslims at Ground Zero nine years ago this week. Salman Hamdani was a twenty-three year-

⁸ Feisal Abdul Rauf, “Building on Faith,” Op-Ed, *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/08/opinion/08mosque.html>; Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor, “How Many Lies Are Contained in the Phrase, ‘A Mosque at Ground Zero?’” <http://www.wupj.org/Publications/Newsletter.asp?ContentID=348>.

old police cadet and part-time ambulance driver. His family was questioned by federal authorities when he disappeared after 9/11. The questions ended six months later, when his remains were identified near the North Tower, along with his EMT medical bag. He had been a first responder, and he was subsequently praised by President Bush.⁹

And then there was Usman Farman, a Pakistani Muslim who worked at the World Trade Center. His story is told by Rabbi David Ellenson, President of the Hebrew Union College, and Rabbi Robert Levine of Temple Rodeph Sholom in New York City. Farman was running north as the first tower was falling, when he was hit by glass and debris. He lay stunned as frightened people ran by him. “The pendant he usually wore inscribed with an Islamic prayer for safety written in Arabic

⁹ Robin Podolsky with Rabbi Haim Dov Beliak, “A Muslim Community Center? Why Not? Why Should Jews Care?” Sept. 7, 2010, <http://www.jewsonfirst.org/10a/CulCenter1.aspx>; Amy Goodman, “Mosque-Issippi Burning,” Aug. 17, 2010, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/mosque-issippi_burning_20100817/.

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.’”¹⁰

Muslims attacked, yes, but Muslims also helped save lives, and Jews saved Muslim lives. As Mayor Bloomberg remarked, “[i]n rushing into those burning buildings, not one [of the first responders] asked, ‘What God do you pray to? What beliefs do you hold?’”¹¹ What is hateful to you, do not do to any person. How would we respond if someone wanted to prevent us from building a Jewish cultural center two and a half blocks from Ground Zero? Are we loving the strangers as ourselves?

¹⁰ Rabbis David Ellenson and Robert Levine, “Why Jews should support mosque near Ground Zero,” On Faith, *Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 2010, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/08/why_jews_should_support_mosque_near_ground_zero.html.

¹¹ Bloomberg, “Governor’s Island Address.”

Some have compared the Park51 project with the controversy in the 1980s and '90s concerning the proposal to build a Carmelite Convent on the grounds of Auschwitz. Jews were offended by this, even though the Carmelites had nothing to do with the Shoah, but just because it would be a non-Jewish prayer space at a scene of Jewish tragedy. So, too, the analogy goes, New Yorkers are offended by a mosque, even though Islam per se was not responsible for 9/11. If we were right about the Carmelite Convent, the opponents are right about Park51.

It happens that most of the families who perished at the World Trade Center support the building of the Muslim community center, including its “mosque.”¹² But even aside from that, the analogy fails. Several commentators have made

¹² Rabbi Eric Yoffie, “Silence Is Not an Option,” Remarks to the URJ Executive Committee, Sept. 14, 2010, <http://blogs.rj.reform/2010/09/cordoba-house.html>.

this point, including at least one who was intimately involved with the entire negotiations about the Carmelite Convent.¹³ At Auschwitz, Jews were killed for being Jews. The nuns wanted to pray for the souls of all the departed including, as one brochure said, for “the conversion of strayed brothers.” Having them pray non-Jewish prayers, especially for the conversion of Jews, on the grounds where Jews were killed for being Jews was an affront.

On the other hand, on 9/11, some of the most extreme elements in Islam wanted to and did kill Americans of all religions and ethnicities not because of their religion or their ethnicity but for being American. They were targeting the openness and pluralism of America.¹⁴ As one commentator said,

¹³ See Bretton-Granatoor, “How Many Lies?,” Podolsky and Beliak, “A Muslim Community Center?”

¹⁴ See Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

“The convent was perceived to be a place where people prayed that Jews cease to be Jews; the ... community center will be a place in which Americans will pray for America to be blessed and strengthened.”¹⁵ And just to put a final point on this issue, the Jewish community was comfortable when the Carmelites eventually built their convent off the Auschwitz grounds, at a place about as close to Auschwitz as Park51 is to Ground Zero.

Some people question the bona fides of the guiding spirit of this project, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf. I won't take the time here to try to clear off all the mud that has been flung at him by opponents of the center; suffice it to say that the charges rely heavily on the worst sort of guilt by association. But I do want to say three things about him. First, the FBI has brought him in to conduct trainings for its agents, and the State Department has sent him on speaking tours throughout the Middle East as a

¹⁵ Podolsky and Beliak, “A Muslim Community Center?”

spokesperson for American Islam. It would be surprising if he had duped both these institutions. Second, even Irshad Manji, the Muslim reformer who herself has concerns about the Islamic Center, acknowledges that Rauf is a “moderate” and is not an “Islamist.”

Finally, it is notable that in 2003, Rauf stood on the bimah of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York City and eulogized the murdered journalist Daniel Pearl. He concluded his remarks with these words, “If to be a Jew means to say with all one’s heart, mind, and soul, ‘Sh’ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad – Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One,’ not only today I am a Jew; I have always been one.” As the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg noted, “Any Muslim

imam who stands before a Jewish congregation and says, ‘I am a Jew’ is placing his life in danger [from extremists].”¹⁶

Of course, it may be, as has been suggested, that these are words that he says to us; he might speak differently when we aren’t around – and if not Imam Rauf, then other moderate Muslim leaders. And if a person says one thing in public and another in, say, “the secrecy of [their prayer spaces],” then, as one writer put it, “ordinary social and business relations are impossible to maintain with them.”¹⁷ Well, actually, that writer wasn’t talking about Muslims. Rather, Henry Ford was talking about the Jews.

¹⁶ Podolsky and Beliak, “A Muslim Community Center?”; Irshad Manji, “A Muslim Reformer on the Mosque,” Aug. 26, 2010, <http://pasadenajews.blogspot.com/2010/08/muslim-reformer-on-mosque.html>; Bretton-Granatoor, “How Many Lies?” For a summary of many of the charges and the facts, see Anne Barnard, “Parsing the Record of Feisal Abdul Rauf,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/nyregion/22imamfacts.html>.

¹⁷ Henry Ford, “Jewish ‘Kol Nidre’ and ‘Eli, Eli’ Explained,” *The Dearborn Independent*, Nov. 5, 1921.

Kol Nidre in its traditional formulation annuls vows made between this Yom Kippur and next. We know, as Jews, that this applies only to vows between us and God. Nevertheless, when taken out of context, it looks bad. And anti-Semites were specialists at taking things out of context, or in finding Biblical and Talmudic passages and putting them in the worst possible light. The anti-Semites presented a caricature rather than an accurate depiction of the beliefs of most Jews. And I suggest that those who cry out against Islam – the Islamophobes – are doing exactly the same thing.

Sometimes, they say, “We’re not against Muslims; we like the good Muslims.”¹⁸ Henry Ford said the same thing. He supported efforts by “a few really spiritual Jews” to remove *Kol*

¹⁸ See, e.g., “Islamophobia or Reality?” (debate between David Horowitz and Daniel Luban), *Tablet Magazine*, Aug. 27, 2010, <http://www.tabletmag.com/news-and-politics/43711/islamophobia-or-reality/>.

Nidre from the prayer books.¹⁹ Most Jews didn't go along with this, as reasonable as it may have sounded to Ford's readers. And most Muslims won't jump through the hoops that those who attack them would set out.

We cannot join in baseless hatred. But even that is not enough. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." "Love" is an active verb. In the Haftarah that we shall hear shortly, Isaiah makes a demand on us: *K'ra v'garon, al tach's'cha, kashofar hareim kolecha*, "Cry with full throat, without restraint; raise your voice like a shofar!"²⁰

On September 7, a group of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders gathered in our nation's capital to make a statement. They concluded with these words: "We are convinced that

¹⁹ Ford, "Jewish 'Kol Nidre.'"

²⁰ Isaiah 58:1.

spiritual leaders representing the various faiths in the United States have a moral responsibility to stand together and to denounce categorically derision, misinformation or outright bigotry directed against any religious group in this country. Silence is not an option.” Silence is not an option. We must raise our voice like a shofar.

If we do, if we speak for an America where everyone may freely and safely worship, then we shall reap the reward that Isaiah sets out for us. *Mos’dei dor v’dor t’komeim*, We will “rebuild foundations laid in generations past.” Those foundations are as old as the first Jews in America, and as new as the most recent Muslims here. Just as we were known as those who built shuls when it would have been easier to hide, let it now be said of us, “They rebuilt the foundations laid in generations past.”

Kein y’hi ratzon, be this God’s will..