

Jonathan Biatch, Rabbi, Temple Beth El, Madison, Wisconsin
Charles Cohen, Professor of History/Religious Studies; Director, Lubar
Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, University of Wisconsin,
Madison

This week we observe a unique confluence of days sacred to Jews, Muslims, and all Americans. The convergence of the beginning of the Jewish New Year, the conclusion of the month of Ramadan fasts, and the ninth anniversary of the terror attacks of September 11 compel us to reflect on the current controversies ignited by those who wish to divide Americans on the basis of religion.

We are disgusted by recent attempts in various US cities to intimidate Muslim Americans, people who wish simply to exercise their constitutional rights. Anti-Islam activities in New York City, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Sacramento, California, and elsewhere soberly remind us that hatred can fester in any locale. We categorically reject these fear-infused acts to stand with our Muslim cousins – and all Americans of good will – against hate. These actions are utter anathema to us as people of faith and as citizens.

Most disturbing of late have been the threats by a Florida church to burn copies of the Holy Qur'an on September 11. Two generations ago, our parents and grandparents fought the Nazis, who also incinerated books that offended them. It is shameful that a few Americans wish to emulate Hitler.

We believe that the current attacks on Islam go deeper than a fear of terrorism; they put forward the canard that Islam is fundamentally at odds with American values, a viewpoint that we categorically reject. These assaults recall others on religious (and non-religious) minorities: Catholics were thought minions of a foreign potentate; Mormons were hounded because Joseph Smith was (like Muhammad) regarded as a false prophet; Jews were charged with deicide; and atheists were deemed unfit to hold public office. That all of these groups now participate fully in American life is self-evident and cause for national self-congratulation.

Those Muslims who hijacked four planes on September 11 surely caused America grievous harm. Islam itself, however, is not the enemy. The adversary is religious extremism and intolerance for differences. America's

better angels have always upheld religious freedom. We hope that the majority of Americans, and surely the majority of Madisonians, will drown out the voices of hatred, bigotry, and ignorance that have rung forth so discordantly this past year.

Observances of both the Jewish New Year and the month of Ramadan encourage their faithful to examine the self, reject sin, and choose better ways of living. We urge Americans of all backgrounds, whether religious or not, likewise to examine themselves and affirm the values that make us a people: freedom of conscience, and respect for different religious heritages.