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Kol Nidre 5771

In February of this year, our community mourned the death of Alma Walden, the beloved wife of our friend and congregant, Thorn Walden, and the beloved mother of their daughter, Zoe. Alma was stricken with cancer and though she was courageous, and for some months seemed to be getting better, she eventually succumbed to the ravages of the disease. She was taken from her family – and us – much too soon.

But we were not the only religious community that mourned Alma's death. Thorn and Alma's marriage was unique – at least in my experience. You see, Alma was an Ismaili Muslim, and her funeral was in accordance with Ismaili customs. On the day of her funeral, several members of B'nai Tikvah and I went to the Ismaili Jamatkhana in SE Calgary to attend her funeral service. All of the guests were given a pamphlet that described Ismaili practices and funeral customs, and also included a brief description of the Ismaili community here in Calgary. Although I have been the featured Jewish speaker at numerous Ismaili programs, I didn't know very much about them – except that they were very friendly, and they were a relatively small, liberal denomination of Islam.

I was impressed that day by so many aspects of the service. First, the Ismailis, like us, mourn as a community. The community is involved in virtually every aspect of the process, from the preparation of the body to the funeral itself, from the rites surrounding the burial to the Ismaili equivalent of shivah. Each stage of death is *shared* by the community because every individual's death is a profound *loss* to the community.

Second, based on my estimates of the attendance, there were perhaps 700 – 800 members of the Ismaili community who came to mourn for Alma. Alma was not a major

figure in the community, yet her funeral felt – to me at least – like a funeral given for a dignitary, someone who had made enormous personal or philanthropic contributions to Ismaili life. It was clear to me the Ismailis didn't just talk the talk about the importance of community. They truly walked the walk.

Finally, at the bottom of the pamphlet, something caught my eye. It noted that the Ismaili population in Calgary was about 7,500. “Wow, I thought. That's just a few hundred less Ismailis in Calgary than Jews in Calgary.” And then, as the saying goes, the wheels in my head started turning.

If the summer of 1967 is infamously known as the “Summer of Love,” then the summer of 2010 will undoubtedly be recalled as the “Summer of Islamophobia.” In countless television news reports, talk radio programs, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, chat rooms, and Twitter feeds, Islamophobia has been topic #1. Of course, in the United States, the catalyst for the discussion has been the proposed plan to open Cordoba House, also known as Park 51, in Lower Manhattan.

Here in Canada, the topic has centered on the recent arrest of three, or possibly four, Muslim-Canadians who are accused of facilitating terrorism, although as of this writing, the specific allegations remain unclear.

Several years ago, following the arrest of the Toronto 18, I gave a sermon on Kol Nidre and asked the rhetorical question, “Is there hope for assimilation?” Call it whatever you wish: the melting pot, the gorgeous Mosaic, assimilation, acculturation, the drive for acceptance – we could create a sociology class just surveying the different terminology. The larger question is, in a society struggling with how to assimilate a religious group, how will the Jewish people – a people quite familiar with such a struggle - help in the process? It

is the eternal Jewish question: are we a part of the solution? And if so, what can we do to help?

As we know only too well, assimilation is a gradual process – a process that takes place over generations, as the *minhag* from the “old country” slowly, inexorably fades away. Our great-grandparents’ way of life seems unimaginable to us today. In a little more than a century – a virtual drop in the bucket of the Jewish narrative – the culture and customs of the shtetl, which were so dominant for nearly 400 years, have now vanished into thin air.

Our ancestors were able to leave that world behind because Judaism has never been subservient to dogma or creed, place or nation. It is not about where you live, but **how** you live. And if the rabbis or the scholars were no longer the center of the universe, and a new *minhag* was needed, we would do exactly that. As I have said many times before, we are the world’s most adaptable people.

But assimilation into a larger, dominant culture requires more than just the minority’s willingness to shed the past. Of course we could shave our beards, leave our yarmulkes at home, and go to work on Shabbat. But the dominant culture must change as well: it must be ready to truly accept the new group, it must be able to respect their cultural differences, and it must be ready to trust the assimilation as genuine and organic, and not a subterfuge to cover up more nefarious objectives.

As I noted in my sermon several years ago, early Canadian Jews were forced to confront Goldwin Smith, an Oxford professor who moved to Canada in 1871. Smith was known as “the intellectual leader of his new homeland” and was a leader of the nationalist “Canada First” party. In the late 19th century, Smith wrote that the Jews were a “a parasite race,” “dangerous” to any country that allowed them to enter, and “needed to be watched

very closely. He also wrote that Jews could not become good citizens because we form a “closed group...a tribe scattered yet united, sojourning in all communities, blending with none and forming a nation within a nation.”

And one of Smith’s disciples, Henri Bourassa, a French-Canadian MP, was a major promoter (for roughly 50 years) of anti-immigrant legislation that was specifically targeted to prevent thousands of Jews from emigrating to Canada during the Holocaust. Indeed, as Irving Abella described it during his weekend visit last Spring, Canada’s relationship to Jewish immigration and assimilation in the early to mid 20th century was problematic at best, and positively discriminatory at worst.

In this century, though, it is Muslim-Canadians who must confront these issues of suspicion and acceptance. They are hampered by some of the same disabilities that we faced a century ago. A large percentage stand out by their dress and head coverings, they adhere to a religion most of us are unfamiliar with (and have deep suspicions of), many Muslim-Canadians hail from nations that are involved in armed conflict with NATO forces, many are still mastering English and French, and of course, most Muslim immigrants have darker skin, so unlike us, they are unable to “pass.”

But as the last few weeks demonstrate so clearly, September 11 remains **the** touchstone for people’s feelings about Muslims in North America. Just as the Japanese (and Asians generally) were viewed with suspicion and hostility in the generation following World War II, Muslim immigrants today, in both the U.S. and Canada, are treated as pariahs, potential criminals, and conspirators seeking to undermine our generally secular way of life. The memories of that day seem to be too raw to put behind us, too raw to begin the process of teshuvah and acceptance.

As all of you are aware, the controversy over the building of Park 51 has brought these feelings to an ugly boiling point. Last week, on the anniversary of September 11, rallies were held in Lower Manhattan both for and against the project. For the record, the proposed building is not a “ground zero mosque” as its opponents falsely claim. It is not at Ground Zero, nor can it be seen from Ground Zero. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the leader of the Reform movement stated this week, “It is two and a half blocks from Ground Zero and might as well be 100 miles from Ground Zero. As others have pointed out, retail stores, strip joints, office buildings, and other places of worship are to be found there, all part of the general frenzy that is downtown New York.”

Nor is it a mosque. It is a community center, modeled on one of the cleverest assimilationist institutions of our community – the Jewish Community Centre. As an increasing number of Jews in post-war North America were drifting away from traditional synagogue life, Jewish leaders developed a new model to re-engage the community. The idea behind it was to build a Jewish center for recreation, cultural programming, dining (of course), and worship, all in one building – a one-stop shopping experience for all of your Jewish needs. Indeed, Calgary’s JCC was designed for this purpose, and we were the JCC’s primary religious tenant.

As it is in Manhattan, Park 51 is modeled on the 92nd Street Y, perhaps the most famous JCC in the Western world. It will have a gym, a swimming pool, a 500-seat performing arts center, a restaurant, and an area for worship, and will be, as The Jewish Forward’s editorial board recently wrote, “a cultural and recreational magnet for the general public as well as a place for Muslims to pray and learn.” This project speaks to a

fundamental desire to normalize the Muslim immigrant experience, and, of course, to imitate our own success. It's not suspicious. It's downright flattering.

It's founder, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, and his wife Daisy Khan, have been interfaith leaders in New York City for many years, and Imam Rauf's board of directors features prominent New York rabbis and Jewish communal leaders. Rauf is no terrorist. He and his wife, to quote Time Magazine, are "the kind of Muslim leaders right-wing commentators fantasize about: modernists and moderates who openly condemn the death cult of al-Qaeda and its adherents."

And so, with all of this said, I am really struggling with the ideas on the other side. Just after the recent arrests in Ontario, the National Post's lead editorial, by a journalist named Robert Fulford, declared that Muslim antipathy toward the Jews (and by extension, the West) was rooted in conflicts dating back to the Prophet Mohammed, and thus, no amount of time or distance from those events could possibly change the Islamic perspective on the modern world

The news articles covering this story also emphasized that the suspects were born here in Canada, that one of them was a physician and auditioned for Canadian Idol, and that two of the three men participated in the 2009 Salaam Cup, a tournament described as "the Ultimate Muslim Ball Hockey Tournament." The message was quite clear: if they were born here, received the benefits of our educational system, and even played hockey, what more could we have done? This is an angry, dangerous group of people who refuse to be assimilated into Canadian life. Or, in the words of the journalist Mark Steyn, "...for most Western Muslims, Islam is their primary identity, and for a significant number thereof, it's a primary identity that exists in opposition to all others. That's merely stating the obvious."

Well, let **me** state the obvious: the promotion of fear, hate, and suspicion is a response, but it is **not** an **acceptable** response. Or to put it another way, what's the endgame here? Does the right simply wish to attack Islam as inherently barbaric? Or is the problem with those who follow Islam? Or perhaps they want to warn us that we have an enemy rising up within our midst? So be it. But if that is the case, those who promote this viewpoint are creating a narrative that confirms the most destructive world views of Al Qaeda – that the West is on a religious crusade to rid the world of Islam. As the New York Times columnist Frank Rich recently wrote, “If the cleric behind Park51 -- a man who has participated in events with Condoleezza Rice for heaven's sake -- is labeled a closet terrorist sympathizer and a Nazi by some of the loudest and most powerful conservative voices in the U.S., which Muslims are not?”

And these voices are – sadly – not limited to the United States. Here in Calgary, the anti-Muslim backlash has been eagerly promoted by the likes of Ezra Levant, Dave Rutherford, and of course, the aforementioned National Post. Fear and paranoia may be responses, but they are, most assuredly, not solutions.

If we want to have a meaningful conversation about the future, then we must discuss some alternatives, some ideas that may provide a more hopeful vision. Let me offer a counter-narrative, a more complex narrative that the media has, up to now, largely ignored.

You see, slowly, gradually, inexorably, the Islamic minhag – from the old country is beginning to fade away. And while I know all of us would like it to be faster, we are just barely scratching the surface of the 2nd generation of Muslim-Canadians. Moreover, unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islam has never had the moderating impact of an Islamic

Reformation – a religious upheaval that might forge a path toward modernity. Indeed, the acceptance of Reform Judaism enabled a significant percentage of Jews both to maintain their Jewish identities and learn how to express themselves as Canadians and as Americans. Muslims haven't been able to use their religious identities – not yet at least – to acquire acceptance here.

And yet, there is reason for hope. Did you know that in the recent controversy over Quebec's proposed legislation to ban the burka, the Muslim Canadian Congress spoke out publicly in **support** of the ban? They did so in newspapers, on CBC Radio's "The Current," and in press releases on their website. Farzana Hassan, communications director of the MCC said, "Islamists are defending the burka as if it was the central pillar of Islam. They consider Muslim women who do not cover their heads and faces--the vast majority -- as sinners or lesser Muslims. It is of utmost importance that the Canadian government take the lead and end this medieval misogynist practice once and for all." She added that, "while the rest of the world is moving toward the goal of gender equality, right here in Canada Islamists are pushing back the clock, convincing educated Muslim women, they are no more than sexual objects and a source of sin, if they reveal their faces in public."

With a little more searching, I discovered another group, the Canadian Muslim Union, whose charter states that "it provides a voice to Muslims who seek a progressive vision of Islam." It also states that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian constitution are paramount in pursuing that vision. The group's charter also promotes the separation of church and state, opposes the "fanaticism and extremism that afflicts some elements within the Muslim community," opposes homophobia, and desires to

“work to build communities free from the ravages of racism, intolerance, ignorance, disease, and poverty.”

And did you know, that a group of influential American imams recently returned from their own “March of the Living” trip, visiting concentration camps and Holocaust memorials throughout Eastern Europe. The tour was designed not only to eradicate any vestiges of Holocaust denial in the Muslim community, but also to increase the imams’ sensitivity to Jewish historical suffering.

Here in our own community, in 2008, Imam Syed Soharwardi walked across Canada – from Halifax to Vancouver - to make a statement against violence in all its forms. As he said on numerous occasions during his journey, he simply wished to promote peace and non-violence for all people. More recently the imam issued a decree denouncing terrorism in North America.

And despite these positive developments, it isn’t all black and white, not by a long shot. Despite Imam Soharwardi’s decree against terrorism, his website is often used to publish irresponsible and incendiary articles about Israel. And despite the Muslim Canadian Union charter’s lofty language, it was still advertising last spring’s Israel Apartheid Week. And even Imam Rauf, the leader of Park 51, has been ambiguous in his denunciation of Hamas. But if there were perfect agreement with us on every major issue, we would hardly need a dialogue at all. To quote Rabbi Yoffie once again,

If [Rauf] is not a fitting partner for dialogue then there are no such partners. And I am distressed by those in the Jewish community who continue to believe that we should only talk to and approve for dialogue those who agree with us on every point and who have never made a problematic statement about Judaism or Israel. We don’t need dialogue with

those people. We need it with people like Imam Rauf, who are reasonable, sensible, and courageous – even though, to be sure, we often don't agree.”

How can we – we of all people - say that another group can't be assimilated? How can we – who have been pariahs in so many nations, who have been marched off to labor and concentration camps because we were declared loyal only to our own kin – how can we say that another religious group is loyal only to its own? How can we – a people who have experienced the horrors of collective persecution and blame for centuries – now condemn an entire religion for the hateful behavior and crimes of some? How can we send emails and videos declaring that Muslims are a scourge upon our nation – using the same bigoted canards (they want to impose their own legal system upon us, they deceive everyone but their own, they want to take over the world) that have been hurled against us for centuries? Indeed, just this week an email was circulating in our Jewish community claiming that those who do not oppose Islam were promoting genocide.

Indeed, if we are unable to reach out to shake the hands of those who reach out to us, how will we ever find common ground? How will we ever live together in community? How will the gorgeous mosaic of Canada ever expand beyond its comfortable horizons?

There are other stories to be told. There are doctors and lawyers, plumbers and bricklayers, accountants (mine, for example) and welfare recipients, professors and cab drivers, English speakers and Arabic speakers, imams and laypeople, people with good intentions and people with bad intentions, and every one a Muslim, and every one a Canadian.

The time has come to embrace our Torah and welcome the stranger as we are commanded. The time has come to stand up to demagogues – in the Muslim world and in ours – and say no to senseless hatred and bigotry. The time has come to realize that we may not agree with our neighbors about every geo-political and cultural issue, but these disagreements must not preclude us from interfaith study and dialogue. The time has come to welcome those who want to be welcomed.

Here's what I am proposing: a Jewish-Muslim parade for Shalom and Salaam; a Jewish-Muslim parade for peace. This Fall, come and join Daniel Lenfest Jameson and I as we meet with Muslim leaders – both lay and religious – from the many different streams of Islam here in Calgary. We will propose a series of weekly adult education classes that will enable us to study the Torah and the Koran so that they will learn more about our tradition and we will learn more about theirs. These classes will take place in both synagogue and mosque, and will be open to anyone who wishes to attend. As we learn more about Islam, and they learn more about Judaism, it is my hope that many misunderstandings – on both sides – will be cleared up.

During these classes, I hope to establish an interfaith parade committee, to plan out the logistics of the event. And then, in June, 2011, I hope to be walking down 9th Avenue, along with hundreds – who knows – maybe even thousands of Jews and Muslims – holding up a banner that says, “Calgary Jews and Muslims Marching for Peace.” We will not discuss Israel, the Palestinians, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or any other geo-political issue that divides us. We will not discuss settlers, terrorism, democracy, or dictatorships. When we learn together, we will study our sacred texts, our beliefs, our laws, and perhaps remember that

Adonai and Allah are two different words for the same God, the Eternal One, the Creator. We will be marching for peace, marching to show our nation, and the world, that we can reach out to each other and build the bridges that need to be built.

Come and join us. If you're interested in pursuing this project, there's a sign up sheet outside the sanctuary. If you think you might want to serve on the committee, or attend the education classes, or just march on a Sunday afternoon in June, just let us know. As the Mishkan Tefilah reminds us – just before we sing Micha Mocha – “that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt; that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through that wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.”

I may be hopelessly naïve. I may be tilting at windmills. I may not appreciate all of the obstacles that are ahead of us. I may encounter resistance from most of the Jewish community, and I may encounter resistance from most of the Muslim community. And there is a possibility that it's too much too soon. But we are, at our very core, a people who seek justice, a people of idealists, who are not afraid to fail in the service of the principles of Torah.

In the Torah portion of Chaye Sarah, our father, Abraham, dies at the age of 175. He is buried next to our mother, Sarah, in the cave of Machpelah, the family's burial site in Hebron. He is buried by his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, who come together to say goodbye to their father. Our midrash explains and the Koran teaches that Ishmael was the revered patriarch of Islam, and thus Judaism and Islam came forth from the progeny of Abraham. We are – Jews and Muslims - of common ancestry. Our ancestor Isaac, and Islam's ancestor,

Ishmael were brothers who joined together – out of respect and sorrow – to fulfill the divine command. Surely we can discover what it means to be brothers – and sisters – again. This time not in sorrow, but in mutual respect and understanding. Cain yehi ratzon. May it be God's will.