

A Letter.

To: Abe Foxman, Director, Anti-Defamation League. 605
Third Avenue, New York, NY.

Dear Abe,

I am writing to respectfully request that the Anti-Defamation League reconsider its opposition to the construction of the Cordoba Center, an Islamic community center and mosque at 45 Park Place, about four blocks away from the site of "Ground Zero," the former site of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan.

In the 1920s, all-white, all-Christian, all-male jury acquitted those accused of murder in the matter of the lynching of Leo Frank. Frank was a Jewish factory owner wrongfully convicted of murdering one of his Christian employees. Some of those involved in this miscarriage of justice went

on to found the modern incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), too, was founded in direct response to this outrage. For decades, just as the Klan and other enemies of freedom and justice did not discriminate among Jews, Catholics, or African-Americans, so too, the ADL was a proud voice against bigotry and for justice for all. That's why I read ADL's statement on the proposed Cordoba Center in New York with disbelief, shock, sorrow, regret, and anger – the emotional handmaidens of loss. I mourn the loss of the ADL that once was.

I deeply respect that both your deep Jewish commitment, so I probably don't have to remind me that our Torah portion this week, *Shoftim*, calls out, in a voice that has rung for millennia: "justice, justice shall you pursue." It says, "Bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the

plea of the just" – reminding us that we must be ruled by law, by scrupulously fair practices. It even asks, in one of the best rhetorical questions of all time, "What, are trees of the field human, that they could flee behind city walls before your army?" in order to teach us that even in wartime, we are still bound by rules and by justice.

But today, in the ADL's view, "The controversy which has emerged regarding the building of an Islamic Center at this location is counterproductive to the healing process. Therefore, under these unique circumstances, we believe the City of New York would be better served if an alternative location could be found."

How could the building of a new kind of Islamic center, not only a mosque, but a community center designed along the very same lines as a Jewish community center, whose board will include Christians and Jews be "counterproductive to the healing process"?

How could Feisal Abdul Rauf, the Imam leading the project, who says the Cordoba Center's presence is to "send the opposite statement to what happened on 9/11," who says, "We want to push back against the extremists," cause more pain to those who lost loved ones?

As you yourself explained it, Abe, "survivors of the Holocaust (and by analogy, September 11 victims) are entitled to feelings that are irrational." You went on to say that "the anguish felt by the families of Sept. 11 victims entitles them to positions that others would categorize as irrational or bigoted."

Well, of course. Of course, anyone who lost a loved one or close friend to Muhammad Atta and his heartless pirates, and those who sent them, could be forgiven for venting their rage and pain against Muslims. In a way, we all lost someone that terrible day. It would be heartless to expect that people who lost loved ones would be neutral when they

first hear the idea of "a mosque at Ground Zero, in the shadow of the Twin Towers."

But Mr. Foxman, your own home page couldn't respond more appropriately: "[the ADL's] ultimate purpose is to secure justice and fair treatment to all citizens alike and to put an end forever to unjust and unfair discrimination against, and ridicule of, any sect or body of citizens." Sure, victims and their families are entitled to feel what they feel. But it is an incredible leap from allowing them some room for normal human emotions to allowing those responses you call "irrational or bigoted" to drive national policy! Should we associate all Muslims with Muhammad Atta or Osama Bin-Laden? Is 45 Park Place any less in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty than the Twin Towers?

What if gentile victims of Bernie Madoff's pyramid scheme were to oppose the construction of a Synagogue or Jewish Community Center in lower Manhattan – "mere blocks from Wall Street"? Would you say that the Jewish site should be moved "to facilitate the healing process?" Or would you say that the vast majority of the Jewish community loathes Madoff's crimes, deeply regrets the harm he caused, and feels deep shame and remorse? What if white victims of street crimes demanded that an African American church be built somewhere else? What if a major American political party jumped on such a bandwagon?

Doesn't the ADL's mission include bigotry and intolerance against Muslims? What about those Muslims, both American citizens and foreign nationals who died in the Twin Towers? Are their families not entitled to mourn their dead? Should we besmirch moderate, righteous Muslims

by association when they condemn the atrocities committed in Islam's name by Al-Qaeda and its allies?

I'm so impressed by Fareed Zakaria, who returned the Hubert H. Humphrey First Amendment Freedoms Prize, awarded by the ADL in 2005 because he was "deeply saddened" by ADL's contradictory position. Zakaria was so right to point out the irony: "if this community center were being built anywhere else in the world, the U.S. Government would likely be funding it."

And Independent Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City is part of a grand American tradition. Bloomberg said the American spirit of openness to everyone and anyone who works and plays by the rules "was attacked on 9/11, when 3,000 people died because some murderous fanatics didn't want us to profess our own faith, speak our own minds, follow our own dreams, and live our own lives."

Abe, please be aware of the stakes here. It's not only about a single Islamic center in New York, however iconic that particular battle has become. The deeper issue is justice and fair treatment for all citizens alike. Across our country, echoes of the fight about the Codoba Center have begun to ring: in North Carolina, where a candidate for Congress disparages Islam to whip up popular support, to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where another proposed Mosque becomes a flash point.

I'm saddened to see such bigotry in the old South but proud to see a new response to it. Thank God that in Murfreesboro, anti-Mosque demonstrators were outnumbered by those with signs like "I love my Muslim neighbor" and "freedom of religion."

I can only hope you'll listen to the anguished pleas like this one, from the Jewish community and others devoted to upholding the bill of rights. I'm sure even your own staff

and board are asking you to reconsider. Abe, have no fear: changing your mind won't make you look weak or indecisive. On the contrary, in this season of Elul before the High Holy Days, when we prepare spiritually to meet our maker by apologizing for our wrongs and promising to turn to a better way, you'll set an example that will be the admiration of the entire Jewish people. Not to mention it would win you some powerful new allies. It might even convince some of those victim's family members who still nurse bigoted, irrational feelings against all Muslims to turn away from hate. There really are so many good Muslims fighting the good fight, and still more who are choosing sides – we will need these people to win. Let's not drive them into the arms of the bad guys.

I hope you'll remember that both President Obama and Former President George W. Bush have said many times that the War on Terror is not a war against Islam. But if

even they cannot convince you, Abe, maybe there's one other American President who might. No, I'm not thinking of your namesake Abraham Lincoln, though I'm sure he'd disagree with you too. I'm thinking of President George Washington, who assured Moses Seixas, the Sexton of the Touro Synagogue of Newport, Rhode Island that the new government of the United States was one which gave "...to bigotry, no sanction; to persecution, no assistance."

Have faith. In America, in Israel, and around the world, good and righteous people will once again win the fight for freedom. As always, to secure freedom and justice we must embody these values. Justice, justice, shall you pursue. May bigotry and persecution be dispersed like smoke in this new year. Keyn y'hi ratzon. So may it be God's will.

Sincerely yours, L'Shanah Tovah, and Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Justin Kerber