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## **The “Ground Zero Mosque” and Rosh Hashanah**

We live in an age when information is constantly available. When news happens, it flashes around the globe in a matter of minutes. I’m sure many of us remember when a good controversy grew slowly. Something was revealed. Soon it was investigated and then written about in a newspaper, before spreading over time to other newspapers, and eventually people all over the place would be standing at the water cooler talking about it. Finally, somebody might decide they needed to do something official about it. Well, these days, news cycles are swift and brutal – an issue can come out of nowhere, and become earth-shattering within a few days.

The results of this are both positive and negative. The good is that knowledge and understanding and access are growing every day. More people have more opportunities to learn about more things than ever before. The downside, of course, is that more people have more opportunities to comment on more things than ever before.

Unfortunately, I believe this is part of what has been happening recently with regards to a civic project in New York City. You may have heard it referred to as either the “Ground Zero Mosque” or the “Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center at Park 51.” And if you have read the newspaper, listened to the radio, surfed the internet, or overheard people talking in the coffee shop, you probably are aware that it has turned into a major controversy across the country. People are talking, polls are being taken, blogs are being written ... and the discourse has not been civil.

The issues that have been raised on all sides of the argument are complex, and honestly, both those in favor of the building and those opposed have fair concerns. Beginning with the name.

Our Jewish tradition is very clear that words matter. In fact, they are vital. One of the ways our Torah is unique is that our creation story is unlike any that had come before. God spoke and the world came into existence. The building blocks of the world are letters and words. It’s a beautiful thought, really, and we have always placed great emphasis on words and how they affect us. In this case, those tending to oppose the structure call it a “Ground Zero Mosque.” The implication is clear – triumphalist Islam is building a mosque on top of the Ground Zero site they destroyed, just as they built the Dome of the Rock directly on top of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem, and as they built mosques on top of the sites of churches they conquered around the Mediterranean. So the term “Ground Zero Mosque” is evocative of a much larger unease than simply a house of worship in a city neighborhood.

On the other side, people point out – as Jon Stewart did on The Daily Show – that the proposed community center is not going to be built at Ground Zero at all, but on the former site of a Burlington Coat factory several blocks away. It's not even within the sight lines of Ground Zero. And it is not a mosque, which would be equivalent to a synagogue, but a cultural center modeled after the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y – New York's preeminent Jewish cultural and community center. To them, the term "Lower Manhattan cultural center" evokes the very best of religious tolerance in America.

So which is right? Both names reflect the honest emotion that people feel about this project. And my goal tonight is not to dive into the politics, per se; rather, it is to discuss how we make decisions as Jews, how decisions like this impact our community, and how we, as individuals might respond to such a frenzied conversation.

And so I'd like to tell you three stories. The first takes us back to St. Louis in the early 1950s. Temple Israel there is a lot like our own Beth Israel – an old, proud, prominent, and active congregation. After outgrowing their previous location, the board decided to build a new Temple in the suburbs. They looked for just the right area, researched building codes and spoke with friends and neighbors, before purchasing a plot of land. One month later, the city of Creve Coeur passed a new zoning ordinance forbidding the construction of the synagogue. The Temple Board decided to go to court, supported by the local Archbishop and the entire Protestant Church Federation. After appealing all the way to the Missouri Supreme Court, the Temple won the right to put up their building. And it still stands in there today

(<http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/collections/freedom.php>).

We truly are Wandering Jews, whether it was moving from the Mediterranean to Europe, getting kicked out of England, France, and Spain, or even following the Jews as they moved from Herman Park to Fondren Southwest to Memorial and Bellaire. As a tiny minority, we have always been dependent on the good will of the authorities wherever we lived, and part of the reason that we have been so successful here is the particular nature of our democratic system in America. All the way back in 1790, George Washington wrote a letter to the Jews in Newport, Rhode Island, confirming their accepted status by stating that the Government of the United States "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, [and] requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens." He concluded by defining the relationship between the government, its individual citizens, and religious groups thusly:

"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 under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."

The second story took place about 10 months ago, when a young medical student in Israel named Nofrat Frenkel did something that Jews dreamed about for nearly 2,000 years before regaining the opportunity in 1967 – she went to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Many of you have been there, and you know that it is a magnificent site. You literally can feel the weight of Jewish history standing with you as you meditate, talk to

God, put a note in the Wall, or just gaze in admiration at the stones that have sat there for thousands of years.

But that ordinary morning last November did not end like so many others. Nofrat was arrested, pushed physically to a police station, and booked on charges of incitement. What had she done? Dared to wear a *talis* during prayer at Judaism's holiest site. I love Israel and truly feel ashamed to stand here describing this scene. But if you know the Yiddish word, "*shanda*," you will understand when I say that it is appalling and deeply discomfoting to know that even we, Jews, can take such reprehensible actions toward members of our own religious community. That is not the Israel we are trying to build.

The third story brings us back to a day that none of us will ever forget: September 11, 2001. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that our entire way of life was attacked that day. Our way of life as Americans, as Jews, as modern people. I imagine that every one of us remembers exactly what we were doing when we heard the news. And yet, as much as 9/11 stands out, it does not stand alone. There was also the car bomb in Bali. The theater in Russia. The commuter trains in Spain. Turkey, India, Morocco, Saudi Arabia. And, of course, Israel. We simply cannot deny that bad things are happening out there in our world. And we, as Jews, know better than anyone that when bad things start happening, they can get even worse.

Listening to these stories, you might think they pull us in different directions regarding the current situation. And you would be right. We have been refused the ability to build our own religious sites, we have oppressed religious minorities within our own midst, and we have suffered the scourge of fundamentalism. And each of these lessons should drive us. But in which direction?

The Talmud is the definitive source of Jewish wisdom not necessarily because it provides us with the right answer to so many real-world problems, but because our Sages had the insight and the foresight to preserve arguments on both sides of an issue. Like our own Supreme Court, we get both majority and minority opinions. The difference is, whereas in our American system only the majority opinion becomes law, in Jewish tradition, we continue to take guidance from the entire conversation, not just the conclusion.

This particular conversation does not take place in a vacuum. We are less than a week away from Rosh Hashanah, the time when we decide once again what kind of person we want to be next year. Not what we demand of others, not what we need, not what we deserve – but how our own actions will define us. And so I would humbly suggest that even regarding such a public issue as the fate of Lower Manhattan, our response will be less about a building that will or won't go up, and more about identifying who we are.

In staking out a position, each one of us could choose to be more strict or more forgiving. More interested in maintaining the sacred memory of the past, or more interested in forging a new future. More committed to ensuring safety or more willing to offer the benefit of the doubt.

On the cusp of the High Holy Days, we know that when we offer the benefit of the doubt, we open ourselves up to being taken advantage of. When we extend a hand, it can be slapped. But we also know that these are days of forgiveness, and in our tradition we forgive those around us not for their benefit but for our benefit. When we forgive our friends and family for the slights and harms they have done to us – when we offer them new opportunities to build stronger relationships with us – then by definition we are forgiving people. We are merciful and compassionate. We mirror those very qualities in God that we aspire to, even as we ask God to be forgiving toward us.

Whether it is Rosh Hashanah or New York, these are not easy decisions. But they do cut to the core of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And they demonstrate to me just why Judaism remains so vital and so relevant today.

*Shana Tovah* – may it be a good year ahead for all of us.