

THE ISLAMIC CENTER & THE AMERICAN HEART  
By Rabbi Joel R. Schwartzman

What strange and wonderful things the internet sometimes brings us. Today I got a 'You Tube' story about an elephant refuge in Tennessee. You learn in this video that the elephants may come to the refuge solo, but they quickly find a partner. Elephants being the social creatures that they are, none stays alone for very long. Now it seems that Tarra, an elephant has bonded with Bella which, of all things, is a dog. The two are inseparable. The last scene shows Tara rubbing Bella's stomach with her enormous foot. Some great trust on Bella, the dog's part, no? The moral which the voice over fellow strains to tug from this story is that if an elephant and a dog can get along so well, why can't we?

Well, that leads me to another story which has persisted for some time on the internet and in the news. It concerns the Islamic Center at "Ground Zero" in lower Manhattan. I weighed in on this issue at a session that I held last weekend for the members of Synagogue of the Summit and nearly got my head handed to me for my "Liberal" views.

Let me make something lucidly clear. I think that building an Islamic center near ( it is not at the actual site of the Ground Zero...please know that the center would be located about 2 blocks from Ground Zero...is a public

relations disaster). I wrote this to Mayor Bloomberg say that it would be akin to the Japanese placing a memorial to their fallen at Pearl Harbor. If it weren't enough for the media knowing that it has a lucrative tiger by the tail and for some national, political leaders making demagogic hay out of the issue, tapping into a deep, deep well of American pain, trauma, and anger which rightfully persists throughout the nation's soul; the fact that the sources of money for this project haven't been revealed hasn't helped in selling it at all. No one wants an Islamic Center near Ground Zero that might have any funding from Al Qaeda, from Saudi Arabia or any source that might in any way be connected with the terrorists who flew commercial aircraft into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and into a Pennsylvania field but was surely headed for another site in Washington, D.C., were it not for the courage and guts of the passengers. No one needs that jab in the heart. That there is a continuing reservoir of national hurt and outrage is understandable and even, in some way, commendable.

However...and I'm sure that you have been waiting for my "however," given the time of year for us Jews, we need to step back from the verbal melee and put some perspective on the issue. This is the month of Elul, a time when we need to be doing a *chesbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our souls. Are we indeed living up to our potentials? What have we been

making of our lives? What is our assessment of our personal righteousness as we enter the High Holiday period which is but 2 ½ short weeks away? Perhaps, we can help lead our beloved country in this introspection. Given the heat over this center issue, it might really be useful.

That this center is New York City's business is, to some degree, true. It is the city's responsibility to approve the plans and to issue the licenses and permits to build. It is technically not the job of Congress or of the President or of national political figures; and to the degree that it is not, they might want to allow the locals to work the issue through. Yes, there is a patina of pain that they can appeal to, but there is nothing solidly sordid or threatening about the building of a religious center among the other businesses and houses of worship in lower Manhattan. The true fact, in my eyes, is that if anyone is worried about what is going on in this center, they ought to be encouraging its building and then rifle it with agents of security agencies to monitor the tone and doings of the place, its leaders and its participants. I prefer having the overt which can be observed than to have sleeper cells which are harder to track and which led to the terrible, terrible success of the Twin Tower bombers.

That there is a security argument, a moral argument and a good taste argument to be made about the building of this center all pales in the face of

the legal argument. This country was founded on the basis of our collectively compacting around a Constitution. That Constitution has Ten Amendments and the first of them insures religious liberty. Putting aside all the emotional turmoil and the highly charged rhetoric, this Sufi imam and his supporters have every legal right to build this center where they have planned to. “As a matter of constitutional law,” and here I am quoting my son who is a First Amendment scholar at the University of Virginia’s Law School, “the Free Exercise Clause...prohibits discrimination targeted against religion.”

“On both constitutional and statutory grounds, the legal issues are quite clear,” he writes. The center will be built. And to this I say, thank God. I say this not because I am any lover of Islam or of blanket forgiveness or anything close to it. You know me better than that. I say this because I am a believer in law. As a Jew, I understand the stance of one New York Jewish representative, Jerold Nadler. He said that were New York to deny the right of these Moslems to build their center, the next day they could do the same to us Jews. We’ve been there in this country and have been one group which benefited when the rule of law won out over prejudice and hatred. Freedom of religion and religious practice does not stop at the door of any faith in America. And for national figures to fan the flame of hatred

by painting all Moslems with the brush of their all being Islamic extremists is to practice the worst form of bigotry. We Jews know better. We had better know better.

Believe me; some very creepy, very deceptive people will do their best to take advantage of this argument. If America is to be what the American constitution depicts us to be, they will fail. Just as this week's torah portion urges us to follow God's laws regarding our treatment of the poor, and God has held our feet to the fire when we have failed to live up to these laws, we cannot call ourselves a nation of laws and of responsible governance one day and then turn our backs on that stance the next day when some other argument seems more powerful.

I agree with the President when he said that legally, the proponents of the Islamic Center have every right to build whenever they want. It may not be the wisest thing to do, but it cannot be stopped. But, as the debate rolls on, and as we quickly approach the holiest days in our year, we need to appeal to principle. Outrage and raw emotion cannot triumph if America is to be true to itself. We can and should continue to mourn our victimhood at the hands of some vile and despicable enemies; we must defend our shores from another such attack. But we must allow the freedoms promised in our

founding document to all our citizens else we shall cease to be a free,  
democratic republic. We shall cease to be America.