

© 2010 Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Sermon for Rosh haShanah Morning
Beth Shir Sholom
Santa Monica, CA
2010/5771

My family loves a show on the Food Network called “The Best Thing I Ever Ate.” that highlights the favorite dishes that the network’s hosts and chefs love to eat in restaurants well-known and obscure. A dish recently featured is from a restaurant here in Santa Monica called Riva. It’s a chocolate hazelnut “purse” and it’s as decadent and challenging to your cholesterol count as you might imagine – a dish with a warm, liquid chocolate center that becomes small streams of the stuff as soon as the thin, outer pastry is so much as touched by a fork or spoon. Aren’t you glad I didn’t give this sermon on Yom Kippur?!

It would be curious if rabbis were asked to name the best thing they ever ate. Too many would put forth chicken soup at a local deli and a small but surprising number might even mention something with shrimp in it. Better to posit for us something like, “The Best Place You Ever Prayed.” Again, some of the answers might be predictable: some would say grand synagogues or the Western Wall or some tiny, nameless shtiebel and still others would favor open, natural spaces – shorelines at sunrise or sunset, vistas toward mountains and from their heights.

For me, some of the most prayerful spaces in which I’ve ever been are mosques. In Jerusalem, in the days before the Second Intifada, as a Jew, I could freely enter the buildings on the plaza that we call the Temple Mount, below which are the remnants of the Second Temple. The plaza, known by Muslims as Haram al Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, is the site of two of the most holy structures in Islam. The lesser known building, and far less aesthetically dramatic than the gold laden and encrusted Dome of the Rock, is a mosque called the Al Aqsa, which means the Farthest Mosque, visited by Mohammed on his Night Journey. When I entered the mosque, I was overwhelmed by how large and old Al Aqsa is and its well-used, well-worn beauty. I could feel the many prayers articulated on millions of knees over the centuries and I was stunned that the soul of those prayers didn’t feel alien to me. I expected to feel that, as a Jew, I was trespassing in Al Aqsa. Instead, in the empty mosque, the holy space, the prayers embraced me as an honored guest.

© 2010 Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Sermon for Rosh haShanah Morning
Beth Shir Sholom
Santa Monica, CA
2010/5771

However, since the Second Intifada, Jews are not allowed in Al Aqsa. Muslim caretakers keep all Jews out. I'm not sure who that's supposed to punish or what it defends or protects. Seems to me that everyone loses. I visited Al Aqsa with my bigotries and they were mitigated by people long gone who I only knew as the "other." Now, I was the "other." We're all bigots.

The time next I was in a mosque it was the beautiful Blue Mosque in Istanbul. I was the Jewish leader of an interfaith trip spending only a couple of days in that amazing city on our way to Israel/Palestine. Once again, I felt deeply impacted by countless prayers hanging in that place. Still, when our group was invited by our Muslim leader, my friend, Jihad Turk, to participate in Muslim prayer, I politely declined. Like Muslims, our tradition has some parameters regarding what aspects of other people's rites and rituals are appropriate for us, so that we strike a balance between honoring others and maintaining our integrity and the integrity of our people. I stood, waiting quietly to the side until the prayer was finished. Then I began to explore the mosque. I was drawn to the main prayer niche on the wall facing Mecca. No one was around. I kept walking toward the niche. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jihad approaching. He quietly joined me at my side. We both just stood there, gazing. Suddenly, Jihad said, under his breath and with note of urgency, "Get on your knees!" As is my M.O. in such pressing situations, I said and did nothing. Jihad again screamed in a whisper, "Get on your knees!" and he added, "Pray with me!" I dropped to my knees. Jihad told me to shift my eyes to the left and I saw one of the caretakers of the mosque, what we Jews would call a *shamas*, walking purposefully our way. I had apparently stepped into territory that wasn't appropriate for a starring, non-pray-er, touristy-looking guy like me. Jihad's tactic worked and the caretaker kept walking by, but by then, for me, it was no longer a ruse. Shoulder to shoulder with my friend, on our knees facing *his* holy city, I was praying. As with the other few moments of true prayer I have had, it caught me by surprise; it had no words. It wasn't a prayer **to** God or **to anything** or **anyone**. It was a prayer **with** Everything-and-Everyone. It didn't need a melody

© 2010 Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Sermon for Rosh haShanah Morning
Beth Shir Sholom
Santa Monica, CA
2010/5771

and it wasn't specific to any religion or ceremony. It was a moment born of friendship, caring, trust, respect and love. It was an incredibly strong moment – quiet, earnest and life-affirming. Thank you, Jihad. It was an honor to share that moment of true prayer with you and, as I feel it, because of you.

Later on that same trip, we were in northern Israel in the town of Tz'fat, the center of Jewish mysticism since our expulsion from Spain in 1492. As we entered one of the famous synagogues there, Jihad and I decided we would do a short compare and contrast about Muslim and Jewish mysticism with our group. Just like in the Blue Mosque, that synagogue has a *shamas*, a wonderful similarity between Muslims and Jews. The *shamas* was quite eager to let us in and I don't think he quite understood the interfaith nature of our group. He got it, though, when we began to speak about mysticism and Jihad, in particular, began to speak about Sufiism. I thought the *shamas* was going to explode. He started yelling, screaming - doing everything he could to interrupt our discussion and get us out. At the back of the sanctuary, one of the Muslim members of our group, Saad Issa, was standing behind some Israeli soldiers who were putting on *talitot*, when one of the soldiers muttered – in English!, “Damn Muslims!” Saad asked the soldier, “Are you going to pray?” The stunned soldier said, “Yes.” So, Saad said, “I'll pray with you!” The current caretakers of Al Aqsa and this Jewish *shamas* really are cut from the same cloth. Not too far below the surface, we all are.

There are religious caretakers everywhere you turn who are trying to protect something. We had a speaker at Beth Shir Sholom a couple of years ago, James P. Carse who helped us understand what so called “religious caretakers” are doing. Professor Carse was, for thirty years, NYU's Director of the Religious Studies Program and Professor of the History and Literature of Religion. In his book, “The Religious Case against Belief”, Professor Carse says that **belief systems** need defending, religions don't. Belief systems have a list of dogma to which its members eternally and steadfastly adhere. Both the beliefs and their defense must be unwavering, otherwise the whole system disintegrates. Religions, on the other hand are

© 2010 Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Sermon for Rosh haShanah Morning
Beth Shir Sholom
Santa Monica, CA
2010/5771

malleable, constantly questioning themselves and exploring the territory behind and ahead.

Such a frozen, nonnegotiable belief system and its religious caretakers have come into the ring to do battle with the Islamic Center near the Twin Towers site. Actually, the caretakers **set up** the ring in the first place. There was no ring before, no fight, until they decided there should be one. They've created a belief system that they validate to themselves with posters and slogans, which is the sole ritual of this belief system – affirming what they already believe. They believe that creating a center for the Muslim community two and a half blocks from the former site of the Twin Towers is insensitive, when the reality is that there are far more insensitive actions planned for the site and the current “raw” display of emptiness, dust and bits of twisted concrete and steel is anything but a graceful or gracious honoring of those who died there. They believe that the site is holy, a cemetery. It is, but then again, so are places all over New York City. True story: In the days following 9/11 a colleague of mine was contacted by a congregant whose apartment windows, despite the fact that she lived many blocks away from Ground Zero, were covered with ash. When she finished wiping her windows, she called my colleague and asked, “Rabbi, what do I do with the cleaning cloths?” Those cloths contained tiny fragments of paper, desks, walls, windows and...people. They took the cloths to the cemetery and buried them. The cloths and what bones could be found are buried. It's time to build a memorial exactly on the footprint of the Twin Towers – no more, no less. Everything else should be declared to be...New York City, with an Islamic Center 2 ½ blocks away. The belief system that argues otherwise is a thin veil for bigotry – pure and simple. To declare those who died there as the martyrs of this belief system is nothing short of obscene. Martyrs die willingly for a cause. Those in the Twin Towers didn't die for a cause and certainly not willingly! They were murdered. They all would much rather have lived! To manipulate their deaths for political purposes, now that they have no voice and no vote, is cheap and abusive. To appropriate their deaths to justify hatred, xenophobia and stereotyping displays

© 2010 Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Sermon for Rosh haShanah Morning
Beth Shir Sholom
Santa Monica, CA
2010/5771

an utter disregard for their memory and their surviving family and friends.

Of whom are these “religious caretakers” afraid? They’re afraid of the wrong people because the Muslims who WILL build there and who WILL pray there and learn there and teach there are part of a trend that is reminiscent of Islam during the Golden Age of Spain. During that time, Islam was at its most cosmopolitan and the cooperation and crosspollination between it and other religions, especially Judaism, was extensive and mutually enriching. THAT is why they wanted to call it the Cordoba Center. The fear and hate mongers denigrated the name saying that it reflected a period of Islamic domination. They could not have displayed their ignorance any more precisely.

There is work to do. We must all talk to our family and friends, near and far, 60-70% of whom are part of that prejudiced, fearful belief system. Send them this sermon! We must tell them the truth about Muslims, Islam and the progressive agenda of the Islamic Center in New York City. Building an Islamic Center dedicated to peace and pluralism, in lower Manhattan, within a couple of blocks of what used to be the World Trade Center, is a **great** thing to do for the future of this country. If we don’t enable that to happen – those crazy people who flew those planes – who were not doing anything in the name of REAL Islam – those crazy people will have won. If we don’t enable the Islamic Center to be built, we will have fulfilled their vision of us, that we are bigoted xenophobes who hate the “other.” And then they will not only have won, we will have become them.