

THE MOSQUE AT GROUND ZERO

I wonder how many of you have heard of Anat Hoffman. She is a woman in the Middle East who is facing three years in prison for practicing her religion in a way not approved by the fundamentalist elements which control the faith in her country. But, unexpectedly perhaps, she is not a Muslim woman living in a hard-line Muslim theocracy. Anat Hoffman is a Jewish woman, living in Israel, and she is facing three years in prison for the crime of carrying a Torah on the woman's side of the plaza in front of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. She was NOT trying to crash the men's side, she was not there to cause an uproar. She was there, with others, to do what any Jew should have the right to do: to pray and read Torah at what is considered by many to be the holiest site in Judaism. She was there with Women of the Wall, a group of women who have been praying for women's religious freedom at the Western Wall since 1988. Their very presence is seen as an affront by the ultra-Orthodox who control the area, and who have the backing of the government. As frequently happens when the women arrive for prayer, on this particular morning the police were called. Anat Hoffman refused a police order to put down the Torah – can you imagine such a thing? - and so she was arrested. We learned only two weeks ago that the prosecutor is recommending that she get three years in prison.

Over the past two decades, the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel have taken the issue of prayer at the Western Wall to the Israeli Supreme Court. "Israel is a democracy," we argued. "The Wall belongs to the entire Jewish people, not one group. Why should the Orthodox control what happens there?" The Supreme Court agreed, in theory. "But," they said in effect, "why would you want to upset the Orthodox? They feel very strongly about this, and their feelings must be considered." And so the Supreme Court has declared that the main section of the Western Wall, along with the entire plaza leading up to it – basically the section that you see in photos or imagine in your head when you picture the Wall – this entire area is to be considered an ultra-Orthodox synagogue, under the control of the Chief Rabbinate, and anyone who enters must follow ultra-Orthodox rules. Therefore, anyone refusing to abide by those rules – such as a woman daring to touch a Torah – is subject to arrest.

"And what about liberal Jews," we asked, "the ones living in Israel, as well as the ones who come from abroad? What about the *bar mitzvah* boy from New York who wants to stand at the Wall and read from the Torah with his mother standing next to him? What about the *bat mitzvah* girl who wants to be called to the Torah herself? What happens to them?"

The answer is Robinson's arch. This is a section of the retaining wall about 75 yards to the right and hidden from the main part of the Wall by the walkway leading up to the Dome of the Rock. Standing at Robinson's arch you can't be seen or heard by anyone at the Wall. This is the section that has been designated by the Supreme Court, over Orthodox objection, as the spot for Reform and Conservative Jews to hold their *b'nei mitzvah* services. I have participated in several ceremonies there with TBA families. I happen to think that it's a lovely spot, away from the crowds and the schnorring that goes on at the main plaza. The families are always happy. And yet it makes me incredibly angry that we have, in effect, been exiled to this spot because of how the Orthodox feel about us. "You are a threat to the Jewish people. Your very presence offends us. If you

must come to this sacred site at all, go over there where we can't see you. You go pray over there.”

This angers me – and it should anger you too. This is a democracy, after all! They have the idea that all Liberal Jews are out to destroy Judaism, so I shouldn't be allowed to hold a *bat mitzvah* ceremony at the Wall? Because they make an assumption about all Liberal Jews, we are denied the right to pray at the Wall? Because our very presence offends them, we have to move further away? It makes me furious, and it should make you furious as well. This is not happening in 15th century Poland. This is happening right now, in Jerusalem, at the Western Wall.

And something very similar is happening right here, in New York, at Ground Zero.

The vitriol being aimed at Imam Feisal Rauf and the Islamic Cultural Center he is trying to build is eerily similar to the things that are said by the ultra-Orthodox about liberal Jews in Israel. The situations are by no means identical, but the parallels are unmistakable. In both cases, a religious group is being told it shouldn't pray in a certain spot, because of the way others feel about them. In both cases, assumptions are being made about the intentions of all members of the group: Liberal Judaism will destroy the Jewish people; Islam is seeking to destroy America. In both cases public sentiment seems to be that although these groups have the legal right to be there, the passionate feelings of those opposed – ought to trump those rights. That is, if the Orthodox feel so strongly that Liberal Jews praying at the Wall is insensitive, what's the big deal if you Liberal Jews pray over there at Robinson's arch, where we can't see you? If a significant percentage of Americans feel so strongly, what's the big deal if you Muslims move 2, 8, 10, 40 blocks farther away – no one has actually said how far would be far enough.

The details are different, but the parallels are unmistakable. And if we are outraged – as I hope that we are – at the idea of a woman being jailed for carrying a Torah; if we are outraged - as I hope we are – at the idea that Liberal Jews cannot pray together at the Western Wall, then I believe that we ought to be equally outraged at the calls for the Park51 project to be moved, equally outraged at the attempt to prevent a group of American citizens from building a house of worship on a site where they have already been worshipping for more than a year.

And yet, most of us are not outraged by what is being done to this group of Muslims. In fact, many don't think anything wrong is **being** done. If the polls are correct, 70% of Americans and 50% of Jews– about half of us sitting here today - think that insisting that Muslims move the Cultural Center is the right thing to do. I wonder why that is?

Over the past month, many arguments have been advanced as to why it would be a good idea to move the project elsewhere, from the outlandish statements of the reactionary blogosphere to the more measured and apparently heartfelt concerns for victims' families. Some arguments can be dismissed out of hand. For example the claim that the intent of erecting this center is to cast a triumphalist Muslim shadow on an American defeat. Or the comment that here in America we should only allow a mosque to be built in New York if the Saudis allow a synagogue in Mecca. As if religious oppression elsewhere is an example on which we should model our behavior. As if we should lower ourselves to the intolerant standards of a despotic monarchy, rather than upholding the values that have made our country great. I think that these arguments can simply be dismissed.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the anguished voices of some of the families. Mayor Bloomberg says that most of the families of victims are actually in favor

of the project. But even if it's only a handful who object, their pain must be acknowledged. As an editorial in the Forward said, "The hate-filled rants of conservative bloggers and Tea Party activists against this project are to be condemned unequivocally, but a father's lingering pain and confusion deserve some respect." They do. They deserve respect and more. But, as others have pointed out, and as uncomfortable as it is to say, the pain of the families cannot be a basis for public policy. The pain of the families is not a reason to compromise the American values for which so many died that day. The Mayor said it eloquently:

"On September 11, 2001, thousands of first responders heroically rushed to the scene and saved tens of thousands of lives. More than 400 of those first responders did not make it out alive. In rushing into those burning buildings, not one of them asked 'What God do you pray to?' 'What beliefs do you hold?'"

"The attack was an act of war - and our first responders defended not only our City but also our country and our Constitution. We do not honor their lives by denying the very Constitutional rights they died protecting. We honor their lives by defending those rights - and the freedoms that the terrorists attacked."

Between the fevered imaginings of the blogosphere and the all-too-real pain of the victims' families, there have been other, reasonable-sounding arguments as well. There has been much discussion of the area being sacred ground. I believe this to be true. Ground Zero is the site of a tragedy in which 2752 human beings of all faiths died, and it is, in effect, a mass grave. It is a holy site. But what I cannot understand is why putting a religious center near a holy site is offensive. There are strip clubs and fast food joints which are closer to Ground Zero, which I do find offensive at a holy site. But no one is suggesting that those be closed. Or that new ones be prevented from opening. And if we say for some reason that there should simply be no religious institutions there, then I cannot understand why no one is saying of the churches in the area, some even closer to Ground Zero – that they should be closed or no new churches should be opened.

It seems to me that what is really being said is **not**, "This is holy ground and therefore we have to be very careful what we build in the area." What is really being said is, "This is holy ground on which Americans died, and therefore we should not allow Muslims near it. It was Muslim extremists who attacked us, and they did it, they claimed, in the name of Islam, and so the presence of any type of Muslim in the vicinity is an affront, a provocation, a slap in the face. At the very least, it is 'insensitive.'" If we buy into this argument, what we are saying in effect is that all Muslims – 1.5 billion people – must be held accountable, or at least must bear the penalty for the actions of their co-religionists. In fact, as Rabbi Eric Yoffie pointed out just a few days ago, what this argument, and in fact all the arguments against have in common is this: they make "no sense unless you hold that all Muslims are somehow to be held responsible for the actions of a few. That is really the claim here, acknowledged or not."

I think that, as difficult as it is to admit to ourselves, Rabbi Yoffie is correct. Somewhere inside many of us, if we are honest about it – and Yom Kippur is the time for that – somewhere inside many of us we feel an uneasiness with Muslims. Not just with a mosque at Ground Zero – but with Muslims. Jews feel it particularly strongly perhaps because of our relationship with Israel, but I think it is true of many Americans. We don't want to be intolerant, and yet there is that doubt: Is it possible they do really all hate us?

You can test my theory that we are uneasy with Muslims with a thought experiment – and remember, it’s Yom Kippur, so be honest with yourself. You learn that the Islamic Fellowship of Westchester has purchased land for a mosque in Tarrytown, or Irvington or Ardsley, or wherever you live. What is your first reaction? Thrilled? Upset? Uncertain? And not because of parking or taxes. Really – what’s your immediate initial reaction to a mosque filled with Muslims in your neighborhood? The many conversations I have been having with people during the past few weeks tell me that many of us would be ambivalent at best.

This helps explain the question that I began with: why are we angry about what is happening at the Wall in Jerusalem, but not at what is happening at Ground Zero? It helps explain why it is easy for us to become outraged on our own behalf, easy to see discrimination when it is aimed at us, but so difficult to recognize it when it is aimed at a group we don’t know so well. The statements that sound outrageous when they are aimed at us somehow start to sound like plausible truths when aimed at them.

We immediately dismiss the statement, “Jews are part of an international Zionist conspiracy to control the world.” But perhaps we are less quick to dismiss, “Muslims are part of a global Islamic jihad to take over the West.” We immediately distance ourselves from the group of ultra-religious, ultra-nationalist Jews who quote the Torah to prove that violence against and even killing of Palestinians is justified. “They don’t represent mainstream Judaism,” we say. Why then do we hesitate to believe mainstream Muslims who wish to distance themselves from the various groups of ultra-religious, ultra-nationalist Islamists represented by Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, who quote the Koran to prove that violence against and even killing of unbelievers is justified? We don’t want to be tarred with the same brush as our violent co-religionists. Why is it so hard to resist tarring others with such a broad brush?

I don’t believe that we are all bigots. And yet it painfully clear that many otherwise open and tolerant people harbor doubts about Muslims. Why is that? I think it is simply that we are afraid. We watched the Towers collapse and we are afraid something like that will happen again and we know that a group of Muslims did it and because we don’t know enough about Islam to be able to distinguish among the various factions we see them all -1.5 billion people - as one big terrorist group. In short, we are afraid of what we don’t know.

Nicholas Kristoff, with whom I often disagree, had an insightful op-ed about this two weeks ago. In responding to the question of whether he thought bigotry was the main reason for opposing the Islamic Center, he wrote:

“Most of the opponents aren’t bigots but well-meaning worriers — and during earlier waves of intolerance in American history, it was just the same.

“Screeds against Catholics from the 19th century sounded just like the invective today against the Not-at-Ground-Zero Mosque. The starting point isn’t hatred but fear: an alarm among patriots that newcomers don’t share their values, don’t believe in democracy, and may harm innocent Americans.

“Followers of these movements against Irish, Germans, Italians, Chinese and other immigrants were mostly decent, well-meaning people trying to protect their country. But they were manipulated by demagogues playing upon their fears...

“Most Americans stayed on the sidelines during these spasms of bigotry, and only a small number of hoodlums killed or tormented Catholics, Mormons or others. But the assaults were possible because so many middle-of-the-road Americans were ambivalent.

“Suspicion of outsiders, of people who behave or worship differently, may be an ingrained element of the human condition, a survival instinct from our cave-man days. But we should also recognize that historically this distrust has led us to burn witches, intern Japanese-Americans, and turn away Jewish refugees from the Holocaust.” (NY Times, September 4)

Kristoff goes on to point out that “typically as each group has assimilated, it has participated in the torment of newer arrivals.” And frankly, my friends, this is what really worries me today.

I am not that worried about what happens to Imam Rauf. Though I will be saddened and disappointed if the Park 51 site is moved, I know that he will continue to teach and preach his moderate, Sufi form of Islam wherever he ends up, at whatever number of blocks away is deemed acceptable. I know that he will continue to reach out to all other faith communities in the area, as he has done for years. He has worked with both the Conservative and Reform movements, he has taught and preached in our synagogues. I am not worried about him. I am much more worried about what this entire event says about us as Americans, and specifically about us as Jews.

350 years ago we were “that deceitful race” that Peter Stuyvesant sought to bar from New Amsterdam, and did prevent from building a synagogue. One hundred years ago, we were the ones whom the established Americans were afraid of, the ones accused of plotting the downfall of America. In 1940, a poll showed that 17% of Americans thought that Jews were a menace to the country. In the 50’s and 60’s suburban communities all across the country changed their zoning laws to try to keep synagogues out. They failed, but they tried.

And all along, in addition to the attempts at legal blackballing, there was what was referred to as genteel anti-Semitism. There’s nothing on paper that says you can’t join the country club – but everyone knew you couldn’t. There’s nothing written that says you can’t live in this neighborhood, but everyone knew you couldn’t. There was nothing written, but they were told, sometimes in so many words, “why would you want to join a club where you’re not wanted, where your presence will make people uncomfortable?” They were told, “Why would you want to live in a neighborhood or build a synagogue where you’re not wanted, where your presence will make people uncomfortable?” Just because you legally can, doesn’t mean you should. It shows insensitivity. Why would you want to do that?

And then, lo and behold, we made it. Our synagogues are everywhere, the suburbs are open to us, our kids go to all the colleges they couldn’t before. The question now is, what happens next? I’m reminded of an old line from the Russian-Jewish comedian Yaakov Smirnoff who said, “The moment I became a citizen of the U.S. I was overcome by a powerful feeling – the feeling that we shouldn’t let in anymore of those damn foreigners!” Is this how we now feel? Having succeeded, finally, in being allowed to join the country clubs and attend the colleges and move into the neighborhoods and build our synagogues, have we suddenly turned into the gate-keepers? Will we continue in the tradition that Kristoff laid out, where in America the victims become the tormentors?

I believe better of us. The Torah says repeatedly to the Jewish people, “do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Jewish response is not to say “we went through it, now it’s your turn.” The Jewish response is, “we went through it, now how can we help prevent it from happening to you?”

2000 years ago our great sage Hillel, when asked for the essence of Judaism said, “What is hateful to you do not do to anyone else. All the rest is commentary.” What is hateful to you, do not do...” What is hateful to us as Jews is being thought of as an international conspiracy. What is hateful to us as Jews is having the actions and proclamations of a few extremists be considered the goals and beliefs of all of us. What is hateful to us as Jews is suffering because of any of the stereotypes that we have worked so hard to dispel. What is hateful to us as Jews is being told “we don’t really trust you, and so you can’t build your synagogue here.” All of these things are hateful to us and we must not inflict them on others!

It is understandable that we are uncomfortable with the unknown. It is easy to ascribe evil intentions to faceless groups; it is much harder to do that with individuals with whom we live and work. Familiarity does not breed contempt – it leads to understanding. The people through the centuries who didn’t want Jews in their neighborhood weren’t necessarily hate-filled bigots. Many of them were ignorant of Jews and therefore afraid. Having never interacted with Jews, perhaps having never met Jews, they believed what they had been taught, by the church and by others, about how evil Jews were. They believed that, given half a chance, a Jew would steal their children and use the blood to make matzoh. They believed that we would poison their wells and cause the plague. They did not know us and so they were afraid of us. And being afraid made them do hateful things to us. It is only after living and working together for many years that we have been able to largely overcome those fears.

One of the problems here in Westchester is that we just don’t know many Muslims, so we have not had the chance to become familiar with them. I have been searching for ten years to find a group that would be willing to engage in an interfaith dialogue. There are so many churches and synagogues that want to do this that there aren’t enough Muslims to go around! “We’re booked solid,” they tell me. If you have Muslim friends that would be interested in participating, I want to meet them. Please, help me be in touch with them. If you don’t have Muslim friends, you would be well-served to find some. Not so you can say “some of my best-friends are Muslim,” but because this is the way we will overcome our unease, step by step.

Meanwhile, I want to recommend a book: **An Introduction to Islam for Jews**, by Reuven Firestone. It is not light reading, but it is important. I plan to devote my Spring adult education series to discussing it. Unease and uncertainty may be understandable, but willful ignorance is not. We have an obligation to learn more, to do what we can to overcome our own prejudices.

“What is hateful to you do not do to anyone else.” At this season of introspection, I urge you to look honestly at your feelings about the Cultural Center at Ground Zero and about Muslims in general. We do not need to be ashamed of our fears, but we should be ashamed of ourselves if we do nothing to confront those fears, if we do nothing to overcome them.

At this holy season which has seen the confluence of Ramadan and of Rosh Hashanah, I pray that this year will see increased understanding among the descendants of Abraham, between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael, here in America and throughout the world. And may we, each and every one of us, do our part to make it a reality.