

HOW MANY LIES ARE CONTAINED IN THE PHRASE: “A MOSQUE AT GROUND ZERO”?

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A sermon by
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There is something very strange and wonderful about this scene. In fact, what we are doing here right now would have been unfathomable in my grandfathers’ generation. My father’s father habitually crossed the street when he approached a church. Though most of the customers and co-workers at Granatoor’s Pharmacy in the Bronx were not Jewish, and he was dearly beloved by all – and returned that love through caring for all their health needs (and even serving as a “doctor” to those who could not afford one – earning him the nickname “Doc”) – there was a deep seated fear that came upon him when looking at a church. He passed away just days before I was ordained a rabbi – but he would not believe that one day, his grandson would be conducting High Holiday services from the pulpit of a church¹. We have come a long way as a tolerant society in the past twenty-six years. Or have we?

On September 11, 2001, as planes crashed into the World Trade Center, I was trapped in the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, on my way to Stephen Wise Free Synagogue for which I was then the Senior Rabbi. While I was safe, a number of my congregants and friends perished in that tragedy. The Monday prior to Rosh HaShannah of that year, I conducted three funerals in a row, with many more to follow in the weeks and months ahead.

¹ Congregation Da’at Elohim – the Temple of Universal Judaism has shared space with the Park Avenue Christian Church for 36 years. Many of the social justice programs are jointly administered. There are no visible icons during the times that we use the space and it has been a felicitous relationship throughout the years. Each year we jointly host a Heschel-King event celebrating the leadership and examples of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.

As with many of us, I feared for my community, my city and my country. When the perpetrators were identified, I feared also for my Muslim friends and for the spirit of pluralism that has long characterized the American experience. I worried that the atrocities perpetrated by Al Qaeda would irrevocably equate Islam and Muslims with Islamism, a political movement which aims to subjugate Muslims and non-Muslims alike to a strict and uncompromising interpretation of Sharia law.

In large measure, the American Jewish community of which I am a part has opposed efforts to demonize Islam because of Osama Bin Laden's savagery. But then from corners of the community that I least expected, I heard strains of intolerance – under the guise of well-meaning, but intolerance nonetheless. And I was shocked.

Among the first of these statements, came one from a place with which I associated myself as a leader for four years. The Anti Defamation League, a Jewish organization with a long history of opposition to discrimination of all stripes, had thrown its weight behind those who opposed the building of the Cordoba Initiative - the Islamic Community Center - in the vicinity of Ground Zero. I was stymied by what seemed to be the ADL's startling abandonment of its core principles as captured in the "rationale" expressed by the ADL's National Director, Abraham Foxman. The New York Times² reported that he justified his opposition to the location of the Islamic Center by saying that the victims of a tragedy -- even victims of the Holocaust -- had the right to irrational feelings or even bigotry.³ Therefore, the ADL insists, the mosque should be moved further away from the site of Ground Zero.

How far would be far enough? Would 23rd Street be acceptable? 96th Street? What about Jersey City, already home to large Muslim population? What we see here is the perverse illogicality of bigotry. It would not take much to give sanction to almost any bigoted act should it be found that the bigot had suffered some injustice. And

² Saturday, July 31, 2010 Front Page

³ It is always possible that Mr. Foxman's words were misinterpreted or misconstrued – however, there has not been a repudiation of these remarks and they have been repeated in several other forums.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg⁴ is correct when he states that moving the Islamic Center will not change the attitude of the haters.

If I learned anything from my years working for tolerance and understanding, and my years working with the ADL, it is that the root of most bigotry and discrimination is found in ignorance. Education is the only antidote to bigotry – an Islamic Community Center near the church that offered succor to the survivors and first responders, near a new Jewish community synagogue that is growing, near the seat of government of the City of New York, is *exactly* what is needed to begin the process of education. Only then can we judge the leaders of that Islamic Center by what they do and how they serve that community. If they encourage or excuse extremism, they can be rightly taken to task. However, making that determination in advance is not in the spirit of an organization which embraces pluralism and fights for tolerance.

Yet ignorance is exactly what is being perpetuated in this roiling debate. Simple facts are distorted and lies are told so frequently that they take on the weight of truth.

The Cordoba Center is not being built on Ground Zero. A quick check on the internet and one finds a number of surprising businesses the same two and a half blocks from the actual site of Ground Zero – included among them are: liquor stores, fast-food restaurants, bars, strip-clubs, and other places of high moral value. There are those who say that an Islamic Center so close to the site is an affront to the memories of those who perished. There was an Islamic Center in the neighborhood for years prior to 9-11-01 – no one complained. Some have likened this situation to the contretemps over the presence of a Convent run by the Carmelite nuns on the grounds of Auschwitz – which required the good offices of Pope John Paul II to intervene and move the convent. I was intimately involved in the entire protracted and sordid business of the Carmelite Convent controversy and I can say without equivocation that this is a false analogy on every level.

⁴ At a Ramadan Dinner at Gracie Mansion

To remind you of the details; 1984 Cardinal Macharski, who was the archbishop of Cracow, gave permission for the establishment of convent of Carmelite nuns, who would pray for the souls of those who died at the site. This was at the site that the Pope said mass in 1979 - a large 24' cross had been erected there.⁵ This provoked a vigorous response from the world-wide Jewish community. Years of negotiations ensued, and in 1989 an agreement was made to move the convent by the following year. This did not happen. There was another hew and cry and meetings between the Jewish community and the Catholic hierarchy (of which I was part) led to a request for the Pope's intervention. In 1993, seven of the original 14 nuns moved to a new convent – down the road, and things settled down.

Notice - the Carmelites were on Auschwitz property – when the issue was resolved, they moved a short distance away (less that the distance between the Cordoba Center and Ground Zero).

Further, and even more important: what happened at Auschwitz was a targeted plan to eradicate the world of Jews - the Carmelites' presence (even though the Carmelites were not perpetrators) on the back of centuries of a culture of anti-Judaism, which at very least led to the creation of an environment in which the Shoah could take place, caused their presence ON THE GROUNDS to be hurtful. However, the attack on 9/11 was an attack on the liberties and pluralism of the US by Wahabist terrorists – to demonstrate that they have not won that battle, we must support the creation of an Islamic community center nearby to show that they cannot prevent pluralism, democracy and religious freedom from flourishing on these shores.

And to the man himself – Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf and his wife Daisy Khan -- many in opposition to the Islamic Community Center have adopted the use of the “Big Lie” – he has been portrayed as a supporter of terrorism. His book, *What's Right with Islam Is What's Right with America* is being torn apart in search of clues to his

⁵ This is an over-simplified version of a very complex story. The cross and additional crosses was one stream of the controversy. Cardinal Glemp, the Archbishop of Warsaw and a Polish nationalist, inflamed Jewish concerns with a series of speeches which prompted Rabbi Avi Weiss to lead several demonstrations – including one in the parking lot of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops office in Washington DC while I was present at a meeting of Jewish leaders with Cardinal Glemp. There is much more to this story.

“hidden agenda” – interviews are parsed and contextualized and regurgitated as warnings. The very title of the project that led to the proposed Islamic Community Center – “The Cordoba Initiative” has been marked with controversy. It was his intention to mark a time and a place in which Muslims, Jews and Christians⁶ got along. His detractors point out that the only way that the Jews and Christians got along with the Muslims is that they lived under Islamic rule – and they find a hidden agenda in the name. The man is a Sufi – in an Islamic world marked by over 136 denominations (and you thought the Jewish community was fractious), the Sufis are the most open, welcoming and peace-loving community in the Islamic world. And his deeds have backed this up. He has been involved in bridge building long before 9-11, and when others – especially in the Islamic community went to ground in the wake of the Islamophobic sentiment unleashed by those attacks -- he continued to reach out to the wider community, and worked for understanding.

And it was in 2003 that Imam Rauf stood on the bima of a synagogue⁷ and eulogized Daniel Pearl, the journalist who was murdered by Islamist terrorists in Pakistan – concluding his remarks, with “If to be a Jew means to say with all one’s heart, mind and soul, ‘Shma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad – Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, The Lord is One’ not only today, I am a Jew, I have always been one.” And as a friend, the terrific journalist for the Atlantic and author of *Prisoner: A Story of Friendship and Terror*, Jeffrey Goldberg wrote: “That any Muslim imam who stands before a Jewish congregation and says, “I am a Jew,” is placing his life in danger.” To which I add: Let us not forget that the Psalmist teaches us to “Seek peace and pursue it.” (Ps 34:14) Here is a man who put his life on the line to pursue peace.

Right wing pundits and others have circulated idiotic stories that in Islam, it is the tradition to build mosques on the sites of victories for Islam. What rubbish – but it makes great copy on the evening news and on placards held up at demonstrations. This is a pure distortion

⁶ There were two international meetings between Rabbis and Imams (in Budapest and in Seville). At both, Cordoba was remembered as a place and time of warm relations. Rauf participated in these meetings.

⁷ Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in NYC

of the facts⁸: the Dome on the Rock which was built to commemorate a military victory is NOT a mosque. The Al Aksa mosque built much later was built at the edge of the Temple Mount to distance itself from a war memorial, as a mosque should be a place of peace, prayer and study.

We all grieve for what happened on September 11 – the day is seared into our souls, the images of the planes have burned our retinas. Many of us lost loved ones, and all of us are forever changed by the events of that day. I would never do anything to dishonour the memories of those who died. And I stand here on this day to say that to stop the Cordoba Initiative from going forward on 45 Park Place is to dishonour the memory of every person who died on that day – for we will have turned ourselves into the kind of hate-filled, intolerant beings sharing the same narrow-mindedness as the very terrorists who perpetrated these attacks. If we give in to our fears, our prejudices, our xenophobia, then we lost our battle for democracy, upon which this very country was founded.

An Islamic Community Center near Ground Zero that is involved in the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan would demonstrate that Al Qaeda does not represent the complex beliefs and experiences that compose Islam. And like every community that has a fringe element (and we have plenty of our own) that causes embarrassment and pain to the majority through their distortions of core teachings, the Center would enable our Muslim fellow citizens to distance themselves from the evil that was done in their name.

The City in which we choose to live should be a beacon of tolerance and understanding. And understanding begins with knowledge. We will give no bigot cover, regardless of how and why they became a bigot. An Islamic Center in the heart of Ground Zero – an apt response to Bin Laden from a nation founded on the principle of religious liberty - is a necessary part of that process.

⁸ As further proof that this assertion is false, there is a tradition that the 2nd Caliph, Umar, when arriving in Jerusalem was invited by the Patriarch to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher – Umar declined saying that he didn't want others to follow his lead and cause the Church to be turned into a Mosque. Both Rabbi Dr. Reuven Firestone of HUC-JIR, LA and Dr. Abdulwahab Hechiche of USF have provided this information and confirmed it. I am grateful to both of them.

I never had the opportunity to engage my grandfather on his prejudices. I am sure that if I had, he would have turned from the thinking of his past and embraced a more open and tolerant stance. What he feared, we disprove by our very presence here tonight. And on the cusp of a New Year, we stand ready to embrace what we profess to believe – that all are created in the image of God and then give every person, every community, every faith and every culture the right to be judged by what they do and not by what we fear.

Shana Tova u'mitukah!