

AT THE CROSSROADS

September 18, 2010- Yom Kippur Morning

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This morning, our Reform Torah portion is different from the one our Conservative and Orthodox co-religionists read. Ours comes from the book of Deuteronomy. Theirs comes from Leviticus. In that portion, we learn about an exotic ritual. On the day of Yom Kippur, the High Priest took two male goats and placed lots upon them.

One lot was marked: "For the Lord." The other lot was marked: "For Azazel." Azazel was probably some dreaded demonic figure living in the desert. The High Priest sacrificed the goat designated for the Lord. He sent the other goat, designated for Azazel, into the desert. That goat was to carry away his own sins, as well as the sins of the people.

Driving the goat into the wilderness is the antecedent to what we today call, "scapegoating." William Tyndale, first important translator of the Bible into English, coined the term "scapegoat," in the 16th century.

Originally scapegoating was used to describe an animal on which the community transferred its guilt. In those days, the people at least acknowledged and admitted their own sins before displacing them on the goat. However, today, scapegoating means something significantly different. Today, people do not take any responsibility. Instead they instantly blame a person or a group of people for their faults, their sins, and their misfortunes.

Americans seem to have changed scapegoats over the decades. In each case, they target those groups whom they claim have sinister motives, because scapegoating is more than simple bigotry. It is much more complex. It involves charges of conspiracy. These groups who are scapegoated are believed to exert a powerful, invisible evil force which eventually will ruin America and conquer the world.

In the late 1800's, Catholics were the target of the American people's frustrations. One critic called Catholics, "Alien Romanists." He charged that Catholics swore allegiance to the pope instead of the country.

Soon thereafter, we Jews became the scapegoats. Anti-Semites charged that we were threatening world conquest. In the 1930's and 1940's, these conspiracy theories spread like cancer. In 1939, Father Charles Coughlin unleashed his venom against Jews to a crowd of 20,000 at Madison Square Garden. Surrounding the stadium were huge banners that read: "Stop Jewish Domination of America." Around the same time, Charles Lindbergh, the aviator hero, denounced American Jews for pushing our country into war.

This paranoia about Jewish world domination reminds me of one of my favorite stories about a German Rabbi, named Altmann. He and his secretary were sitting in a coffee house in Berlin in 1935.

She said to him, "Rabbi Altmann, I notice you're reading *Der Sturmer*. It is such a vicious Nazi newspaper. I can't understand why. Are you some kind of masochist or, God forbid, a self-hating Jew?"

"On the contrary," the rabbi answered. "When I used to read the Jewish papers, all I learned about were pogroms, riots in Palestine, and assimilation in America. But now that I read *Der Stürmer*, I see so much more: that the Jews control all the banks, that we dominate the arts, and that we're on the verge of taking over the entire world. You know – it somehow makes me feel a whole lot better!"

There have been other scapegoats as well, like the Japanese-Americans and the Communists. So now the Muslims are our scapegoats. Some Americans fear that the Muslims are attempting to foist Shariah law on our banks, our academic institutions, and our government agencies.

Some even charge that they ultimately hope to replace our Constitution with the Koran. These anti-Muslim apprehensions have been inflamed by the news of the plans to build a \$100-million Islamic Center two blocks from Ground Zero in New York City.

This development has whipped up a whirlwind of irrational charges, especially against the Feisal Rauf, the Sufi Muslim imam who is behind this project. Some say that he is a closet extremist and has ties with terrorists. There have also been accusations about the sources of funding for the Islamic Center, even though no money has been raised yet.

From personal experience, I can tell you that these claims are libelous and unfounded. Lynn and I have known Imam Feisal Rauf for several years. He is a frequent lecturer at Chautauqua Institutional in western New York state, where we have spent the past several summers.

In fact, I have shared the lecture platform with him. On at least two occasions, we have welcomed him to our condo for Shabbat dinner. Within the American religious community, Feisal Rauf has been an outstanding peacemaker. He abhors violence. He is an ardent champion of interfaith harmony and cooperation.

He counts many rabbis among his closest supporters. During the 1967 Six-Day War in Israel, he talked daily with Alan Silverstein, a Jewish classmate at Columbia University. Silverstein reports that Imam Rauf was genuinely trying to understand the deep concerns of American Jews about Israel.

When Imam Rauf speaks about Shariah law, he highlights its core principles like the right to life, dignity and education, and rejects the Taliban's inhumane distortions of Shariah. To him, the stoning of women and denying them an education are aberrations of Shariah. Shariah contains a vast complex body of religious legislation, akin to that of the Talmud. Only a skilled interpreter, like Feisal, and not amateurs, can draw correct conclusions from it.

We have now moved into an era when voicing any kind of prejudice is taboo. It is not fashionable to use the "N" word or to speak disparagingly about any racial, religious or ethnic group in polite society. The one single exception is the Muslims. Bigotry against Muslims seems to be our only legitimate prejudice. The Muslims are our latter-day scapegoats.

Prominent American leaders, like Franklin Graham, son of the famed evangelist, Billy Graham, have joined this ugly chorus of defamation. He has labeled Islam as a “very wicked and evil religion.” He continues to denigrate Islam unceasingly and unapologetically to this very day.

Like all brands of scapegoating, antipathy to Islam is driven by an irrational fear. What is its source? For generations, our country was controlled by a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority. Their ancestors came from England, Scotland, and other lands of Northwestern Europe generations ago.

They set the standards for our behavior. They determined our cultural norms. In short, they defined America. Those who cling to this vision of America and are hostile to any other vision are known as nativists. An ugly streak of nativism has run through our country’s history from the beginning.

Now these nativists feel threatened, because they have lost power and influence. Their numbers are dwindling. Their fears have been exacerbated by America’s vulnerability since 9/11, by our current economic crisis, by the wave of foreigners entering America, and by having a black president in the White House.

Their dreams of an ideal America have been tarnished and defiled, and they need someone to blame. American Muslims are now the targets of their discontent. Hostility against Muslims has taken frightening expressions. Last month, a young man stabbed a Muslim cabdriver in New York. Just days ago, a pastor in Florida planned to mark September 11 by publicly burning Korans.

This year, the end of Ramadan coincided with September 11. The conclusion of Ramadan is traditionally marked with gala celebrations. Yet this year, many Muslim groups refrained from celebrating for fear that others would interpret it as their rejoicing over the tragedy of 9/11.

The truth is that the vast majority of American Muslims are faithful American citizens. They abhor the terrorism wreaked by the radical Muslims, like the 19 hijackers. In fact, the casualties of 9/11 came from all religious communities, including the Muslim. At least 60 out of the 3000 casualties of 9/11 at Ground Zero were Muslims. One was a cafeteria manager from Guyna. Another was a copy machine operator from India. Then there was a computer tech, who was about to celebrate his fourth wedding anniversary on September 12.

Of all times, it is essential that we, in the Jewish community, feel the pain of our beleaguered Muslim brothers and sisters and rush to support and aid them. After all, not too long ago, we were America’s scapegoats, as they are today.

In 1654, Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor, tried to expel the first Jews who arrived in New York. His superiors overruled him, but then Stuyvesant told the Jews that they couldn’t build a synagogue anywhere in Manhattan. In fact, it wasn’t until almost 100 years later, that the first synagogue, Congregation Sherith Israel, was allowed to be erected.

In subsequent decades, we American Jews couldn’t buy homes in scores of exclusive residential areas of most major cities. We were denied membership in country clubs. Except

for tiny numbers of us, we could not attend top Ivy League universities and medical schools. We were also banned from the leadership of most industrial corporations and law firms.

It is only in the last 45 years that all these doors of admission have swung open for us. Thus, it behooves us to feel the painful sting of discrimination and bigotry. We American Jews were the American Muslims of yesterday, and yesterday was not that distant.

Unfortunately, some American Jews tend to forget our agonizing past and have joined in this bashing of Muslims. They speak about the Muslim threat to our security and to Israel's security. They send e-mail messages that stir up and increase the animosity against this people.

Personally I find it is grossly reprehensible for any Jew to be prejudiced against any group of people. Islamophobia is a dreadful spiritual disease, to which we Jews should develop a permanent immunity.

We who have been the targets of hatred, persecution, harassment and mass murder for over 4000 years intimately know the agony and humiliation of the victim. In our Torah, we are reminded 36 times that we were slaves in Egypt and therefore should know the heart of the stranger and the outsider. We who have been taught to love our neighbor and to regard every human being as a child of God can not allow ourselves to harbor even a shred of bias against any religious community.

Instead, it is in our own interest as Jews to fight this anti-Islamic menace. Bigotry against any group is not only morally repugnant. It is also bad for Jews. Some Jews may take comfort in knowing that now that the prejudice has found a new victim, the heat will be off us. This is false assurance, however. Hatred spreads like a malignancy beyond its original target. Who can assure us that those preachers and pundits who defame Islam will not eventually begin to malign Judaism next? Indeed, bigotry knows no boundaries.

There are some positive developments that I can report. Just six days after 9/11, President George W. Bush said: "America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens, and Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country. Muslims are doctors, lawyers, law professors, members of the military, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads. And they need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect. . . . They love America just as much as I do."

Then, too, I am grateful that most American Jewish organizations, including our Union for Reform Judaism and the National Council of Jewish Women, have supported the building of the Islamic Center two blocks from Ground Zero. In fact, a large number of Jews and Christians serve on the Board of the Islamic Center.

I was also pleased to read in the column by Nicholas Kristof in last Sunday's *New York Times*, about Student Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, daughter of Marvin and Liana Barenblat, who was confirmed at our Temple. She has done something remarkable to combat this anti-Muslim bigotry. She has raised more than \$1000 from both Jews and

Christians to replace the defiled prayer rugs on which a drunken intruder had urinated at a mosque.

In this New Year, let us emulate these people, rid our hearts of any trace of Islamophobia, and, once and for all, render scapegoating, in all of its twisted manifestations, anachronistic and obsolete. Amen.