

Sacred Grounding

Seven score and seven years ago, Abraham Lincoln gave a speech. Perhaps the most famous speech in American history. He stood at Gettysburg, site of thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of casualties, charged with the terrible task of making meaning out of tragedy. He had come to dedicate part of the battlefield as a cemetery for fallen soldiers.

Lincoln knew the power and limits of words. He said: “in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.”¹ As our nation today stands before Ground Zero, nine years after the 9/11 attack, we recognize the sacredness of that spot. We too find ourselves at war with the enemies of freedom. We too witness a nation divided.

Tension has erupted recently around plans to build a Muslim community center, with a mosque, known as the Cordoba House, near Ground Zero. But it’s about more than just a mosque. It’s about religious freedom and radical Islam, about security and terror, and about what America should stand for, and whom we should stand with.

This evening, I want to offer a few thoughts on how we as Jews might think about these issues. I do not intend to impose my point of view; I know that reasonable people can and do feel differently. I know that a sermon is never the final word, but rather an invitation to dialogue. What I hope to do is to elevate our thinking, and to encourage us to think through this together.

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First, I want to comment on the nature of Jewish Islamophobia. It is a mark of how secure and at home Jews feel in America that so many of us and our organizations are speaking out against “the mosque” and Muslims. The blessing of our prosperity here and our integration into the fabric of American society is manifest. And yet, there are two important ironies here.

First, have we forgotten how some of us, our parents and grandparents, our immigrant ancestors experienced the sting of Anti-Semitism and occasionally violent pressure to fit in or get out? How many country clubs and neighborhood associations and businesses excluded us for

¹ *Gettysburg Address*, <http://www.bartleby.com/43/36.html>. See http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2010/09/reading_lincoln_at_ground_zero.html for my original inspiration to connect Gettysburg and Ground Zero.

irrational reasons? Have we forgotten the guilt by association and bigotry that made the Jewish immigrant experience an ordeal?

Second, it seems that many of the Jewish voices denouncing Islam and “the mosque” are the same voices who remind us that we are still plagued by the scourge of Anti-Semitism. In other words, some of those who courageously fight irrational Jew-hatred are also the agents of irrational Muslim-hatred. This combination is self-defeating and dangerous. Even aside from our biblical commands to “love the stranger”² and “love your neighbor as yourself,”³ *self-interest* should dictate a different approach. How can we Jews maintain credibility in our fight against Anti-Jewish defamation if we also act as agents of the defamation of others?

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I should also comment on the man at the epicenter of this controversy, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf. You have probably read and heard a lot from your neighbors and friends, on TV, and by emails that are making the rounds. I know of him through my colleagues in the rabbinate and Reform Movement who have worked with Imam Rauf to further interfaith understanding and cooperation. Here I will quote Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, speaking about Rauf:

He is a Sufi [Muslim] and a moderate by any definition. What is happening now is that many are searching through his 30-year activist history to find things he has said that could discredit him. And let me say clearly: he has said things that I oppose and find offensive. But if he is not a fitting partner for dialogue then there are no such partners. And I am distressed by those in the Jewish community who continue to believe that we should only talk to and approve for dialogue those who agree with us on every point and who have never made a problematic statement about Judaism or Israel. We don't need dialogue with those people. We need it with people like Imam Rauf, who are reasonable, sensible, and courageous - even though, to be sure, we often don't agree.⁴

² Leviticus 19:34.

³ Leviticus 19:18.

⁴ <http://blogs.rj.org/reform/2010/09/cordoba-house.html>; the emphasis is mine.

In December of 2009, Imam Rauf's wife and building project partner, Daisy Khan, was interviewed by conservative Laura Ingraham on FoxNews's The O'Reilly Factor. Ingraham praised Khan and the Cordoba House project, saying:

I can't find many people who really have a problem with it. [Mayor] Bloomberg is for it. Rabbis are saying they don't have a problem with it. [...] I like what you're trying to do and Ms. Khan we appreciate it..."⁵

Nine months later, Ingraham and many others are singing a different tune. I hate to be cynical, but this looks to me like a case of election season sensationalism. It's distracting us from real issues. If we are to progress in the very real battle against radical Islam, then we have to be level-headed about those American Muslims who are moderate, patriotic, and open to dialogue. We need to build alliances in this fight, not alienate potential allies.

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Let me also mention the issue of sensitivity to the families of 9/11 victims. Lincoln's words at Gettysburg resonate here. The deaths of American soldiers, citizens, and rescue workers have hallowed that ground. There is nothing we can do or say to ease their pain. We can honor their memories and care for those who survived. And we should be nothing but sensitive to the grief of those who have suffered tragic and traumatic losses. (Indeed, we should spend more energy getting an appropriate memorial built.)

Unfortunately, the idea of the pain of victims' families is being manipulated to serve political agendas. It is easy to assume that all these families oppose the building project. But it's simply not true. Some do; others have mixed feelings; others support it publicly.⁶ (And it's worth mentioning that more Muslims were victims of the attacks than perpetrated them.) In the end, being sensitive to the families' pain and grief does not simply dictate one political decision. Indeed, being sensitive to their pain *should* dictate *not* turning it into a political tool or talking point.

In the absence of emotion as a basis for policy decisions, what can we do but rely on the Constitution and the rule of law? As one conservative blogger wrote,

⁵ <http://thinkprogress.org/2010/08/16/laura-ingraham-mosque/>

⁶ See, for example, <http://www.aolnews.com/nation/article/9-11-families-speak-out-on-ground-zero-muslim-center/19581141>.

Part of supporting limited government is understanding that sometimes, things you don't like will happen, and the government (especially the federal government) won't do anything about it. Getting to do what you want comes at the price of other people getting to do what they want -- including build mosques where you'd prefer they didn't.⁷

He also points out that *two blocks* in the Financial District of New York City is unlike two blocks in most of the rest of the country. There are government offices, high-rises, grocery stores, and a strip club a few blocks from Ground Zero, and none of them are considered to be *at* Ground Zero.

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Yet in spite of these considerations, let's consider seriously a few concerns about the Cordoba House and Islam in America. First, how should we really feel about unfettered freedom of religion?

Christopher Hitchens reminds us⁸ that civilized society tolerates only moderate expressions of religious devotion. Our nation's history is one of reining in deviant religious practices, such as Mormon polygamy and Catholic Anti-Semitism and anti-democratic tendencies. This is the paradox of freedom: free exercise of religion can only function when religions function within reasonable bounds. Islam will indeed have to make concessions to integrate into the fabric of American civic life.

Writing on this topic in the NY Times, Ross Douthat speaks of Two Americas. One is the America that embraces immigrants and outsiders; the other "demands that they change their names and drop their native languages."⁹ One glorifies freedom of religion; the other persecutes religious minorities. Both Americas, he suggests, offer something vital to America's future. While "the ideals of the first America protect the *e pluribus*, it's the demands the second America makes of new arrivals that help create the *unum*." It's as if to say, you have to earn your way into the American mainstream. And I think most of us would agree, and want to see the standard of moderation applied to our Muslim neighbors. But can we see past our fear, anger, and hatred into the words and deeds of those Muslims who are working on just that?

⁷ <http://www.nationalreview.com/agenda/243752/very-long-post-cordoba-house-josh-barro>

⁸ <http://www.slate.com/id/2266154/>

⁹ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/opinion/16douthat.html?_r=2&scp=3&sq=douthat&st=cse

This idea raises a particularly interesting question for Jews. Which of these two Americas are we a part of? Surely we have suffered the persecutions and defamation of the latter; but haven't we benefited from protections of the former? From our unique history and status, can we help usher Islam through the same process that all American religions have undergone? Or have we already written Islam off as un-American, un-democratic, unsuited for our civic life? Keeping in mind, of course, that such was the attitude of many Protestant Americans toward our Jewish ancestors.

But let's be clear: we should not be Pollyannas about this. As Leon Wieseltier wrote this month, Islam is not just a religion of peace, as some have said. "Like Christianity and like Judaism," he says, "Islam is a religion of peace *and* a religion of war."¹⁰ Like all religions, it contains violent and peaceful impulses. And the monstrous 9/11 hijackers did not *happen* to be Muslims, they *were* Muslims. "It is not Islamophobic to say so. Quite the contrary, it is to side with Muslims who are struggling against the same poison as we are."¹¹

We are, in our lifetimes, witnessing the birth of a distinctly American, hopefully progressive stream of Islam. Will we help guide it to embrace our American ideals? Or will we, by will or by complacency, condone the holy war that is sure to consume us all? We should embrace with open arms those minorities who commit, in word and in deed, to the ideals of America. But we should link arms in forceful solidarity against those who would do us harm. We should speak out against slander and libel, even when it's directed at those we fear. Then, when we do have a case to make against our enemies, our words will bear unimpeachable integrity, credibility, and force.

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Ultimately, we should learn from our Founding Fathers. Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson studied Islam and owned copies of the Koran. Having learned from the lessons of European religious oppression, they enshrined in our nation's early documents protection of all religious minorities. In his Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, Jefferson wrote that his aim was to protect "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan [Muslim], the Hindoo [sic] and infidel of every denomination." Benjamin Franklin reminded Christians that *their* insistence on preaching the Gospel to unbelievers entailed the same right for *Muslims*.¹²

¹⁰ <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/magazine/77381/leon-wieseltier-mosque-notes>; the emphasis is mine.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/09/12/the_true_history_of_the_koran_in_america/

Unlike our leaders today, they were “impervious to the fanaticisms that spring up like dandelions whenever religion and politics”¹³ mix. But they also understood that civil society demands compromise. That freedom of religion requires religions to make concessions to the greater good. And that fear-mongering, propaganda, and bigotry threaten *both* our shared liberty *and* our common security.

In our *cheshbon hanefesh*, our soul searching, this Yom Kippur, can we root out the sources of xenophobia in ourselves and our communities? At the same time, can we acknowledge and honor the real pain and fear that many of us feel, and the real threats we face? I guarantee, it is easier to paint others with broad, dismissive strokes. To let fear blossom into indiscriminate hatred. To jump on the scapegoating bandwagon. It is also easier to be intoxicated with hope, to pursue naively a world in which everyone gets along and differences simply melt away.

But these easier paths lead us to dead ends. And once we get there, we will find that we’ve ignored forces that seek to attack us. Or we will find that we were so busy running that we dropped the ideals that made us love America in the first place.

My prayer for us, as 5771 begins, comes from George Washington’s prayer for the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, after his visit in 1790. In his letter to the Touro Synagogue, he wrote:

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 in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.¹⁴

Washington knew his Bible: this is a quote from the prophet Micah (4:4). It’s no coincidence that the defining feature of the prophet’s vision of the messianic age is the absence of fear. Fear makes us forget our principles and see threats everywhere.

But Washington didn’t quote the end of the verse. It continues: *Ki pi Adonai tz’vaot diber*, often translated, “for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.” But the name of God *Adonai tz’vaot* is a name of power -- of military might. *Tz’vaot* are legions, armies, amassed soldiers. In the world as it is, we know that freedom sometimes requires the use of force.

Hold on to this image. A prophetic vision of a *peaceful* world free of fear, spoken by the Lord of *War*. This is the tension, the duality, of the human condition. This is, I believe, what it

¹³ Ted Widmer, “People of the Book: The True History of the Koran in America,” *Boston Globe*, September 12, 2010. http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/09/12/the_true_history_of_the_koran_in_america/

¹⁴ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/bigotry.html>

means to be a Jew in the world today. To hold both hope and fear in equal measure, and let neither blind us to the truth.

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As we began with Lincoln, so shall we end. At Gettysburg, he uttered timeless words that ring true today at Ground Zero.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...¹⁵

Whether that new birth of freedom includes Muslim Americans and protects our nation depends very much on us.

Let us pray that we are strong enough, and wise enough, for the task we have inherited.

Tzom kal, may you have a meaningful fast.

¹⁵ <http://www.bartleby.com/43/36.html>

Some of What I've Been Reading

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Christopher Hitchens, "Free Exercise of Religion? No Thanks": <http://www.slate.com/id/2266154/>

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Gustav Niebuhr, "Reading Lincoln at Ground Zero": http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2010/09/reading_lincoln_at_ground_zero.html

Leon Wieseltier, "Mosque Notes": <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/magazine/77381/leon-wieseltier-mosque-notes>

Nathan Roth, "The Battle is Within Islam": <http://blog.z-word.com/2010/09/message-to-imam-rauf-the-battle-is-within-islam/?msource=IMPACT44&tr=y&auid=6997042>

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Laura Ingraham's Mosque Switch: <http://thinkprogress.org/2010/08/16/laura-ingraham-mosque/>

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

Rabbi Andrew Jacobs, "Legal Right vs. Moral Responsibility": <http://rabbiaandrewjacobs.org/2010/09/19/kol-nidre-5771-legal-right-vs-moral-responsibility-the-ground-zero-mosque/>

From The Onion (satire news): <http://www.theonion.com/articles/man-already-knows-everything-he-needs-to-know-about,17990/>

Mayor Michael Bloomberg on The Daily Show (he tells a powerful story): <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-august-26-2010/michael-bloomberg>

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Josh Barro, "A Very Long Post on Cordoba House": <http://www.nationalreview.com/agenda/243752/very-long-post-cordoba-house-josh-barro>

Todd Gitlin, "The Subversive Theology of Imam Rauf": <http://www.tnr.com/blog/foreign-policy/77176/ground-zero-mosque-the-subversive-theology-imam-rauf-contd>

Todd Gitlin, "American Values and the Ground Zero Mosque": <http://www.tnr.com/blog/foreign-policy/76990/american-values-ground-zero-mosque-constitution-law?id=/O5gLHEQk/2mGx4iUHTj2dx9D12Pz84NI1KTM8G7zYcS5UZAfdrZo5druB/bi7>

Bernard Avishai, "Too Far Away," <http://bernardavishai.blogspot.com/2010/08/cordoba-house-too-far-away.html>

Reuven Firestone, “The Ground Zero-Sum Game”: http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/3176/the_ground_zero-sum_game_/

Firestone, “Fellow Demons”: http://www.jewishjournal.com/cover_story/article/hatred_and_mistrust_prevent_jews_muslims_from_building_intercultural_bridge/

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Kristof, “Taking Bin Laden’s Side”: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/opinion/22kristof.html?scp=1&sq=taking%20bin%20laden's%20side&st=cse>

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“Concern is Voiced Over Religious Intolerance”: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/08/us/08muslim.html>

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