

You Shall Not Wrong a Stranger

Rosh Hashana Morning 5771

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וְגַר לֹא-תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him;
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex. 22:20¹)

Peter Stuyvesant was governor of the Dutch colony New Amsterdam from 1647-1664. A strict enforcer of Calvinist Orthodoxy, Stuyvesant objected to public worship for Lutherans, fought Catholicism and threatened those who harbored Quakers with fines and imprisonment.²

But life really became difficult for the powerful governor when 23 Jewish refugees from the Portuguese re-conquest of Recife (*re-SEA-fee*), Brazil arrived on the island city in 1654. Stuyvesant sought to have them expelled and wrote to his superiors at the Dutch West India Company:

The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant. . . we have, for the benefit of . . . the land in general, deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart, praying also most seriously in this connection, for ourselves as also for the general community of your worships, that the deceitful race -- such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ -- be not allowed to further infect and trouble this new colony. . .³

The Jewish refugees turned to influential Jewish shareholders of the West India Company in Holland. Having just expended considerable sums in taking Brazil, the company directors back home feared to alienate its investors. So although in their reply letter they expressed the shared desire not to let the new territories be “infected by people of the Jewish nation” nonetheless they required the governor to allow the small group of Portuguese Jews to travel and trade in New Netherland “provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.”

1 See also 23:9 and Jeremiah 7:6 – also Deut. 10:19 - “Love you therefore the stranger, for. . .”

2 Jonathan D. Sarna, “When Shuls Were Banned in America” Forward, August 20, 2010, p. 13.

3 Letter dated September 22, 1654. Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

Stuyvesant was not amused. A year later he sent a wry report to the company, indicating his compliance with their order. Free trade for the Jews was allowed. However, he noted:

. . .they have many times requested of us the free and public exercise of their abominable religion, but this cannot yet be accorded to them. What they may be able to obtain from your Honors time will tell.⁴

One can only imagine how Stuyvesant would have felt about Muslims.

The early history of Jews in America is replete with such examples of rejection. This is our story, and we should know it. Once again, on the very island which would one day become the center of American Jewish life, the 20 Jewish families living now under British rule in 1685 – 31 years after Stuyvesant's letter - petitioned to change Dutch policy and establish, at last, a synagogue. They were curtly refused. New York City's Common Council informed them that “Publique worship is Tolerated. . .but to those that professe faith in Christ.” It was not until the 18th Century that Jews in New York would win the right to worship in public and Congregation Shearith Israel built its first house of worship, the first synagogue in America, in 1730 – 76 years after Jewish settlers first arrived on its shores.⁵

33 years later, in 1763, the Jews of Newport, RI dedicated another sanctuary, Touro Synagogue, in what is now the oldest synagogue building still in operation in North America.

In 1790, the synagogue's warden, Moses Seixas, wrote to the new United States President George Washington, expressing support for the administration and good wishes for him personally. Washington sent a letter in response, which read in part:

...the Government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...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 in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

Washington was speaking of the Jews of America when he penned this historic document – the

4 Letter dated June 10, 1656. *Ibid.*

5 Sarna

text of which is enshrined in stone outside the Touro Synagogue. But he might well have written it today, referring to another “Stock of Abraham.”

There are many groups under oppression in America today. The hateful anti-immigration legislation in Arizona which paints all Mexican-Americans as suspected illegal immigrants. The unconscionable law of Proposition 8 in California denying Gays and Lesbians in that state the equal protection and privilege of marriage. Both use the power of government to separate and invalidate a group of law-abiding citizens. We Jews know these laws. We have felt them. We have borne the brunt of them throughout our history. These cannot stand. To uphold our values of American fairness and justice, the Supreme Court must overturn Arizona's SB 1070 and California's Proposition 8.

But the issue of the moment is one that is even more difficult – and difficult for us as Jews: the status of law-abiding Muslims in our country.

As Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna wrote in a recent column in the Forward “. . . if today's target is the mosque, yesterday's was most assuredly the synagogue.” Or, to turn it around: if yesterday's target was the synagogue, today's, most assuredly, is the mosque.

A few weeks ago I gave a sermon where I came out forcefully in favor of the proposed Cordoba Center in lower Manhattan – the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque.” In this, I join with major Jewish institutions in America today, including AJC⁶, J Street, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, the Shalom Center, and the Reform Movement's Union for Reform Judaism and Religious Action Center⁷. All, with the notable exception of the ADL, have recognized the ability of this proposed community center to support interfaith dialogue and the anti-violence message of its founders. I pointed out, as many others have done, that the religious force behind this center, the couple Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan are well-known leaders in the New York community who promote a Sufi-based vision of mutual respect within Islam. They are, by the accounts of those who know them, the moderate partners we are

6 David Harris, “Build the Cordoba Center?” The Huffington Post, August 2, 2010

<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=ijIT12PHKoG&b=6161209&ct=8552121>

7 Reform Jewish Movement Welcomes Approval of Cordoba House Mosque and Community Center -

http://urj.org/about/union/pr/2010/?syspage=article&item_id=47220

looking for.⁸ They stand in opposition to the terrorists who perpetrated the horrible crime of September 11, 2001.

I lived in the New York region during that time. Many of my New Rochelle congregants worked in or near the World Trade Center. Some are even among the victims. I know the emotions of the survivors, the victims' families and those who rushed to help in the days and years after this horrific event – this act of violent terror against the American people. I also know that these emotions, deep and powerful as they are, cannot be the only voice – not even the final voice. As New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg put it:

. . .if we say that a mosque and community center should not be built near the perimeter of the World Trade Center site, we would compromise our commitment to fighting terror with freedom.

We would undercut the values and principles that so many heroes died protecting. We would feed the false impressions that some Americans have about Muslims. . .

Islam did not attack the World Trade Center – Al-Qaeda did. To implicate all of Islam for the actions of a few who twisted a great religion is unfair and un-American. Today we are not at war with Islam – we are at war with Al-Qaeda and other extremists who hate freedom⁹.

But as this controversy has raged over the past few weeks, it seems to me that the issue has been hijacked, as so often happens, for political purposes. After all, the Cordoba Initiative made public this proposed site in late 2009 to resounding silence. It was only after bloggers picked on some small protests that this issue received any attention. Politicians have been stirring the flames of this for personal gain. It is no accident that the entire controversy has received national media attention in the months leading up to the mid-term elections.

But the noise this issue has generated has masked a far more serious issue in America today.

8 Anne Bernard, “For Imam in Muslim Center Furor, a Hard Balancing Act”, New York Times, 8/21/2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/nyregion/22imam.html?scp=3&sq=feisal%20abdul%20auf&st=cse>

9 Bloomberg Remarks at Iftar Dinner, TIME, August 30, 2010 – from prepared remarks <http://thepage.time.com/bloomberg-remarks-at-iftar-dinner/>

In Murfreesboro, Tennessee candidates are denouncing plans for a proposed Muslim center near a subdivision. In Sheboygan, Wisconsin a few Christian ministers led a fight against a Muslim group which sought to build a mosque in a former health food store. In Temecula, California members of a local Tea Party group took dogs and picket signs to Friday prayers at a mosque seeking to build a new worship center on a vacant lot. As reported in the New York Times¹⁰, in each of these conflicts the protestors have made it clear that the issue is not traffic, parking or noise – it is Islam itself. It is not about the issues of sensitivity related to 9/11. The protestors reject the site because the petitioners are Muslim. This is not a question of situating an Islamic center 2 blocks away from Ground Zero, or 10 or 100. Temecula is 90 miles from Los Angeles, and 2,700 miles from Ground Zero. For some no place is far enough.

As Rabbi Steven Jacobs of Temple Kol Tikvah in Woodland Hills, California said “You may talk about New York, but in our own vast city of Los Angeles, there are religious leaders standing up and saying the same thing about a mosque being built in the midst of their city. . . . It is not about New York. It’s about the soul of America.”¹¹

These Muslim communities are being targeted out of fear, out of misinformation, out of simple hatred of the “other.” All Muslims are becoming branded by some with the label of “terrorists” or “terrorist-sympathizers” – including those who are the most outspoken against the extremists who have hijacked the name of their religion for their own political causes. Academics have found that community mosques such as the ones being protested are often deterrents to the spread of militant Islam and terror. They support youth programs, sponsor anti-violence forums and scrutinize teachers and texts. The absence of community mosques and programs allows disaffected youth to become radicalized over the internet.

And none of this is more striking than the hateful plans of a small-time Florida pastor who has claimed international attention for his plan to burn copies of the Koran this Saturday. Those who conflate the right to build a community center dedicated to peace with the right of those who wish to burn books and condemn an entire people are missing the point. This is simply hate

10 Laurie Goodstein, “Across Nation, Mosque Projects Meet Opposition”, New York Times, August 7, 2010
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/us/08mosque.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=mosques&st=cse

11 <http://us.oneworld.net/article/369442-jewish-leaders-join-support-ground-zero-mosque>

speech. We Jews know it well. Our books were burned in the 13th and 16th centuries and in the 1930's by the Nazis. We cannot stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds. As noted in a statement from the Reform Movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis:

The burning of books is a powerfully symbolic act which condemns to the flames not only the words contained therein but those who would live by those words as well. In the 20th century, we tragically witnessed the prophetic truth of Heinrich Heine's words, 'Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings too.' We call on all people of reason and good faith, to condemn this incendiary act and the blindness and hatred which motivate it.¹²

This is not about radicalization or publicity stunts. It is about intolerance. We have seen this before. Catholics, Irish, Germans, Japanese have all suffered discrimination in America as they have tried to integrate and freely express their religion or ethnicity. We Jews have seen this before, as we were excluded from the free and public exercise of our religion. But by fighting for our rights and for the rights of others, we have helped to make of the United States a more tolerant and just society.

This ideal, to be sensitive to the stranger in our midst, is deeply ingrained in our Jewish morality. No less than three times in the Torah we are taught a variation of this commandment: *You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* The Torah does not say to avoid oppressing only those with whom you agree – or to make an exception for those who have issues with you. There can be no doubt that there is often tension between the Muslim and Jewish community – something the Cordoba Center is particularly aimed at smoothing. But the Torah is simply focused on the 'stranger' in your midst. No credentials necessary. Simply understand that they are experiencing what you experienced. And you – we – need to speak out against it.

This coming Sunday, I plan to attend an open house at the Bilal mosque in Beaverton and to offer personal words of support to our Muslim friends during this difficult time. I hope you will

¹² <http://www.haaretz.com/news/international/jewish-groups-bolster-support-for-u-s-muslims-1.313010>

join me.

This sanctuary we stand in is the third in our congregation's history. At its dedication in 1928, we were greeted in friendship by local churches including the presentation of the Friendship Window by Trinity Cathedral. When the previous sanctuary burned in 1923, local churches offered their houses of worship for our congregation. Beth Israel has been a welcome and public part of the Portland religious community. But it was not always so. In 1861, when the congregants of Beth Israel proposed building, for the first time, a synagogue in Portland, the Oregonian published this editorial:

What have the Jews done for the benefit of the American nation, for religion or morals, that they should with swaggering arrogance claim exclusive rights and privileges denied to other sects and creeds?¹³

We have been strangers in the land of Egypt. We have been strangers in the land of America. We have been stranger here in Oregon. We are strangers no more. But the beauty of our heritage is that we are taught to learn from our experience and to insure that the pathway is easier for those who follow.

As we begin a New Year, may we renew in ourselves the commitment to honor the stranger in our midst and to fulfill the prophetic promise quoted back to us by the first President of the United States: *every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.*¹⁴

13 From personal correspondence with Judith Margles, Director, Oregon Jewish Museum 8/30/2010

14 Micha 4:4