

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 2010
Civility, the Golden Rule and Praying with our Feet
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During the month of Elul and the Days of Awe 5771, we have an opportunity to look at our conduct, individual and collective over the past year; to think about what we might have done better, to say sorry for our wrongs and to forgive others. I am indebted to many of my colleagues for helping me put my thoughts and ideas together for you this morning.

We have this time to ask if we have done all we could to make our communities and our country better places. Have we spoken out to protest injustice, even when to do so would be to draw enmity to ourselves? Have we treated others as we would be treated?

Shabbat 54 (a tractate of the Talmud) teaches:

Rab and R. Hanina, R. Johanan and R. Habiba taught: Whoever can forbid his household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] his household; [if he can forbid] his fellow citizens, he is seized for [the sins of] his fellow citizens; if the whole world, he is seized for [the sins of] the whole world. R. Papa observed, And the members of the Resh Galutha's [household] (the head of the Jews in exile) are seized for the whole world.

We who live in a representative democracy cannot "forbid" our fellow citizens, but we can speak up, and we can vote. We are liable, therefore, for those times in which we did not use our agency as citizens to effect what policies we believe to be right.

Our country and our world are so full of anger, I sometimes wonder if that is not the underlying cause of global warming. If only we could turn that heat into an alternate form of energy we would not have to be so dependent on foreign oil.

A crucial aspect of our civility problem seems to be anger management. An article in the Los Angeles Times put it this way: So maybe it is not H1N1, but the nation seems to have come down with a serious case of Impulse

Control Disorder." Impulse Control Disorder is an excellent description of what we suffer.

Pirke Avot, the Ethics of the Sages, teaches "Al t'hi noach lichos- be not easy to anger," and contrast that with the rage in our society. There is a time and place for righteous indignation, and that is certainly in keeping with our prophetic tradition, but it must be used judiciously and saved for lofty moral causes....

We live in a time and place in which Jews, as a religious minority, enjoy unprecedented freedom of worship and social mobility. However, it is not so long ago that much of what is now being said about Islam and done to Muslims has been said about and done to us.

A recent film series, PBS's *The Jewish Americans* documents the extent to which anti-Semitic tropes employed by such career bigots as Henry Ford (who was, the film reminds us, discussed positively in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*) are the same as those by which Muslim-Americans are now characterized by their domestic enemies. In the 1930s and pre-World War II 1940s "the Jew" represented a threat to those who felt that the America they knew—white, Christian and rural was slipping away to be replaced by a more cosmopolitan, urban society; one in which the film reminds us, the anti-Semitic Ku Klux Klan had over four million members—more than the American Jewish population of the time.

There was a time when, outside of enclaves such as a few boroughs of Manhattan, "good Jews" were expected to be careful not to be blatant, a time when suburban synagogues, like gay bars, were nondescript buildings that did not advertise their function. There was a time when Jews who wanted to get ahead in America were expected to change their names, regulate their gestures and, with regard to where they might live and what office they might hold, be modest in their expectations. There was a time when "Jew"—like, in some quarters, "Muslim" today—was slung as an insult, and Jewish Americans described themselves as "Hebrews."

It was only after the reverberations of horror following World War II, with its reminder of where anti-Semitism can lead, and also the cultural shift in favor of diversity effected by the African-American civil rights movement,

feminism and their social cousins, that Jews emerged into full participation in American life. A key element in that transformation has been the sharpening understanding of the guarantee of religious freedom afforded by our Constitution: the assurance that, cultural biases aside, our nation as such was founded on the basis that our government promotes no religion and respects them all.

President George Washington wrote in a letter to the warden of Touro Synagogue in Rhode Island in 1790 that "the Government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance..." He continued, "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 everyone shall sit safely under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."

Today, we are reminded of our own history, our potential vulnerability, at the same time we are being actively recruited to join in the anti-Muslim bullying. A recent World Gallup Poll revealed a link between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, indicating that contempt for Jews makes a person "about 32 times as likely to report the same level of prejudice toward Muslims."

You all know the very famous story from the Talmud: (Shabbat 31a): A certain gentile came to Rabbi Shammai and said: "Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot. Rabbi Shammai was incensed and chased him away. When he went before Rabbi Hillel, he said to him "What is hateful to you do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary thereof; now go and learn it.

The Talmud comes to teach us and build upon the Torah principle of loving our neighbor. A simple truth you know how you would like to be treated and how you don't like to be treated. Therefore—don't do what is hateful to your neighbor. And that is the essence of our faith...The essence of our religion. The essence of Judaism is according to Rabbi Hillel—What is hateful to you do not to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. All the rest is but commentary.

We know how we are supposed to act...Why? Because we know how it feels. We know when a line has been crossed. We intrinsically know in part what the good Rabbi Hillel is telling us...

"And so it is with our neighbors then in Talmudic times and with our neighbors today. We ought to know when we have crossed a line.

In recent weeks and days a line has been crossed. Some in America have been treating our neighbors in a hateful way.

Prominent Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders held an extraordinary "emergency summit" meeting in Washington, D.C. the day before Rosh Hashanah to denounce what they called "the derision, misinformation and outright bigotry" aimed at American Muslims during the controversy over the proposed Islamic community center near ground zero.

They said they were alarmed that the "anti-Muslim frenzy" and attacks at several mosques had the potential not only to tear apart the country, but also to undermine the reputation of America as a model of religious freedom and diversity.

The clergy members said that those responsible for a poisoned climate included politicians manipulating a wedge issue in an election year, self-styled "experts" on Islam who denigrate the faith for religious or political reasons and some conservative evangelical Christian pastors.

Islamophobia has reared its ugly head. All over our country people are talking about Muslims in increasingly hateful tones. The commotion and questions that have been raised over the Cordoba Initiative's plan to build a Muslim Community Center in lower Manhattan is something we in the Jewish community should be ashamed of.

The Cordoba Initiative is an organization that seeks to build ties between the Muslim World and the West. Its board has both Christians and Jews that sit on it. This group has sought to build a community center that would also contain a small mosque in a neighborhood two blocks away from the site of the former World Trade Center—known as Ground Zero.

The name Cordoba was chosen carefully by the center organizers, as it states on its website, to reflect a period of time during which Islam played a monumental role in the enrichment of human civilization and knowledge. A thousand years ago Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted and created a prosperous center of intellectual, spiritual, cultural and commercial life in Cordoba, Spain.

While this was their motivation on choosing the name Cordoba and their perspective on the Golden Age of Spain, some may have a different take on it because of the changes that took place over successive Muslim rulers. I think it is instructive to consider their motivation as we consider their Initiative.

I know the Jewish community and our congregation is divided on the Park 51 Islamic Center, so while you may not agree with me, please hear me out. Some have said that building a mosque so close to Ground Zero—since the perpetrators of 9/11 were Muslim extremists, is an affront to those who died. That is what the ADL said. Not that the Cordoba Initiative group shouldn't build a center. But build it elsewhere. Are we painting all Muslims with the broad stroke of extremism? That's like saying all Jews want to oppress women and want to settle in the West Bank....As Jews we ought to know better. We know what it is like to be the outcasts of society; to have someone suspicious of our religion. Because we are more accepted now—should we turn and do this to our neighbors? This is an opportunity to build bridges and extend our hands as neighbors. This is a chance to live out the Torah's highest ideals—Love our neighbor as ourselves.

Our local involvement with the Children of Abraham programs is one way we can further this ideal. Through the program on October 10th, you can explore with other Jews, Christians and Muslims why we relate to each other and get to know members of our diverse community as people in facilitated small group discussions. Please join us for this important, transformational work; put our Jewish values and ideals into action. You can pick up a flyer about the program on the table in the lobby.

The memories of those who perished at the World Trade Center are not diminished by the building of a mosque two blocks from Ground Zero. I believe their memories are honored. For we live in a country that celebrates Freedom of Religion and Free Speech. These are our American ideals—and they are our patriots who died because America stands for these values. Those that murdered the 3000 plus victims of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and Flight 93 on 9/11 that fateful day, struck the Twin Towers and the Pentagon because we as a country stand for those values and terrorists hate those values. Only a few months after 9/11, a Muslim

prayer space was designated in the Pentagon, with no controversy and has been used for Muslim prayer ever since.

I am ashamed that some in our country want to diminish these values for others.

So let us learn from our Torah and from Rabbi Hillel—Do not do to others what is hateful to you. And Love your neighbor as yourself.

During this season of reflection, when we are encouraged to face our regrets, apologize and try to do better; do we have the clarity and courage to act on our convictions? Students and faculty from Hebrew Union College in New York took action last month, following in Abraham Joshua Heschel's footsteps.

Rabbi Heschel was a scholar and theologian. He both read and wrote voraciously. But he was also a practical man who lived by his principles. A refugee from Nazi Germany, he knew injustice quite personally. So when he came to the United States, the racial segregation prevalent at the time made him cringe. He became active in the civil rights movement, marching alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama. As he noted to a fellow marcher, "When I march in Selma, my feet are praying.

Today, the movement for religious freedom and pluralism may well define our era, as much as the movement for racial equality defined Heschel's. So last month over 40 students, staff and faculty from Hebrew Union College-New York, where Andrea is a cantorial student and where I was trained as a rabbi, walked with signs of support, kippot, tallitot and shofars to the Park51 community center. The seminarians wanted to demonstrate their solidarity with the American Muslim community in its right to freedom of religion. They sang, spoke and prayed outside of the community center, affirming religious pluralism and freedom in America. Kamal, a security guard for Park 51 waited at the doorstep and after hearing their prayers, invited them inside. He told them of what a dark time it had been for him, saying "Thank you for brightening my month. You all changed it for me and gave me hope."

(Praying with our Feet)

The story is told of a prince who was far away from his father – a hundred days journey away. One day his friends said to him, “Return to your father.”

He replied, “I cannot. I have not the strength.”

There upon his father sent word, saying to him, “Come back as far as you can according to your strength, and I will go the rest of the way to meet you.”

With each other’s help, we can be enlarged by our responses to difficult times, rather than diminished.

Here is another true story of praying with our feet:

When Gerald Wolpe was only 11 years old, his father died suddenly. As a young boy in a more or less traditional Jewish community, he used to walk to the synagogue to say kaddish for his father. After the second or third week, Mr. Einstein, the Ritual Director of the shul happened to be walking by the Wolpe home and said to the young boy, “You know, this is on my way and I thought, why not pick you up and we will walk together. That way I will not have to walk alone each morning.”

And so, through the seasons, the two of them walked together, day after day, and the boy was not alone.

Years later when Rabbi Wolpe grew up and was married with a son, he went back home for a visit and called Mr. Einstein. “You know,” he said, “I would love for you to meet my son.”

Mr. Einstein was now well into his 90s and did not leave his home much. Still, he said, “I would love to meet him. Why don’t you and your wife bring your son here. I will give you directions. You will come by. We will meet.

Rabbi Wolpe then wrote these words: “The journey between my childhood home and his was long and complicated. His home, by car, was a full 20 minutes away. I drove in tears as I realized what he had done. He had walked for more than an hour to my home so I would not have to be alone

each morning. By the simplest of gestures, the act of caring, he took a frightened child and led him with confidence and faith.”

As we face this New Year, let us try to take that responsibility upon ourselves in a serious way. Let us try to set an example of civility in all of our interactions. As we face our neighbors, may we see in them the Image of God, and demonstrate the appropriate respect in word and deed.

May our lives thus be a source of honor to God and to the Jewish people, and may God’s blessings be upon us and upon all created in God’s image.

May we assure each other with the simple act of our presence that better, more forgiving times await. In this way, we might answer the question “ayecha?” where are you? Not with words, but with our lives.”

And when, like the prince a hundred days journey away from his father, we have come as far as we can, let us go the rest of the way to meet each other.

“So the Holy One, blessed be God, says to Israel: Return to me, and I will return unto you.”

G’mar Tov – May you be sealed for good in the year to come.

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