

On Mosques, Philosophers and what really bothers us.  
Temple Beth Jacob of Newburgh  
Yom Kippur 5771  
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A few weeks ago I spoke about the proposed mosque and community center called the Cordoba Initiative. I solemnly and strongly reminded Jews that we of all people should be first to champion the freedom of religion for all in this great country.

It did not go well. Let me say that part of what I spoke about was frustration at the mindless and ignorant opinions many of the protesters have. Some of our members felt I was including them among those people. I was not. I was speaking of mindless and ignorant protesters screaming not much more than lies and hate. I will presume that our members, a bit more educated than many, hopefully more sophisticated than some can come to conclusions that are thoughtful and considered. Reasonable people can disagree but none of us should give in to ideas that are false or fear based on crude stereotypes.

Why has this mosque, or community center as it really is, stirred up such passions? Is it because it is a victory statement of Islam or is there just something that makes us uncomfortable about an Islamic institution in lower Manhattan or could it be that we, ourselves, harbor, somewhere deep down our own prejudices? Now I know that none of us think that we hold prejudices. Prejudice is what the other guy has but something is bothering us. What could

be a better time than Yom Kippur to be honest with ourselves as we try to understand what it is that upsets us so much.

So let's talk about what is going on. Some people say it is a victory mosque. So then we need to ask, is Islam really at war with America?

There is at least one particular corner of Islam that surely is at war with us. Of this I am certain. That corner includes reactionary Muslims of the Wahabi set championed by Al Qaeda. I know we are in a war because they bombed the World Trade Center, blew a hole in one of our Navy ships, attacked two embassies and then, ultimately, flew four planes at targets on US soil. I know they are at war with us because this group and those sympathetic with them write and preach and broadcast every day that they are at war with us. Memri.org is just one place you can read translations. So we know that some Muslims are at war with us. But why? Why exactly is at least one corner of Islam at war with us?

The answer is found in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a reactionary Muslim hanged by Gammal Abdul Nassar in 1966.

Paul Berman wrote an essay in 2003 that appeared in the *NY Times* Magazine section that has long stayed with me about Sayyid Qutb known as Al Qaeda's philosopher. At its core, Paul Berman highlights Sayyid Qutb's argument that the separation of the secular and religious worlds is the cause of modern problems.

Qutb's argument begins by describing a pre-modern state where religious life and secular life was unified. In this pre-modern era the church or mosque or Jewish law, Halacha, held sway over ordinary daily life. Religious law judged everything from contract law to property disputes to proper clothing to the time of prayer. In other words, nothing was secular. Everything was a moral and religious issue. What you wore, how you treated your neighbor, what you ate, how you had fun, what you sang along with ritual practice was all in service to God's will. There was no religious school and regular school. It was all religious. It was all regular.

Qutb asks, when did this break down? He looks to the Jews and admires the times of Moses. There was a time when Jews lived completely under God's law and all aspects of life were unified. The mortal, the spiritual all were one and this was good. In time, though, the laws became rigid and lifeless so God sent another prophet, Jesus, to bring some needed reforms, to reset the law so that once again all aspects of life were joined. But Jews and Jesus argued and Jesus' own disciples perverted Jesus' message, according to Qutb, meaning that Jesus never was able to give out his true message. Qutb wrote that the disciples strayed too far from Jewish law. They created two realms, the life of the spirit and the life of the flesh and this added to the eventual separation between religious practice and secular life. The famous line, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" was clear evidence of this turn from a unified life. Secular life there. Spiritual life there. The body split from the soul.

Day to day behavior separate from moral and spiritual thinking. Centuries went on leading to modern times where that distinction was normal and desired.

Religion is one thing. Regular life is another.

Qutb despised at Modernity, hated it because it separated mosque and state. He believed the Enlightenment and modern society meant a rejection of God's morality in people's personal lives. Writing in the 1960's, he admired scientific progress and economic advancement but he felt that people had put too much faith in the triumph of human reason. (Following the Holocaust, a lot of Jews worried about that, too.)

Qutb's ideas are not exclusive to Islam. There any number of Christians and Jews who also argue that society needs to rejoin God and religion with the secular world, that society would be better if we rejected secularism. That is fine until some followers of the that school of thought turn to violence and this is the flaw in Qutb's teaching.

What Qutb could not know or would not accept is that religion separated from the secular world has fared very poorly. Religion away from secular life denigrates and soon discriminates against other religions and eventually develops fanatical adherents. The fanatical religious determine the secular world unredeemable and therefore worthy of attack. Within Islam it is al Qaeda who attacked us because our value of an open society is at odds with their narrow definition of a perfect society found only by a very specific kind of adherence to Islam as they define it. The 9/11 attackers were part of this group.

I guess al Qaeda sees 9/11 as a victory and some of the most vocal opponents of the community center call the building a victory mosque. But when some non-Muslims refer to the community center as a victory mosque, we should ask if Muslims in general see it as a victory mosque. They do not. Not all Muslims. Not all of Islam. Not the people building the community center. We should remember that al Qaeda isn't building the center so it would have to be a victory mosque built by Muslims who have condemned the actions that such a monument would celebrate. Some people would disagree with that premise and insist we follow the money so we'll wait and see on that.

Still, the victory mosque idea hits hard. I've read numerous references to Muslims building mosques at the site of military victories. I had never heard of that so I asked Prof. Reuven Firestone of HUC. He speaks Arabic, has lived in Egypt for a year and is a professor of medieval Jewish and Islamic studies. He never heard of such a thing either. It is true that mosques are built on top of churches and churches are built on top of mosques. When one would defeat the other, that's what they would often do but not as a sign of military victory. It has more to do with sanctity. The location might have an aura of holiness or, quite simply, the walls and foundation of a big building were there and it is easier to retrofit than rebuild. This architectural reality, the re-use of a holy site by the next group has been around long before any monotheists were building anything.

If it is not a victory mosque then what is its purpose? Some say that the Cordoba Institute by using the name Cordoba indicates that just as Islam ruled Spain, they will do so here. But, the Muslims lost Cordoba to the Christians so that's not a great symbol. More to the point, Cordoba references a time of great comity between communities. Yes, Christians and Jews were officially second class. It wasn't perfect for the Jews but compared to other times it was pretty good. Cordoba represents a golden age of Spain more than oppression of non-Muslims.

So I don't accept that it's a victory mosque and I don't see the evidence that it's about Islamic supremacy. What troubles us then? The proximity.

To build an Islamic cultural center near the former World Trade Center is insensitive to the victims' families we have heard. And I know that here in Orange County we have people who were there, people who were killed, people who responded and worked amid the horror so I tread carefully and respectfully. So, respectfully, I have to note that some families oppose the center while plenty of victims' families are unopposed to the project. There are some families supportive as a way of spitting in the face of Sayyid Qutb and his theories.

Yes, the attacks left a terrible scar on the people of New York and we need to be sensitive to the grieving families but does that mean that the area around ground zero shall never again have any formal Islamic presence? Must all Muslims bear the guilt of some Muslims forever? And how far do we take this?

Insensitivity and closeness is an imprecise thing. When they finally finish building on the ground zero site can Muslims working in an office building there have a prayer room? Can a kebab seller set up his cart on the sidewalk if it has Arabic menus?

The proposed building is two blocks away. Some say it is too close. Would three be better? Four? What is the radius that allows some New Yorkers to feel comfortable? I'm not being facetious. I'm asking serious questions. We are talking about making an area of New York City, an area of the United States, restricted from any formal Muslim presence. The majority dictating where the minority can pray is a serious thing to consider and deeply and profoundly un-American. Our Constitution and Bill of Rights make this country as great as it is. It is to our eternal credit that our country has from before its inception, with bumps along the way, allowed people to worship as they please and, subject to reasonable zoning rules, where they please. I can understand if the perpetrators, if the terrorists wanted to set up some display or a museum celebrating their attack but that is not the case. There is a spectrum of Islamic belief and practice just as in Judaism and we must resist condemning the whole because of the actions of a few. And why must these Muslims who did nothing carry the burden of terrorists they abhor?

Perhaps, maybe, many of us carry prejudices toward Muslims. Most of us don't know very much about Islam. It can be difficult to be immune from the name calling we hear from both sides though here in Newburgh, many people

do have friendships with Muslim which helps break down barriers. Most of the time, these prejudices show themselves in benign ways, small misunderstandings, inconsequential slights but for many Americans the prejudices come out as nothing less than hate. By now we have all heard of the pastor who saw it his Christian duty to have a Koran book burning.<sup>1</sup> We can dismiss him as a bigot but he represents merely an extreme version of what many in America believe. There is Islamophobia out there. There is suspicion about Muslims as a group even if we don't like to admit it. And it is when we fear Muslims as a group, when every Muslim is presumed to share the agenda of the most violent Muslims, that we enter into the realm of bigotry and we leave reasonable discussion.

The mosque included in the Park 51 project is already there. It's been there for some time as has another one in the neighborhood. The project was given a green light back in December and until a yellow journalism blog<sup>2</sup> started hyperventilating, everyone in any place of authority -zoning boards, community groups- approved it.

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/us/26gainesville.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=koran%20burning&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/us/26gainesville.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=koran%20burning&st=cse)

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[http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war\\_room/2010/08/16/ground\\_zero\\_mosque\\_origins](http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2010/08/16/ground_zero_mosque_origins)



But once our own American fanatic bloggers started saying World Trade Center terror mosque and ground zero mosque and monster mosque and all sorts of other incendiary things you get people going.

For some the syllogism works like this: the terrorists attacked in the name of Islam. This cultural center will be in the name of Islam. Therefore this cultural center is a terrorist center. That is the logic of an awful lot of people. I hear them say it.

Others have expressed their concerns this way. The terrorists were Muslim. This center is for Muslims. Muslims remind me of the attacks. Therefore no Muslim institution can be in the area.

I'm not trying to belittle people who have an emotional reaction. I'm trying to understand how the presence of this center offends people unless we are lumping all of Islam, all Muslims, into one group.

This is not to say we should allow political correctness to keep us from calling it like it is. Fear of al Qaeda and the followers of Qutb is a very good idea. No one knows better than Jews that when a person says he wants to kill us, we take that very seriously. Vigilance is good. Fear of Muslims as a group is another thing entirely.

It's Yom Kippur. It is a day to search our souls. It is a time to dig down deep and try to understand, really understand where our sensitivity is coming from. It is a day to still the shrill screaming we hear from so many opponents and look into our own souls quietly. If the cultural center is insensitive, what

exactly about it is insensitive? What upsets us? Are we upset because of the rumors and false information and outright lies we've read? Are we upset by distance? Are we upset that Muslims as a whole haven't sufficiently humbled themselves, that they don't know their place? Or do we hold onto a fear of Islam, a fear of Muslims.

Nine years ago, we were attacked in the name of Islam. We were scarred by Muslims who acted as Muslims. They attacked us for our values. That is a hard thing to overcome. It is hard not to look at a mosque or a headscarf or hear an accent and wonder, what do they think? What do they really feel? And some suspicion is good. Some suspicion keeps us alive. But too much suspicion just makes us fearful and mean and we must not be fearful and mean. It is Yom Kippur. It is the time to look deep within and ask ourselves the hard questions. Why do I feel the way I feel?

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