

Kol Nidre Sermon 5771  
Rabbi David N. Young

Reacting to Islamophobia in America:  
An Open Letter to Imam Sofian Abdelaziz Zakkout

Dear Imam Sofian Abdelaziz Zakkout:

You and I have spoken a few times recently, and I want to first express my gratitude to you. You have many times offered to dialogue with the community at large. Your organization, AMANA, the American Muslim Association of North America, does some incredible work with the Greater Miami Community. I know you work very hard to build understanding and respect between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, so again, thank you.

When my family and I lived in Plantation, our house was in a cul-de-sac with eight or nine other houses. We lived in between two homes whose inhabitants both drove big white vans. One our left was a Pakistani family with children a little older than ours. They were very friendly, and enjoyed spending time outside watching their children play. From their home wafted the sweet and pungent smells of Middle Eastern spices that the wife used in cooking. They moved to America about ten years ago and started a small business that had just begun to be successful. On their white van was their business logo in large red letters.

On our right was an American family. The husband and wife were born in Miami and lived in Plantation since they were married. They had teenage kids who spent most of their time shut in their garage practicing with their band. From their home wafted the smell of cigarette smoke. I do not know what they did for a living. On their white van was a large bumper sticker that read, "Islamophobe and Proud of it."

We were the Jews in the middle.

Since building understanding is part of your mission at AMANA, I would like to open up a dialogue between your community and mine. Right now, a plague of Islamophobia is growing in our country. The Jewish people are commanded to be *Or Lagoyim*, a Light to the Nations. So I feel it is my responsibility as a rabbi to help fight this plague and work toward ending its run in America. The Jews in the middle are commanded do not stand idly by, and instead work toward the day when all people will be one and acknowledge that God is one.

Brother Sofian, I know you just finished the holy month of your calendar, and I hope you and your community had a *Ramadan Mubarak*, a blessed Ramadan. As you probably know, we are now in our holiest time of the calendar year as well. We call them *aseret yamei teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance. We started last week on Rosh Hashanah, celebrating the Jewish New Year. Like the secular New Year, Rosh Hashanah symbolizes a new beginning for the Jewish people. We eat apples dipped in honey to symbolize the circular nature of the year, and our hope that it be a sweet one. We blow a *shofar*, a ram's horn that has been hollowed out to bring in the New Year with a loud noise that wakes us up and reminds us that it is time to start ourselves fresh, too.

Ten days after Rosh Hashanah we gather again for Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement—which begins tonight. As I understand it, the fourth pillar of Islam is the belief in a final Day of Judgment, *yawm al-din*. Yom Kippur is referred to in our liturgy

as *yom hadin*, our day of judgment. On Yom Kippur we spend the day in prayer and study to repent for our sins. We actually have an opportunity to do this every day during the prayer service, but if a Jew is going to go to synagogue only one day in the year, this would be the day. It is known as the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the holiest day of the Jewish year. We fast for 24 hours to help us focus on our spiritual needs instead of our bodies. Our goal for this day is to do what we call *tshuvah*. I think that by explaining *tshuvah* to you it might illuminate some of my hopes for the coming year between our two communities.

The word *tshuvah* has three basic meanings, all related to one another. It means “returning,” “response,” or “repentance.” Of course these three meanings are all related, yet each adds a significant emphasis to what we are doing on Yom Kippur when we make *tshuvah*.

### TSHUVAH AS RETURNING

*Tshuvah* shares its root with the word *lashuv*, to turn. The prophet Jeremiah uses this word to describe the best possible relationship between God and the people of Israel.

*Im tashuv Yisrael*, If you return, O Israel—declares Adonai—*Im tashuv eilai*, If you return to Me, If you remove your abominations from My presence And do not waver, and swear, "As Adonai lives," In sincerity, justice, and righteousness -- Nations shall bless themselves by you And praise themselves by you.<sup>1</sup>

Jeremiah describes returning, or repenting, as the tool by which we will merit the respect and admiration of other nations. Other people will look to our example and live by it.

*Tshuvah* as returning means we return to God and faith, to the best version of ourselves we can be, before we were corrupted by prejudice and negativity. It can also mean returning to our roots.

I think about our shared Biblical ancestor Abraham, the first person to embrace monotheism, acknowledging that there is only one God. According to the book of Genesis, after Abraham’s wife Sarah dies, he marries a woman named Keturah. Her name is related to the word *ketoret*, or incense. In the book of Exodus, Moses marries Tziporah, whose name in Hebrew we translate as “bird,” but it was also a type of incense in Biblical Hebrew. Incense was the import that we got from Ishmaelites, the Arab tribes that were the progenitors of modern Islam. All the more so Tziporah was a Medianite, daughter of the priest Jethro. Both of these names represent the lively trade relationship the Israelites shared with the Ancient Arabs, the people who would become Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

I think about Abraham’s first two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. A Midrash, a rabbinic teaching about the biblical text, suggests that Isaac and Abraham would take trips away from Sarah to visit Ishmael. This suggestion teaches us that both Abraham and Isaac had a loving relationship with Ishmael, and thereby his descendants.

I think about the Talmud, the magnum opus of generations of rabbis. The Talmud refers to some Arab clans as *Tayaye*. Tayaye were “seminomadic traders living in the vicinity of the Babylonian Jewish community of Pumbedita,” according to Rabbi Reuven Firestone.<sup>3</sup> They were a people who had a great deal of respect and understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 4:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Reuven Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Judaism and Jewish culture. A Tayaye is credited with showing Rabbah bar Hanah the spot where Korach's rebels were buried, and shows him the spot "where heaven and earth kiss."<sup>4</sup> The Talmud illustrates a positive relationship between Jews and monotheistic Arabs, who would become Muslims.

*Tshuvah* as returning proposes that we go back to our ancient ways. We must heed the words of Jeremiah and return to God and our faith, which will allow other people to live by our example. Both Jews and Muslims must look to the examples set by those who came before us. We must return to the behavior of our ancestors, emphasizing the positive relationships between our two cultures, and cultivating loving relationships between our peoples.

You recently sent me a video of Muslims sharing worship space with Jews in Washington, DC. They celebrated the end of Ramadan by worshipping in an historic Jewish synagogue, donating canned goods to the Christian-run Salvation Army, and participating in an interfaith feast with Christians and Jews. They were invited in response to President Obama's suggestion that we open dialogue between Jews and Muslims. The video suggests that interfaith events like these are becoming more frequent in Washington. It is my hope that they become frequent here in Miami, too.

Through *tshuvah* we can return to the relationships we had in the Bible, in the Talmud, and in our nation's capital. We can return to become communities that care for one another and understand one another.

In order to understand one another, we can look at the second meaning of *tshuvah*.

*Tshuvah* also means "response." It is a response to questions we struggle with, questions of ideas we have difficulty grasping, and a response to help alleviate some of our own ignorance.

Park51, the proposed Islamic Cultural Center in Lower Manhattan, has proven to be the catalyst for an intense period of questioning in our lives. It is perhaps the single most dividing issue being discussed today. Should we "allow" a building with an Islamic prayer space inside to be built two blocks away from the most horrific attack ever perpetrated on America?

It is incredibly difficult to get a response to this question when we are inundated with rhetoric from all sides. It has been called the "Ground Zero Mosque," even though it is not a mosque, nor is it at Ground Zero. Park51 is a cultural center, exactly to you what a Jewish Community Center is to us. JCC's are so important to us that Temple Sinai has just built a bridge to get closer to ours. We of all people should understand how important the Islamic Cultural Center is to you.

We have been told it will be thirteen stories high, which admittedly sounds huge to a Miamian. Here in North Miami Beach the apartment buildings stick out as they stretch above the other buildings around them. We have to realize that in New York City a thirteen story structure is nothing, blending in with the scenery and getting lost among much taller edifices. We have heard that two blocks away is much too close to World Trade Center Plaza. This leads to another question. How close is too close? Where do we draw the line? Will we force the building to be farther than a block? A mile? A city? A state? || A country?

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<sup>4</sup> B. Talmud, Baba Metzia 86b

The *tshuvah*, the response to this question can only come from a place of understanding. We know we cannot tell a religion where they may or may not build their places of gathering and worship. If anyone tried to prevent the building of a JCC because of the actions of a fringe group of Jewish Fundamentalists, my people would raise a litigious firestorm. We know that Islam itself is not to blame for the attacks of 9/11, and we do not hold all Muslims accountable for the atrocities of that day.

I pray that our response to Park51 is one of acceptance and understanding. That it must be built where it is planned. At the same time, Park51 must respond with the pursuit of peace and positive interfaith relations. Imam Rauf, a liberal Muslim who works with the Reform Movement's Commission on Interreligious Affairs, has already condemned the actions of Islamic Fundamentalists who would do harm to any people. I ask that all Muslim leaders do the same, publically and in a loud voice. To do *tshuvah*, to respond, with more than religious tolerance, but with mutual respect and appreciation is the best way to honor the fallen of 9/11.

*Tshuvah* can also mean repentance.

Judaism acknowledges that human beings are not perfect. God created imperfect beings that do good and bad. We try to do good. We try to react positively and work toward the best things in the world. It doesn't always work that way. We make mistakes. We sin. We miss the mark. *Tshuvah* is the device God gives us to fix our mistakes and make good on the times we have missed the mark.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, in his book *The Thirteen Petaled Rose*, writes, "Repentance is not just a psychological phenomenon...it is a process that can effect real change in the world, in all worlds." My hope is that we can, together, change the world through the power of *tshuvah*. Repentance is the device by which we end the cycle of "an eye for an eye," and begin the process of healing our nation and our world.

Brother Sofian, I am writing to admit to you that we American Jews have sinned. We have not fought to guarantee the rights for Muslims that we would demand for ourselves. We should remember how it feels to be denied religious freedom. When we hear the rhetoric of Islamophobia we should be reminded of the ranting of those like Father Coughlin in the 1930's. It was unacceptable to speak like that then, and it is unacceptable now. We have sinned by not speaking out against those who spread hatred by their words or their fingers. I myself sat silently and deleted anti-Islamic emails sent to groups of people. I watched as I learned from a colleague that it is important to tell our friends and family members not to send us these messages of intolerance. We must not let the voice of hate set the tone for our discourse. We have sinned with our silence and our inaction, and we need to make *tshuvah*.

I am also writing to ask that the Muslim community make efforts toward repentance. On AMANA's web site there is a link to a Jewish Fundamentalist organization called Netorei Karta. Perhaps some of their goals match some of the goals of the Muslim community, but their motives are misguided. They are an anti-Zionist fringe group that misrepresents our sacred texts for their own political purposes. I am sure this link is not on your web site to intentionally insult or harm mainstream, Jewish moderates. Please make *tshuvah* and remove this link. Every step you make towards us makes it easier for us to step toward you.

Through *tshuvah*, through repentance, we can repair damages done by those who spread hatred and fear. Both the Jewish and Muslim communities have made mistakes. We say things that our counterparts do not understand. Imam Rauf has said things in his 30 years of service that I find offensive, and I am sure there are Reform rabbis who have upset you and other Muslims. I hope to be a part of the process that brings our communities together through *tshuvah*. We can only do that by keeping open the lines of communication, even when we hear something that we might not agree with.

Let us be judged favorably on this Day of Judgment, whether we call it *yawm al-din* or *yom hadin*.

Brother Sofian, we must teach our two communities to learn about each other, to work with one another, and to care for one another. We can only do this by speaking in peace with one another. We must build a lasting relationship between the Muslim and Jewish communities that will serve as an example to all peoples, that will be a light to the nations; a light that will eventually lead us to mutual admiration, kindness, and peace.

I want to thank you by helping me make the first step toward peaceful dialogue. I am thrilled that you are able to be here tonight to hear me read this letter to you, and I hope it is the beginning of a strong relationship built on respect and understanding.

In Peace, Salaam, Shalom,

Rabbi David Nathan Young,  
Temple Sinai