

## Mosques and Islam, Hatred and Kindness

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As the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority begin to gain some momentum, there is no shortage of opinions being offered, both from professional pundits, as well as from average citizens. And, sadly, as is often the case, among the more reasonable voices, there are those who use these moments to spread the most vile lies, accusations and stereotypes against our people. Protesters outside of a new Israeli synagogue, not being built anywhere near the disputed territories, held signs which read, "Synagogues are monuments to Apartheid." The New York Times quoted a woman on the street, an average grandmother, they said, as saying that she worried that the Jews were plotting to take over the government, and the whole country. A past member of Congress actually accused the Israelis of acting just like the Nazis did. And, so it goes. These are just few of the dozen, probably hundreds of such comments which have surfaced over the past few weeks. Jews, of all backgrounds, denominations and political leanings, are being lumped together and accused of the most horrific of crimes against Palestinians, and against the West. And, no one seems outraged. No one seems frightened that, here in America, it's possible to espouse a hatred of an entire group of people, and to compare us all to the most vile criminals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to not have that hatred hounded out of public discourse. Even if not everyone agrees with the statements, it is atrocious that it's possible to call us all Nazis, and then be invited on cable news shows to politely discuss those views. I truly find it distressing, and frightening. I didn't think that this could happen in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.

There's only one thing. Those statements from the press aren't accurate. They're all more or less correct, but there is one important thing about them which I changed. They weren't made about Jews. They were made about Muslims. They were made about Islam. The signs actually read, "Mosques are monuments to terrorism." That grandmother was worried that "we will be overtaken by Islam, and their goal is to get people in Congress and the Supreme Court to see that *Shariah* is implemented." And that congressman really did compare the builders of the planned Islamic Community Center, near Ground Zero, to Nazis. Several times. I am scared, but not nearly as scared as I'd be, were I Muslim.

Why the fear? It's not just the issues themselves; it's the tone of the debate. To me, the arguments against the so-called Ground Zero Mosque have been weak, at best. The community center, which will include a prayer-space, but is not primarily a house of worship, has been planned for over a year, and has long had support from many who, now that it's a hot-button issue, are quick to condemn it. And, it's *not* at Ground Zero, but two blocks away—light years, in New York terms. I suppose that reasonable people can debate if even that is appropriate, but that's precisely the problem. There seem to so few – so few reasonable people making those arguments, that is. The rallies and speeches against the center have been, to a shocking degree, hate-filled mob scenes, condemning a 1500 year-old religion, and all of its 1.5 billion followers, for the acts of a relatively miniscule minority. An evil, utterly evil, minority, to be sure. And, one which has far too much support in *some* quarters of that religion, without a doubt. But, to claim that all of Islam is evil, or that all Muslims are, is to engage in the baldest form of prejudice – judging an entire group based on the behavior of part of that group. It is to give voice and credence to the worst instincts within us—to give in to fear, and to lash out, indiscriminately, based on that fear. It is to give in to hate – and, make no mistake, this is very much about simple, old fashioned hate. If there is one thing of which the vitriol has convinced me, it's that *most* of the objections to the Park51 building come from the same place as the thankfully called-off Quran burning, or as the man who stumbled into

a Queens, NY mosque during prayer time, and urinated on the prayer-rugs. They come from fear, and they come from hate.

We Jews know a thing or two about hate. We have been hated, and we have had cause, over the centuries, to hate others as well. And, our sages, through it all, have done their best to help us see that one of the greatest mistakes—sins—we can make is to embrace that hate. Rabbinic legend has it that our first Temple was destroyed because we engaged in the three cardinal sins: idolatry, sexual immorality and murder. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple? It was destroyed because of only one sin: *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred. And, lest we somehow miss the message, the Talmud makes it explicit (Yoma 9b): the sin of senseless hatred is equivalent to those three sins, it teaches us.

Is that just rhetorical hyperbole? Perhaps. Even if it is, it's still noteworthy. Our sages are still trying to point out to us how truly terrible hatred can be. But, there is something else going on here. *Sinat chinam*, senseless hatred, is worse than most other sins, even other heinous sins, in at least one important way: it's one of the few sins which we're all too happy to let ourselves get away with. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin remembers one of his teachers asking why the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple was rebuilt relatively quickly, when it was destroyed for some truly horrific transgressions, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, destroyed for seemingly minor reasons, has yet to be restored? Because, his teacher told him, with those other sins, upon realizing what we've done, most of us will repent, and repent fully. But, *sinat chinam*? That one we just rationalize. "Oh – it's not *senseless*. They've earned it. They destroyed our towers. They bombed our cities in Israel. They blew themselves up, taking our fellow Jews with them." They. An interesting word, one which hides so much. "They" can be a word of hate. A word of prejudice. "They" didn't do anything. Some of them did. Many more did not.

Hatred is a cancer. It spreads uncontrollably, and it eats us up from the inside, destroying us, as it turns us into what we don't want to be. A medieval Jewish story tells of a man who is granted a wish by an angel. "But," the angel warns him, "whatever you wish for, your neighbor, whom you hate, will receive in double. What do you wish for?" The man answered, "Poke out one of my eyes." We get so invested in hurting those whom we hate that, so often, we wind up hurting ourselves. That's how hate works.

In the opening pages of the Talmud, we read a story of the great Rabbi Meir, who was being constantly assaulted by some hooligans. One night he prays for their death, and he is upbraided by his wife, Beruriah. "Does it not say that we should pray for *sin* to be no more?" she asks him. "Sin – not sinners should be no more. You are not allowed to hate them, or to pray for their deaths," she teaches her husband. That sensibility, that hatred is *not* a Jewish value, that we are supposed to, to the best of our abilities, keep ourselves from hating others, becomes ensconced in Jewish tradition. At the end of every *Tefillah*, we ask for those who wish us harm, not for God to destroy them, but for God to change their minds or spoil their plans. During *Unataneh Tokef*, one of the most powerful prayers of these High Holy Days, we pray, "Adonai, it is not the death of sinners you seek, but that they should turn from their ways and live." And, during *Ya'aleh V'yavo*, the prayer which declares the holiness of this day, we all said, "On this Day of Atonement we pray for awareness. Let love and compassion grow among us, and goodness be our daily care."

Love. Compassion. Kindness. Is it too cliché? I honestly don't think so. Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the day of the year on which, more than any other day, we are supposed to be asking ourselves if we are really living up to our highest ideals. If we are truly becoming the people we wish to be. So, ask yourself: what kind of a person do I want to be? Hate-filled and angry? Or kind, and compassionate? It might be trite, but some of the greatest lessons are: hatred is not a Jewish value. Kindness is. Compassion is. I'm not suggesting that we don't fight our enemies – Judaism is not pacifist,

and it demands that we fight back against those who would do us harm. But, it also demands that we not fight those who *look* like those who would do us harm. That we not hate when we don't need to. Prejudice, bigotry and racism – these are not Jewish values. These are not what we strive for today.

As a Rabbi, I have the task, and the honor, of presiding over funerals, and time and again I have heard mourners praise a loved one as someone who never hated. Someone who didn't have a hateful bone in their body. Someone who was kind to everyone – family, friends, business associates, rivals – it didn't matter. These are the words we use to praise our dearly departed. I've yet to hear anyone praised as someone who sure hated all Muslims. God save me from that fate. What will they say about me at *my* funeral? Or you, at yours?

What frustrates me when I hear Jews descending into hatred is the knowledge that we are supposed to be on the other side of this. The core teaching of Judaism is to be kind to the stranger, for we were strangers in the Land of Egypt. The Passover seder, the most observed ritual in Judaism, is a yearly reminder that precisely because we have been oppressed, we have a special obligation to look out for others who are being oppressed. That, maybe more than anything else, is what it means to be a Jew. When I hear of Muslims having their new mosques protested and blocked all over America, not just near Ground Zero, when I hear of people yelling at them in the streets, calling them terrorists and telling them to "go home," I know that our people heard the same things, not very long ago. When I learn of a supposed Pastor planning a Quran burning day, I want to cry, because *we've* had our books burned, and *we've* been vilified as an evil people, and *we've* been accused of conspiring against our country, and *we've* watched as others have turned away and refused to stand with us. We of all people can *not* be silent. We know that the German writer Heinrich Heine was right when he said, "Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people as well." Two weeks ago, a construction site for a new mosque in Tennessee was burned – an act of arson. Never again. Not "Never Again, to us." Never. Again.

It is our sacred obligation to speak out, as a community, and individually, against hatred. When we hear someone saying that Islam is a religion of evil, we have to speak up and say that Baruch Goldstein, the religious Jew who locked himself in a mosque at prayer-time, armed with an assault rifle, and killed as many Muslims as he could, was evil. But, he didn't make Judaism evil. The thousands of Jewish supporters who still look to him as a hero, don't make the rest of us Jews evil, either. When we hear someone saying that "they" are out to get "us," we have to speak up and remind them that "they" *are* "us." Muslims died on 9/11, and Muslims defend this country, every day. Our tradition compels us to speak up for those who are being held down. It never gives us an escape clause, should that innocent face Mecca when he prays.

Our prophets declared to us:

Repel evil with what is better. Then will he, between whom and thee was hatred, become as it were thy friend and intimate. And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint.

Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a paradise whose width is that of the heavens and of the earth, prepared for the righteous – Those who... restrain their anger and pardon all people – for God loves those who do good.

Beautiful, no? Except – in truth, our prophets said no such thing. Mohammed did. This morning, we heard *our* prophet's call:

Is this not the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house?

Unlock the shackles of injustice. Free the oppressed. Care for the weak, and the suffering. In short, practice kindness. May the words of all of our prophets be fulfilled. May peace reign here on earth, as it does in heaven.