

Stand Up All of You : Do What is Right
A Response to Religious Ignorance & Intolerance

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Rabbi Aaron B. Bisno
Rodef Shalom Congregation
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Gut Yontif.

This past week our nation observed a most significant anniversary. But I don't have in mind September 11th. I have in mind the anniversary that marked the day after, which is to say September 12th.

This past Sunday, September 12, was the 50th Anniversary of John F. Kennedy's speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960 in which he addressed "the so-called religious issue," namely the fact that he was a Catholic, and no Catholic had ever been elected President of the United States.

Fifty years ago this week, John Kennedy spoke to the country at a time when the spectre of religion and its influence over the body politic was a fearful thing. And here we are, again, distracted and at odds as a nation because of ignorance and fear in the face of religion.

Half a century ago this week, JFK declared that for the need for the country to deal with "the religious issue ... the real issues in this campaign have been obscured -- perhaps deliberately." His words.

And what were those issues? Over and above some that were unique to that age: fear of the spread of Communism and the quest to reach the moon, for example, many of the issues then-candidate Kennedy articulated are still with us.

He spoke in that speech in Houston of the hungry children he saw in West Virginia, the old people who could not pay their doctors bills, families forced to give up their farms, and of an America with too many slums and too few good schools.

"These are the real issues which should decide this campaign," John Kennedy declared. "And they are not religious issues... War, hunger, ignorance and despair know no religious barrier."

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Today, fifty years later... and fully nine years since the September 11th terrorist attacks that so changed our sense of isolation with its built-in sense of security...

And at a time when more citizens in this country believe our Christian President to be a Muslim or, for that matter, that he is un-American (and for many, it seems, the terms "Muslim" and "un-American" are sadly synonymous)...

And in the wake of the fury the proposed building of an Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan has unleashed, clearly revealing a deep vein of prejudice and fear...

And when a renegade, deeply-bigoted, media-hungry, small-time preacher – it is said that there are less than 50 members of his congregation – threatens to burn copies of the Koran, and is found worthy of wall-to-wall media attention ...

... drawing comments from the Secretary of State and the senior military commander in a theatre of war, as well as a call from the Secretary of Defense ...

Let us speak of religious ignorance and let us speak of religious intolerance.

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For as we gather, our nation is once again roiled in a war far from home and we are wrestling not for the first time with true economic despair.

Indeed, fifty years after our national attention was last focused so singularly on the topic of religion as it informs and inflames our body politic, we are sadly no further along a path towards eradicating these pernicious plagues.

Once again, we are at odds with ourselves over what it means for us to claim that we are "*E Pluribus Unum*," that we are "One from Many ... with Liberty & Justice for All."

Consider the words President Obama shared with our nation just one week ago tonight. Consider the fact that the President needed to make such a statement.

Hear the President's words: "The American people are one nation under God. And [while] we may call the God different names... we remain one nation."

"This country stands for the proposition that all men and women are created equal, that they have certain inalienable rights..."

"And what that means is that if you could build a church on a site, you could build a synagogue on a site; if you could build a Hindu temple on a site, then you should be able to build a mosque on the site.

And President Obama went on, explaining the importance of remembering that Muslims are fighting with the United States in the two wars begun since the attacks of 9/11.

"They're out there putting their lives on the line for us," President Obama, went on.

"And we've got to make it crystal clear for our sakes and their sakes: They are Americans and we honor their services. And part of honoring their service is making sure that they understand that we don't differentiate between them and us. It's just us."

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And so, fifty years to the week after JFK's speech...

As we gather once again in our largest numbers... for Yom Kippur ...

As we take up the deep and meaningful personal and communal introspections in which we are enjoined to engage ...

On this holy night let us speak once again of religious ignorance ... and let us speak of religious intolerance.

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Today we are met at a time when our nation's promise of security and freedom is not shared by all our nation's citizens.

For even as we joyously celebrate the Jewish New Year, in every great city and in every small town across America, due to a want of knowledge ... or, perhaps, more accurately, due to a lack of wanting to know more than we do...

And due to a pervasive fear ... or, perhaps, more accurately, due to the fearful things that can happen when religion meets politics and media ...

And due to a dispiriting turning away from the universal and compassionate message all religions embody...

If you'll permit me, even as we joyously celebrate the Jewish New Year by placing sweet honey on our tongues, this year the sweetness is marred by a measure of bitter.

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I surely recognize that there is fear in our community.

Legitimate fear. Fear of the unknown; as well as fear of the known.

But when we fearfully extrapolate from the rantings and actions of a misguided few in a rush to condemn the many, this betrays a fear that stems from prejudice.

All of us should endeavor to root such a disease from within our body politic.

Some in our community bristle at the thought of allowing a mosque or Islamic center to be built near the site of the World Trade Center. I appreciate the need for sensitivity toward those who lost a loved one there. And I know that we don't all share the same views on these matters.

But if our objection is that the center is Muslim and therefore its ideology or location is simply too provocative, then are we not really suggesting that we don't trust ourselves? Are we not really saying we can't be responsible for the actions of offended Christians and Jews?

And so... What? We tell a religious community...

We tell a minority community ...

We tell our fellow citizens they simply don't qualify for their inalienable rights?

Nice!

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Tomorrow morning's Torah reading inveighs,

"You stand all of you this day ... the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, every one in Israel, men, women and children – and, too, the strangers in your camp ...

"You stand this day – Israelite and stranger, both – to enter into the covenant ... in order to establish yourselves as people who share a unique and single God."

Lest anyone believe that that was for then while this is now, Deuteronomy continues,

"And it is not with you alone that I make this covenant. I make it with those who are standing here today and equally with all who are not here this day." (Deut 29:9-14)

Jewish tradition is unequivocal.

We stand all of us this day ... And now is the time to stand up for what is right.

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Over the course of 3500 years of Jewish living, we've learned well the experience of being the stranger. For centuries, portrayals of Judaism by others were not a true reflection of Jewish life or thought. Indeed, they were a crude characterization of it. For much of the Middle Ages, Jews were considered a race – an inferior race – and as such were segregated – and suffered – within society.

It was enlightenment thinking that helped the world understand that Judaism was a religion, an ideology. Unlike with a race, one can convert to Judaism; and one can leave the community. Not only that, one can identify one's own particular understanding of Judaism – of which today there are many.

America embraces these enlightenment principles.

Our Founding Father Thomas Jefferson championed equal rights for Jewish people not because he had any great love for Judaism, but because Jefferson respected the right of every individual to hold whatever faith he or she wished.

Citing John Locke, Jefferson argued in the Virginia legislature:

“Neither Pagan, nor Mohammadean, nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of his religion.”

And it was none other than George Washington who in 1790 wrote in his letter to the Jews of Newport Rhode Island, the following:

“The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy ... It is now no more that toleration is spoken of ...

For happily the Government of the United States, gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, [and] requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens."

And then, Washington concludes his letter with:

"May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."

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Fear of those who are different, however, is not new...

As New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently wrote: "Suspicion of outsiders, of people who behave or worship differently, may [well] be an ingrained element of the human condition. [Likely it is] a survival instinct from our caveman days."

But let us not be sanguine, for -- and here I return to Kristoff -- "we should recognize that historically this distrust has led us to burn witches, to intern [more than 100,000] Japanese-Americans, and to turn away Jewish refugees from the Holocaust." (9/4/10)

The vilification of Muslims, writes Associated Press religion writer Rachell Zoll, "evinces similarities to the prejudice Roman Catholics and Jews experienced as newcomers to America starting in the 19th Century. The hierarchical Catholic Church was denounced as a threat to the separation of Church and State. Synagogues were banned in many states, and Jews were viewed as undermining the nation's Christian character."

Mark Silk, director of Connecticut's Trinity College's Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life, sees the current plight of Muslims as paralleling the experience of the Japanese Americans who whose loyalty was questioned and were incarcerated during World War II.

“I don’t think we’re about to round up all the Muslims and put them in concentration camps,” Dr. Silk explains, “But [at the same time], I don’t think we’ve ever seen [this] degree of legitimacy given ... to straight-up, anti-Islamic expression.”

And all of this is possible precisely because so many of us remain ambivalent and silent. In a word (or two), quite simply, our ignorance and our apathy are to blame.

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Have we any better excuse for the ways we – all of us – while perhaps not guilty -- are nonetheless responsible for the incivility, indeed the intolerance, that so deforms our national dialogue and so pollutes our public square?

Have we any better explanation than our own ignorance and apathy?

Do we truly not know? Can we truly claim not to care?

For, and here I quote the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin: “Insofar as our ignorance stems from our complacency, ours is an ethical and not an intellectual default.”

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Traditionally on Rosh Hashana we read the Torah portion wherein Abraham is dispatched by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The portion is called *Akedat Yitzchak* or the Binding of Isaac.

The story opens with God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son.

“Take your son!” God demands of Abraham.

“I have two sons,” the Rabbis tell us Abraham responds.

“Your only son,” comes back God’s reply.

“One is the only son of *his* mother, and the other is the only son if *his* mother.”

“The one that you love.” God insists impatiently.

“I love them both,” Abraham parries.

“Take Isaac!” God summarily instructs.

This story, though, has a parallel in the Koran, the sacred text of Islam considered by Muslims to contain the revelations of God to Muhammad.

In the Jewish version, God tests Abraham’s faith by commanding his willingness to sacrifice his only son by Sarah, Isaac.

In the Islamic reading of the text, the Koran has God commanding Ibrahim to sacrifice his only son by Hagar, Ishmael.

In its essence, both versions are the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son. And for both religions, this story plays a central role in its traditions. In both accounts, the sacrifice is called off.

The lesson for all of us is that human sacrifice is forbidden. And for centuries, Judaism and Islam have read this story as the ultimate declaration that the preservation of life is our highest value.

So it is that six days after the September 11th attacks – on September 17, nine years ago on this day – President George W. Bush went to the Islamic Center in Washington DC and declared, “These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it is important for my fellow Americans to understand that.”

Indeed, the significance and sanctity of life is found at the heart of all three of the Great Monotheistic or Abrahamic Faith Traditions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

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This is all lovely, Rabbi, some here are surely thinking.

But what of the fact that the ones committing violence, sometimes heinous violence, always seem to be Muslim?

My answer: When in the 1980’s Catholics and Protestants lay dead in the streets of Ireland, victims of internecine acts of terror...

And when home-grown American terrorists, such as anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder, who is accused of killing Dr. George Tiller while Tiller served as an usher during Sunday morning services at his church ...

When religious zealots bomb health clinics and murder doctors in keeping with their warped understanding of the dictates of their Christian faith... their Christian co-religionists around the world appropriately cringe and recoil.

Clearly, Christianity is not without blemish; yet surely no one would dare suggest that this great faith justifies killing in the name of God or is in the business of maligning and denigrating other faith traditions.

And so when Terry Jones, the pastor in Florida, announced plans to burn copies of the Koran, is it any wonder that the Pope as well as the entire spectrum of the Christian world rose to condemn Pastor Jones' intentions and actions.

This from Rev. Richard Cizik, president of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good: "To those who would exercise derision, bigotry, and the open rejection of our fellow Americans of a different faith, I say, shame on you. As an evangelical, I say to those who do this, you bring dishonor to those who love Jesus Christ."

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And let me hasten to add that Jews are not immune from prejudice turned to violence.

To wit, Baruch Goldstein, who in 1994, you may recall, shot and killed 29 Palestinian Muslims while they were in prayer. This Goldstein did in the name of God, informed by what can only be described as a perverse understanding of Judaism.

And when, a year later, Yigal Amir assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in consonance with his understanding of Jewish thought, Jews the world over reeled and flatly rejected the way in which this misguided soul was reading our sacred teachings.

And shamefacedly, let us concede that in recent weeks, the world again got a taste of Jewish fanaticism, when Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a key power broker in the current Israeli government, called for God to smite all Palestinians "with the plague."

Yet, surely, Judaism does not advocate killing innocent people. Who would suggest that it does?! As we shall read in the Torah tomorrow:

“I set before you life or death, blessing or curse;

choose life that you and your descendants may live.”

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And what of the Moslem world? Where do they stand on violence perpetrated in the name of religious belief? ... particularly violence against non-believers? ... against Jews and Americans, more generally? ... and even violence against fellow Muslims?

The vast majority of Muslims – an estimated 1,500,000,000 adherents the world over – fully a quarter of the world’s population ...

The vast majority of the world’s Muslims are horrified when radical religious and political leaders spew hatred and support acts of terror in the name of their faith.

Do you imagine the moderate Muslims of Turkey...?

Or the Muslims of Indonesia, who have already elected a woman president...?

Surely the good and honorable Muslim citizens of this country ...

...would be adamantly opposed to using discrimination, intolerance or hatred to justify taking of innocent life. Now, this said, I’m no Pollyanna. There is no denying Islam has a violent sect within it. But have we not already established – are we not all prepared to stipulate? – that the same similar strains of fanaticism can be found within the two other Monotheistic faith traditions?

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Did you happen to catch Gail Collin’s recent column entitled “The 5% Doctrine”?

In it, she describes the fact that “it is important to remember that about 5% of our population is and always will be totally crazy. [But] I don’t mean mentally ill,” she

writes. "According to the National Inst. of Mental Health, [in any given year] 26% of American adults will suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. So basically that's just normal life. I mean 'crazy' in the sense of '[he] thinks it is alright to joke with the flight attendant about seeing a bomb in the [lavatory].'"

Clearly, Terry Jones, Scott Roeder, Barukh Goldstein, Yigal Amir, Ovadia Yosef, and the misguided Muslims who incite and commit acts of religiously-motivated violence ...

Clearly, all would qualify as charter members in the "5% crazy club."

But let us also consider for inclusion in the club all people – without regard to religion – who intentionally frustrate meaningful dialogue and greater understanding.

And here I have in mind not just those in the religious word, but too those in the media and political arenas who foolishly, senselessly, shamelessly – and irresponsibly – stoke the populace's fears by abetting the people's ignorance, effectively seek to thwart our ability to improve, let alone to perfect, our world.

Crazy, it seems, knows no particular religious allegiance.

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To protect ourselves from true threats of harm and real acts of violence, we have laws.

But for verbal and symbolic violence: slander, vitriol, misinformation within the media, protests that seek to divide us, and even the burning of books, much of it arising out of an intolerant religious perspective aimed in the direction of other religious groups...

For this we have a constitution to safeguard our freedoms. And as uncomfortable as that may be at times to stomach, it is *precisely* these legal bounds that allow our religious communities to flourish, even as they often allow concomitant and conflicted anguish.

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Consider for example, the American Nazis who marched in Skokie, Illinois simply to provoke Holocaust survivors...

Or demonstrators, back in the Reagan White House era, who burned the American flag as a form of symbolic expression...

Or the Muslims who burned copies of Salman Rushdie's "Satanic Verses"...

Or the deluded folks from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas who persist in protesting military funerals ...

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And, yes, all of these expressions are in some way related to the debate about the right to build the proposed Park51 mosque near Ground Zero;

And they relate, as well, to those among us who would malign the President of the United States by calling him an epithet as frightening as "Muslim." *Horrors!*

And yes, all of this plays right into the very issues John Kennedy raised half a century ago – half a century ago this week!

For our inability to understand one another, we fail to appreciate how much we could be accomplishing were we willing to join together in pursuit of the common good.

What are we all so concerned about? True violence is one thing. But to be frightened by the fact that someone has a different name? ...or a different means of expressing his or her faith? ... or that he or she calls God by a different name? ... or that someone prays in a different tongue?

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Does Jones have a right — in the name of symbolic expression and free speech — to create a small stack of Korans, carefully keeping his mini-bonfire materials within the limits of local laws, and then strike a match?

Of course he does. It's stupid. It's wrong. It's reckless. It shows disrespect. And worse, it's dangerous.

Indeed, almost every person of good faith on the face of the planet would agree the act is also sinful, for a wide range of reasons.

But, yes, Terry Jones has the right to light that match.

And the group behind the Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan has the right to build their building.

And the Nazis had a right to march.

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And we don't have to like any of it.

But what *is* required of us is to acknowledge that these protections exist precisely because the rights of a minority to peaceably assemble, and to worship, and to engage in speech or protest deserve, indeed, require protection.

Especially when the minority or their views are unpopular.

And if you – if I, if we – don't like it, we have the right to protest ourselves.

But demagoguing – and generalizing from one misguided God-fearing man or woman, even a violent one, outward so to malign an entire faith tradition and an entire people...

And to use a pulpit, a radio show, a TV program, the media, the internet or other such bullhorn to foment fear, encourage ignorance, and sow seeds to distrust ...

This is akin to yelling fire in a crowded theatre when there is no fire.

Only smoke ... and mirrors.

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On Yom Kippur, I tell you, such activity is truly a grievous wrong. It is a sin.

This is truly a sin. For we know better. And we can be better.

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In his recently released autobiography “A Journey,” former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who knows the world’s religious landscape well, sadly affirms:

“[It is true that], religion can be distorted into violent extremism. Having spiritual beliefs has never rendered a person incapable of doing wrong or evil. But far more often, faith can be a force for good.”

“The central role of synagogues, churches, temples and mosques [is] helping the poor, [the] vulnerable, and [the] disadvantaged... [And] in every case, men and women of faith who are trying to put the idea of unconditional love into practice are leading these efforts.”

“We should not allow those who [would] use religion as a divisive force to succeed.”

Rather, let us harness our common values and religion’s power to bring us together.

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The High Holy Days are a time when we ask:

What forms of prejudice do we acknowledge exist within ourselves?

In what ways do our own fears – our own impatience, our own frustrations...

In what ways does our own ignorance bleed into prejudice and intolerance?

And in what ways does our ambivalence about our relationship to faith keep us from contributing to what communities of faith, when working together, can accomplish?

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*“You stand this day all of you ... the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers,
every ... men, women and children – and, with you, the strangers in your camp ...*

“You stand this day – Israelite and stranger, both ...”

No less than thirty-six times does the Torah call upon us to show compassion toward and to love the stranger; for, as Jews, we are commanded to remember own experience, a time when we and our parents and our children were strangers in a strange land.

My friends, if sin and evil enter the world when our ignorance about others and our apathy toward their plight meets our ambivalence about our own responsibility to be a healing and constructive force in the world ...

When this happens, is there any wonder that those who are strangers to us are found wanting for protection and peace?

My friends, if sin and evil encroach when we are intolerant of others for an absence of character or conscience, or in the implicit belief that those who are different – those who are strangers to us – are truly “other” than us...

Then let us confess our sins this day... And let us set ourselves upon a new path.

The path of knowledge and conscience and courage ... and of faith in people willing to open their minds, soften their hearts, extend their hands, and work together to perfect our union and to redeem our world.

And therein, to bring – *“Oseh shalom binromav, hu yaseh shalom aleinu, v’al kol yisrael. V’imru, Amen”* – to bring some of the peace that reigns in the high heavens here to earth among us, as well.

All the rest is commentary. Let us go and learn.

Amen.