

Everyone's a Little Bit Racist
Yom Kippur Morning 5771
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When a large group gathers in public, a protest sign is sure to follow. The last few years have seen a rise in the originality and humor of such signs. They range from the illegibly hand drawn ones to nonsensical ramblings to slick, professional produced ones. The Westboro Baptist Church, that Kansas home of intolerance and hatred, protests with numerous signs around the country much of the year especially at military soldiers' funerals. They were at the West Orange JCC and Rutgers University last year carrying signs such as "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," "God Hates Fags," "Antichrist Obama," "Israel is Doomed," "America is Doomed," and "God Hates You." Counter-protestors have brought a variety of signs to mingle and disrupt among Westboro's hatemongers, including one simply reading, "God Hates Signs."

With such obvious hate on display, we easily recognize the bigotry and venom of a group such as Westboro Baptist Church. We readily separate them from any other Christian group in the world and properly declare them as aberrant and wrong. We know there are other Christian leaders advocating forms of discrimination against gays or Jews or atheists or blacks or immigrants, but easily see Westboro is the most extreme in form.

Separating out the most extreme forms of racism is easily done. But it sometimes gives us an easy out in ignoring milder, occasional, more casual bigotry that everyone has in one form or another. The brilliant satirical puppet musical, *Avenue Q*, suggests that all of us have a little racism in one of their most controversial songs:

Everyone's a little bit racist sometimes.
Doesn't mean we go around committing hate crimes.
Look around and you will find
No one's really color blind.
Maybe it's a fact we all should face
Everyone makes judgments based on race.

That comes across better when sung by puppets. Not to say any of us are the racists we imagine in our head from that term – Nazis and Klansmen and skinheads. But all of us have a

collection of biases that we were taught or developed about others. We presume stereotypes about groups, make fun of certain collections of people (sometimes in good fun) and lump widely disparate individuals under a single heading. For each of us it is different, but we all have collectively referred to a group as if they were all the same: So we might make a joke involving Poles that implies all Poles are dumb or that Germans are violent, or share a gross generalization about African-Americans or Republicans, or use a reference to gay people or gay acts as a term for weak or stupid. Stereotypes, generalizations, assumptions are all part of how we categorize the world around us and create guidance to interact and understand others. It can be good-natured, innocent, thoughtless, or cruel. And it can be very dangerous.

On December 8, 2009, a front-page headline in the *New York Times* read, “Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero.” It shared how a Burlington Coat Factory two-blocks north of the Twin Towers, had been used as an overflow prayer space from a growing group of Muslim worshippers. A community center would be built on the spot, which had been damaged by a piece of plane wreckage on September 11, 2001. Their leader, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, said the location specifically appealed to him as it sent “the opposite statement to what happened on 9/11. We want to push back against the extremists.”¹ There was little reaction to the article.

As we all know, that changed. The center, originally known as Cordoba House and now called Park51, based on its address, has been in recent months at the firestorm of accusation, complaint, and critique. Early on, attempts were made to declare such a building illegal. Statements from politicians of all dispositions defending their first amendment rights limited such a line of attack. The conflict moved onto whether they *should* build it there. Republican Senator Orrin Hatch, who spoke out in support of Park51’s legal rights, said, “The question in this case is whether, given the inflamed passions of the community – including those of many people who lost family members on 9/11 – building the mosque at that location is a good idea.”²

I’ve wrestled with these issues over the past weeks and come to the clear conclusion for my own thinking. Should the Park51 Muslim Community Center be built two blocks from Ground Zero? I have no idea. That’s up to the leaders of that community. If they could turn back time, I’d bet they pick a different spot just to avoid so much controversy. But I support their right to do it on both legal and moral grounds, and I believe all Jews should as well.

One of the most frequent critiques of Park51 is that it is being built on hallowed ground. Two blocks in New York City can be quite a distance. The Burlington Coat Factory store is surrounded by numerous other shops, restaurants, office buildings, an OTB, and, as many have pointed out, strip clubs. The Freedom Tower being built on the site of the Twin Towers will have a huge variety of offices. Will we police those tenants and their financial backers on some sort of appropriateness scale?

Some have drawn allusions to the Carmelite Nunnery that was established in the Auschwitz concentration camp to honor Christian dead. This Catholic site was seen as affront to the Jewish community and the murdered of the Holocaust. It has been named a parallel to the Ground Zero Mosque. After ugly confrontations, Pope John Paul II ordered the Nuns' home moved. That's where some people stop the story. In reality, it was moved just outside the border of Auschwitz, essentially about two blocks away from the camp's hallowed ground.

The Twin Towers did not have a mosque, but it had a room on the 17th floor designated as prayer space for Muslim workers in the Towers. For the Muslim workers at Windows on the World, there was a nearby stairwell where they prayed.³ These spaces remained after the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing. The Pentagon, the other building attacked by the terrorist controlled planes in 2001, has a non-denominational prayer space used daily by all faiths, including five times a day by Muslims. There is also an existing mosque currently near the site of Park51.

What we call this proposed building also creates a reaction. 'The Ground Zero Mosque' is not quite accurate. Yes, it is near Ground Zero. Yes, it has a Mosque in it. But that's an over simplification. Park51 is a Muslim JCC modeled after the 92nd Street Y. It will be 15 stories and have childcare, a senior citizens center, a gym, a swimming pool, and a 9/11 victims' memorial

But the reason I believe Jews and most every other American should defend the building of Park51 is that the above arguments are ultimately a smokescreen. The reason people are suggesting the community center shouldn't be built is because it is being built by Muslims. I think we would all agree that if a church or a synagogue or a Hindu ashram wanted to go up in this spot, there would be nary a complaint. So the argument against Park51 is that Muslims are building it and the terrorists on 9/11 were also Muslim. Those terrorists were extremists who

used Islam in a twisted way. By treating them as identical, we would be equating one billion Muslims in the world as just as guilty and responsible as Al-Qaeda.

When Yigal Amir killed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, I didn't feel responsible. I recognized he was a Jewish terrorist helping destroy a chance for peace. When Rabbi Meir Kahane called for the deaths of all Palestinians, I didn't feel he represented Jews or Rabbis, but a fringe group of terrorists who also called themselves Jewish. When Bernie Madoff perpetuated one of the worst financial crimes in the world, one hopes all Jews were not seen as corrupt money launderers.

Should all American Muslims be eternally saddled with guilt for the actions of 15 men from Saudi Arabia, 2 from United Arab Emirates, 1 from Egypt, and 1 from Lebanon? Every time we say the Mosque needs to be moved, we are saying it is because they are building a home for Muslims and Al-Qaeda is Muslim too.

Some of the fiercest critiques haven't even tried to disguise their outright bigotry towards Muslims. Right-wing blogger Pamela Geller was one of the first to fan the fire of this issue. She wrote, "This is Islamic domination and expansionism. The location is no accident. Just as Al-Aqsa was built on top of the Temple in Jerusalem... The only Muslim center that should be built in the shadow of the World Trade Center is one devoted to expunging the Koran and all Islamic teachings of the prescribed violent jihad and all hateful texts and incitement to violence."⁴ Terrorist Muslims and regular American Muslims are synonyms for her.

In a powerful speech by Rabbi Eric Yoffie earlier this week, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism reminded us, "The point is that we do not tar all Muslims with the brush of extremism because extremist strands of Islam exist in their midst. To do so is to engage in the kind of stereotyping that has plagued us as Jews throughout our history, and that we reject, categorically and unequivocally."⁵ Consider reading the full speech at URJ.org.

When we connect the terrorist attacks with all Muslims we imply, even if unintentionally, that those atrocities were part of the Muslim faith. Mayor Michael Bloomberg echoed this, saying, "It is my hope that the mosque will help to bring our city even closer together, and help repudiate the false and repugnant idea that the attacks of 9/11 were in any way consistent with Islam. Muslims are as much a part of our city and our country as the people of any faith - and

they are as welcome to worship in lower Manhattan as any other group.”⁶ In other words, terrorists are not welcome. Muslims, however, are not automatically terrorists and are welcome.

We have often been guilty of such generalizations – and sometime with terrible results. Jews have spent thousands of years wandering the globe because we were treated as one large homogenous group worthy of only disgust. In New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant banned all Jews. Hundreds of years later, Jews were denied life-saving access to the American shores as refugees during the Holocaust. At the same time, Americans were creating Japanese Internment Camps in World War II and locking up over 100,000 people with any Japanese ancestry including many thousands of American citizens. General John L. DeWitt then testified before Congress, “I don't want any [persons of Japanese ancestry] here. They are a dangerous element. There is no way to determine their loyalty... It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese. American citizenship does not necessarily determine loyalty... But we must worry about the Japanese all the time until he is wiped off the map.”⁷ Substitute “Muslim” for “Japanese” and you get the sentiments of many today.

Fear of Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Chinese, Japanese, Irish, Mexicans, and so many others have resulted in American policies treating each as one unit with revulsion and oppression.

Park51 raises many deep emotions for us. 9/11 killed people we knew and fundamentally changed our country. Some argue that this Ground Zero Mosque is different and touches on deep sensitivities. The 9/11 Families object to it and that should be enough. Lumping all the families who lost someone on the planes or in the Twin Towers into one group is disingenuous. Those parents, spouses, and children are diverse with many varied opinions. I have heard speakers for all sides claim that the majority of 9/11 families agree with them. The Ground Zero mosque has become the lightning rod for a much deeper struggle that fills our country.

The results of such attitudes – even when unintentional – are real. The Council on American Islamic Relations, or CAIR, reports anti-Muslim violence has risen twelve-fold in recent months. In late August, a Muslim cab driver in New York City was stabbed by passenger who screamed “Assalamu Alaikum. Consider this a checkpoint.” Mosques around the country are being harassed, set on fire, and repelled from different communities. They aren't anywhere near Ground Zero, but are mosques in cities such as Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Temecula,

California, and Willowbrook, Illinois. In Temecula, one protestor's sign declared, "Mosques are monuments to terrorism."

Imagine if the citizens of Oklahoma went into an uproar because a Methodist Church was going to be built in downtown Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh, the perpetrator of the horrific domestic attack that blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was a Christian. He was part of the fringe Christian group Christian Identity that is virulently antisemitic, racist, and anti-government. Surely, we wouldn't want any Christians to be near the site of his terrorism. But we understand Christianity is far more diverse than that. I haven't heard anyone claim that all Christian Ministers want to burn the Koran because one idiot pastor got publicity for saying he would. We can accept the fringes in Judaism and Christianity and Americans, but we struggle to do so with Islam.

Why? There are many answers, but the most important is that we don't know Muslims. There are maybe 10 million Muslims in America. Like some immigrant groups throughout history, they tend to be clustered in certain neighborhoods. Like some religious groups, they tend to focus on their own schools and religious sites. Like groups with dietary restrictions, they have their own restaurants. When we look at the history of other feared groups in America such as Jews, Catholics, Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and so on, when we got know each other understanding crept it. It came when their kids went to school together, when they appeared as positive characters in popular media, and when people could identify with famous members of the group. Sadly, the most famous American Muslim, at least for 20% of the country according to studies, is our President, Barack Obama, a Christian.⁸

A 2007 Pew Research Center poll found that people who actually knew Muslims had a 56% favorable impression of them, compared with only 32% of people who didn't know any Muslims. The study found similar results for Mormons and gays and lesbians. Pew's director of survey research said, "The strong presumption here is that familiarity *doesn't* breed contempt. Instead, familiarity breeds understanding and de-mystification."⁹

Thirty years ago, there were almost no positive gay characters in media, no out celebrities, and few people personally knew many out gay people. As that changes, reduction in fear and greater acceptance has risen. There is much progress yet to achieve, but most people

today wouldn't lump all gay people in one giant category. They'd recognize the diversity across any group even with a common characteristic.

Getting to know Muslims in Livingston isn't the easiest task. There aren't any Muslim centers in our immediate area. So we have to strive harder to read, learn, and develop sensitivity. If some Americans could embrace the bagel and make *Seinfeld* the #1 show, even without Jewish neighbors, we can grow in our recognition and sensitivity to Muslims.

When opportunities arise, we need to take advantage of them. On Tuesday, November 9, Irshad Manji, the widely respected Muslim reformer and human rights activist will be speaking at Temple B'nai Jeshurun. Temple Emanu-El is a co-sponsor of this event. She won the first Oprah Chutzpah award and that combination of disparate elements should alone get you to go.

On Yom Kippur, we recognize the sins we have committed against God and those done towards individuals. This year, let us check the sins we commit against groups of people – forcing large diverse groups to conform to a single-minded understanding or to extremist elements. Maybe it's casual or sloppy; maybe it comes from indifference or maybe being a little bit racist sometimes, but in 5771, we strive to get past those generalizations and recognize each of us as created uniquely in the image of God.

¹ *The New York Times*, "Muslim Prayers and Renewal Near Ground Zero," December 8, 2009.

² *The New York Times*, "Zoning Law Aside, Mosque Projects Face Battles," September 3, 2010.

³ *The New York Times*, "Muslims and Islam Were Part of Twin Towers' Life," September 10, 2010.

⁴ http://atlasshrugs2000.typepad.com/atlas_shrugs/2010/05/monster-mosque-pushes-ahead-in-shadow-of-world-trade-center-islamic-death-and-destruction.html

⁵ <http://blogs.rj.org/reform/2010/09/cordoba-house.html>

⁶ *New York Daily News*, "Mayor Bloomberg Stands Up for Mosque," August 3, 2010.

⁷ http://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=225

⁸ *The Washington Post*, "Poll Shows more Americans think Obama is a Muslim," August 19, 2010.

⁹ *The Forward*, "To Know a Muslim," September 8, 2010.