

TO BIGOTRY NO SANCTION, TO PERSECUTION NO ASSISTANCE

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When I was a kid, my father's best friend was someone we called "Uncle Mahmood." I'm not sure how old I was when I finally realized that Uncle Mahmood was not actually our uncle, but I think it was around the same time that I realized that Mahmood is Farsi for Mohammed, not exactly a name that my very religious Jewish grandmother would have named one of her sons.

Uncle Mahmood and my father grew up together in Iran. They had been boyhood friends, and our families lived in the same neighborhood. When Mahmood moved to LA, the first person he looked up was my dad, they resumed their friendship, and our two families often got together, just as their families had back in Iran.

I grew up with friends who were Muslim, Christian, Jewish and no religion at all. I learned from my parents and grandparents that people should be judged as individuals, and not by their ethnic or religious backgrounds, their sexual orientation, or their family of origin, but rather each person should be judged on their own merits.

Growing up, I thought that these beliefs were a reflection of our living in such an ethnically diverse state. But as I got older and more learned in Jewish text, I realized how much of what they taught me came directly from the Torah, the Talmud, and our prayer books.

As I studied these sacred texts, my parents and grandparents teachings seemed to jump out at me.

In Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy we are given an extensive amount of laws. We are taught how to create a just nation, to be a people guided by a sense of justice, to be an *or l'goyim*¹ - a light amongst the nations.

We are commanded to create courts of justice, and to make sure our judges are free of prejudice and bias.² We are given laws that are not only to protect the ordinary citizen, but even those accused of wrong doing as well as the most vulnerable in our society, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst³. We are taught that there should be one law for the stranger and the home-born, and more than that, we are commanded to love the neighbor and the stranger as ourselves⁴.

¹ Isaiah 42:6 and Isaiah 60:2-3

² Deuteronomy 1:16:-17, Amos 5:15

³ Leviticus 19:15-16

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:12-19

Whenever I study the legal passages of Torah, I can't help but think of how my father and great-grandparents, who were all well versed in Jewish text, must have applied those passages to their experience in this country when they came here as immigrants and strangers to this magnificent land, a land that promised freedom and opportunity, equality and justice, not only to them, but to the generations of immigrants who arrived, and continue to arrive, on our shores.

Every major religion has its own version of the Golden Rule. Judaism actually has two variations on it, one is from the Torah and is written in large prominent letters outside our library building: "Love thy neighbor as thyself"⁵ and the other is from the Talmud, and written in Hebrew lettering on the outside of our sanctuary: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others."⁶

The two versions represent how far we have come in just a half a century. The version in English is from a sacred text we share with our Christian neighbors who were not so thrilled to have a Jewish house of worship in their midst when our congregation first moved to Land Park in the early 1950s.

So our leadership chose words that would be familiar and reassuring to them, in essence asking our neighbors to tolerate us, basically saying, please, accept us, we are not so different than you. The second version, the one that was put up as part of our Sanctuary renovation just a few years ago is written in Hebrew letters, and it speaks to our current sense of comfort of being Jewish in America. It is written in *our* sacred language, and comes from our *own* sacred text, not a shared one, and the Hebrew lettering makes it clear, the message is for *us*, not for some other group.

We know we are Americans and do not feel the same need to prove it as earlier generations *had* to.

What a difference a half a century makes.

The point of the Golden Rule is to not to ensure that we treat the people we like with compassion and understanding, rather it was written to remind us how to behave with the people we *don't* like and are *not* naturally inclined to give the benefit of the doubt. The Golden Rule is meant to remind us that we are not inherently better than anyone else, and that we all have the basic right to be treated with dignity and as human beings, and as equals in the eyes of the law.

Whether our individual families came here from Europe or the Middle East, our people have known too many times over that religious zealotry and xenophobia can be deadly. And if it is allowed to go unchecked from the start, it can grow into something dangerous and uncontrollable.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

Over the last two thousand years our people have been scattered to the ends of the earth because of the whims of particular rulers or because others didn't like the way we prayed, or what we believed, how we dressed, the way we looked, or how our names sounded funny and foreign. Sometimes we were seen as too exotic or dangerous to the status quo, other times we were seen as spawn of the devil and inherently evil, or the killers of their god.

We have seen our synagogues desecrated, our sacred books and scrolls burned. We have known what it is like to not be allowed to own property or to live in certain neighborhoods. And we have paid the ultimate price, too many times, when no one was willing to speak up in our defense.

But here, in America, things have been different. Of course things have not always been perfect.

There were restricted clubs and neighborhoods, there were quotas in schools, and businesses that would not hire us. And there was a lynching of a Jewish businessman named Leo Frank that caused the creation of the Anti-Defamation League⁷, so that we could try to protect ourselves through the judicial system. Because, here we had something on our side that we didn't have anywhere else. It was here that we found the gold standard for the Golden Rule. It goes like this:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

These words have done more than inspire us, they have protected us. The Torah teaches us that the Jewish people have built our civilization and our faith on the idea that laws are a good thing, that *chukim u'mishpatim*, laws and precepts, should protect the minority from the whims of the majority, and that all people, the stranger and the home born should be treated equally under the law.⁸ Because as the Torah tells us, this is what our God demands of us.

It has been both the American legal system, as well as that fundamental American belief in the first amendment, that has permitted the Jewish people to become Americans rather than remain as strangers in this land.

When in 1790, President George Washington, of blessed memory, wrote to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, we knew that this country was different than any other we had lived in since the destruction of the Temple. He reassured us with these words:

⁷ www.adl.org/ADLHistory/1913_1920.asp

⁸ Leviticus 24:22

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, ***which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance***, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.” (George Washington’s letter to the Jews of Newport, RI, 1790)

What beautiful words “***to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance***” and the only price that we must pay for such security is that we participate in our society as good citizens. What comfort it must have given the Jews of that time, what inspiration it should give to us now.

This letter is seen as the foundation stone of American religious liberty and it’s twin principle of the separation between church and state. It is an ideal that we have a moral obligation as well as a self-interest to protect.

We all know too well of what happens when we have lived in countries that do not protect religious freedom, or defend minorities from the darker inclinations or paranoia of the masses.

I came of age just as Muslim extremists took over the land of my father’s birth. I remember the anxiety of not knowing if my aunts and uncles and cousins would be able to escape Iran. My family’s home was seized by a fundamentalist Islamic regime because it was the most prominent Jewish property in Abadan, the city in which they lived.

I knew at an early age that because I am a Jew I will never be able to see the town square that bears my family’s name in my father’s home town. And from an even younger age I knew that because I am a Jew I would never feel safe to be able explore the streets of Baghdad where my grandmother grew up, and countless cousins fled.

But I am also mindful that the reason that my family was in Iran and Iraq in the first place was because we fled Spain during the Inquisition, and that it was in those Muslim countries that my family was able to find a safe haven at that time.

But like many of you, one of the most memorable days of my life was September 11, 2001. I will never forget when I watched with horror that second plane fly into the Twin Towers, and the hours following as the enormity of what had happened began to be realized.

But I also remember where I was on June 18, 1999, when a different type of religious zealot torched three synagogues in Sacramento. Two brothers, claiming to be Christian, inspired by religious fanaticism, they thought that they were doing God’s work by going on a violent rampage over the course of a few weeks, burning our synagogues, killing a gay couple in their sleep, and torching a health clinic that provided abortions. And all the while they made lists of more people and more institutions that they wanted to attack next.

And then I remember that it is not religion that causes people to act in hateful ways, it is how individuals interpret their religion. *Every* religious group, sadly, even our own, has dangerous factions who believe that violence is not only permissible, but mandated by God.

It is important to remember that it was a Jew who murdered Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, *z"l*, because the murderer believed that he was doing God's will.

But I still do not believe that the purpose of religion is hate, even if there are people who are more than happy to twist and reinterpret sacred texts for that purpose.

Judaism has always preached moderation, to take a level headed path, to shun extremism, bigotry and violence. We know all too well what happens when extremist behavior and ideas are allowed to become the acceptable mainstream belief.

It makes my stomach churn and strikes fear in my heart to hear that there is an American church that is planning on commemorating 9-11 by burning copies of the Quran, and that there are elected officials who call Islam an evil cult that prays to a monkey god. These things do not make Jews, or Americans any safer, in this country or abroad.

While some of this talk might have begun with a disagreement about the building of a particular mosque, that is not actually a mosque, but rather is a community center that was in fact inspired by the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side. The Cordoba House⁹ is a community center that is being built by moderate Muslims who wish to improve relations with the West by finding common ground with Western Culture, it's goal is to be a community center that is just like the Salaam Center¹⁰ here in Sacramento.

But the national discussion is no longer really just about the Cordoba House, because there are now those who are calling on a total ban of the building of any new mosque anywhere in the United States.

Several weeks ago a prominent political figure defended his opposition of the building of the Cordoba House by writing "There should be no mosque near Ground Zero in New York so long as there are no churches or synagogues in Saudi Arabia." (Newt Gingrich, July 21, 2010)

My first response to this was, to think, is he saying that Saudi Arabia should now be *our* standard for ethical behavior and religious tolerance? God forbid!

Do we want to measure ourselves by the standards of a repressive fundamentalist theocracy? Or do we want to live by the standards that have been set by our founders, and by our sacred texts?

⁹ <http://www.cordobainitiative.org/?q=content/frequently-asked-questions>

¹⁰ <http://salamcenter.org/>

What we do now, as Americans and as Jews, determines the type of people we want to be, the type of community that we want to create, the type of nation we want to live in.

To paraphrase Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York, “government should not be involved in deciding who we pray to, what we say, or where we say it.” And I would add, that the role of government is also to protect our right to pray where and how we want to, even when the majority does not like the religion that we practice.

Yes, the Cordoba House may be a painful reminder for many people of those who attacked our country on 9-11. But it should also remind us that we were attacked because of such core American beliefs and practices as the freedom of religion and the freedoms that the first amendment protects.

These are the freedoms and rights that attracted the Jewish people to this country in droves, even as many of the Americans that we found when we got here accused us of being swarthy, dark skinned, untrustworthy *sheisters* and the killers of their God that were dangerous and unfit to live in their neighborhoods or to work in their business.

We held fast to these freedoms even as Henry Ford widely distributed the libelous and disgusting Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Father Coughlin preached a gospel of anti-Semitism and xenophobia. We held fast to these freedoms as Jewish soldiers in WWII experienced anti-Semitism from their comrades in arms, even as they were fighting the Nazis.

And we must hold fast to these freedoms still, even as our life here affords us a sense of safety and security that our ancestors could only have imagined.

As I said, the free exercise of religion is a right that we have both a moral obligation and a self-interest to protect. Because if we don't, who will?

In the aftermath of WWII, a German minister, Pastor Martin Niemöller said:

“They came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me
and by that time no one was left to speak up.”

If we do not speak up now, who will speak up for us? We have already seen in several presidential elections a religious litmus test being presented. Do we really believe that our theology would pass such a test?

Just last week the head of one of the political parties in Hawaii encouraged pastors to only allow one candidate to come and speak to their churches and not the other candidate, because the other one was not God-fearing. In fact he said, if the politician that he endorsed was to be elected, he would be Hawaii's first "righteous leader" since Queen Liliuokalani, who died in 1917.¹¹

It should be noted that the current Governor of Hawaii is Jewish, and of the same political party as the man who made those comments. Clearly, in his eyes at least, a Jew can not qualify for the title of a "righteous leader."

Ten years ago, when I was serving as the Chaplain of the California State Assembly I learned the surprising lesson that there are many people who still believe that Jews do not pray to the same God as them. A number of legislators complained about me to the Speaker of the Assembly, they were upset because they said that I never said God's name in any of my prayers.

When this complaint was brought to my attention, I was surprised, and looked through all of my blessings, and saw that like all the Chaplains that came before me, I used many names for God, like our Creator, the Source of Life, God, and even Lord.

But, then I realized that for these elected officials, and for many Americans, God only has one name, and it is not the one that I use when I pray. The God that I was invoking, was not, in their mind, the same God.

It was a surprising wake up call for me that in California of all places, I could be seen as "the other."

When we discuss the issue of the Cordoba House, or the building of any mosque in America, we need to remember that America does not stand for collective punishment, or guilt by association. We need to remember that on 9-11, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Bhuddists, Atheists, and so many more died for one reason – because they were Americans.

We are a nation of laws. We are nation of immigrants. We are nation that both stands for, and legally protects the free expression of religion and ideas, even when we don't like those ideas or agree with those religions. That is the law.

The Torah commands us: "*Tzedek! Tzedek! Tirdof!* Justice! Justice! You shall pursue! (Deut. 16:20)"

¹¹ James 'Duke' Aiona Will Defeat 'Unrighteous' Democrats Because Of 'The Church': Hawaii GOP Chair, AP, 9-1-10

The great Jewish sage, Bachya ben Asher teaches in the Talmud that we are to understand this verse in the following way: “The double emphasis means: Justice under any circumstance, whether to your profit or your loss, whether in word or in action, *whether to Jew or non-Jew*. (Bab. Talmud, San. 39b)”

Justice under any circumstance, not only for ourselves, *but for all people*.

The fastest way to radicalize a people is to marginalize them. When we say to Muslim Americans that *they* should not enjoy the same freedom of religion as *we* do, that *they* should be blamed or punished for what *their* co-religionists have done, *we* are doing three things.

First, we are undermining our most sacred beliefs, both those that are enshrined in the Torah, and in the Constitution that all people are created equal in the eyes of the law.

Secondly, we are creating a situation that fosters and encourages fundamentalism. Because if we say Muslims don't have the same rights as other citizens, then what value should their citizenship have for them? What loyalty should they have to a country that sees them as de facto traitors and terrorists regardless of what they are actually doing?

And lastly, we are engaging in the same type of actions that have been directed towards us in countless countries throughout the centuries. And we are forgetting the most fundamental lesson of our own history. God freed us from Egypt not so that we would someday become like our oppressors, but rather, so that we would bring justice and compassion and peace into the world by modeling these attributes and becoming an *or l'goyim* - a light unto the nations.

America has seen itself has having a similar role, as also being a beacon of truth and justice in our world.

The United States is a nation that is built on a belief that government should be fair, it should protect the minority from the tyranny of the masses, and it should treat everyone equally in the eyes of the law.

These are ideals that we as the Jewish people know well, because these are also the values that we are taught by our own Torah.

Religious Freedom means freedom for all religions - not just the ones we like, or the ones that like us.

Today it is the rights of Muslims that are being attacked, are we so sure that tomorrow it will not be our rights that are challenged? We might have a favored status today, but as we have seen in every century, and in many countries, our status can change (snap) like that.

May the Judge of Truth inspire us to walk in the righteous paths of our ancestors, may we never forget the pain of being a stranger in a strange land, and for the sake of the generations who will

come after us, may we always be eager to pursue justice and protect the rights of all of God's children. *Ken yehi ratzon* - may this be God's will. Amen.