

Standing Up for What's Right: A Jewish Response to Islamophobia in America
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Can you build a mosque two blocks from Ground Zero?

The whole country seems to be asking that question. Is it right? Is it just? Is it a testament to freedom or is it an insult to the dead.

More and more over the last few years, Islam has taken center stage in our national debate – Islam in Afghanistan and the Middle East; and more recently, Islam in America. And the debate has not always been pleasant, especially recently:

- Last month, a mosque under construction in Tennessee was set on fire.
- In New York, a cab driver was assaulted with a knife when his passenger found out that he was Muslim.
- In Florida, as we all know, a minister planned an event called “International Burn a Koran Day.” And even though he called it off, there were others who went through with it.

It would be one thing if these events were isolated, but they seem to be part of a growing pattern in our society that casts Muslims as dangerous outsiders. And it's coming from throughout the political spectrum.

When the first Muslim congressman was elected, a TV host sat him down and said, “Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.”

At a recent rally in New York, protestors held signs calling the proposed mosque a “sacrilege and mockery.”¹

Two weeks ago, a writer for the New Republic pondered in writing whether Muslims are “worthy of the privileges of the first amendment”

These are strong words. There is a great deal about the Islamic world today that is worrisome. 9/11 is still fresh in our minds. Those of us who follow the situation in Israel know just how dangerous groups like Hamas and Hizbollah can be. But as Jews, we should be concerned by the tone of the rhetoric in our country, both because it is part of our tradition to stand up for justice, and because in the past we have often been on the receiving end of such discrimination.

James Besser wrote in the *New York Jewish Week*:

¹ <http://itn.co.uk/c5ad8b26bbc2fc4191acc6ef94fe68c0.html>.

Terrorism by Islamic extremists is real and must be fought with both might and wisdom. And yes, there is unspeakable anti-Semitism spewed by some Islamic leaders. That doesn't change the fact that it's becoming acceptable in today's America to attack *all* Muslims as part of this evil force, to portray the Muslim faith as inherently violent and evil in almost exactly the same way that Judaism has been labeled for centuries.²

On the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, our country's relationship with Islam is more complex than ever. It is complex because as a country, we don't fully understand the beliefs and practices of Islam. It is complex because we are in a protracted war with an enemy that represents one segment of the Islamic world, while at the same time American Muslim community is growing larger and more visible.

The U.S. State Department estimates that there are around 6 millions Muslims in America today, slightly more than there are Jews. Islam either is or is about to be the second largest religion in America, after Christianity. This is a fact with which our country must come to terms.

We Jews may be in a unique position to guide debate on this issue. Because of our commitment to justice, we can stand up and demand that Muslim leaders speak out clearly and firmly on radical Islam, that the Muslim community take a stand against violence - here and in Israel and around the world. And at the same time, because of the same commitment to justice, we can stand for the rights of Muslims to build houses of worship and wear head coverings, to live free of discrimination and stereotyping. Martin Luther King, Jr., said "Justice denied anywhere diminishes justice everywhere."

I am not here today to take a stand on whether Cordoba House should be built two blocks from the World Trade Center. I have my feelings on the matter, like everyone in the room. And so do the leaders of the Union for Reform Judaism and of the Reform synagogues in New York. But that you can find on the internet. I am here instead to speak about the immense disservice that is being done to our country by those who would question whether Muslims and whether Islam belong here.

Thomas Jefferson said in his inaugural address that the United States is a country founded on tolerance. He said we have "banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered."

John F. Kennedy added that "Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs. Rather, it condemns the oppression or persecution of others."

² http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political_insider/islam_hatred_and_anti_semitismconnect_dots.

Judaism does not traditionally speak in the language of tolerance or pluralism; these are modern concepts. But the Torah does offer guidance when it comes to building relationships between communities and even between religions. It says “Love the stranger.” It says “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And it says “Love Adonai your God.” And these three principles can guide us as we work to build bridges with a religion that is on the one hand foreign to many of us, but at the same time is intimately related to our own way of life.

We are taught: *V'ahavta et HaGer* – Love the Stranger. It is a commandment to be accepting of those who look, speak, and pray differently than we do.

The word *ger* – stranger – appears in the Torah 51 times. Over and over again, our tradition instructs us: to love the stranger, to include the stranger, not to oppress the stranger. And over and over again, it says *ki gerim hayitem* – because you were strangers.

We Jews know the experience of being the other. Our ancestors wandered their way through Egypt and Babylonia. From the Persian Empire to Greece and Rome. From Baghdad to Spain and Germany to Poland. From the Lower East Side to the south of Charlotte. In nearly every generation, we have been newcomers to some place. And in nearly every generation (maybe other than our own), we have known the suspicion and mistrust that come along with being different.

Today is, of course, not the first time that American society has been wary of a religious group that was somewhat unfamiliar. Rabbi Jonathan Biatch reminds us that once upon a time:

Catholics were thought [to have foreign allegiances]
Mormons were hounded because Joseph Smith was regarded as a false prophet.
Atheists were deemed unfit to hold public office,
And “all of these groups,” he points out, “now participate fully in American life.”³

For a nation of immigrants, we sure are slow to warm up to new ideas and new people. (We don't need to look any further than the current debate over immigration policy to see that.) But Judaism says: “Love the stranger.” Judaism says: embrace your differences, and the stranger will soon cease to be a stranger. Two generations ago, it was the Jews, with our European accents and our strange customs, who represented the “other.” And there will likely come a day, a generation or so from now, when Muslims will serve in congress, when Imams will speak with Midwestern instead of Middle Eastern accents, and when Islam will be a part of the fabric of our society like Judaism

³ Biatch, Jonathan and Cohen, Charles. “Islam is not the Enemy.”

and Christianity. But until that day, it will be up to us to keep reminding those around us what it is like to be a stranger, and that a stranger can grow to be a neighbor.

We are taught to love the stranger. And we are taught: *V'ahavta l'reacha kamocha* – Love Your Neighbor as Yourself. It is a commandment to see each individual as an individual, and as an expression of God's image.

The midrash tells that the great Rabbi Tanchuma once came upon a man speaking ill of another. The rabbi said to him, "When you act this way, you should know whom you are really humiliating, for [the Torah teaches], that human beings are created in the likeness of God."⁴

At the center of our religious tradition lies the notion that every person is a unique expression of God's image. And out of that teaching comes the idea that each person is to be judged based on his or her own merits, not on our preconceived notions about their background or beliefs.

Nearly 2000 years ago, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia taught in the Mishnah: "*Hevei dan et kol ha-adam l'chaf z'chut* – Judge each person favorably."

The phrase *l'chaf z'chut*, means literally that until proven otherwise, we should consider each person "as though their scale was tilted toward righteousness." It calls to mind the traditional image of the High Holy Days – that our good deeds are weighed on a scale against our faults. During this time of the year, we are particularly cognizant of our shortcomings, and we recognize our tendency to judge harshly those who disagree with us. That may be especially true of our reaction to the Muslim community, who often seem to be on the other side of every issue from us (particularly when it comes to Israel). And yet Judaism teaches us to look at every person based solely on the sum of their own deeds.

Last week, a group of prominent clergy – including leaders of our own movement – met to decry the anti-Islamic sentiment that is so prevalent right now. In their statement, they said: "we insist that no religion should be judged on the words or the actions of those who pervert it through acts of violence."⁵

And while it may not be easy for us to separate Islam itself from the actions of its most extremist followers, it is worth remembering that Judaism has had its Baruch Goldsteins

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 24:7.

⁵ <http://www.isna.net/articles/News/Beyond-Park-51-Religious-Leaders-Denounce-Anti-Muslim-Bigotry-and-Call-for-Respect.aspx>.

and its Yig'al Amirs, who killed in the name of their beliefs, and Christianity has had more than its share as well.

Rather than rejecting Muslims, rather than denigrating Islam, we should reject the tendency of all fundamentalists to see the world only through selfish and narrow eyes. And we should embrace those of all religions who honor the divine image in humanity and who honor God's name through their actions on earth.

We are taught to love the stranger. We are taught to love our neighbor. And we are taught: *V'ahavta et Adonai elohecha* – You shall love Adonai your God. It is a commandment to honor the pursuit of the holy, in all its forms.

The Talmud records this favorite saying of the Rabbis of Yavneh:

I am a creature of God and my neighbor is a creature of God.
Will you say that I do great things and he does small things?
All that matters is that a person directs his heart to heaven.⁶

No one religion has a monopoly on wisdom. There is a great deal that we can learn from the teachings of Islam, a faith that takes very seriously the notion of God's oneness and the command to be righteous.

As Reform Jews, we are uniquely suited to see the glimpses of the divine in other religions. The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the first statement of principles for Reform Judaism, began with that very idea. Its opening words say:

We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every book of revelation held sacred ... [we recognize] the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man.

From the very beginning, Reform Judaism has been built on the idea that there are many ways to reach God. As Reform Jews, we can appreciate Hinduism without being Hindus. We can appreciate Christianity without being Christians. And without being Muslims, we can also appreciate Islam – especially because of how much it shares with Judaism.

Every year, we take our Tenth grade Confirmation class to visit other faiths' houses of worship, so that they can learn about the traditions of their neighbors. Last April, on a visit to the Charlotte Islamic Center, we got to observe a group at prayer – bowing and rising, sitting and standing, chanting in Arabic. One of the Tenth graders came up to me and said, "Rabbi, they look a lot like us."

⁶ B. Berachot 17a.

Maybe more than any other religion, Islam is a sister to Judaism. We share a geographical birthplace – the Middle East. We share customs and values – the tradition of praying toward a holy city; the affirmation of God’s eternal and absolute oneness. We share linguistic roots in Hebrew and Arabic. Muslims pray to *Allah* and Jews pray to *Eloheinu*. And some of the greatest Jewish literature and philosophy was born out of the medieval Spanish Golden Age –a time when Muslims and Jews lived, worked, and prayed side by side. These are facts that are easily forgotten in a world where Judaism and Islam seem to be so often at odds.

The Jewish writer Dennis Prager speaks of God as a parent. He says, like any parent God would rather see His children love one another than merely to love Him and to treat each other unkindly.⁷

It may not be easy, and it may not be obvious how to reach out to our Muslim neighbors, but it can be done. At Temple Beth El, we hold public dialogues with Myers Park Baptist Church and Ash-Shaheed Mosque. We participate in the citywide Interfaith Thanksgiving service with Christian and Muslim and other houses worship. Our young adults last year held a Jewish-Muslim seder at Passover time. And even if you weren’t at any of those, many of us have neighbors and coworkers of the Islamic faith. Let us, in the Jewish community, be among the first to reach out and begin to build those relationships.

Accepting and welcoming the Muslim community does not have to mean giving up what we believe. We must not ever back down on our defense of Israel’s right to exist. We will always defend our way of life and the values we hold most dear against extremists who would seek to damage them. But we must also recognize that among those values is the freedom of religion, and the freedom of life and liberty for all people.

Last week we marked a unique convergence of the High Holy Days, the end of Ramadan, and September 11. It is holy time on the Jewish, Muslim, and American calendars; and on each of those calendars it is a time to remember our past, and to rededicate ourselves to a better future. We can best observe those holy days by reaching out to one another across our differences. We can best honor the memory of those who died on 9/11 by building a society in which all people and all peaceful religious traditions are honored for their contributions to our way of life.

As we enter the new year, may it be with the mission to begin working toward that society. May we reach out to our Muslim brothers and sisters – as one immigrant population to another, as one “stranger” to another. May we always remember our responsibility to stand for what is right.

⁷ Paraphrase of Telushkin, J. *Jewish Wisdom*, p. 175-6.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.